

Context

Drawing upon peer review exercises across the UN system, the Professional Peer Review (PPR) of UNODC research function was initiated in April 2017 to assess UNODC's research capacity and the quality of its services. This review takes place at a strategic time for UNODC. The end of the implementation period of the *Thematic Programme on Research, Trend Analysis and Forensics* (2015-2016) is an opportunity to identify good practices and lessons for the next research programme. The world drug problem and organized crime landscapes and their corresponding policy debates have evolved significantly in the past five years, placing new responsibilities at the core of UNODC research. The adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda further expands UNODC's research tasks to include analysis of its mandated areas in relation to environmentally sustainable social and economic development.

Objectives

This peer review aims at assessing to what extent the UNODC research function is fully fit for purpose, well equipped to make the best possible contribution to the work of the Office and those it serves, and tailored to UNODC's evolving approach.

Overarching assessment question:

Are the Office's research function, methodologies, products and services: impartial; credible; accurate and useful for policy-making, as assessed by a Panel of professional research peers against the principles set out in the *UNODC Thematic Programme on Research, Trend Analysis and Forensics*?"

Five main dimensions of UNODC research function have been assessed:

- the governance and institutional environment for research activities;
- the visibility, use and relevance of the research services and outputs;
- the methods and approaches used (in light of international scientific standards and ethics);
- the existing RAB data quality and reliability safeguards;
- the collaborative practices used within UNODC, with Member States and with other external stakeholders.

Methodology

In line with the UNEG-DAC Framework for Peer Reviews¹ and the UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation in the UN System, a specific normative assessment framework was designed for the peer review. It focused on three core criteria:

- **RELEVANCE:** The extent to which the research function is suited to the priorities and needs of the target groups, with emphasis on the adequacy, accessibility and utility of research.
- **CREDIBILITY:** The extent to which research activities are conducted in a professional and transparent way to ensure the quality of the data and analysis produced. This criterion homes in on the accuracy, quality and reliability of data, as well as the capacity to innovate.
- **IMPARTIALITY:** The extent to which research and its objectives are balanced and possible biases avoided. Key issues include confidentiality, transparency and integrity of research.

¹ Developed by the Joint Task Force of the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Network on Development Evaluation (EvalNet)

Following consultations within UNODC, an external panel of three experienced professionals was assembled. The panel members were all working in the field of research and statistics, within and outside the UN system. The success of this exercise relied heavily on mutual trust among the staff of the organization under review and its peer evaluators. The Panel generated an evidence base by considering primary and secondary sources of information. These included a thorough desk review of relevant internal UNODC documents, a web survey distributed to Member States, face-to-face interviews and group discussions with UNODC staff and Member States delegates in Vienna as well as phone interviews with other relevant stakeholders (UN entities, regional organizations, UNODC field office staff, civil society experts, and prominent researchers in the fields of drugs and crime).

Main observations

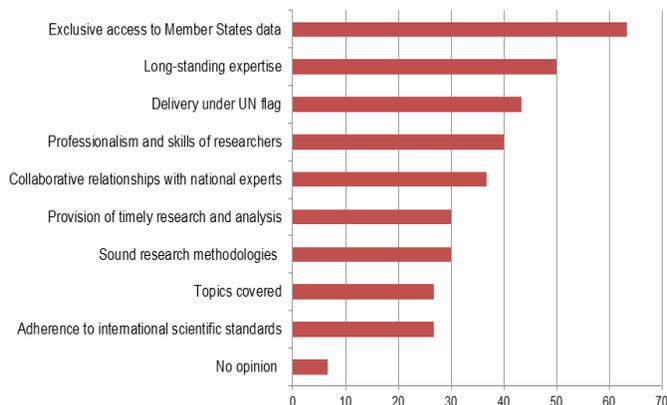
Overall, UNODC research constitutes the key global authority in the fields of drugs and crime, providing high-quality, essential evidence to inform policy-making, including in the framework of the Sustainable Development Agenda. The expertise and professionalism of Research and Trend Analysis Branch (RAB) staff, combined with RAB management dynamism and responsiveness guarantee that UNODC research outputs reflect the priorities of its Member States and Governing bodies.

Research services and outputs

- RAB's efforts to enhance the research function – and, by extension, UNODC's image - through more user-friendly publications are expressively welcomed by consulted Member States, partners and colleagues. RAB staff availability and responsiveness throughout the research process is highly appreciated. The visibility of UNODC research outputs has increased, but there is still room for further improvements on research dissemination at field levels and on the usability of data and findings (notably the online data portal interface).
- UNODC research outputs constitute global reference works. They provide necessary and relevant baseline information on trends and highlight issues in the fields of drugs and crime. Yet, for most of interviewed stakeholders, publication themes and scope are not sufficiently linked to field concerns, and tend to lack in-depth analysis for use in programming of operational activities or national policy-making.
- UNODC RAB technical assistance is highly valued but remains too limited and under-resourced to fully respond to beneficiaries' increasing demand. There is a need to review the scope of the RAB technical assistance portfolio to ensure that despite limited resource TA is an integral part of the RAB work programme and is complementary to its normative and analytical work.

Methodologies, quality and impartiality safeguards

- RAB has demonstrated outstanding efforts to closely align UNODC research with international scientific standards. The setting up of scientific advisory committees for global reports, along with closer cooperation with the UN Statistical Commission and UN-/regional research-oriented institutions demonstrate clear progress.
- The need for new indicators in accordance with evolving policy approaches, and the gap between the complexity of the mandated



data collection tools and the capacity discrepancies across countries demand a tailored, simplified revision of those tools (notably, the ARQ).

- An extreme cautiousness could be observed among RAB researchers to collect and use qualitative information, to formulate in-depth policy analysis, and to diversify their sources of information beyond official sources (using for example scientific literature, academic research, specialized expertise). This cautiousness appears to be in response to some stakeholders' sensitivity over research findings, which has transformed data validation and accountability mechanisms into burdensome, controlling practices.
- With full consideration of the delicate nature of UNODC's research topics, it appears urgent to create greater space for national technical focal points and UNODC field research officers in data collection processes to avoid possible interference by considerations other than technical and scientific exigencies, and thus to strengthen data reliability and credibility.

Cooperation and partnerships

- RAB is effectively developing cooperative models with specialized UN, regional and national organizations in the production of data and reports, and is mutualizing efforts on common research themes, notably with WHO on drug use and ILO on trafficking for forced labor.
- The SDGs but also the UNGASS frameworks offer increased opportunities to expand partnerships and transform existing collaborative experiences into more synergic and systematic cooperations. The recent ties built with the UN Statistical Commission to improve drug measures and reflect on a more coherent UN monitoring system for the SDGs send good signals.
- There are nevertheless signs that the dialogue with the international scientific community, including academia and civil society experts, could be strengthened, especially in the context of the SDGs, to maximize the objectivity and reliability of research.

Institutional research environment

- The development of the *Thematic Programme* positively contributed to the harmonization of multiple UNODC research mandates under a coherent and sound roadmap. However, financial and political considerations tend to leave the research agenda open to MS pressure and increase internal anxiety to report on mandates stemming from UNODC governing bodies.
- The highly resource-constrained environment has created unhealthy internal competition for funds, and silos within the Organization. This situation has tended to subsume field and scientific research needs to donors' funding priorities. The absence of core funding for UNODC research projects, including flagship reports, threatens the continuity, impartiality and quality of research, and may harm UNODC's reputation as a global knowledge broker on drugs and crime.
- Without questioning the delicate nature of its mandated areas of research, the Panel observes excessive pre-publication authorization processes and highly hierarchical finding validation mechanisms, that provide disproportionate space to diplomatic interlocutors over technical, national ones. These procedures constitute clear obstacles to fostering an enabling environment for credible and impartial research.

Key recommendations to UNODC

- ✓ Considering the diversity of UNODC research audiences (MS, international organizations, academia, civil society etc.), manage expectations by rationalizing the research offer according to needs and available resources.
- ✓ Re-equilibrate the data collection tools and sources of information used for UNODC research towards more open-source qualitative and multi-dimensional material, scientific literature and expert information.

- ✓ Consolidate the standardization of data reporting systems: establish agreed requirements for estimates that all stakeholders can follow, encourage the use of existing guidelines and manuals, and increase the pedagogical dialogue on the importance and use of data collection tools.
- ✓ Maintain issue-specific scientific advisory groups in the long term, and formalize the establishment and functions of such groups to install a dynamic peer-review and peer-learning culture for increased scientific legitimacy.
- ✓ Strengthen linkages with the broader scientific community on drugs and crime, including inter-governmental specialized institutions, national research centers, academia and civil society experts.
- ✓ Simplify data collection questionnaires (notably the ARQ) and other tools as required, in line with scientific standards and in close consultation with national technical focal points and UNODC field experts.
- ✓ Refine drug and crime indicators to provide a complete, multi-faceted picture of the studied phenomena, and build confidence on mixed methodological approach.
- ✓ Strengthen collaboration among UN entities and, as relevant, with regional entities specialized in drugs and crime for harmonization of data and methods to avoid duplication and further develop common sets of indicators and measurement systems.
- ✓ Identify a better balance in the review process of RAB products between external expert committees, scientific advisory groups, internal review channels and mandating authorities' pre-approval mechanisms.
- ✓ Consider the SDG framework as an overarching process to consolidate UNODC partnerships, enhance its visibility and refine the relevance and utility of UNODC research to the global UN agenda.
- ✓ Encourage a multi-stakeholder discussion, open also to other global donors besides MS, to rethink the resource model dedicated to research and related capacity-building activities.
- ✓ Establish an informal platform of dialogue with all relevant stakeholders to discuss research needs, policy results and thematic priorities and learn from wide range of perspectives to increase the relevance and quality of research ("Friends of RAB"). An autonomous technical and scientific advisory board/steering committee with leading academics and experts in their fields could be useful to inform the development of UNODC's research agenda.
- ✓ A long-term, strategic and strong vision for research is necessary for the next phase. To this end, organize a multi-stakeholder, autonomous dialogue around stakeholders' ambitions for UNODC research and an all-RAB staff retreat on the same topic. Engage with senior management and MS to develop a shared institutional vision for research.