UN System-wide Action Plan for implementation of the CEB Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (CEB/2006/2)

Guidance on peer reviews

1. Background to the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN SWAP)

The UN SWAP is a unified gender equality framework, designed to promote accountability, a common understanding, enhanced coherence, systematic self-assessment, and a steady targeted and progressive approach to which UN system agencies can aspire and adhere in their work on gender equality and the empowerment of women at the corporate level. For the first time the UN system has a common set of measures on gender mainstreaming and the representation of women against which to report, and against which senior managers can be held accountable. The UN SWAP will facilitate and substantiate accountability to Member States for the work of the UN system on gender equality and the empowerment of women. For more details go to: http://www.unwomen.org/2012/04/un-women-welcomes-a-landmark-action-plan-to-measure-gender-equality-across-the-un-system/

2. Purpose of the peer review

As the UN SWAP is an accountability mechanism, it was decided that the UN SWAP self-reporting process would be supported by entity peer review, which will be carried out on an ongoing basis, facilitated by UN Women. Peer review will involve two entities visiting each other and reviewing the UN SWAP reporting procedures and results, similar to the OECD-DAC peer review.¹ The purposes of the peer review are:

- Promote cross-agency learning about accountability mechanisms and functions
- Review the UN SWAP process within entities, including constraints and opportunities
- Share experience concerning the UN SWAP and accountability for gender equality and the empowerment of women within the UN system
- Lesson learning

Details of what makes up a peer review and how to carry it out, adapted from OECD-DAC guidance, can be found in Box 1.

Box 1: OECD-DAC peer review

Peer review is the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of an organization by its peers, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed organization

¹ http://www.oecd.org/dac/peerreviewsofdacmembers/DCD%282012%294%20ENG.pdf
improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles.

The peer review process is conducted on a non-adversarial basis, relying on confidence in the process. It is not intended to serve as a procedure for resolving differences - peer review does not imply a punitive decision or sanctions; it generally goes beyond fact-finding to include an assessment of performance, and is characterized by dialogue and interactive investigation. Peer review is a means of peer persuasion which can become an important driving force to stimulate organizations to change, achieve goals and meet standards.

All professional peer reviews contain the following structural elements:

- A basis for proceeding: including the necessary agreement for cooperation, and a clear question for assessment;
- A normative framework: an agreed set of principles, standards and criteria against which performance is to be reviewed;
- Designated actors and roles in carrying out the peer review; and
- A set of procedures for planning, assembling and testing the basis of evidence and findings, leading to the final result of the peer review – an exchange around the conclusions.

Strengths of a peer review are:

- It starts with a shared appreciation of the distinctive challenges of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, and the fact that all concerned are constantly striving to improve.
- It can adapt and apply the most pertinent professional principles, norms and standards in coming to an assessment.
- The assessment should carry particular weight, both internally and externally, for the independence and professional credibility of its results.

3. Peer review risks

There are four main risks outlined in OECD-DAC guidance:
i. The review might become too heavy to be justified – e.g. very burdensome on the organization being reviewed, or too expensive or extended;

ii. It might become too light to be credible – e.g. too cursory or superficial a treatment;

iii. It might become, or be perceived as, too “cosy” an assessment among professional evaluation peers, lobbying for this professional function or exercising too much “professional courtesy” in its assessments. Establishing an entity committee to support the peer review may help in overcoming this risk; or

iv. Because it requires access to sensitive information and leads to important assessments of the quality of the work of organizations and teams, each review will encounter and have to manage different views on process and substance, and could become bogged down in disputes at various levels.

4. Key questions for the UN SWAP peer reviews

- Is the entity’s reporting on the UN SWAP accurate and complete?
- Has an adequate remedial plan of action been put in place?
- Is the remedial plan of action being implemented?
- Will the entity likely meet or exceed all UN SWAP Performance Indicators by 2017?

5. Peer review process

The peer review process needs to be flexible to accommodate the different parts of the UN system. It should follow the following steps:

**Step 1:** Discuss the idea with senior managers and get their buy-in, explaining that the peer review process is central to the UN SWAP roll out, that their entity will exceed minimum requirements if it undertakes a peer review, and peer reviews are common among OECD-DAC members.

**Step 2:** Determine a partner entity and when each entity will visit the other. Selecting a similar entity in a close geographical location will reduce costs and facilitate collaboration.

**Step 3:** Determine who will be part of the review and receiving teams – there will need to be time allocated by both the host and visiting entities or approximately 3-4 days for each peer review visit.
Step 4: Before the visit, review background documents, in particular the entity gender equality policy or equivalent and strategic plan, and the last UN SWAP report, and any other key entity documents.

Step 5: At the peer review entity, hold an initial meeting with the gender unit/focal point to discuss the peer review process.

Step 6: Set up individual meetings with staff from departments responsible for meeting and exceeding the UN SWAP Performance Indicators, i.e. policy, strategic planning, HR, evaluation, audit, finance, communications etc, to discuss progress to date and challenges and opportunities. Review the remedial plan of action in each case as appropriate.

Step 7: With the assistance of the peer review focal point, draft a short report (2-3 pages) on main findings and observations, including progress since the last UN SWAP reporting period.

Step 8: Hold a joint validation meeting to present and validate the draft findings of the peer review to staff who have been involved in meetings.

Step 9: Complete the report and post it on the receiving entity website.

6. UN Women’s role

UN Women will be responsible for the following:

- Support contact between entities
- Provide guidance on the methodology to be used
- Review the draft report
- Act as a depository for completed reports
- Mediate concerning any dispute between the two peer review parties