Comparative review
of the Desk function

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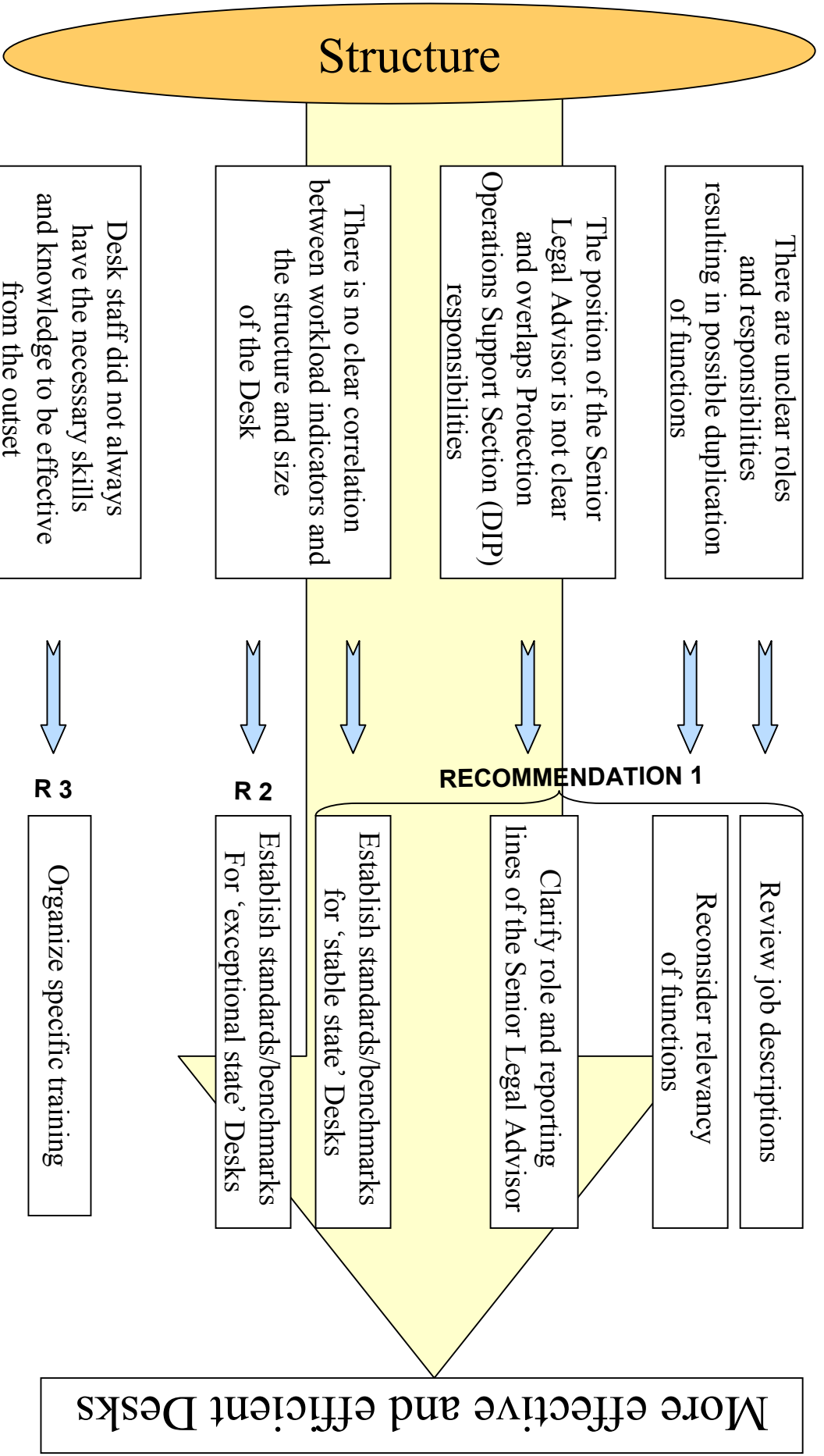# 0. Comparative review of the Desk function
Executive summary

✓ From October 2004 to January 2005, OIOS conducted a comparative review of the Desk function. The Desks act as a liaison between UNHCR Field and Headquarters and are involved in most of UNHCR's internal mechanisms and processes. The primary goal of the review was to understand the extent of the Desks' roles and responsibilities and the rationale behind the different structures, as well as to analyse the Desks' operational processes. From initial interviews with all Heads of Desk, OIOS later focused its analysis on a sample of four desks (Desk 2 for Europe, Desk 1 for Asia and Pacific, Desk 4 Afghanistan, and Desk for East and Horn of Africa) considered to be representative of both the operations[1] and protection activities of UNHCR.

✓ OIOS found that the roles and functions of the Desks needed to be more clearly established: clearer standards for the different structures, more precisely stated missions, hence roles and responsibilities, and measurable performance objectives.

✓ OIOS' review of the Desks' input in some internal processes such as the resources allocation process noted that these need to be revised and simplified.

✓ The following three charts summarise OIOS' observations and recommendations or opportunities for improvement, which are further developed in the report itself. OIOS voluntarily left some of the opportunities of improvement identified in the form of observations (shown in green in the charts) and did not turn them into concrete recommendations. It was felt that, as they were more medium to long-term objectives or applying to UNHCR as a whole, OIOS' standard follow-up procedures on the implementation of recommendations did not apply.

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[1] Throughout the report, the term 'operations' refers to all aspects of country operations excluding protection activities.

Observations

Structure

There are unclear roles
and responsibilities
resulting in possible duplication
of functions

The position of the Senior
Legal Advisor is not clear
and overlaps Protection
Operations Support Section (DIP)
responsibilities

There is no clear correlation
between workload indicators and
the structure and size
of the Desk

Desk staff did not always
have the necessary skills
and knowledge to be effective
from the outset

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Review job descriptions

Reconsider relevancy
of functions

Clarify role and reporting
lines of the Senior Legal Advisor

Establish standards/benchmarks
for 'stable state' Desks

R 2

Establish standards/benchmarks
For 'exceptional state' Desks

R 3

Organize specific training

More effective and efficient Desks

Observations

Role and responsibility

Desk staff protested at the large number of initiatives, which required their attention leading to an unfocused strategy

Support: overflow of information

UNHCR's heavy reporting requirements are not always justified or properly used

Desks are involved in processes where the added value is limited, resulting in essential functions being neglected

MSRP impact not fully taken into account

Recommendations
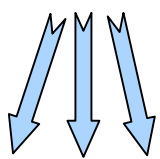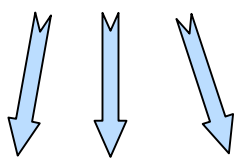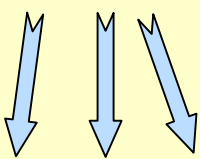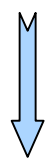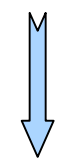
Prioritise initiatives

Develop guidelines and ways to filter information and identify priorities

R 4

Reduce number of reports

Merge specialists and general reports for integrated presentation of operations

Customise reports for offices/countries

R 5

Clarify responsibilities in the area of procurement, staffing & donor relations

Revise planning/programming and monitoring processes

Allow for more focus on strategy, analysis and evaluation/control

Amend procedures

Simplify and delegate further

Adapt to the Desks' needs and processes

More effective and efficient Desks

Assessing performance

Observations

Recommendations

Objectives were not sufficiently specified to enable performance measurement

The Field's perception of the Desk is mixed

R 7

Then

R 6

Develop SMART performance objectives and related indicators

Monitor performance

Update Chapter 2 of the UNHCR Manual

S Specific
M Measurable
A Achievable
R Relevant
T Time-bound

More effective and efficient Desks

Table of content

1. Introduction

- ✔ From October 2004 to February 2005, OIOS conducted a comparative review of the UNHCR Desk function. The audit was conducted in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

- ✔ OIOS reviewed the activities of all Desks and conducted an in-depth review of Desk 2 for Europe, Desk 1 for Asia and Pacific, Desk 4 Afghanistan, and the Desk for East and Horn of Africa.

- ✔ As outlined in the UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2, Organizational Structure and Responsibilities, the Desks are "involved in operational strategic planning, political analysis, dissemination of information and coordination, and programme support functions including monitoring, staffing, finance, procurement and administration." With such a broad definition of their functions, the role of the Bureaux and the Desks is a central one for the delivery of UNHCR field activities.

- ✔ Previous reviews of the Desk function were carried out in 1994 and 1999, but the recommendations were not fully implemented, and in some cases were found not to be practical.

2. Audit objectives

The main objectives of the audit were to:

✓ Understand how the Desks operate and to determine what the main functions of the Desks are, through collating and summarizing the differences between the Desks in terms of structure, resources and workflow processes.

✓ Evaluate the workflow processes to determine whether adequate guidance and procedures are in place and to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of internal controls.

✓ Assess the performance of the Desk function and hence, its added value; review the management tools available to measure performance and the Desks' impact on field activities.

3. Audit scope and methodology

✓ OIOS interviewed all the Heads of Desk to obtain an understanding of the function of the Desks and to identify similarities and differences in their perceived roles and responsibilities.

✓ Four Desks were selected for an in-depth review. Two "protection-oriented" Desks: Desk 2 in the Bureau for Europe, and Desk 1 in the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific and two "operations [1]-oriented" Desks: Afghanistan in the Bureau for CASWANAME and East and Horn of Africa in the Bureau for Africa.

✓ Most staff members within these four Desks were interviewed including the Senior Legal Advisers (SLAs) and Senior Resource Managers, whether (structurally) placed within or outside the Desks to understand their specific responsibilities and the detailed work processes. At the Afghanistan Desk, due to a request from the Head of Desk, the interviews were limited to the Head, the Senior Desk Officer and the Senior Resource Manager.

✓ OIOS focused, although not exclusively, on the processes linked to the following topics: planning, programming and monitoring.

✓ OIOS reviewed the four Desks' project files to understand the type of documents and correspondence maintained on file, as well as to determine the effectiveness of the Desks' oversight and evaluation of field activities.

✓ OIOS reviewed pertinent staff members' personnel files to determine whether staff assigned to a Desk function had the necessary qualifications and experience.

✓ OIOS interviewed certain field staff recently reassigned to Headquarters, and sent questionnaires to the 26 field offices falling under the purview of our four sample Desks for feedback on the Desks' performance. OIOS analysed and summarized the answers of the 19 offices (73 per cent) that replied. In view of the on-going Headquarter Review and EPAU's review of the Desk function, OIOS did not review or assess the Desks' performance towards their 'Headquarters Clients'. The review was limited to an assessment of the relationship of the Desks with the Field.

[1] Throughout the report, the term 'operations' refers to all aspects of country operations excluding protection activities.

4. Audit Findings and Recommendations

4.1. Structure and staff

4.1. Structure and staff

Our analysis of the structure of the Desks comprised an analysis of the:

✔ Organigrammes and staffing tables of the Desk;

✔ Size and resources of the Desks;

✔ Experience and skills of the staff; and

✔ Different positions in the Desks and their tasks;

In relation to the:

✔ Mission of the Desks;

✔ Functions of its staff;

✔ Processes it is involved in; and

✔ Workload.

Size

Organisational chart

Positions

Experience / skills

Workload

Processes

Functions

Mission
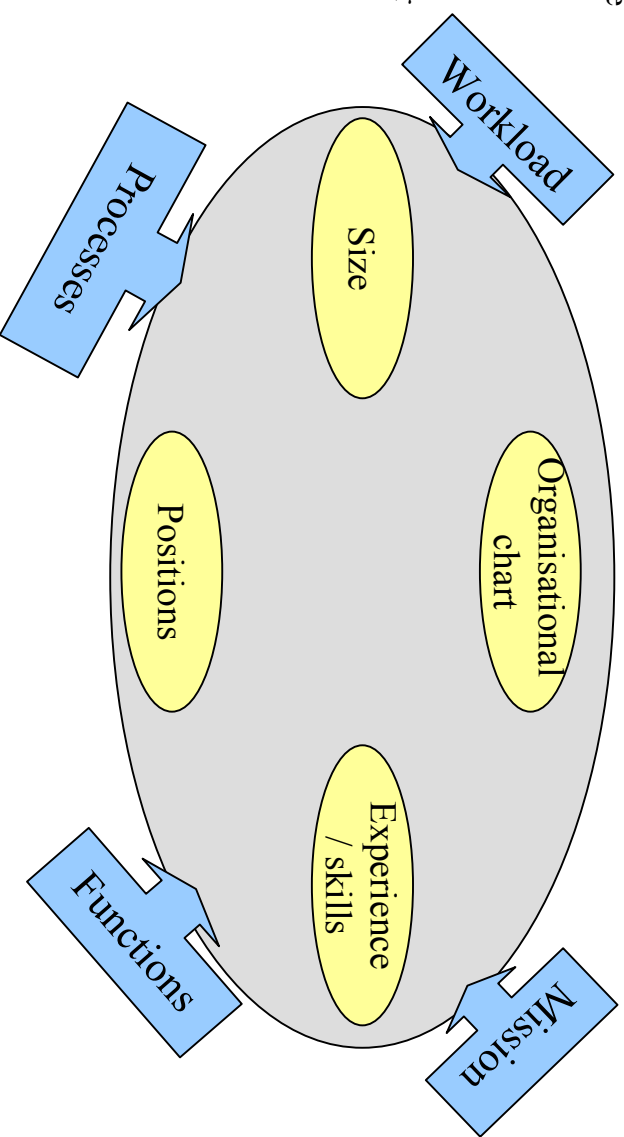
4.1. Structure and staff

✔ There are various Desks' structures in place in UNHCR.

✔ OIOS' reference points for the Desks' structures in the Bureaux were outlined in the UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2. It states:

■ For the Bureau for Asia and Pacific, Desks are lead "by a Head and supported by a Senior Legal Officer, two Desk Officers, one Programme Assistant and a Secretary".

■ The Desks for the Operations for the Sudan Situation are composed of a Head of Desk, "a Senior Desk Officer, a Desk Officer, Programme Assistants and other supporting staff".

✔ UNHCR Manual Chapter 2 does not detail the structure of a 'standard' Desk, nor does it provide a typical organigramme in other Bureaux.

✔ From an analysis of the organigrammes and staffing tables provided to OIOS, it appears that the most common structure consists of a:

■ Head of Desk - P-5

■ (Senior) Desk Officer - P-4/P-3

■ (Senior) Programme Assistant - G-7/G-6

■ Secretary.

✔ For CASWANAME, this general structure was found in two Desks (Desk 1 and Desk 2 & 3). However, the Afghan Desk and the Iraq Support Unit differed:

■ The Afghan Desk had a Senior Resource Manager instead of a second Desk Officer;

■ The Iraq Support Unit had a 'Coordinator' instead of a Head of Desk, a Senior Legal Officer, a Senior Supply Officer, an Administrative Assistant and two Secretaries.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.1. 'Standard Desks'

✔ The Desks within the Bureau for Africa had the above standard structure, though the number of Desk Officers and Programme Assistants varied from one Desk to the other. The Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia Unit was of a 'lighter' structure.

✔ The European Desks are similar to that of the Bureau of the Americas, and consisted of Desks headed by a Senior Desk Officer, assisted by a Programme Assistant, and a Desk Officer in a few cases. (A Secretary and Programme Assistant were shared.)

✔ The Asia Bureau has recently moved to a similar set-up as Europe and the Americas. Specific to the Asia and Pacific Bureau, however, the Senior Legal Advisor is integrated in the Desk.

✔ OIOS appreciates that it is often difficult to compare Bureaux due to the different nature of operations. From OIOS' review however, and our interviews with Desk staff, it appears that there was an overlap in the functions of the Head of Desk and the Senior Desk Officer. It was suggested on several occasions that these two functions be merged to avoid an additional layer of bureaucracy. The Inspector General also recommended this type of merger in 1999.

✔ OIOS' review of the job descriptions of Head of Desk and Senior Desk Officer noted that they have similar responsibilities, apart from the coaching of staff and ensuring a smooth communication flow within the Desk.

✔ In OIOS' opinion, from the information received there is a need to review the staffing structure of the Desk to determine whether it is optimal to have both a Head of Desk and a Senior Desk Officer. For larger and more complicated operations, the Senior Desk Officer could be at the P-5 level, and for smaller and more stable operations the position would stay at the P-4 level. If it is determined that, in most cases, neither positions are required, the merging of these functions would simplify the Desk structure, and possibly increase the reactivity and efficiency of the Desks' to respond to the field.

✔ OIOS also noted that Desk Officers often perform very similar functions to Senior Desk Officers, and the Heads of Desk in assigning responsibilities did not always take this 'seniority' into account.

4.1. Structure and staff

4.1.2. Structure and workload of a Desk in a 'stable state'

✓ In its analysis, OIOS acknowledged the existence of the notion of 'stable state' and 'exceptional state' Desks as developed by the 1994 Working group.

- Stable state refers to limited involvement of the Desks in the Field, as the Field is mostly in control of the implementation of its programmes.

- Exceptional state refers to situations where the demands of the Field and the operation are such that the stable state arrangements cannot adequately respond to these needs.

✓ OIOS selected indicators and compared and analysed the ones which should be representative of the workload of the Desks, as follows:

- Number of countries;
- Number of Field Offices;
- Number of Persons of concern;
- 2004 revised budget allocations;
- Number of Letters of Instruction (LOIs);
- Number of Headquarters posts; and
- Ratio of estimated staff costs (based on Standard Salary Costs) on total budget (in per cent).

✓ *In response to the comments received on the draft report, OIOS confirms that the above list of indicators was not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. UNHCR correctly mentioned that an analysis of the number of sub-projects and amount of procurement could gainfully complement OIOS' analysis.*

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.2. Structure and workload of a Desk in a 'stable state'

Table 1 : Comparative data on the UNHCR Desks' workload

	Desk	Projects (LOIs)	2004 budget (million USD)	Persons of concern	Countries	Field offices	Total number of staff	Staffing vs budget 2004 (%)
							A	
Asia and Pacific	Desk 1	21	26.7	245,278	17	21	6	3.0%
	Desk 2	11	25.9	604,156	6	9	6	3.0%
Europe	Desk 1	11	4.2	251,890	9	12	2	5.9%
	Desk 2	11	4.1	1,096,455	8	9	2	6.1%
	Desk 3	9	10.2	120,089	7	10	3	2.4%
	Desk 4	7	17.0	1,914,708	4	10	2	1.5%
	Desk 5	13	32.7	962,616	6	18	3	1.3%
Americas	Desk 1	11	5.0	25,776	20	7	2	4.6%
	Desk 2	8	11.5	221,038	12	8	4	4.3%
CASWANA ME	Desk 1	22	48.7	2,196,193	7	16	6	1.6%
	Desk 2 & 3	22	15.2	873,802	18	17	6	5.1%
	Desk 4 - Afghanistan	10	74.0	740,839	1	5	6	1.1%
	Iraq	4	74.7	162,727	1	3	8	1.6%
Africa	Liberia & Cote d'Ivoire	7	37.0	580,613	2	10	5	1.5%
	West Africa	30	42.0	430,185	11	19	6	1.8%
	Southern Africa	21	34.1	539,155	9	17	7	2.2%
	East and Horn	34	66.9	1,190,077	7	25	7	1.3%
	Central Africa GL	46	64.5	1,078,984	8	32	7	2.1%

A- The ratio was calculated based on OIOS' calculation of staffing costs (UNHCR standard salary scale per grade) on the 2004 budget.
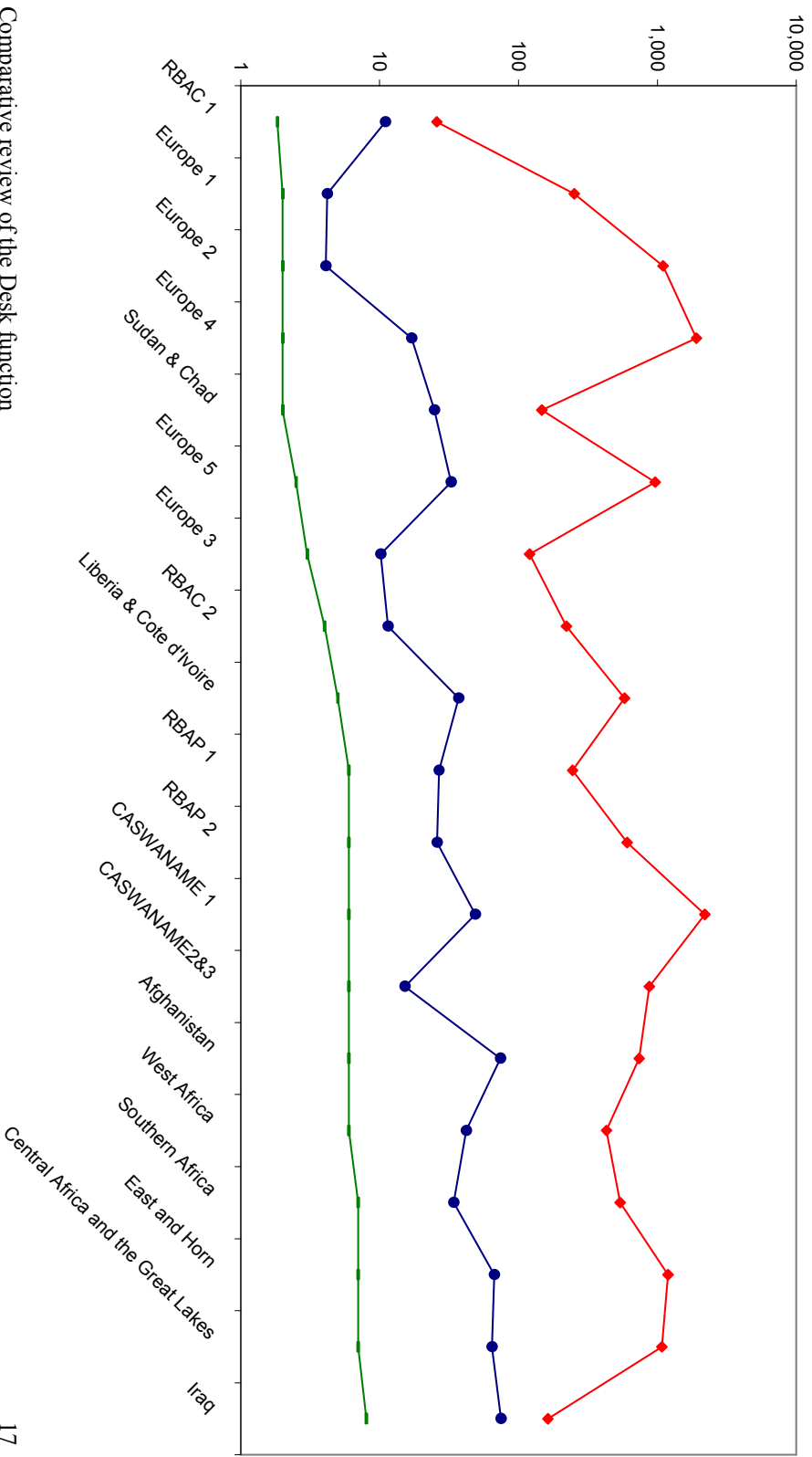
4.1. Structure and staff

4.1.2. Structure and workload of a Desk in a 'stable state'

Taking the following indicators:

- ● 2004 budget (in million USD)

- ■ Persons of concern (in thousands)

against the — total number of staff, the following chart shows the different patterns.

4.1. Structure and staff

4.1.2. Structure and workload of a Desk in a 'stable state'

✓ OIOS found some trends in the distribution of resources, but also some exceptions.

✓ The relation between the staffing levels and the budget seemed to be based on the following allocation formula: two staff members for budgets below US$ 10 million; (about) 6 staff members for budgets between US$ 25 and US$ 35 million, and 7 staff members for budgets over US$ 60 million. However we noted the following:

  ▪ Europe Desks 4 (two persons for a budget of US$ 17 million) and 5 (three persons for a budget of US$ 33 million).

  ▪ The Southern Africa Operations Desk, with a budget of US$ 34 million has 7 staff, compared to the Central Africa Desk (US$ 65 million and 7 staff members) and East and Horn of Africa Desk (US$ 67 million and 7 staff members).

  ▪ Europe Desk 5 has a budget similar to that of the Southern Africa Operations and more persons of concern yet, their staffing consists of respectively 3 and 7 staff members.

✓ OIOS found that within the Bureaux the total cost of staff per Desk was correlated to the total budget. Most Desks had staffing costs representing about 1.5 to 3 per cent of their budget. There are notable exceptions, as Desks 1 and 2 of the Europe Bureau amounted to 6 per cent.

✓ When comparing these ratios to the nature of the activities and the type of support provided, it appears that regions involving protection and lobbying tend to have higher ratios as they require more policy monitoring and guidance at the Headquarters level.

✓ Operational Desks focus more on the provision of goods and services to the field, thus require more financial than staff input.

✓ OIOS understands the need for flexibility in the Desks' structure, as not all operations and regions have the same needs. OIOS would however expect a clearer correlation between workload indicators and staffing levels. Taking this into consideration, in OIOS' view, UNHCR should identify logical and rational minimum standards and a framework based on representative indicators, yet at the same time enabling adaptation to the specific needs of the Desks.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.3. Structure and workload of a Desk in an 'exceptional state'

✓ Over time, the South Eastern Europe Operation provides a good example of progressively decreasing workload with a significant decrease in the number of staff of the Desk (from 13 to 3 in the course of one year).

✓ The Iraq Support Unit, on the other hand, seems heavily staffed compared to the 2003 budget level, and some positions need to be justified, for example the Senior Supply Officer. Procurement in the Middle East region in 2003 amounted to US$ 16.8 million* as compared to the South West Asia Region (Afghanistan), which reached US$ 42.5 million* in 2002, without a dedicated Supply Officer positioned in the Desk.

   ▪ OIOS appreciates the significant difference between the operations, but the differences between the types of staff required was not very clear.

✓ The Afghanistan Desk has a Senior Resource Manager position. The functional overlap with the Senior Desk Officer was mentioned to OIOS. As most of the resources derive initially from Special Budget (SB), the monitoring and reporting workload it induced may have justified the position in the Desk. However the position was extended well after the operation was fully funded under the Annual Budget (AB), which probably increased the overlap of the remaining functions of the Senior Resource Manager and the Senior Desk Officer. *UNHCR stated that operational modalities/ programme support functions under AB remain the same as in SB.*

✓ The Desks for the Special Operations in Sudan have a Senior Resource Manager.

✓ The Iraq Support Unit, although it had a US$ 74 million Special Budget in 2004, did not have a Senior Resource Manager, but instead a Finance/Project Control Officer. Whether the decision to modify the administrative support (from Senior Resource Manager to Project Control Officer) within the Iraq Support Unit resulted from lessons learned from the Afghanistan Desk was not clear.

✓ *The Bureau of CASWANAME did not agree that the Iraq and Afghan Desks should be assessed using the same parameters in regard to the creation of a Project Co-ordinator post instead of an Senior Resource Manager. Since the Iraq and Afghan operations were very different in scope and volume, and any lessons learned would have to be clearly qualified.*

* Per FMIS

4.1. Structure and staff

4.1.3. Structure and workload of a Desk in an 'exceptional state'

- ✓ The UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2 states that during large-scale, complex emergencies where the current capacity of a Bureau is exceeded, a Special Operations Unit may be created either within, or as a separate entity to, a Bureau. Such Special Operations will have a Coordinator or Regional Coordinator reporting to the Bureau Director or directly to the High Commissioner in the case of a separate organizational entity, or other senior manager as designated by the High Commissioner.

- ✓ OIOS noted that Special Unit/Desk structures have been created for operations in South Eastern Europe, Iraq and the Sudan Situation.

- ✓ While OIOS appreciates the need for UNHCR to be able to react quickly to new situations and be flexible to change, it was stated to OIOS that the decision to create new Desks' structures and take the responsibilities out of the 'traditional' Desk were not always transparent nor was the need to establish Special Units/Desks clear. If the 'traditional' structure was not effective, or was deemed not to be the ideal solution for an emerging emergency, an evaluation should have been done to determine the reasons why and to draw lessons learned for future situations.

- ✓ In some cases, in the past, it appears that available resources and donors' interests have influenced the size of a Special Unit more than objective workload patterns. *In its reply to the draft Report, UNHCR concurred that the donor-drivenness of some Special Budgets applies to emergency Desks as well.*

- ✓ OIOS noted that while the Handbook for Emergencies provides useful guidance on a variety of activities such as procurement, staffing levels, supervision, etc., clear standards/criteria still need to be developed for the establishment of a Special Unit/Desk to support these emergencies from a Headquarter perspective.

- ✓ The need to establish criteria for the creation of an 'Emergency Desk' was actively discussed at the Evaluation Policy and Analysis Unit (EPAU) Reference Group (comprising (Senior) Desk Officers, Programme Assistants and staff members from other UNHCR Units such as the Division of Financial and Support Management, the Emergency and Security Service, the Division of Human Resources Management and the MSRP implementation team) in February 2005. There was a consensus that a policy should be developed of what an Emergency Desk should comprise including its structure and the staffing expertise required, which would be dependent on the estimated size of the emergency and the potential risks associated with it.

- ✓ OIOS also understands that work has already begun in the development of such a policy.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.4. Experience of Desk staff

✓ Desk positions require a thorough knowledge and understanding of the main processes of UNHCR with regard to planning, programming and reporting, as well as an understanding of all the other Units interacting with the Desk/Field such as the Operations Review Board (ORB) and the Division of External Relations (DER) for dealing with donors, etc.

✓ OIOS' review of personnel records concluded that, in general, Desk staff had the necessary skills and experience as required by the job description.

   ▪ The average length of relevant experience varied from nearly 19 years for Heads of Desk, and 14 to 16 years for Senior Desk Officers and Desk Officers respectively. Field experience was found to be quite extensive with an average of 9, 6 and 14 years respectively.

✓ OIOS noted, however, that what could be interpreted as increased responsibility for the Senior Desk Officer in the Bureau for Europe (performing some of the functions of a Head of Desk in other Bureaux) did not translate into a higher experience requirement, though the incumbent's protection background was taken into account where this position was regarded to be a more a protection oriented post.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.5. Skills of Desk staff

✓ While staff had the experience and years of service required for Desk positions, per the job descriptions, they did not always have the necessary skills to be fully effective from the outset.

✓ Staff recently reassigned from the field mentioned that (Senior) Desk Officers tended to lack practical experience and understanding of systems and procedures (MSRP, IPR Project Management Systems, ORB, dealing with donors), and some (Senior) Desk Officers interviewed agreed that they did not come to the position with adequate knowledge of the workings of Headquarters.

✓ OIOS was informed that Programme Assistants often had to provide on-the-job training to new Desk staff (in one case estimated at 20 to 30 per cent of their time), which may not be an efficient use of a Programme Assistant's time.

✓ Further, OIOS noted that Desk staff did not always have a sound understanding of the geographical area they covered, as staff could be assigned to a Desk regardless of their prior knowledge of the countries to be covered.

✓ OIOS noted that solid knowledge of Headquarters systems and procedures is not a requirement for the appointment at a position in the Desk, neither was there a need to have experience in the geographical area to be covered. Moreover, on assignment to a Desk, there are no standard orientation meetings, detailed briefings or training of Desk staff, to enhance their skills and knowledge.

✓ OIOS appreciates that with UNHCR's rotational policy it is not possible to assign to Desks staff with all the relevant skills and knowledge of the working environment. However, these issues should be addressed by UNHCR to ensure satisfactory Desk performance and more efficient management of Desks.

✓ The issue of the lack of pertinent training was also raised in the 1994 Working Group.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.4. Skills of Desk staff – Field missions

✓ To ensure adequate knowledge of field activities, field missions should be an essential part of all Desk staff's activities. OIOS found that in general travel undertaken was insufficient, and some Desk staff had never visited some of the countries under their responsibility at all. Most Desk staff agreed that there should be a minimum of two field visits per year to enable them to fully appreciate significant country programmes and the associated field constraints. Not all Desk staff managed to achieve this bear minimum.

✓ OIOS appreciates that there are sometimes conflicting priorities and budgetary constraints. Nonetheless, this should be an important function of the Desk that should not be overlooked.

✓ In response to OIOS' questionnaire to field offices, 74 per cent considered field visits by Desk staff essential to understand field operations.

✓ According to one Field Office, the effectiveness and added value of the Desks was directly related to field visits. Others mentioned the usefulness of visits, especially in the period of the Country Operations Plan (COP) preparation. In particular, the practice of the Afghanistan Desk to organize working groups with the different stakeholders to prepare the COP and to provide systematic feedback thereafter can be highlighted as a valuable one.

4.1. Structure and staff

4.1.6. Position of the Legal Adviser vis a vis the Desks

✔ The position of the Senior Legal Advisers varies from Bureau to Bureau:

- In the Bureau for Asia and Pacific, they form part of the Desk,
- In the Europe Bureau, they are integrated in a separate Policy Unit, and
- In the Africa and CASWANAME Bureaux, they are in a separate Legal Advice Unit.

✔ In OIOS' opinion, each of these structures have their own advantages. Senior Legal Advisers assigned to the Desk develop strong operations knowledge and benefit from close coordination with the Desk Officers. Separate Legal Units allow Senior Legal Advisers to closely interact with colleagues (direct legal feedback) and provide clearer reporting lines. They guarantee consistency of policies throughout the region and complementary expertise provided by several Senior Legal Advisers.

✔ The position of the Legal Adviser however needs further clarification. Desk Officers seek the input of Legal Advisers only when they consider it necessary, whereas the Legal Advisers, in order to do their job properly, should be involved in, or at least have an overall view of all the issues that may have legal implications.

✔ Legal Advisers were not always consulted on the COP, which is contrary to IOM/FOM/020/2004 on Parameters and Procedures for review of 2005 Country Operations Plans and Headquarters Plans, which prevents a consistent Protection and Operations approach.

✔ Some concerns were also raised as to the supervision of the Legal Advisers by the Director of the Bureau, considering the latter's non-legal background that does not always allow for proper evaluation of legal performance. A second reporting line is created *de facto* as the Legal Adviser obtains the necessary legal guidance from the Department of International Protection (DIP).

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.6. Position of the Legal Adviser vis a vis the Desks

✓ Another concern rests with the overlap of the function of the Legal Advisers in the Bureaux and that of the Protection Operations Support Section (POS). Following UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2, both are responsible for providing advice and support to field operations and mainstreaming policies and standards. As both have a geographical responsibility, the risk of duplication of work is high. Legal/Protection Officers in the Bureaux confirmed that their terms of reference coincide with those of POS. From this perspective, OIOS is in accord with the Board of Auditors' recommendation that "UNHCR review the terms of reference and procedures of the Protection Operations Support Section, with a view to streamline and optimise the relations with the Bureaux and the support provided to protection field operations". UNHCR agreed, within its 2005 restructuring effort, to review the terms of reference and procedures of the POS.

4.1. Structure and staff
4.1.7. Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The UNHCR Department of Operations, in order to streamline and rationalize the Desks' structure and its resources, should develop a standard Desk structure for 'stable state' operations, through:

- Reviewing the functions and job descriptions of the Desks with regard to their coherence and relevance, and eliminate the duplication of functions between a Head of Desk and a Senior Desk Officer;

- Establishing guidelines for the staffing resources allocated to each Desk, taking into account representative workload indicators (such as number of countries, number of Field Offices, number of persons of concern, budget allocations, number of Letters of Instruction, number of Headquarters posts and ratio of estimated staff costs on total budget) and considering each Desk's resources along these guidelines;

- Clarifying the role and reporting lines of Senior Legal Advisers (Rec. 01).

Recommendation 2:

The UNHCR Department of Operations should determine criteria for establishing Special Units or Emergency Desks, and develop standards related to the actual workload for the allocation of human resources and expertise (supply management, administration and telecommunications) if it is determined that such expertise is better placed in the Desk rather than remaining within the functional Units at Headquarters (Rec. 02).

Recommendation 3:

The UNHCR Department of Operations in cooperation with the Division of Human Resources Management (Staff Development Section) should develop standard orientation training programmes for new Heads of Desk and (Senior) Desk Officers with a view to enhance the performance of the Desks. It should include the functions of Units at Headquarters, the processes involving the Desks, their responsibilities, as well as the Desks' functions, programming systems and procedures from a Headquarters perspective. The training could be module-based with staff selecting topics where they need to enhance their knowledge (Rec. 03).

In response to the draft report, UNHCR stated that with a clear job description and keeping in mind how universal Desk Officers' knowledge and skills have to be, Desk Officers should be able to enhance their knowledge in the areas where they need it with the variety of learning programmes already existing. OIOS believes however that consistent and comprehensive training is not always best achieved by relying on individual judgment.
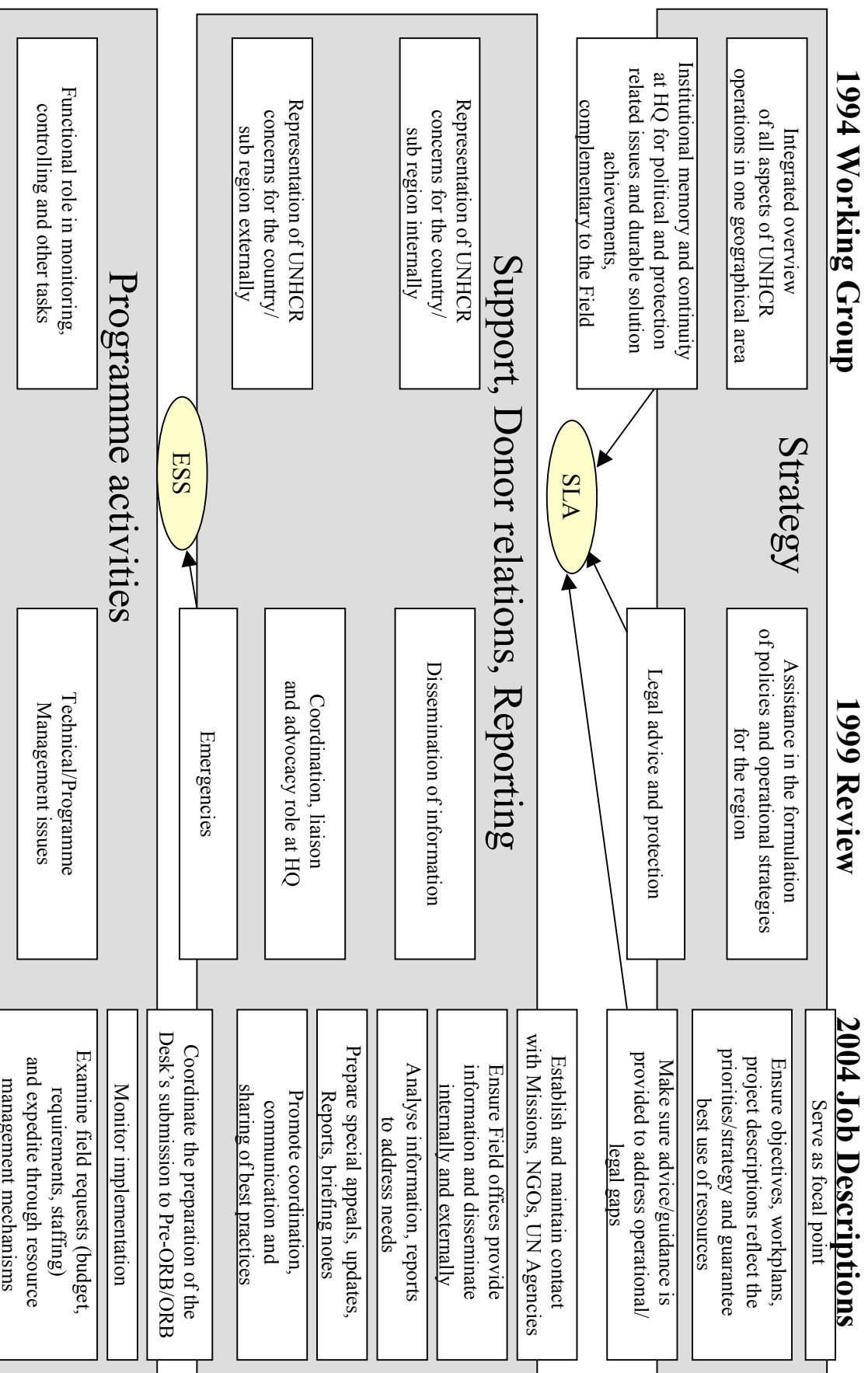
4.2. Roles and responsibilities of the Desks

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

- ✔ OIOS could not find a clear and consistent description of the functions and role of the Desk other than that already referred to in the UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2 (which was very limited), and in Desk staff's job descriptions.

- ✔ The 1994 review concluded that the Desk was confronted with "unclear delineation of responsibilities, [...] differing and conflicting interpretation of the role of the Desk [...], confusion over the extent to which the Desk or Bureau should take on functional roles [...], and disagreement over the extent of Desk involvement [...]";

- ✔ The 1999 review called for a clarification of the future roles of the Desk. Appropriate action was not taken, and in OIOS' opinion the roles and responsibilities have still to be clarified.

- ✔ In trying to assess the current situation, OIOS reviewed all available relevant documentation, manuals and instructions, and solicited the views of the Desks and the Field on the roles of the Desk.

- ✔ Building upon:

  - Conclusions of the 1994 Working Group;
  - Findings of the 1999 review; and
  - Current job descriptions of Desk positions;

- ✔ OIOS identified the following main functions of the Desk for further analysis:

  - Strategy;
  - Support;
  - Donor relations;
  - Reporting; and
  - Programme-related activities (planning, programming, implementing and monitoring)

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

1994 Working Group | **1999 Review** | **2004 Job Descriptions**

Strategy

- Integrated overview of all aspects of UNHCR operations in one geographical area

- Institutional memory and continuity at HQ for political and protection related issues and durable solution achievements, complementary to the Field

- Assistance in the formulation of policies and operational strategies for the region

- Serve as focal point

- Ensure objectives, workplans, project descriptions reflect the priorities/strategy and guarantee best use of resources

SLA

- Legal advice and protection

- Make sure advice/guidance is provided to address operational/ legal gaps

Support, Donor relations, Reporting

- Representation of UNHCR concerns for the country/ sub region internally

- Representation of UNHCR concerns for the country/ sub region externally

- Dissemination of information

- Coordination, liaison and advocacy role at HQ

- Establish and maintain contact with Missions, NGOs, UN Agencies

- Ensure Field offices provide information and disseminate internally and externally

- Analyse information, reports to address needs

- Prepare special appeals, updates, Reports, briefing notes

- Promote coordination, communication and sharing of best practices

ESS

- Emergencies

Programme activities

- Functional role in monitoring, controlling and other tasks

- Technical/Programme Management issues

- Coordinate the preparation of the Desk's submission to Pre-ORB/ORB

- Monitor implementation

- Examine field requests (budget, requirements, staffing) and expedite through resource management mechanisms

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4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.1. Strategy

✓ Some of the functions of the Desks, as identified in 1994 and 1999, have been repositioned in the Bureau (rather than the Desk). For example in accordance with UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2:

▪ In terms of policy development and research, "the Bureau Director takes the lead role for his/her region as a whole in accordance with the HC, DHC and AHC, the Representatives/Chiefs and support services at Headquarters [...]".

▪ SRMs are responsible for assisting the Directors of the Bureaux "in strategic and operations planning, coordinate programming, and support offices in the Field in monitoring and reallocating resources in response to new developments and changing circumstances".

▪ Legal advice is in the purview of the Senior Legal Advisor, and only under the Desk's responsibility in the Bureau for Asia and Pacific.

▪ "In conjunction with the Senior Resource Managers, the Desks in each Bureau are also involved in operational strategic planning, political analysis, dissemination of information and coordination, and programme support functions including monitoring, staffing, finance, procurement and administration."

✓ OIOS found that Desk staff are sometimes focal points for the developments of one or several initiatives or projects (Internally Displaced Populations, Gender and Age, Fundraising). This means that they have to attend related meetings, disseminate the information in the Bureau and advise the Field and others in the Desk/Bureau on the topic. They also have the responsibility to relay all initiatives to the Field to ensure their proper implementation.

✓ Most of the Desk staff interviewed admitted that due to their support functions, information overload and daily 'emergencies' there was not much time left for strategic planning and direction. The 1994 review confirmed this and reported in this regard that "some functions of the Desks were neglected, namely contingency and forward planning and formulation of strategies at the sub-regional and regional levels".

✓ Also a strong statement was put forward whereby the Desks resented the scattering of resources among so many initiatives.

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.1. Strategy

✔ Considering the number of initiatives, in OIOS' view the multiplicity of priorities results in additional workload, which can distract the Desks from their core support functions. Desk staff indicated that their involvement in such activities was time-consuming and inferred that it was not always clear what their responsibilities were, nor did they always have the expertise or resources to assist field operations in these matters.

✔ Nonetheless, Desk staff are in many cases in an opportune position as they have a unique 'bird's eye' view of country operations within a certain region. Desks, therefore, can add value if they provide proper analysis of what is implemented in neighbouring countries and assist in exchanging best practices. This could achieve more synergy and consistency in the sub-region. Staff in the field confirmed they would welcome such an approach.

✔ In OIOS' view the involvement of Desk staff in strategy needs to be further clarified to ensure a coherent approach and a better understanding of what their roles and responsibilities are in this area.

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.2. Support

✔ The majority of Heads of Desk interviewed saw their main role as one of support. The 2005 EPAU Reference Group on the Desk concluded that the orientation and focus of the Desks was towards the Field, meaning that there was little, if any, room for the Desk function to service Headquarters.

✔ Replies to OIOS' questionnaire confirmed this understanding, and field offices highlighted the coordinating and liaising function of the Desks as the main one (72 per cent), essentially relating to budget and resources (61 per cent). They regretted the lack of systematic feedback and practical advice (67 per cent) and would welcome more support in the areas of operations and programmes (68 per cent), protection (47 per cent) and policy or global initiatives (42 per cent).

✔ The UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2 identifies the primary role of the Bureau Directors as "advising and assisting the High Commissioner and Assistant High Commissioner in the formulation of policy and directing their development and promulgation". On the primary role of the Desks, the Manual is not clear. The impression was widely shared among Desk staff that their focus was progressively shifting to "feed-in the Headquarters' machinery" rather than truly supporting the Field.

✔ OIOS found it difficult to measure the effectiveness of the Desks' role in their support function, as most of it was provided via E-mail. Although this method of communication is very efficient and practical, indicators of the Desks' support function performance are 'hidden' and hence not easily measurable.

✔ OIOS identified that E-mail was becoming a problem for Desks, particularly those supporting an emergency operation. There is information overload, and it was mentioned that in some cases reading and answering E-mails was a full-time job. Considering the volume of information, some system needs to be introduced to enable Desk staff to prioritise requests and work commitments.

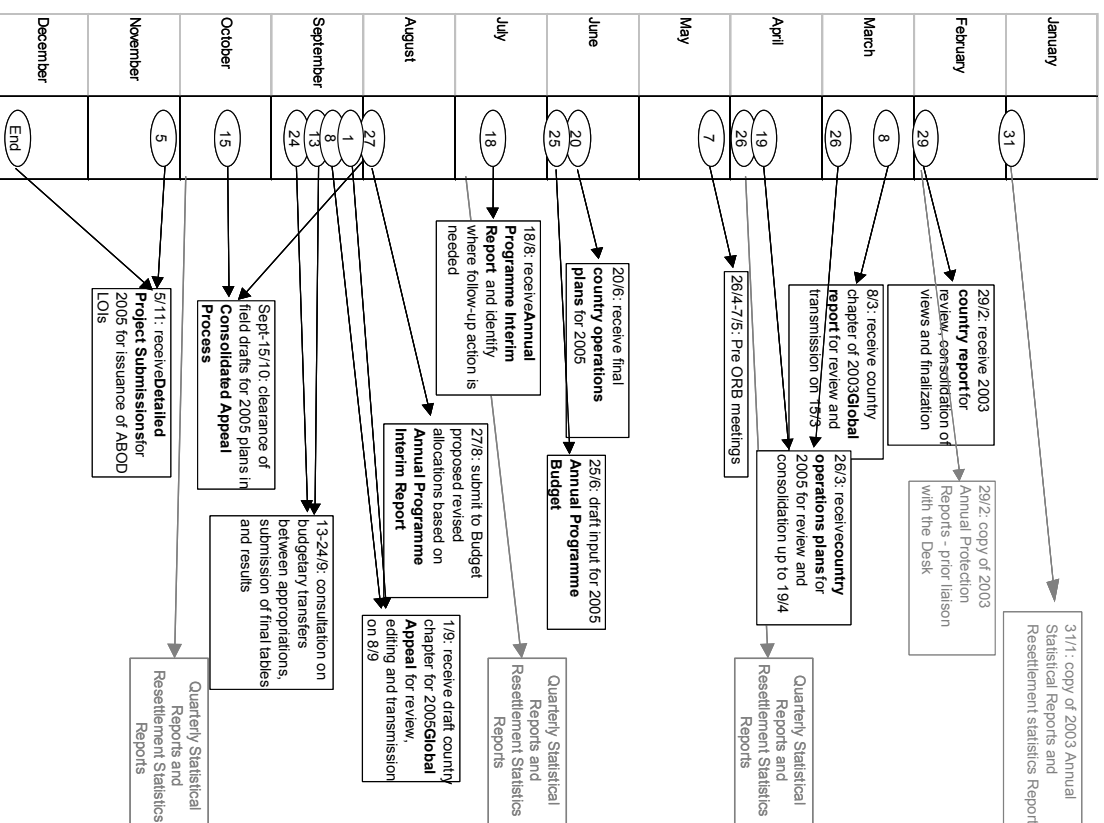# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

4.2.3. Donor relations

Donor relations

⌄ The extent of the Desks' involvement in fundraising activities and donor relations is mainly left to the Desks' discretion. Some staff stated to be heavily involved (Desk 2 for the Americas); some indicated their participation in donor meetings, including accompanying DER on mission and one Desk mentioned that they were heavily involved from a marketing aspect and had to 'sell' their operations to donors. Others rely entirely on DER, and just provided the necessary raw information as input.

⌄ OIOS noted that in all cases Desks were expected to provide *ad hoc* information as and when required for donor related purposes. However, as up-to-date information was not always at hand, such requests were normally re-directed to the Field.

⌄ The EPAU Reference Group confirmed that, although staff at Headquarters received many pertinent reports on field activities such as the Situation Reports (SitReps), it was not always easy to find the information they required and they often had to revert to the Field for up-to-date information. This was seen as a drain on both the Desks' and Field staff resources.

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

4.2.4. Reporting

✓ All Desks mentioned the increasingly overwhelming reporting tasks, both standard and *ad hoc*. In this regard, the Field and the Desks' opinion concur. The reporting responsibility rests mainly with the Field.

✓ Reporting requirements were found to be very demanding - OIOS therefore decided to further analyse the 2004 standard reporting requirements.

✓ It was established that there were 17 reports, which needed to be submitted, most of them due in September, with at least one specific reporting requirement each month. It is appreciated, however, that their complexity varies and that they are not always dealt with by the same person.

✓ The graph does not take into account the ad-hoc reports requested, for which Desks either have to draft or significantly contribute to.

✓ OIOS noted that a recent inventory of reports was made, which included all internal reports to UNHCR, mentions specific donor submissions and reports, input for reports to the General Assembly, Notes for the File or Audit replies.

✓ OIOS has been made aware that a working group has been established to review UNHCR's reporting requirements and identify those who add value.

| Month		
January	31	31/1: copy of 2003 Annual Statistical Reports and Resettlement statistics Report
February	29	29/2: receive 2003 **country report** for review, consolidation of views and finalization / 29/2: copy of 2003 Annual Protection Reports - prior liaison with the Desk
March	26 / 8	8/3: receive country chapter of 2003 **Global report** for review and transmission on 15/3
April	19 / 26	26/3: receive **country operations plans** for 2005 for review and consolidation up to 19/4 / Quarterly Statistical Reports and Resettlement Statistics Reports
May	7	26/4-7/5: Pre ORB meetings
June	20 / 25	20/6: receive final **country operations plans** for 2005 / 25/6: draft input for 2005 **Annual Programme Budget**
July	18	18/8: receive **Annual Programme Interim Report** and identify where follow-up action is needed
August		27/8: submit to Budget proposed revised allocations based on **Annual Programme Interim Report**
September	1 / 8 / 13 / 24 / 27	Sept-15/10: clearance of field drafts for 2005 plans in **Consolidated Appeal Process** / 13-24/9: consultation on budgetary transfers between appropriations, submission of final tables and results / 1/9: receive draft country chapter for 2005 **Global Appeal** for review, editing and transmission on 8/9 / Quarterly Statistical Reports and Resettlement Statistics Reports
October	15	5/11: receive **Detailed Project Submissions** for 2005 for issuance of ABOD LOIs
November	5	Quarterly Statistical Reports and Resettlement Statistics Reports
December	End	

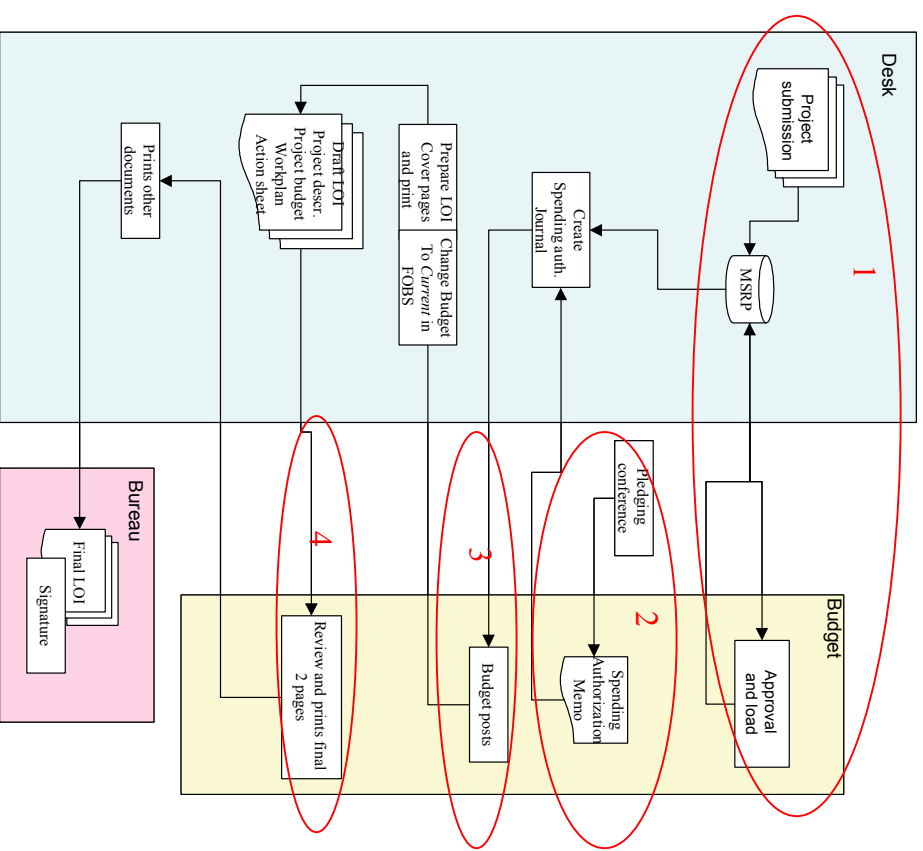# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.4. Reporting

✔ The responsibility for the annual reporting requirements as listed in the previous page mainly lies with the Field. It is noteworthy to mention that the reporting requirements are similar for all Desks and all Field Offices, irrespective of size, staffing levels, persons of concern, budget and/or dynamics in the field. The Desks' input on the reports by the field was perceived as limited (67 per cent of the respondents).

✔ The EPAU Reference Group highlighted that Desks staff did not agree on what their responsibilities with regard to reporting were. Some indicated that considerable time was spent in editing and clarifying issues documented in the report for which the Field should be responsible, others welcomed the review process and perceived it as one of their valuable contributions to Field activities.

✔ There was an overall feeling by Field staff, and to a lesser extent by Desk staff, as to the relevance of some of the reports. An example is the Sitrep, which is submitted monthly, weekly or bi-weekly, depending on the emergency status of the Field. It was stated that the Sitreps were hardly ever read, let alone commented on.

✔ Though the focus of the various reports and their audience seem to differ, it became clear during the interviews with staff that many reporting requirements are dealt with in a 'copy-cut-paste' way due to the heavy demands.

✔ Though certain reports serve a clear and specific purpose (e.g. Annual Statistical report, Annual Protection Report), important issues could be overlooked because the Desks lacked an overall picture regarding the different issues discussed in the various reports.

✔ On the other hand, the more general reports (e.g. Country Operations Plan (COP), Global Appeal) often lack the detail and focus of the specific ones. It has thus been suggested that, rather than having several reports regarding different topics and more general reports covering general issues, there should be one consolidated report, that integrates all those issues of interest, so that potential weaknesses, needs and conflicts can be more easily identified.

✔ The Joint Inspection Unit suggested in its Review of the Management and Administration of UNHCR that "the Executive Committee […] consider modifying the budget cycle from annual to biennial" to eliminate intermediary steps of the programming process and bring attention to longer-term goals. If implemented, such a change should be used to alleviate some of the programming and reporting requirements of stable operations and long-term strategy operations, and to simplify the Country Operations Plan process analysed below.

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning → Programming → Implementing → **Closing**

Monitoring
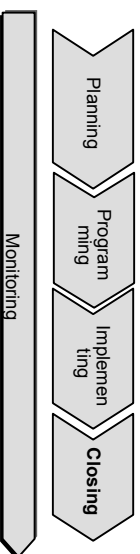
- ✓ An essential function of the Desks is their involvement in the annual planning process (related to the COP preparation and pre-ORB process). OIOS reviewed these processes to identify variations in the implementation of applicable rules and instructions and documented differences between the Desks selected as our sample.

- ✓ OIOS' analysis determined that the Desks could gain in effectiveness and efficiency if:

  - ▪ Built-in MSRP controls allowed for alleviating some of the specific controls seen throughout the Spending Authority and LOI processes. As an illustration, there are four layers of controls performed by Budget in the LOI process (highlighted in this chart), even though the project's budget initially loaded cannot be overriden by the Desks.

  - ▪ Desks were not involved in every step of the programming and implementing processes, but only in a few essential steps where they can contribute substantially to that process, and where added-value is evident.

- ✓ The re-direction of Desks' efforts away from the detailed annual planning exercise would save time and allow them to re-focus on other issues such as strategy and policy. This would meet the Field's expectations (42 per cent of the field respondents would welcome more support on policy and/or global issues).

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning

Program ming

Implemen ting

Closing
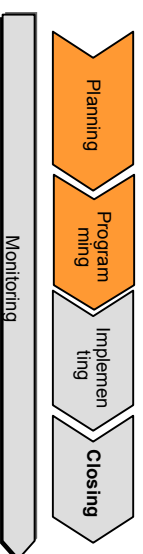
Monitoring

✔ OIOS was unable to quantify the added-value of the Desk or of the various Headquarter Units, regarding the COP and Project Submissions, as intermediate versions of documents initially drafted or completed by the field were seldom filed and maintained by the Desk.

✔ Various inputs and reasons behind major changes to the planning documents and/or management decisions to make changes were not always properly documented or shared with field offices.

✔ The Bureau for Africa initiated a COP Review Committee comprising the two Deputy Directors and the Senior Resource Manager to assess the quality and provide input for improvement and enhancement of the submissions with the Desk. The Committee takes systematic minutes, that are shared with all Desks. This practice could be emulated by other Bureaux, as it keeps a record of what changes are necessary and could be used as lessons learned for future submissions.

✔ Considerable efforts are made to prepare the annual COP, but once completed, OIOS was informed it was rarely used as a reference document, or as a baseline against which levels of achievements could be measured.

✔ *In response to the draft report, UNHCR mentioned that every year a comprehensive programme review takes place at Headquarters. This year, the responsibility of reviewing and validating field submissions was passed over to the Bureau, with emphasis on Bureau-field interaction for finalising submissions and bringing them in line with global objectives and parameters. Also, the COP process has been revised for the 2006 submission and now contains baseline, objectives, targets and budgets per sector that will serve as monitoring and reporting tools.*

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning	Program ming	Implemen ting	Closing

Monitoring
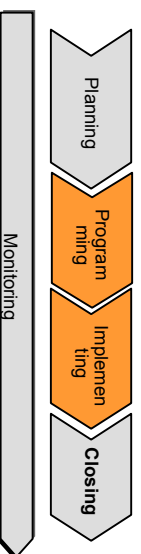
Controls and MSRP

✔ The effect of MSRP on the role of the Desks will not be fully comprehended until it is rolled-out to the field and effectively working in that environment. However, even at this early stage OIOS noted a few areas where procedures and controls could be streamlined.

✔ The Budget Section is responsible for entering the ORB budget in MSRP and also responsible for making budgetary changes to the initial budget once the COP is approved, as well as for the spending authority levels. The Budget Section also clears project budgets, once uploaded by the Programme Assistant, and consolidated obligation plans from the Field, before the LOIs and the amendments to them are issued. This is done following clearance by either the Head of Desk or the (Senior) Desk Officer and the Senior Resource Manager.

✔ MSRP introduced an additional control: it rejects input or transactions that differ from budgets or data already in the system (e.g. name of Implementing Partners). Only the Budget and Finance Sections can enter the system to override or amend such data.

✔ In OIOS' view, as MSRP offers stronger internal controls, this should lead to increased delegation in the programming process.

✔ Overall, OIOS is of the opinion that, in the change process associated with MSRP, UNHCR still needs to:

▪ Carefully study the impact of MSRP on the processes and use its full potential to simplify procedures and effectively delegate decisions to the Bureau, and the Field; and

▪ Develop MSRP in view of the specific requirements of the Desks in the areas of project implementation and monitoring, in line with the integrated nature of the ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning software).

✔ These steps, whether undertaken now or after the roll-out of MSRP to the Field, fall into a medium-term project frame that OIOS will keep under review.

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning

Program ming

Implemen ting

Closing

Monitoring
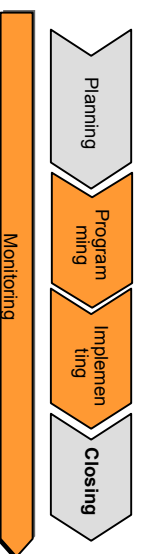
ᵛ According to the UNHCR Manual, Chapter 4, Section 7, "project managers (usually Desks/Sections) at Headquarters will maintain their own project file in order to monitor and control the level of expenditure against the approved budget, and to ensure that the level of expenditure does not exceed the authorized obligation level. The project file should contain copies of the relevant reports received from the Field Office"

ᵛ The project records maintained by the Desks were not systematically the same and in many cases appeared to be incomplete or did not systematically maintain what OIOS saw as key information for the monitoring of projects (e.g. SPMRs, budget variance analysis, audit certificates). The type and quality of the documentation on file varied significantly from one Desk to another, from scarce, to general (SPMRs) or specific (fact sheets and communication to donors, minutes of the Committee on Contracts)

ᵛ No matter what the detail of the information in the project files maintained by the Desks, it mainly consisted of copies of implementing instruments.

ᵛ A review of the documents as well as discussions with Desk staff indicated that the lack of information available at the Desk level did not facilitate proper monitoring. If project monitoring is determined as one of the main functions of the Desk, appropriate action is required to develop procedures to ensure project monitoring and evaluation is effective.

ᵛ *In response to the draft report, UNHCR stated that the LOI delegates the authority for implementation to the Representative, and it is him/her who is responsible for the delivery of planned activities, and effective monitoring can only take place in the field.*

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning | Program ming | Implemen ting | Closing

Monitoring
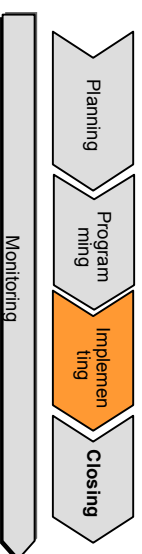
✔ The Desks' involvement in procurement activities is fairly limited, but the responsibility of the Desk versus that of the Supply Management Service (SMS) is not clear.

✔ From OIOS' interviews with Desk Officers and Programme Assistants, procurement appeared to be a secondary issue, whereas the field staff considered it as an essential topic for the Desk to follow-up on and improve.

✔ The responsibility to follow-up on the status of Headquarter procurement and to keep field offices updated on the progress of the procurement pipeline was not clear. Some Desks do keep field offices informed through accessing MSRP, others indicated that they thought this was SMS' responsibility.

✔ One responsibility of the Desk in the area of procurement is to represent the field at the Committee on Contracts (CoC) meetings.

▪ In an internal memorandum, dated 29 October 2004, the Controller had reminded the Heads of Desk of their responsibility to attend the CoC and not to delegate their responsibility.

▪ In response some action was taken by Heads of Desk, but it was limited. OIOS observed from the minutes of the CoC from October to December 2004 that only two Heads of Desk, out of the six Desks concerned, attended one Committee meeting in December.

▪ *In response to the draft report, UNHCR felt that it would have been useful to cite the number of Senior Desk Officer/Desk Officers that attended the CoC. OIOS appreciates this comment, but would highlight that the concern of the Controller related to the widespread practice of Heads of Desk to delegate attendance at the CoC to other staff.*

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

| Planning | Program ming | Implemen ting | **Closing** |
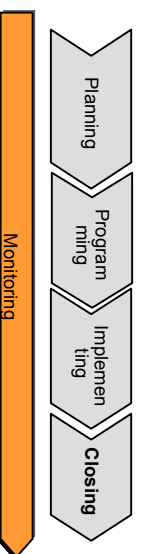
Monitoring

✓ The Desks have a function of monitoring and oversight that is not restricted to budgetary and financial monitoring, and, although implementation is fully delegated to the Field Representatives, the Desks could more effectively follow-up on the delivery of planned activities. The process analysis showed that the Desks have little information to monitor activities (as an example, they hardly ever receive the narrative part of SPMRs).The Desks agreed that they could not adequately assess progress or project implementation. It was also mentioned that the emphasis at Headquarters lies purely with arbitration of resources' allocation and cash flow management, and that the quality of implementation is no longer monitored at the Desk level, but left to the field.

✓ The financial monitoring by the Desks raises questions as well. The Desks are not the recipient of the Field Monthly Accounts, which are sent directly by Field Offices to Finance. This complete dichotomy of budget and expenditure monitoring impairs analysis and control of the inputs and outputs of programmes. It is also important to add that, with the rollout of MSRP, the 2004 expenditure reports became only available in September of the same year.

✓ It is also noteworthy that Special Units are more and more involved in single beneficiary situations covering several countries (Afghanistan, Iraq) while the financial reporting continues to be done at the country level. The Afghanistan Desk introduced monthly situation reports, consolidating several countries' expenditure manually. Such a standard report has only now been developed in MSRP.

# 4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning	Program ming	Implemen ting	**Closing**

Monitoring
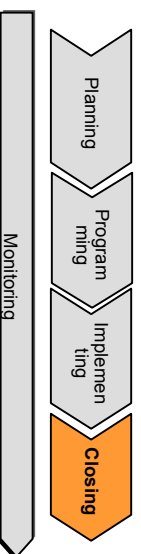
✔ MSRP lacks the functionality to facilitate project closure and to track information on Sub-Project Agreements, including amendments (Supplementary Agreements), status reports and audit certifications. To work around this problem, some Desks have developed *ad hoc* systems (Excel) to ensure that information on sub-projects is kept up-to-date. Also, to fill the gap, the Division of Information Services and Telecommunications (DIST) developed a separate web-based application called Project Monitoring System (PMS). The software was available from mid-2004, but it is not effectively used. Users informed OIOS that as the application has no links to the MSRP finance module the closure exercise has become more complex. Project closure therefore has become an area of concern. For example, 99 per cent of the 400 projects (2,650 sub-projects) initiated in 2003 were still open at the end of 2004. For 2004, there were close to 375 projects established and no strategy has been put in place to close these projects.

✔ This issue has already been raised in our report of MSRP Post-Implementation.

✔ *In response to the draft report, UNHCR mentioned that inclusion of a deadline for submission of project closure documents in the IOM/FOM on 'reporting, implementation and planning' would prove useful. OIOS considers the inclusion of a deadline to be of limited effect, as long as the basic tools for project closure are missing or cannot be used effectively.*

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks
4.2.5. Programme activities

Planning → Programming → Implementing → Closing

Monitoring
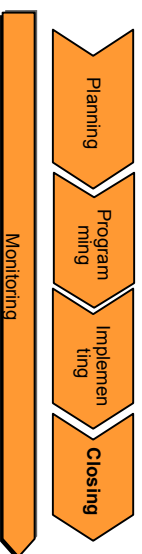
Role of the Senior Resources Manager in the process

ⵣ As the Senior Resource Managers play an essential role in the planning and programming process, OIOS met them to understand how they liaise with the Desks in the overall process. While their participation mainly relates to the allocation of resources and arbitration thereof within the Bureau, their terms of reference also provide for coordination and monitoring. Again, the monitoring function seems to be overtaken by other tasks: for instance the annual staff compendium was felt as very time-consuming.

ⵣ The position of the Senior Resource Managers is normally outside the Desk function (except the Afghanistan Desk and the Sudan Desk) and formally placed it outside the scope of our review. OIOS wishes to emphasize that, considering that monitoring and programme coordination fall under the responsibility of the SRM, and that their P-5 position places them as one of the senior/experienced staff in the Bureau, their functions represent a strong safeguard in the area of budget and finance, if executed well.

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

✓ The role and functions of the Desk have evolved in recent years with the creation of Legal Units and Administrative Units outside the Desks. In addition, MSRP will surely induce significant changes for the Desks rendering Headquarters data available in the Field and reducing the relevance of the Desks for channelling information to and from the Field.

✓ OIOS believes that the Desk function is essential as it is complementary to Field operations, and hence much more than a post box, as some people still perceive it. In the analysis of their actual roles, nonetheless, OIOS feels that too much time of the Desks is devoted to functions that add little value, and that the Desks would gain relevance when focusing more on strategy and policy.

✓ Until MSRP is rolled-out to the Field, the Desks need to remain involved in technical/programming matters, but the impact MSRP will have on the Desk function (essentially vis a vis the Programme Assistants) can already be anticipated.

✓ It is worth noting that 37 per cent of the field respondents consider the distribution of authority and responsibility, as well as the functions of the Desks unclear.

✓ Participants of the 2005 EPAU workshop believed that it was difficult to globally define the roles and responsibilities of the Desk as activities and focus varied significantly between Desks and were dependent both on the operations and sometimes the personal preference of the Desk staff. OIOS highlighted, however, that there should be 'core functions' comparable to all Desks and this could be the starting point.

✓ *In the response to the draft report, UNHCR confirmed that the difficulties experienced by the Desks in effectively discharging their function, and concurred with the statement 'OIOS found that the roles and functions of the Desks needed to be more clearly established: clearer standards for the different structures, more precisely stated missions, hence roles and responsibilities, and measurable performance objectives'.*

✓ *UNHCR felt, however, that the review did not confront the wider management issues that hamper the effectiveness of the Desks. Namely a lack of clarity on the level of authority of the Desks, which often places the Desks at a disadvantage when negotiating crucial elements of the programme such as staff selection/deployment, prioritisation of resources, implementation of policy priorities. OIOS believes that this issue would relate to a wider assignment of UNHCR Units, Services and processes. A comprehensive review of all Headquarter processes would better define the role and responsibility of the Desks, and determine an adequate level of authority for the Desks.*

4.2. Role and responsibilities of the Desks

4.2.6. Recommendations

Recommendation 4:

The UNHCR Department of Operations should reduce the annual reporting requirements by considering the relevance and usefulness of each report, and by:

- Merging specialist and general reports to allow an integrated understanding of UNHCR operations; and
- Adapting the requirements to the size, state (emergency, protracted, stable) and resources of the field office (Rec. 04).
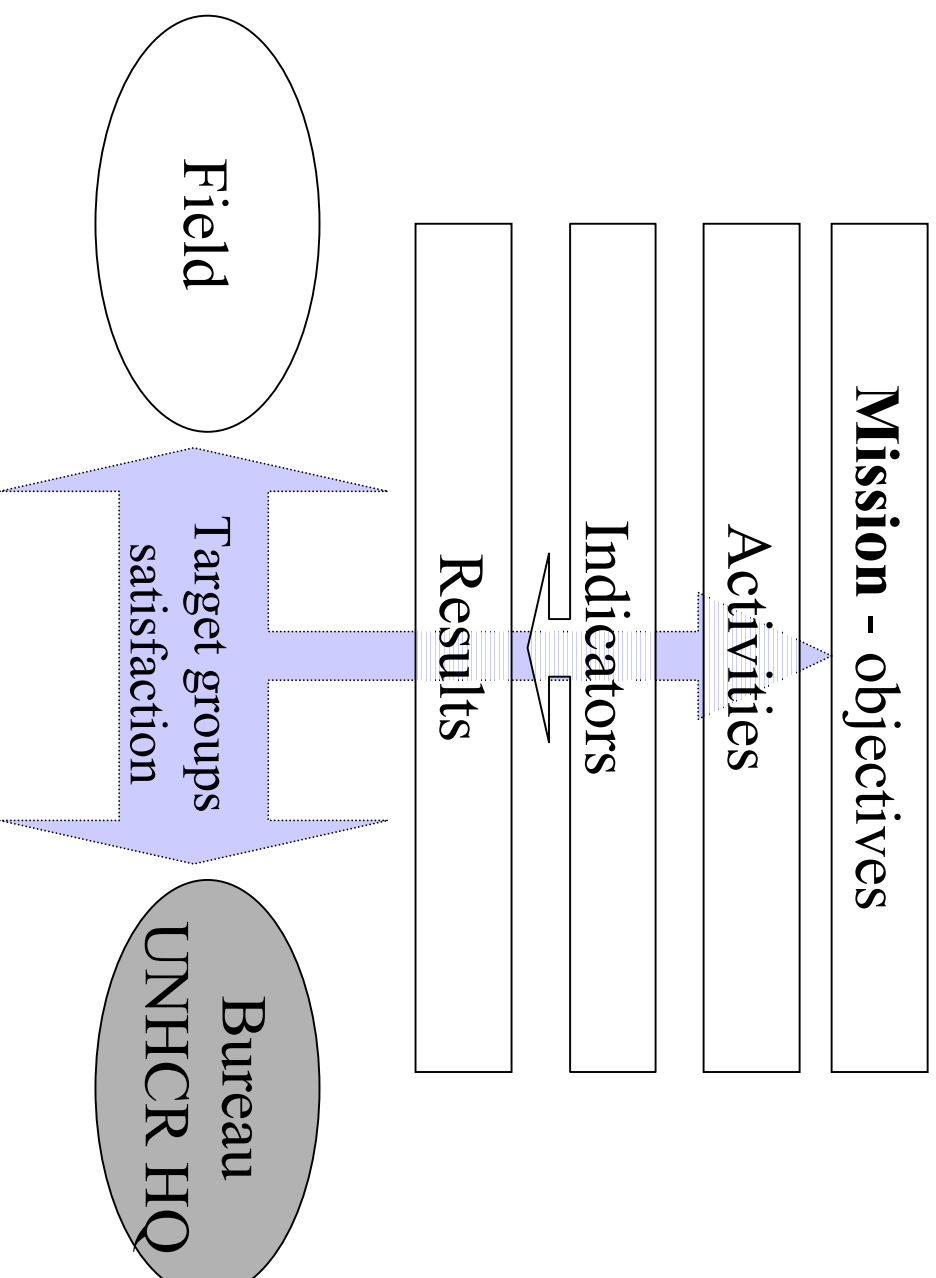
Recommendation 5:

The UNHCR Department of Operations, to enable the Desks to focus on more essential functions (strategy, analysis, evaluation and control), should review the role of the Desks, clarifying the extent of the Desks' responsibilities and involvement in processes such as procurement, staffing, donor relations, and the planning, programming and monitoring processes (Rec. 05).

4.3. Assessing the performance of the Desks

4.3. Assessing the performance of the Desks

Mission - objectives

Activities

Indicators

Results

Target groups
satisfaction

Field

Bureau
UNHCR HQ

4.3. Assessing the performance of the Desks

4.3.1. Mission – objectives of the Desks

✓ With a view to assess the performance of the Desks, the mission or role of the Desks first needs to be confirmed to be able to determine the objectives that should be used as performance indicators.

✓ In doing so the dual role of the Desk, supporting both Headquarters and the Field, is important, as it can imply that one client reports satisfactory results while the other does not.

✓ In the initial interviews with the Heads of Desk, as well as in the replies to our questionnaire to the Field, the Field was identified as the first and foremost client of the Desk. It should be noted that due to the Headquarter Review and the work by EPAU on the Desk function, OIOS intentionally limited its scope to the review of the Desks' performance towards the 'Field' client.

✓ Based on the available information, it was difficult for OIOS to assess the Desk's input in many processes, as most products are a combination of the Field's and the Desks' input. The replies from the Field were very valuable in this regard, highlighting their (be it subjective) perception of the Desks' input versus theirs.

✓ As part of the annual planning process, the Desks prepare an annual "Objective Setting Matrix", defining the outputs, the key indicators, the assumptions and constraints as well as the timeframe for completion for each role or responsibility of the Desk. This exercise in itself is a step forward in assessing the performance of the Desks. We noted however that, in previous such exercises, the objectives as defined by the Desks were:

  ▪ Not measurable,
  ▪ Not time-bound, and
  ▪ Did not seem to fit in the dynamic multi-year strategy of the Desk.

✓ The objectives merely listed the roles of the Desk, whilst the indicators consisted of activities to be performed by the Desk (e.g. "revisions processed", "budgets approved", etc.). In assessing the performance of the Desk, indicators need to target ouputs/results/impact, be measurable activities and time-bound, and allow comparison and benchmarking between Desks or measure progress over a period of time.

4.3. Assessing the performance of the Desks
4.3.1. Mission – objectives of the Desks

✓ Some Bureaux (Europe and Americas) developed a strategy to identify multi-year objectives. The focus of this strategy, however, is on the Field and concerns undertakings and expected achievements. It does not include any reference whatsoever to Headquarter activities. While OIOS agrees that the Desks have a support function, which is difficult to evaluate, the absence of any indicators for activities of the Desks may weaken accountability.

✓ Specific objectives and indicators should be developed for the Desks to be accountable *per se*, as has already been done for the Field.

✓ OIOS refers to the Board of Auditors' observation that no guidelines exist for planning and programming at the Headquarters level. More emphasis should be put in the future on Headquarters' results based reporting, especially in the context - as described in the Instruction and Guidelines regarding reporting in 2004, implementation in 2005 and planning for 2006 (IOM/82/2004-FOM/86/2004) - of a worsening "global ratio of administrative cost (comprising both staff cost and administrative expenditures) over operations" when the efficiency of the administrative structure at all levels should be demonstrated.

4.3. Assessing the performance of the Desks
4.3.2. Field 'client' satisfaction

ˇ The process in which the Desks have the most added value, as per the Heads of Desk and and the Field Offices, is the COP and the ORB review. In the absence of intermediate documents, indicating inputs from various actors in the COP process, it was impossible to evaluate the extent to which the comments and changes made by the Desks added value to the fields submissions. The thus seemingly limited input of the Desk regarding the reporting processes was confirmed by the Field Offices responses to the questionnaire: 63 per cent of the field offices reported limited input of the Desk in their reports.

ˇ Another indicator often mentioned by the Head of Desks was the Field's (client) satisfaction. The responses from the Field in this regard are mixed: 58 per cent consider the Desks' responses to their requests "acceptable" and 68 per cent indicate that their requests are "mostly" handled in a timely and competent manner (the second largest being "sometimes" with 21 per cent).

ˇ Staff in the Field often mentioned their feeling of isolation from the rest of UNHCR, and would welcome increased communication from their Desk, including feedback on what is implemented elsewhere and/or on Headquarters developments. Most communication between Desks and the field takes place at the level of the Head of Desk, (Senior) Desk Officer or Programme Assistant. It was also mentioned that the Programme Assistants are in general more available and/or knowledgeable and, with regard to programme matters, the Field receives a more adequate and concrete response from Programme Assistants than they do from Desk Officers. This further stresses the key role the Programme Assistants play in liaising with the Field.

ˇ It has already been mentioned that 'intermediate' reports and documents were not found in project files, as, if existing at all, they are kept in the form of E-mail. In the same way the value and timeliness of the Desks' responses to the Field requests can not be measured. Considering the fact that the main role of the Desk is acknowledged to be support to the Field, and that most of the Desks' time in this regard is spent on E-mail, it may be appropriate to create an efficient E-mail management and archiving ('foldering') system, that could ease the task and enable performance measurement in this regard. As this is a global UNHCR wide problem, OIOS will review this as part of the planned assignment of UNHCR's electronic archiving Electronic Document Management System.

Assessing the performance of the Desks
4.3.3. Recommendations

Recommendation 6:

The UNHCR Bureaux should develop specific objectives for the Desks, focussing on measurable outputs representative of the activities of the Desk, and should effectively monitor these outputs and address their variance (Rec. 06).
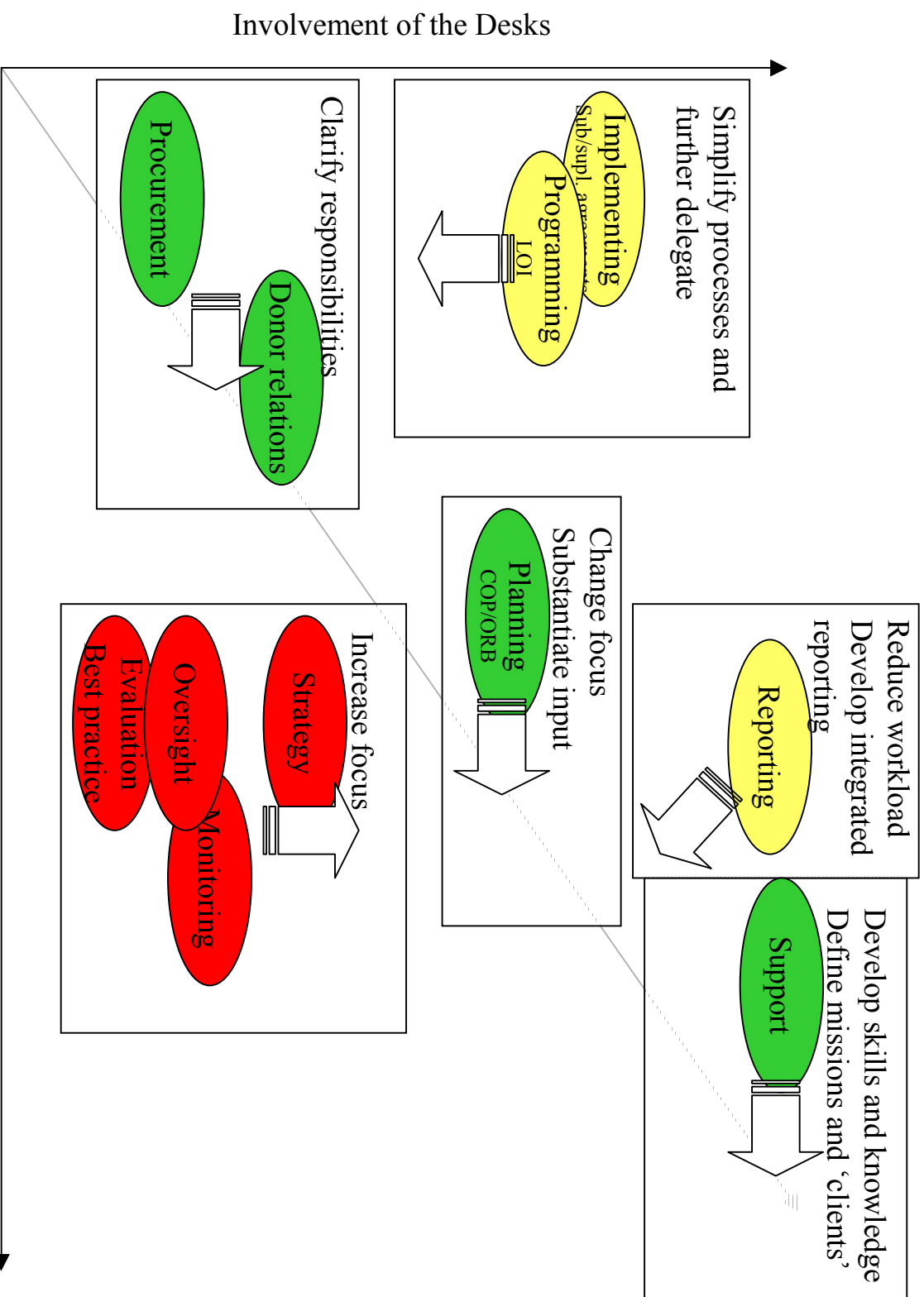
4.4. Conclusion

4.4. Conclusion

✓ Both staff at the Desks and in the Field agree that too much time is absorbed in micro-managing programmes, thereby in part duplicating Field activities. Field and Desk functions should be complementary. Therefore, the heavy involvement of the Desks in programme activities does not seem wholly relevant. In OIOS' opinion, Desk activities need to be re-diverted and concentrated on developing strategic guidance integrated at the regional level, evaluation/control, contributing to the identification and dissemination of good practices as well as to the improvement of programmes. Overall, the revised roles and functions of the Desks need to be defined in a more concrete manner.

✓ The Desks should perform their functions with rationalised and standardized resources. The relevance and the related responsibilities of the various positions in the Desk call for further consideration.

✓ The various recommendations of the report to streamline and rationalise the structure of the Desks, to clarify and revise their mission and responsibilities, once completed, should lead to a revision of Chapter 2 to reflect the changes and formally define the Desks.

<u>**Recommendation 7:**</u>
The UNHCR Department of Operations, once the structures, roles and responsibilities of the Desks have been clearly defined and made more transparent, should revise the UNHCR Manual, Chapter 2 to describe the Desks' structure in all Bureaux including emergency desks, and to clearly outline the roles and responsibilities so that 'clients' of the Desks are appropriate informed (Rec. 07).

✓ In the following chart, OIOS tried to summarize steps to be taken (deriving from the observations and recommendations in this report) to balance the functions of the Desk and to create a tendency towards more efficient support and guidance.

Involvement of the Desks

Importance

Simplify processes and further delegate
- Implementing Sub/supl. agreements
- Programming LOI

Clarify responsibilities
- Procurement
- Donor relations

Change focus Substantiate input
- Planning COP/ORB

Increase focus
- Strategy
- Oversight
- Monitoring
- Evaluation
- Best practice

Reduce workload Develop integrated reporting
- Reporting

Develop skills and knowledge Define missions and 'clients'
- Support

5. Acknowledgement

✓ I wish to express my appreciation for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors by the staff of UNHCR.

Egbert C. Kaltenbach, Chief
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Annex

∨ Questionnaire and analysis of responses to OIOS questionnaire to the Field.