



## **INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION**

### **AUDIT REPORT 2013/095**

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#### **Audit of the activities of the technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management**

**Overall results relating to effectiveness of the support provided by the technical specialists networks to country operations were initially assessed as partially satisfactory. Implementation of six important recommendations remains in progress.**

**FINAL OVERALL RATING: PARTIALLY SATISFACTORY**

**18 November 2013**

**Assignment No. AR2012/163/01**

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# AUDIT REPORT

## Audit of the activities of technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management

### I. BACKGROUND

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of the activities of the technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM).

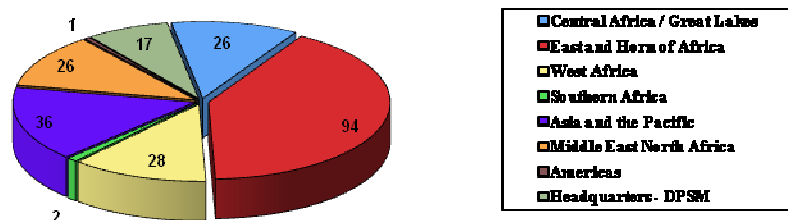
2. In accordance with its mandate, OIOS provides assurance and advice on the adequacy and effectiveness of the United Nations internal control system, the primary objectives of which are to ensure (a) efficient and effective operations; (b) accurate financial and operational reporting; (c) safeguarding of assets; and (d) compliance with mandates, regulations and rules.

3. In line with its Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs), UNHCR has developed objectives covering specific sectors such as nutrition, public health, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, education and livelihoods. These objectives set the minimum standards for services to refugees in camps and across UNHCR operations. Developing and implementing these objectives requires specific expertise which is provided by technical specialists.

4. As of November 2012, UNHCR employed 230 technical specialists working in the five sectors under the DPSM's responsibility. There were 80 technical specialists in the shelter sector, 67 in public health, 35 in nutrition, 33 in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and 15 in the HIV/reproductive health sector.

5. The 230 technical specialists were located in various geographical zones as shown in diagram 1 below which indicated that 176 or some 77 per cent were based in Africa (in the East and Horn of Africa, Great Lakes region, Middle East and North Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa). The remaining 54 or 23 per cent were located at the UNHCR Headquarters, Asia and the Pacific and the Americas.

Diagram 1: Technical specialists by Region



6. DPSM is responsible for developing standards and related implementation guidance for technical specialists. The Division is also responsible for providing support, through networks, to groups of technical specialists in charge of implementing these standards with the aim of ensuring that UNHCR's country operations are technically sound and thus better able to meet the needs of persons of concern.

7. The deployment of technical specialists by country operations is considered during the Annual Programme Review (APR) of the budget. During the APR, DPSM reviews staffing and budgetary proposals, advises and makes recommendations to Bureaux on potential deployments. In the case of emergencies, technical specialists are deployed based on decisions taken by the Emergency Task Force established to support the operation.

8. Comments provided by UNHCR are incorporated in *italics*.

## II. OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

9. The audit was conducted to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of UNHCR's governance, risk management and control processes in providing reasonable assurance regarding the effectiveness of support provided by **technical specialists networks to UNHCR country operations**.

10. The audit was included in the 2012 OIOS risk-based work plan due to risks related to the adequacy of the activities carried out by technical specialists networks to provide strategic and practical support to UNHCR country operations.

11. The key control tested for the audit was project technical support. For the purpose of this audit, OIOS defined project technical support as the controls designed to provide reasonable assurance that there is sufficient project technical support to achieve mandates. This includes sufficient and competent human resources and appropriate project management tools, methodologies, guidelines and systems.

12. The key control was assessed for the control objectives shown in Table 1. Certain control objectives (shown in Table 1 of the Assessment of key controls table as "Not assessed") were not relevant to the scope defined for this audit.

13. OIOS conducted this audit from November 2012 to May 2013. The audit covered the period from January 2011 to May 2013.

14. OIOS conducted an activity-level risk assessment to identify and assess specific risk exposures, and to confirm the relevance of the selected key controls in mitigating associated risks. Through interviews, analytical reviews and tests of controls, OIOS assessed the existence and adequacy of internal controls and conducted necessary tests to determine their effectiveness.

## III. AUDIT RESULTS

15. The UNHCR governance, risk management and control processes examined were initially assessed as **partially satisfactory** in providing reasonable assurance regarding **the effectiveness of support provided by technical specialists networks to UNHCR country operations**. OIOS made six recommendations in the report to address issues identified in the audit.

16. The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM) had established networks of technical specialists across the organization to support the implementation of UNHCR humanitarian standards. However, the project technical support control was assessed as partially satisfactory because guidelines were required for a more precise articulation of the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists networks. The requirement for multifunctional teams, which include technical specialists, to be involved in the programme cycle also needed to be reinforced. A standard system for following up recommendations made by technical specialists to field operations also needed to be put in place. Additional guidelines were required for supporting the deployment of technical

specialists in the field and the use of affiliated workforce for these functions. In addition, there was a need to develop a risk based model for the deployment of technical specialists to operations based on the needs of populations of concern, and to establish reporting lines between technical specialists and programme staff.

17. The initial overall rating was based on the assessment of key control presented in Table 1 below. The final overall rating is **partially satisfactory** as implementation of six important recommendations remains in progress.

**Table 1 : Assessment of key controls**

Business objective	Key control	Control objectives			
		Efficient and effective operations	Accurate financial and operational reporting	Safeguarding of assets	Compliance with mandates, regulations and rules
Effectiveness of the support provided by technical specialists networks to UNHCR country operations	Project technical support	Partially satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Not assessed	Partially satisfactory
<b>FINAL OVERALL RATING: PARTIALLY SATISFACTORY</b>					

## **A. Project technical support**

### Need to issue guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists

18. OIOS observed the following issues, which indicate that guidelines are needed to regulate and enhance the work of technical specialists in the field:

- As of November 2012, the number of technical specialists had reached over 200 and the term “technical specialists networks” was commonly used within UNHCR. The absence of a clear definition had caused confusion within UNHCR and impacted the organization’s ability to effectively manage technical specialists in the field;
- A review of a sample of specialists’ work plans showed that some were based on self-developed technical strategies or on the global technical strategy. Others focused on below standard camp situations or followed an annual calendar of programmatic events;
- The most common observed process for developing technical strategies was a “top-down” approach cascading from global strategic priorities to regional and country strategies. Other approaches used were “bottom-up”, where countries identified the most pressing below standard situations and strategized to address them. And occasionally a “two-way” approach was used (such as the new five-year strategy for Public Health). Technical strategies needed homogenous development to ensure cohesion across the organization;
- Technical specialists were divided on what their exact role was in an operation. Technical specialists at headquarters, in the region and in the branch office had a localized perception and saw their role in general as providing support to the operation, some felt that their role was

reactive in nature and others identified themselves less with ‘enforcing a technical strategy’ as given by the Global Management Accountability Framework. Technical specialists in the field offices saw their role as practical and hands-on. There were different perceptions on how a specialist should contribute to achieving the targets of the organization;

- In 13 out of the 15 countries where technical specialists were interviewed, the concerned specialists were not adequately involved as key actors in every stage of the programme cycle. As a result, DPSM could not ensure that technical specialists were able, as part of the multi-functional team, to implement, prioritize and monitor a technical strategy in line with UNHCR technical standards for persons of concern. Regional technical specialists were also involved only in a limited manner in the programme cycle for countries in their region and had very little influence on the programmes of those countries. They were also not being given opportunities to review Country Operation Plans. OIOS also observed that technical specialists were involved in implementing partner selection and preparation of partner agreements in only four (or 26 per cent) of the 15 countries that were reviewed; and,
- There was no formal system in place to ensure systematic and regular follow up of recommendations made by technical specialists. Thus there was an increased risk that some recommended improvements would not be made. This reduced the effectiveness of reports made by technical specialists.

**(1) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop technical specialists guidelines, which: (a) clarify the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists; (b) define the term ‘technical specialists networks’; (c) reinforce the policy requirement for involving technical specialists in the programme cycle; and (d) establish a system for consistently following up recommendations made by technical specialists.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 1 and stated that the guidelines would be developed and finalized by Q4 2014. Some aspects will be mainstreamed through policy and operational guidelines and through consistent messaging at training events. Recommendation 1 remains open pending development and issuance of guidelines clarifying the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists: The guidelines should include (a) definition of the term ‘technical specialists networks’; (b) the reiteration of the policy requirement of involving the specialists in the multi-functional teams and the programme cycle; and (c) the development of a system to ensure the follow up of recommendations made by technical specialists.*

Need to develop a risk-based model for deployment of technical specialists to operations based on the needs of populations of concern

19. While UNHCR needs flexibility for the deployment of technical specialists taking into account availability and prioritization of resources, a risk-based model for determining the deployment of technical specialists was required to help identify the number and type of specialists needed. It was also needed to support a clear link between people in most need of assistance (where standards were not met), the technical specialist resource requirements, and the impact of the related deployments. In the absence of a risk-based model, the number of technical specialists was often based on availability of funds. Emergency operations also obtained a higher profile and funding because of the immediate needs and stakeholder attention. This deprived other operations of assistance as indicated below:

- Regional technical specialists were often individually assigned to cover 10 to 15 country operations and this meant that it was difficult for them to plan one mission per year to each country in their region;
- Small country operations, such as Djibouti and Eritrea, and camps in larger operations were identified as needing technical specialists but were neglected. This had an impact on meeting standards. This happened because regional specialist resources were being redirected to emergency situations, which were considered to be higher priority;
- Small operations were often unable to express adequately their need for technical specialists resources as up-to-date information about their achievement of UNHCR standards was often missing; and
- In stable operations, where funding was decreasing, technical specialist posts were the first ones to be downsized, without any clear assessment of the impact of such actions on the achievement of humanitarian standards in these operations.

**(2) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop a risk based model for deploying technical specialists to field operations.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 2 and stated that the risk-based model would be finalized in Q4 2014. Recommendation 2 remains open pending development and issuance of a risk-based model for deploying technical specialists to UNHCR operations.*

Need to reinforce reporting lines of technical specialists to programme officers for improved effectiveness of country programmes

20. Of the 20 technical specialists interviewed, only three (15 per cent) were reporting directly to the programme officer. Others were reporting to other functions such as community service officers, emergency coordinators, heads of sub-office, field coordinators or deputy representatives. These officials were not necessarily involved in all stages of the programme cycle.

21. Because they were not always reporting directly to the programme officer, technical specialists were not adequately involved in the programme cycle and were therefore more reactive than pro-active in addressing situations and issues in the field, thus reducing their effectiveness. This was noted particularly in Uganda where all technical specialists were reporting to the Community Services Officer.

**(3) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to reinforce the reporting lines of technical specialists at the country level to the programme management team in the country.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 3 and stated that the new ODMS Guidelines for the Design of UNHCR's Presence will specify a reporting line from technical specialists to the programme pillar in an operation. The annual programme planning instructions (to be issued next time in November 2013) would also promote involvement by the technical specialists in the planning with the programme pillar at the country-level. Recommendation 3 remains open pending issuance of documentation reinforcing the reporting lines of technical specialists at the country level to the programme management team in the country*

Need for a revised framework for using regular staff for technical specialist positions to ensure a core capacity of technical experts as opposed to relying upon an affiliate workforce

22. Under UNHCR rules, technical specialists can be hired as regular UNHCR staff or as affiliate workforce. The status of affiliate workforce corresponds to: seconded staff from standby partners or other UN organizations, individual consultants, United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) and interns. The guidelines for hiring affiliate staff in UNHCR and stand-by partners require time-bound and short term affiliate workforce arrangements.

23. Affiliated staff were often deployed to carry out technical specialist responsibilities because they cost less than regular staff, and their hiring was considered more flexible and responsive than the hiring of regular staff. Sixty one per cent, of the technical specialists in the field were affiliate staff.

24. Several affiliate staff members interviewed explained they had been working for UNHCR beyond the permissible periods set in guidelines and had been performing regular UNHCR duties in a technical specialist capacity. For example, one technical specialist, seconded to UNHCR, had worked for nine years performing mostly regular duties, although the individual was initially recruited for six months for work on emergency needs. In another example, consultants were performing regular tasks as UNHCR technical specialists for more than four years. These examples showed that whilst there was a requirement for an affiliate workforce, there was also a corresponding need for continuity in service delivery through a core expert component of staff positions. The available guidance and current arrangements were not sufficient and did not define core capacity requirements including the number and the type of technical specialist positions needed in UNHCR operations to ensure continuity and balance for delivering technical expertise.

**(4) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to review and revise the existing guidelines on the deployment of technical specialists. DPSM should consider the extent to which UNHCR requires a core capacity of technical specialist staff positions to ensure continuity in delivering technical expertise.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 4 and stated that the revised ODMS Guidelines for the Design of UNHCR's Presence would specify the deployment of technical specialists. Recommendation 4 remains open pending issuance of the revised guidelines on technical specialist's deployment including a definition of a core DPSM technical capacity to ensure continuity in delivering technical expertise.*

Need to mainstream the use of a standard evaluation form for evaluating the performance of affiliate workforce handling technical specialist positions

25. For seconded staff and consultants, UNHCR developed a uniform performance form to evaluate their individual performance when deployed for emergencies. This form was part of the guide to UNHCR's Emergency Standby Partners and External Deployment Arrangements issued in 2008. Although this form existed for emergency deployments, there was no standard form for technical positions in a non-emergency context. While it was observed that for contract renewals a short evaluation was done, no standard format was used. The purpose of this short evaluation was more to justify the continuation of the contract than to evaluate performance of a technical specialist. In the specific case of UNVs, the UNHCR electronic performance evaluation system (ePAD) was used for their evaluation, but off-line. These evaluations were not kept in the system and were not used for future reassignment. UNVs



had to keep a hard-copy of their evaluation if they wanted to submit it for future reference when applying to UNHCR positions.

26. The absence of a standard evaluation form for evaluating performance of the affiliate workforce prevented UNHCR from identifying both poor and outstanding performance in a consistent and objective manner.

**(5) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Division of Human Resources Management to mainstream the use of a standard evaluation form for evaluating the performance of affiliate staff holding technical specialist positions.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 5 and stated that DHRM would pursue implementation and standardization of existing forms to inform recruitment decisions. At the time of the next upgrade of the on-line Enterprise Resource Planning tool, if technically feasible, DHRM would explore the possibilities of expanding the performance evaluation tool to its Affiliate Workforce. Recommendation 5 remains open pending the implementation of a standard evaluation form for mainstreaming the performance evaluation of affiliate staff handling DPSM technical specialist positions.*

Need to clarify involvement of DPSM and technical specialists in the recruitment of other technical specialists

27. UNHCR instructions issued in 2010 require that parent Divisions, such as DPSM, should be consulted on appointments for regional technical positions to process the technical clearance of candidates. However, it was not clearly mentioned how this consultation should be done and whether such technical clearance should be performed for technical specialist country positions and for affiliated workforce. Instructions on the use of affiliate workforce arrangements also made no reference to the responsibility for technical clearance whilst recruiting for specialists. While most professional technical specialists interviewed confirmed that they have been involved in the recruitment of other technical specialists in their country operations, either in the review of applications, technical tests and/or interviews, their involvement was not systematic. In addition, staff interviewed confirmed that no requirement for technical clearance was in place when recruiting national staff, UNVs or consultants. Often these staff were recruited without a technical assessment performed by a technical specialist.

28. Because the level of involvement by headquarters and the region had not been clearly defined, there were risks that they would not be systematically consulted when UNHCR hired technical specialists leading to the recruitment of individuals who may not meet technical criteria and lacked technical expertise to implement UNHCR standards.

**(6) The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management (DPSM) should discuss and review with the Division of Human Resources Management the level of involvement required from DPSM, regional offices and technical specialists in the recruitment of new technical specialists covering international and/or national positions, United Nations Volunteers and consultants.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 6 and stated that clear guidance is expected upon finalization of the on-going review of the involvement of technical specialists in the recruitment of other technical specialists. DHRM will review together with DPSM the level of involvement by DPSM, regional offices and technical specialists in the recruitment of UNVs. Recommendation 6 remains open*

pending results of the internal review conducted by DRHM and DPSM on the involvement of technical specialists in the recruitment of new technical specialists.

#### **IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

29. OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the Management and staff of UNHCR for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.

*(Signed)* David Kanja  
Assistant Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services

## STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

**Audit of the activities of technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management**

Recom. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>1</sup> / Important <sup>2</sup>	C/ O <sup>3</sup>	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date <sup>4</sup>
1	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop technical specialists guidelines, which: (a) clarify the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists; (b) define the term 'technical specialists networks'; (c) reinforce the policy requirement for involving technical specialists in the programme cycle; and (d) establish a system for consistently following up recommendations made by technical specialists.	Important	O	Evidence that guidelines clarifying the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists were developed and issued: The guidelines should include (a) definition of the term 'technical specialists networks'; (b) the reiteration of the policy requirement of involving the specialists in the multi-functional teams and the programme cycle; and (c) the development of a system to ensure the follow up of recommendations made by technical specialists.	31 December 2014
2	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop a risk based model for deploying technical specialists to field operations.	Important	O	Evidence that a risk-based model for deploying technical specialists to UNHCR operations has been developed and issued.	31 December 2014
3	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to reinforce the reporting lines of technical specialists at the country level to the programme management team in the country.	Important	O	Evidence that documentation reinforcing the reporting lines of technical specialists at the country level to the programme management team in the country has been issued.	31 December 2014
4	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to review and revise the existing guidelines on the deployment of technical specialists. DPSM should consider the extent to which UNHCR requires a core capacity of	Important	O	Evidence that the revised guidelines on technical specialist's deployment including definition of a core DPSM technical capacity to ensure continuity in delivering technical expertise have been reviewed and issued.	31 December 2014

<sup>1</sup> Critical recommendations address significant and/or pervasive deficiencies or weaknesses in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>2</sup> Important recommendations address important deficiencies or weaknesses in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>3</sup> C = closed, O = open

<sup>4</sup> Date provided by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in response to recommendations.

## STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

**Audit of the activities of technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management**

<b>Recom. no.</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Critical<sup>1</sup>/ Important<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>C/ O<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Actions needed to close recommendation</b>	<b>Implementation date<sup>4</sup></b>
	technical specialist staff positions to ensure continuity in delivering technical expertise.				
5	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Division of Human Resources Management to mainstream the use of a standard evaluation form for evaluating the performance of affiliate staff holding technical specialist positions.	Important	O	Evidence that a standard evaluation form for mainstreaming the performance evaluation of affiliate staff handling DPSM technical specialist positions has been implemented.	31 December 2014
6	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management (DPSM) should discuss and review with the Division of Human Resources Management the level of involvement required from DPSM, regional offices and technical specialists in the recruitment of new technical specialists covering international and/or national positions, United Nations Volunteers and consultants.	Important	O	Evidence that the internal review on the involvement of technical specialists in the recruitment of new technical specialists has been conducted by DHRM and DPSM.	31 December 2014

# **APPENDIX I**

## **Management Response**

## MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

**Audit of the activities of the technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management**

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>5</sup> / Important <sup>6</sup>	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
1	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop technical specialists guidelines, which: (a) clarify the roles and responsibilities of technical specialists; (b) define the term 'technical specialists networks'; (c) reinforce the policy requirement for involving technical specialists in the programme cycle; and (d) establish a system for consistently following up recommendations made by technical specialists.	Important	Yes	Deputy Director DPSM	31 December 2014	The guidelines would be developed and finalized by Q4 2014. Some aspects will be mainstreamed through policy and operational guidelines and through consistent messaging at training events.
2	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should develop a risk based model for deploying technical specialists to field operations.	Important	Yes	Deputy Director DPSM	31 December 2014	The risk-based model would be finalized in Q4 2014.
3	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to reinforce the reporting lines of technical specialists at the country level to the programme management team in the country.	Important	Yes	Director ODMS & Deputy Director DPSM	31 December 2014	The new ODMS Guidelines for the Design of UNHCR's Presence would specify a reporting line from technical specialists to the programme pillar in an operation. The annual programme planning instructions (to be issued next time in Nov 2013) will also promote involvement by the technical specialists in the planning with the programme pillar at the country-level.
4	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management should request assistance from the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS), to review and revise the existing	Important	Yes	Director ODMS & Deputy Director	31 December 2014	The revised ODMS Guidelines for the Design of UNHCR's Presence would specify the deployment of technical specialists.

<sup>5</sup> Critical recommendations address significant and/or pervasive deficiencies or weaknesses in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>6</sup> Important recommendations address important deficiencies or weaknesses in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

## MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

**Audit of the activities of the technical specialists networks in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of Programme Support and Management**

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>5</sup> / Important <sup>6</sup>	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
	guidelines on the deployment of technical specialists. DPSM should consider the extent to which UNHCR requires a core capacity of technical specialist staff positions to ensure continuity in delivering technical expertise.			DHRM		
5	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support and Management should request assistance from the Division of Human Resources Management to mainstream the use of a standard evaluation form for evaluating the performance of affiliate staff holding technical specialist positions.	Important	Yes	Deputy Director DHRM	31 December 2014	DHRM would pursue implementation and standardization of existing forms to inform recruitment decisions. At the time of the next upgrade of the on-line Enterprise Resource Planning tool, if technically feasible, DHRM will explore the possibilities of expanding the performance evaluation tool to its Affiliate Workforce.
6	The UNHCR Division of Programme Support Management (DPSM) should discuss and review with the Division of Human Resources Management the level of involvement required from DPSM, regional offices and technical specialists in the recruitment of new technical specialists covering international and/or national positions, United Nations Volunteers and consultants.	Important	Yes	Deputy Director DHRM	31 December 2014	Clear guidance is expected upon finalization of the on-going review of the involvement of technical specialists in the recruitment of other technical specialists. DHRM will review together with DPSM the level of involvement by DPSM, regional offices and technical specialists in the recruitment of UNVs.