Support Functions Working Group report

Background

SIPRI has transitioned from being an institute that is almost fully funded by the Swedish Government to one that is heavily reliant on external funding. This has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and has put great pressure on both researchers and support staff. Management of this transformation process has failed to institutionalize both organizational and support structures that ease the increased workload that consequently followed the shift towards and increase in external grants. Instead, some support functions have been downsized and outsourced.

Table 1 clearly illustrates the decrease in the number of support staff simultaneous to the increase in external grants. Furthermore, the number of researchers has also increased, which also puts more pressure on the existing support staff.

Table 1. Overview of the number of external grants, support staff and researchers at SIPRI for the period 2008–13

Year	Number of external grants	Number of support staff	Number of researchers
2013	67	18	37
2012	60	18	33
2011	63	18	33
2010	59	18	33
2009	53	19	31
2008	42	26	26

Source: Figures from GM and HR

Researchers workload related to external funding

The increased workload involves a range of tasks, including reporting, registering and maintaining budgets (between 500.00–3,5 million SEK per project); keeping track of commitments and reporting deadlines; preparing for audits; liaising with stakeholders; and organising conferences, launches, seminars and other events—which are usually part of deliverables in a project. At the same time researchers are also meant to conduct high quality research and participate in the publication cycle (including the yearbook chapters), travel (including planning travel, traveling and reconciling travel related expenses)—all of which often constitute part of the project deliverables; fundraise (usually in two year cycles) and do media outreach. Furthermore, many of the external projects are on a two-year basis and researchers are on two projects consequently leading to an intense workload. Most of the financial support has been outsourced with researchers using software to "ease" the workload. As of today, a researcher in his or her regular day uses 6 software systems for administrative work.[1]

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[1] (1) **Baltzar**—for invoicing externally and internally. Researchers have to write and send the invoices to a scanning central for them to get into the system and then add them to the correct project and itemise them and authorise the invoice. The researcher also has to keep track of external invoices that are sent out. (2) **Flex data**—for travel claims and per diem, which is tied to our SIPRI credit card which we are personally liable to. (3) **VIA travel**—travel agency for booking flights and hotels and there online booking system. (4) **GAD**—which is the internal grants software database for finding contracts and reports. (5) **Hogia**—the financial system for receiving monthly expense sheets, although it does not match the actual

Grant management

The grant management function deals with applications, reports, finding open calls. All of this service is expected in one person. Better software systems, or systems integration into one, could be a tremendous help in reducing the workload. This issue has been discussed in detail and alternatives have been presented within the financial management group.

Overview of support functions

The following graphic provides a visual overview of support staff functions and how many staff are working for the different functions.
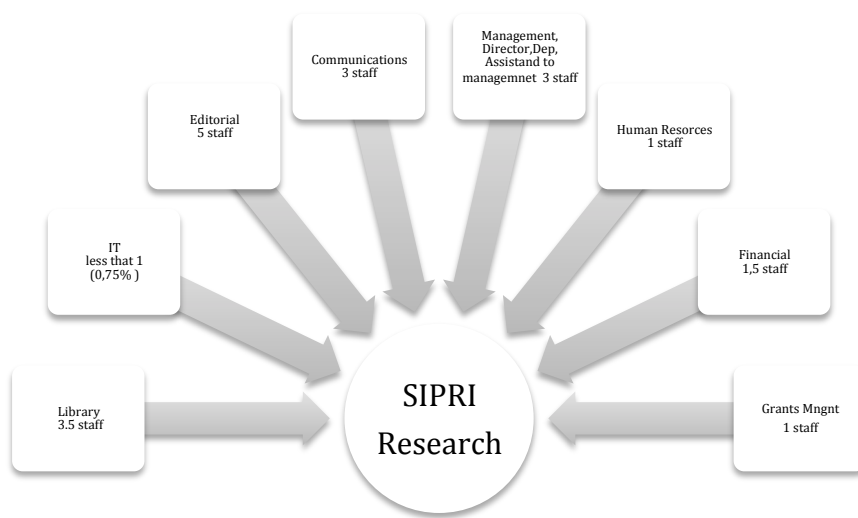
1. Identify key strengths in how SIPRI's support functions operate. How can we build on these strengths?

- Long-term expertise means that there is an intuitional memory that is maintained through the support staff. This is especially valuable since the different nature of researchers' means there tends to be turn over than with the support staff.
- (Most) support staff is available onsite and on-demand
- In-house expertise, that SIPRI has its own communications, library and editorial department ensures that we have a high quality research—which is a significant part of SIPRI's function and its 'deliverable products'.

itemised budget that have been received from the funders, a lot of time (researchers) is needed to integrate the Hogia reports to researcher own excel sheets or own system that they use. (6) **AGDA**—time reporting system for recording vacation, sick leave, parental leave working time all staff uses.

2. Identify key challenges in how SIPRI's support functions and identify concrete and constructive ways of addressing them.

- CHALLENGE: Due to downsizing of the financial department much of the financial administrative tasks has been put on the researchers. Q: How to deal with researchers overburdened with administrative tasks?
  TASK: Conduct an assessment of to determine if the allocation of resources to admin (by researchers) is sustainable. Question: How much of this is structural (largely financial) and how much is about communication/information?

- CHALLENGE: There are tensions between researchers and support staff in terms that the researcher feels that they bear heavy responsibility to fundraise and bring in funding but there is little support received to manage the projects (and services?) that they are funding. Q: How to deal with these tensions?
  TASK: Clearer incitements on how the core funding is divided in-house and to do this in a balanced and fair way to ease the pressure of some programmes/individuals'.

- CHALLENGE: Bridging the administrative and research divide. Q: What does support staff do? What does research staff need? What are the gaps and overlaps? What can and cannot be changed?
  TASK: Do an analysis to see what type of support the researchers really need and if this can be met in the current structure or if there is a need to develop a more robust support team. For example, researchers could be surveyed (focus groups?) regarding their expectations in the various support functions
  --- how are expectations being met?
  --- how are expectations being missed?
  ---in a perfect world, what could be done to improve the situation so needs/expectations could be met/exceeded?

- CHALLENGE: Some researchers see various aspects of the support functions as being inflexible and not service minded.
  TASK: Find ways to assess how support departments can be flexible/ service minded in their working processes to adapt to the needs of the researchers and their projects deliverables. Consider reviews of these areas?

- CHALLENGE: Much about 'support functions' is lumped together in ways that are not always helpful.
  TASK: When assessing or addressing support functions, efforts should be made, as is sensible, to disaggregate 'support functions' into the various functions: library, editorial, IT, finances, grants, 'house' support aka various things Tomas does, and tasks that are outsourced cleaning, etc.

3. What are two to three key actions that could be part of the activities of the next six to twelve months on SIPRI's support functions? Continue to make an order of priorities of issues to address under the theme of this working group.

- Have the support group look at the costs of how much resources is currently spent on admin in terms of researchers time, the cost of the software, the cost of support staff and how this is allocated in the core budget and in terms of external funding. Could this be assessed and looked at through a cost-efficiency perspective? Maybe it would

be better to recruit a financial controller instead of having researchers doing the financial controlling, for example.

- Figure out what an integrated or improved system would cost.

- A lack of strategic management has led to an emergence of structures that are not necessarily sustainable. There needs to be a focus on transparent resource allocation and integrated general financial management. This could enable a transition from the ad hoc approaches of recent years to more structure and clarity on process.

- Establish clearer roles and responsibilities so that colleagues know what to expect of each other will help bridging the divide between researchers and support staff. See #2, various.

- New staff should be trained on how to use the system held by support. This task should not be up to their nearest colleague to have to train them or online manuals. There should be a standard routine. *(However this shows a bit part of the problem, not all of the support staff know how the systems work because they are not the ones using them?)*

- Set up meeting between representatives of support and researchers to improve the understanding of the working situation and trying to improve the supporting routines.

4. Explain how SIPRI's support functions relate to the vision of SIPRI and comment on the draft vision from the point of view of your group. Moreover draft a suggested text on your theme that could go into the medium term (3–5 years) work plan.

From practical and efficiency stand points, SIPRI would function better overall if the researcher–support divide could be effectively bridged. At this point, the first thing that needs to be determining is how much of the current situation is, or is not, structural. From there, a more coherent plan of action could be determined.

5. Report a few 'crazy ideas' (out of the box thinking) that the group may have discussed, however unlikely or infeasible they may seem.