ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system in the context of the post-2015 development agenda

Background Note

Workshop 4 – Organizational arrangements

Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination
Department for Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations

25 May 2015

I. Introduction

In ECOSOC resolution 2014/14, the Council decided to convene a transparent and inclusive dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system[1] in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, including the interlinks between alignment of functions, capacity and impact, funding practices, governance structures, organizational arrangements and partnership approaches.

This note focuses on the "organizational arrangements" of the UN development system, which is the subject of the fourth thematic workshop in the ECOSOC Dialogue series. This term has not been formally defined. It is difficult to present a comprehensive definition, as this term has been used for describing structural and functional arrangements. However, for the purpose of this paper, the term "organizational arrangements" is defined as "the formal inter-agency structures, processes and systems of the UN development system."

The 2015 Secretary General's Report on Progress in the implementation of the QPCR [A/70/62–E/2015/4] provides a detailed overview of how the current organizational arrangements work and how these are being aligned with the QCPR mandates to improve processes, procedures and business practices.

The UNDG paper also provides a detailed description of the current organizational arrangements of the UN development system (UNDS) in support of operational activities for development[2], and progress on the UNDAFs, Resident Coordinator System, Delivering as One, Simplification and Harmonization of Business Practices are outlined in both the SG's QPCR report and the UNDG paper prepared ahead of this workshop.

The note is more of a think piece that briefly describes the current state of play, identifies some lessons learned, presents the likely implications of the post-2015 development agenda and raises some questions. While we acknowledge the linkages between organizational arrangements with functions and funding, they are not explored in this paper.

This note should be read in conjunction with the UNDG paper, the 2015 QCPR report and background notes for the workshops on functions, funding and governance.

II. Current Status

(a) Country level

---

[1] The term 'UN development system' has appeared regularly in General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions since 1995, but has never been formally defined at the intergovernmental level. Member States have instead relied on a definition developed in the context of the annual reporting of the Secretary-General, where the term 'UN development system' is considered to include the 34 UN entities that receive contributions for operational activities for development

[2] Operational activities for development' of the United Nations system are activities that UN entities carry out with the promotion of development as the primary objective. These activities cover both longer-term development-related activities as well as those with a shorter-term humanitarian assistance focus. Operational activities include a portion of the assessed budgets of specialized agencies. The specialized agencies, in consultation with the OECD/DAC, have adopted coefficients to measure the share of assessed contributions considered to be for operational activities for development.[2] In the case of some specialized agencies, these coefficients are significant, e.g. with regard to FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNIDO and WHO. These coefficients are as follows: FAO: 51 per cent; IAEA: 33 per cent; ICAO: 0 per cent; ILO: 60 per cent; IMO: 0 per cent; ITU: 18 per cent; UNESCO: 60 per cent; UNIDO: 100 per cent; UNWTO: 0 per cent; UPU: 16 per cent; WHO: 76 per cent; WIPO: 3 per cent; WMO: 4 per cent.

At the country level, the UN organizational arrangements have evolved over the years. These changes were driven by the changing context for the operations of the UN development system, evolving needs of developing countries, specific country situations such as conflict, funding practices, new approaches to development and reform initiatives. The existing arrangements are the result of either pro-active reforms such as Delivering As One or reactions to the immediate demands of a certain situation such as a conflict. However, in many instances, the UN country presence has not evolved according to the changing needs. It has been repeatedly mentioned in previous ECOSOC workshops that the UN presence, including the organizational arrangements in Middle Income Countries need to be revisited. In fact, the QCPR survey indicated[3] that UNDS is playing different role in such countries but a systemic rethink is needed.

In terms of presence, UN country teams are currently present in 134 countries. As of April 2015, there were 120 Resident Coordinators deployed, and 31 Humanitarian Coordinators, 8 of which were also serving as DSRSG (Deputy Special Representative of the SG). Analysis of CEB data for 2013 indicates that UN staff presence was concentrated in low income and fragile and conflict affected settings. 30 percent of UN professional staff is located in low income countries, 26 percent in low middle-income countries, 16 percent in middle-income countries, and 3 percent in high-income countries.[4] These realities in terms of concentration of staff and the growing number of humanitarian coordinators simply underscore the need for a more holistic, system-wide approach on how the UNDS organizations function in these contexts and in MICs. Furthermore, the universal and unified nature of the post-2015 development agenda will also require different type of organizational arrangements.

It should be acknowledged that Delivering as One has helped improve organizational arrangements at the country level. Governments in general perceived that the "Delivering as one" approach had a positive effect in terms of increasing the efficiency and coherence of the UNDS at the country level, and some 66 per cent of all responding countries to the QCPR survey confirmed their interest in all or some elements of the approach. To date, 45 Governments have requested the United Nations development system to adopt the approach. There is still scope to widen and deepen the DaO model and in particular for introducing UN system wide changes and broadening existing accountability lines to incorporate stronger horizontal accountability. However, the question remains whether DaO only will be sufficient for a strategic response to the unified and universal post-2015 development agenda. At the individual agency level, reform initiatives are designed to respond to the need to be fit for purpose and to formulate strategic plans. From a systemic perspective, the basic structures set up at the country level many decades ago in very different circumstances still remain in place[5]. These have to change so that the UN system can fully support the realization of the new agenda.

(b) *Regional level*

Like the country level, regional organizational arrangements are responding to the changing environment. Owing to the growing demand for the UNDS to increase coherence and coordination,

---

[3] Nearly 75 per cent of low-income countries and lower-middle-income countries that responded to the QCPR survey strongly agreed that United Nations efforts were focused on assisting countries in achieving internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, whereas about half of upper-middle-income countries and high-income countries held the same view. The difference in perception is likely indicative of the differentiated needs of those countries and the differentiated support provided by the system as a result.

[4] These figures exclude countries with major agency HQ presence.
[5] Paper for the ECOSOC dialogue (9 December, 2014) by Bruce Jenk and Bistrat Aklilu.

the UN regional commissions and UNDG regional offices established two principal platforms, namely, the regional UNDG teams and the regional coordination mechanisms.

The key role of the regional UNDG teams is to provide leadership and technical and policy support in the areas of strategic planning and performance and knowledge management to resident coordinators and United Nations country teams to achieve country-level results. The teams also focus on enhancing system-wide coherence at the regional level and provide analytical work and studies, depending on demand and needs. The objective of the regional coordination mechanisms is to improve coordination among the United Nations entities' work programmes at the regional level. The mechanisms also seek to increase cooperation and collaboration among United Nations regional entities and their development partners in tackling regional development issues.

The two mechanisms have developed closer linkages over the past two years. In general, collaboration has taken the form of joint regional conferences and common regional position papers to highlight key development issues. In addition, they have worked closely to facilitate regional high-level and national consultations on the post-2015 development agenda and its means of implementation. But from the perspective of United Nations country team members, support for the regional teams and the regional coordination mechanisms needs to be further improved[6].

There is a widely held view that the regional level platforms will play an increasingly significant role in the implementation and review of the post-2015 development agenda. It is already evident from the convening of regional forums for sustainable development and the possibility of conducting peer reviews at the regional levels. The fundamental question is how to move regional coordination efforts from teams and mechanisms to an integrated and systemic approach for the new agenda.

(c) *Global level*

Over the last two decades, a number of initiatives have been launched at the global level, including the creation of the UN Development Group and Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs (ECESA) to improve organizational arrangements. The Chief Executives Board for Coordination also adopted a new structure built around HLCP, HLCM and the UNDG.

The UNDG has created a number of Working Groups, Task Forces and Joint Teams to promote a greater degree of coherence among its members and provide strategic and harmonized guidance to country teams. The efforts have helped improve coherence and coordination. But during the evaluation of DaO and the recent QCPR reports, it became apparent that the headquarters were lagging behind both at the individual level of funds, programmes and agencies and the system wide level. The global level organizational arrangements have to catch up with the country level changes and on top of that they must be prepared to respond to the post-2015 development agenda. These coordination efforts even made more effective may not be sufficient for delivering the new agenda.

III. Lessons Learned

- The UNDS needs to further strengthen its ability to provide coherent and integrated support, and develop a system wide approach to tailor its organizational arrangements to the needs of programme countries and to the new agenda.

---

[6] Report of the Secretary-General for the 2015 QCPR.

- It is increasingly clear that as programme countries move gradually towards stronger national management capacity, United Nations programming modalities will therefore require significant differentiation on the basis of the capacity and preferences of the countries. This also has implications for the organizational arrangements at the country level.

- Delivering As One, while voluntary, is undoubtedly the preferred approach for strategic country support. At the same time, in recent years, the UNDAFs and DaO have rightly been more flexible and taking different forms to adapt to a variety of circumstances. With respect to post-2015, there is clearly need for exploring further the next generation of UNDAFs, DaO and other instruments in terms of organizational arrangements at country, regional, and global level that are better adapted to the current realities.

- Regional level organizational arrangements have mostly been focused on information sharing, coordination and general quality assurance. There is a need to launch system wide actions that would generate both organizational and operational synergies.

- At the global level, efforts for better coordination, programming coherence through working groups, task forces, system wide guidelines and other instruments have yielded some results but there is a widely acknowledged need that the post-2015 development agenda would require an integrated approach at the global level. The UNDS has to be more than the sum of its parts.

IV. Implications of the Post-2015 development agenda

The unified and universal agenda with proposed 17 goals and 169 targets is broad in scope and yet requires intense integration. The UNDS will have to respond to the demands to provide integrated policy support for implementing this wide range of multilaterally agreed norms. Full realization of the new agenda is contingent upon not only integrating the economic, social and environmental areas but also peace, security, human rights and development.

The agenda will also lead to activities for responding to global challenges, full delivery service, data collection and analysis, science-policy interphase and review and implementation.[7] UNDS will be expected to support Member States in this massive undertaking.

For the system to plan and implement an agenda that is unified and universal, it will require a common, integrated overarching results framework, one that will also enable tracking of progress and accountability. As suggested by some Member States, it may be timely to implement a system-wide results-based framework and corresponding system-wide reporting and accountability mechanisms. Such a system-wide framework will need to leverage the wealth and diversity of the knowledge, experience, and specializations of all entities of the system to tackle the complexities of inter-related sustainable development goals and targets.

Ahead of the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, a broader range of options in terms of organizational arrangements at country, regional and global levels need to be considered, that involve differentiated forms of support, with and without physical country presence, depending on the contexts. Several entities are already implementing a differentiated approach in their country, regional and global operations, and their experiences, in particular those of specialized agencies, merit serious

---

[7] ECOSOC dialogue paper on Organizational arrangements by Bruce Jenks and Rahul Chandran.

review towards lessons to be fed into the next generation of organizational arrangements of the UN development system. Notwithstanding the intense efforts over the last decade or so to adjust the fitness of the system to the changes in the development landscape and the adoption of the MDGs, the post-2015 agenda requires a major rethinking of the organizational arrangements.

Questions for discussion

1. What changes are needed in the organizational arrangements to ensure integrated approaches in the work of UNDS?

2. How should UN system-wide coordination evolve to best support Member States in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda at the country, regional and global levels?

3. What type of organizational arrangements will enable the UNDA to optimally utilize, at all levels, its absolute and comparative advantages?

4. What kind of organizational arrangements need to be put in place to support better integration of development activities and humanitarian assistance in relevant programme countries?