

ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system

Session III

23 February 2015, 10:00 – 13:00

ECOSOC Chamber (UNHQ)

Summary

The third session of the ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system (UNDS) took place on 23 February 2015, at UN Headquarters, in the context of the Economic and Social Council's 2015 Operational Activities Segment (23-25 February 2015). The discussion aimed to respond to the following questions:

- *How will the changing development landscape and the post-2015 development agenda impact the longer-term positioning of the UN development system, including the inter-linkages between: (a) alignment of functions, (b) funding practices, (c) governance structures, (d) organizational arrangements, (e) capacity and impact, and (f) partnership approaches?*
- *How will the growing diversity of developments experiences of programme countries affect the functional relevance and capacity requirements of the UN development system in the post-2015 era?*
- *What kind of specialization and integration should characterize the work of the UN development system in realizing the post-2015 development agenda?*
- *What role can the UN development system be expected to play in leveraging resources and solutions at both country and global levels for the realization of the post-2015 development agenda?*

The Vice-President set the stage for the discussions by summarizing the key challenges of the new development landscape that the UNDS needs to grasp: (a) the imperative of providing coherent and integrated support tailored to changing country needs, (b) increased demand for improved efficiency, lower transaction costs and greater use of national capacities, (c) growing demand for more effective and participatory governance of the UN development system, (d) increased demand for results and accountability, (e) greater competition from non-UN actors, (f) the growing realization that many global issues cannot be effectively tackled without a collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach.

Deputy-Secretary-General Jan Eliasson delivered a keynote address emphasizing that a new development agenda requires a UN development system that can change faster, is more flexible, and operates at significantly lower transaction costs. As the Deputy Secretary-General put it, "we need differentiated responses to respond to differentiated needs and capacities... a flexible and agile UN development system that can bring integrated and tailored content to match specific needs and aspirations". He underscored the need to improve capacities to support governments in leveraging partnerships and embracing innovation. He also highlighted the need to further strengthen coordination and collaboration within the UN system as well as with non-UN actors.

This was followed by a moderated panel discussion among the following speakers:

H.E. Mr. Thomas Silberhorn, Parliamentary State Secretary, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany

H.E. Mr. Albert Toikeusse, Minister of Planning and Development, Côte d'Ivoire (via video link)

H.E. Mr. Courtenay Rattray, Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations

H.E. Ms. Koki Muli Grignon, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Kenya to the United Nations

As a panelist put it, the post-2015 development agenda is in fact a “contract on the world’s future”. As such, the UNDS task at hand is of paramount importance and may require rethinking the current model of development cooperation. A number of priority actions highlighted in this session are summarized below.

1. Tailoring support to diverse development experiences

Following on the previous sessions of the ECOSOC Dialogue, there was a generally shared view that the growing diversity of development experiences of programme countries will require the UNDS to ensure that its operations are adequately targeted to respond to the changing demand.

The special situation inherent to middle-income countries—which, it was noted, includes 70 per cent of the countries in the world and where most of the world’s poor reside —was highlighted as a particular challenge. In general, these countries have made impressive progress against development goals, but continue to confront a wide range of economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities. Yet, their structural challenges are not captured by the national income-based classification system, according to which they graduate from developing to middle-income countries and which results in reduced ODA levels to adequately support the technical assistance and the capacity-building needed to overcome the structural gaps. It was emphasized that the UN system has a role to play in the development of national capacities for tax administration, and more generally in the mobilization of domestic revenue resources and international private flows.

The UNDS has also a special role to play in countries experiencing or emerging from crisis and/or conflict. In the wake of a crisis, the UNDS can serve as a catalyst for change. As highlighted by one of the panelists speaking from the experience of his country, with well-coordinated and integrated action, the UN system has the ability to take countries through the immediate aftermath of a crisis through reconstruction efforts and longer-term, multi-sectoral policy and development planning, with sustainable results.

It was mentioned that one way to tailor supply to the divergent needs of programme countries is through building synergies with regional approaches. Using a regional lens to address challenges, as well as strengthening regional strategies and partners, could and should be the way to find sustainable solutions. It was highlighted that, for example, the challenge of addressing illicit financial flows in Africa is a high development priority among many countries on the continent, and can only be tackled if all come together around a regional approach.

2. Strengthening capacity for prevention, resilience and implementation in programme countries

Investing in prevention, resilience and early recovery was echoed yet again as critical to ensure a path towards sustainable development. Strengthening the preventive arm of the United Nations system and improving more enduring synergies among the different United Nations interventions (from

humanitarian action, to peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development) was highlighted. The Ebola response was pointed out by several Member States as a recent example demonstrating how the UN can serve as a singularly unique global force for effectively catalyzing action in response to crises; lessons could be drawn from this experience with a view to ensuring that the UN system can respond quickly and efficiently with a common approach to deliver shared results.

Various areas were identified by different Member States as particularly needing support from the UNDS, with two mentioned, in particular: (i) statistical capacity and disaggregated data collection and analysis, and (ii) harnessing the data revolution to take informed decisions in real time. Member States also identified a number of sectors and themes with high relevance to the new sustainable development agenda, such as the green economy, renewable energy and climate change mitigation and adaptation, which will require capacity building support in many programme countries. Building national capacities and institutions was further reiterated as a primary function of the UNDS.

3. Aligning functions, funding and presence to deliver results

The key points made throughout the ECOSOC Dialogue reflected a general recognition that the new development agenda requires greater alignment of functions, funding, governance and organizational arrangements, as well as of capacity, partnerships and impact. The work of individual UN entities must be geared towards common strategic objectives based on the integration of inputs and results. The emphasis on integration requires significant strengthening of the ability of the UN development system for coordination at both the inter-agency and intergovernmental levels, and better alignment between headquarters and offices in the field. In this regard, the “Delivering as One” (DoA) approach should be scaled up, the Resident Coordinator system fully empowered and funded, the Standard Operating Procedures further strengthened, and the simplification and harmonization of business practices stepped-up.

In addition, the UNDS must focus on its comparative advantage and adjust its country presence vis-à-vis its value added based on a sound cost-benefit analysis. It was mentioned that in one country there are nine UN entities, but only two of them have operational activities exceeding USD 1 million in 2013. Not only does this undermine the impact of UNDS support to national development plans and systems, but also imposes heavy transaction costs on programme countries. As a panelist put it, there is a need to look not only at what the UNDS should do, but also at what it should *not* do. Unlocking the full potential of the UNDS does not mean that the system should do everything.

Funding emerged again as a critical topic that affects coherence, predictability and results-based management, as well as how the various entities are able to deliver on their mandates, including how they can bridge the divide between the humanitarian and development nexus. The alignment of funding with the new functions needed in the post-2015 era was highlighted as critical. In this regard, balancing the core vs. non-core funding remained a high priority. In addition to the need to focus on the areas where the UN system can bring added value, several Member States underscored the merit of exploring how to use partnerships and the limited public funds available to unlock resources and investments by the private sector, philanthropies, civil society, and individuals – while at the same time not intending these resources as a substitute for ODA.

There was a discussion on how the UNDS could support efforts to leverage partnerships in programme countries through coherence in its own activities and capacity-building for partnerships within national institutions. Modalities for partnerships will be closely linked to the positioning of the

UNDS in the post-2015 context. Going forward, some Member States indicated that they would welcome a deepening of the discussion on partnerships, given their importance to delivering on such an ambitious development agenda.

In addition, Member States were in general agreement that new or more obvious realities – from the rise of inequality, climate change, and the potential of science, technology and innovation – need to be adequately embedded into new ways of working by the UNDS.

4. Communicating effectively the post-2015 development agenda

Looking beyond 2015, it is important that the UNDS communicates more effectively its work in ways that resonate with actors outside of the UN system, including its beneficiaries and the general public. Terminology for UN ways of working and doing business need to better link to results that people see on the ground. Citizens in both donor and programme countries need to be convinced of the importance of the post-2015 agenda and development cooperation by understanding that the agenda concerns all people everywhere; joint efforts are needed by all potential actors; and the world's peoples—and their Governments—have a responsibility to take action on poverty eradication and sustainable development.

At the same time, it was suggested that the UN system should give careful consideration to how it communicates its main messages on the post-2015 development agenda. Clear messaging with multi-stakeholder engagement is good, but there is a complex aspect of implementation and review which needs to be taken into consideration to manage expectations and avoid dashing hopes.

5. Mandating a UNDS that is more fit for purpose

The opportunity to make the UN fit for purpose is at a critical juncture. Member States have clearly shown the momentum is ripe to move away from business as usual, switch gear and bring the change needed to ensure a United Nations development system that can cater effectively to the changing needs of our time.

Just as sustainable development cooperation must be rooted in national country ownership, some Member States indicated that a mandate for a UNDS more fit for purpose should be embedded in Member States' decisions on the post-2015 development goals. Some called for the inclusion of such reference in the outcome document for the Summit on the post-2015 development agenda. The appointment of a high-level panel to advise on potential strategic directions and other needed adjustments for the UNDS was mentioned as an option to take the agenda forward.

ECOSOC was endorsed by several Member States as the natural home to advance and review the work on ensuring a UNDS more fit for purpose. One Member State stated in particular that the proper functioning of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development will be crucial for the UNDS to prove and ensure its relevance and ability to deliver in the post-2015 context.