

Managing major risks to sustainable development: Conflict, disaster, the SDGs and the United Nations

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I. OVERVIEW

A. Context

1. The purpose of this paper is to inform Member States' discussions around the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review. It examines issues previously captured under the heading "transition from relief to development" which includes situations affected by natural disasters and conflict.
2. This discussion is central to implementing the 2030 Agenda.¹ The world has learnt that peace must be seen as a vital "threshold condition" for development, and the SDG's recognize that there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. Conflict-affected countries lag their peers in development outcomes: for example, the 10 worst performing countries for maternal mortality globally are all conflict-affected or post-conflict states.² More generally, gender-based exclusion and violence are a persistent characteristic of conflict.
3. A considerable part of the "last mile" challenge – ensuring that the SDGs reach the people that were "left behind" by the MDGs – will therefore consist of delivering sustainable development outcomes to those directly affected by mass violence or conflict. People experiencing conflict are also particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, which can erode peacebuilding gains; similarly natural disasters can increase the risk of conflict.³ Failure to address violence and conflict, or to more effectively mitigate the effects of and reduce the risk from disasters will challenge achievement of the SDGs.
4. The ongoing human tragedy of Syria places a concrete operational question mark on the value of all policy discussions that this paper addresses. And while the conflict continues – at the time of writing – the twin questions of what should happen when the conflict finally stops, and how to cope with displacement on a scale last seen in World War II, is a major challenge to the global community of nations.

B. Trends

5. The trends on the underlying issues are worrying. ⁴ After declining for much of the 1990s and early 2000s, major civil wars have almost tripled from four in 2007 to eleven in 2014. Roughly two-thirds of United Nations peacekeepers and almost 90% of its personnel in Special Political Missions are working in and on countries experiencing high-intensity conflict. There are more displaced people – 59.5 million – than at any point since World War II, and they are displaced, on average, for 17 years.⁵ 90% of all humanitarian appeals continue for more than 3 years. 78% of spending from the OECD is allocated to protracted crises.⁶
6. Conflict is not the only cause of human suffering. Over the last 10 years, natural disasters have caused 700,000 deaths, affected 1.5 billion people, and economic losses

are estimated at over \$1.3 trillion.⁷ Since 1980, the number of disasters has doubled, and their impact is steadily increasing, and 93% of deaths from disasters have occurred in developing countries.⁸ In 2014 alone, 19.3 million people were displaced as a result of geophysical and weather-related disasters⁹ and in the Sahel region, consecutive food and nutrition crises from 2005-2012, have left 20 million people affected by food insecurity.¹⁰

7. Predictions for the future, while not certain, are not rosy. The average annual loss from disasters is estimated to increase from USD 260 billion in 2015 to USD 414 billion by 2030 – and as a percentage of GDP, the effect will be the greatest on countries at the lower end of the Human Development Index, such as Haiti, Honduras, and Yemen.¹¹ Climate change is expected to drive more frequent extreme weather events.¹² It is already driving migration. The economic and human impact of natural disasters is steadily rising, and the continuing pace of urbanization only increases global risks.
8. Against this backdrop, there is also an elephant in the room, which is that the UN's Operational Activities for development simply matter less than they used to in development. This is a function of scale: the relative amounts of resources available through UNOCD are simply a fraction of other resource flows, such as FDI, remittances, or even portfolio equity flows.¹³ The percentage of ODA flowing through the UN system, once humanitarian assistance is removed, is also declining in absolute terms and declining relative to the international financial institutions, Regional Development Banks, and non-UN bodies, including emerging ones such as the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.
9. This is, however, less true for crisis situations, where the UN continues to be heavily concentrated and forms a larger percentage of international financial inflows, particularly with the inclusion of humanitarian funds.¹⁴ This is also true of the UN's physical presence: at the last careful count, the UN (as a whole) had 3 times the number of staff in conflict-affected states as in Low-Income Countries.¹⁵
10. But it is not clear that Member States are willing to invest in the UN to enable it to play its role. A better linked-up, trained and resourced UN system, operating close to the crises it must serve, working with partners, is an asset to delivery of the SDGs. Member States have collectively recognized the “important role and comparative advantage of an adequately resourced, relevant, coherent, efficient and effective UN system in supporting the achievement of the SDGs.”¹⁶

C. Structure

11. This paper, in the context of the upcoming QCPR focuses on two of the key issues that have driven the tension between the idea of a better UN, and the reality of a fragmented, underfunded system. In particular, it explores conceptual issues around the idea of “a transition from relief to development” and the role of the QCPR.

12. It then, briefly, looks at a series of reforms and initiatives that impact the question of the role of the United Nations reform efforts, including the Secretary-General's High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, the work of the Advisory Group of Experts on Peacebuilding, and the build-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.
13. It moves on to explore areas of progress and change since the last QCPR. The paper closes with a discussion of implications for the 2016 QCPR

II. THE CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

A. The wrong problem

14. Any discussion of “transitions from relief to development” must recognize how long this discussion has been going on. Until the early 1990s these were, for the most part, taken to be distinct and largely unrelated stages in responding to emergencies. Following this, the idea of a continuum (i.e. from relief to rehabilitation to development) became popular. The landmark 1991 UNGA Resolution 46/182 spoke of the continuum from relief to rehabilitation and development, and the need for close collaboration. The origins of the debate on linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) can be traced back to the African food crises of the mid to late 1980s.¹⁷ The key idea behind LRRD is that “Better ‘development’ can reduce the need for emergency relief; better ‘relief’ can contribute to development; and better ‘rehabilitation’ can ease the transition between the two.”¹⁸
15. This model began to be questioned during the 1990s.¹⁹ By the mid-1990s Member States were discussing ‘synergies’ rather than a continuum, recognizing that the relationship between relief and development activities “is not necessarily sequential”.²⁰ Relief and development activities began to be linked to peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. In 1997, the OECD asserted that “Emergency relief, rehabilitation work and development assistance all co-exist in times of conflict and crisis, and they interact in innumerable ways.”²¹
16. Eventually, the system moved towards the idea of “early recovery” as a mechanism for bringing “renewed attention to well-known challenges.”²² This led to the creation of an early recovery cluster (IASC Cluster Working Group on Early Recovery), which according to external assessments, did not solve the challenges.²³ Indeed, a major 2005 review noted that, “[i]n practice, continuum thinking has continued to implicitly underpin much aid programming.”²⁴
17. In 2011/12, driven by crises in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, the term resilience came to the fore. Simply defined, it is “the ability to absorb or resist a stress or shock, and to recover from it.”²⁵ Skeptics labelled resilience as “*a new buzzword of a floundering aid system, pushed by donors increasingly looking for cost effectiveness and a way to marry all components of aid to a process of state building.*”²⁶

18. But despite all these efforts – or perhaps because of them, the outcomes of interventions continue to be problematic. As one major study has argued “we identify the same lessons again and again, incident after incident.”²⁷ Indeed, some of the good practice from the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was not seen in the response to, for instance, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.²⁸
19. There has been a steady drum-beat of support for the idea that disaster response must go beyond immediate humanitarian assistance and attempt to address the underlying power dynamics and inequalities that made a disaster into a crisis in the first place.²⁹ This has been echoed in peacebuilding, where the Advisory Group of Experts has highlighted that “Sustaining peace...is among the core tasks established for the Organization...and should be understood as encompassing not only efforts to prevent relapse into conflict, but also efforts to prevent lapse into conflict in the first place.”³⁰
20. Ultimately, the discussion of resilience, prevention, recovery and transition are about the same issue: how can the United Nations better support countries to reduce the likelihood of a crisis occurring or recurring? and mitigate the impact when it does? The spectrum of issues that create such risks are broad – conflict, mass violence, environmental change, health, and economic shocks, to name but a few. But rather than try to provide a catch-all label, the system would do better to simply describe what it is trying to do: **support countries in reducing and managing major risks to sustainable development.**
21. This suggests that a policy focus on successful transition, as an outcome, is misguided. Transition is a description of a moment in change, not a strategic outcome. The tragic lessons of the continued complex situation in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate the harsh consequences of considering transition an outcome.
22. It is also noteworthy, in the movement of continued global financial constraints, that a risk management approach should be cost effective. For disaster risk reduction, the benefit to cost ratio ranges from 3-15, with projects in flood prevention producing significantly higher numbers – averaging 60.³¹ For conflict prevention, numbers are hard to come by. But the immediate economic costs of civil war range from 7-22 percent of GDP,³² and research increasingly shows that the spillover effects on neighbouring countries are also significant. For the tragedy of Syria, we can only guess what the global benefits would have been to robust efforts to prevent conflict escalation; Europe is now facing the costs of a response that did not address the enormous risk of mass migration rapidly enough.

B. A Wicked Problem

23. Unfortunately, the problem of managing risk – particularly in situations of transition, is fundamentally difficult, or wicked.

24. There is a lot of academic literature on the question of wicked problems– problems that are so complex that they are highly resistant to resolution. A major public policy review of these complex questions suggested four key characteristics that are relevant to operational activities of the UN that are under discussion:³³
- a. *Wicked problems are difficult to clearly define, have many interdependencies and are often multi-causal, and are unstable:* Is the source of less-than-satisfactory outcomes as simple as the problem of the false development/humanitarian/security divide? Is it a function of unsatisfactory political engagement? Or failed technical projects? Or all of the above, at different levels at different times?
 - b. *Attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen consequences:* For instance, efforts to increase the level of financial accountability in donor assistance – a virtuous goal – have resulted in a reduced appetite for risk-taking in scenarios where there are no single or clear answers.³⁴ This leads to less value-for-money, not more.
 - c. *Wicked problems usually have no clear solution, and effective remedies involve changing behaviours:* In the absence of clarity on the problem statement, there is no one single solution that can address the problem. The most effective model of engagement may require systemic and behavioural change.
 - d. *Wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation and can be characterized by chronic policy failure:* Which UN entity is responsible for managing transitions? Given that the first major calls for systemic change emerged after the events in Rwanda in 1994 and 1995, it is hard not to argue that there are chronic policy challenges.³⁵
25. The wickedness of the problem are evident in the challenges faced by the UN in improving its performance in risk management.

THE 'WICKEDNESS' OF IMPROVING THE UN'S PERFORMANCE IN MANAGING RISKS

26. Four key mismatches make it particularly difficult for the UN to improve its performance in reducing and managing risks in transition situations.
27. A mismatch between the prescription for improvement and the problem: This is particularly true in conflict. As the 2012 QCPR input paper on transitions highlighted, the discussion must be framed by the striking “*incongruity of assuming that coherence can have an impact in politically charged environments, where what may make or break the transition has little to do with UN coherence and more to do with high stake political agendas of a very different nature.*”³⁶ It must be stressed that this is also true in the aftermath of disaster, where the political incentives rarely align with understanding why risks were insufficiently mitigated prior to a disaster.
28. A mismatch between governance, structure and task: This mismatch creates *significant limits on the potential benefit of coherence*. The assumption behind the idea of policy prescriptions to improve performance in transition is that there is a set of activities that form a coherent whole that can respond to such a prescription. In reality, operational

coordination and partnership are not only purely voluntary, they are actually hindered by radically differing governance structures across the Secretariat and agencies/funds/programmes, and within those two communities. This “governance gap” means there is no cross-entity discussion, resourcing, or implementation of policies in any way that would support coherence. The constant struggle to finance the Development Operations Coordination Office is an example of this.

29. This is also not new. As the 2012 input paper highlighted “in the absence of...fundamental changes to the UN’s governance structure and fairly radical reforms to its funding arrangements, there are limits to the gains that people at HQ and in the field can achieve in terms of coherence.” This is also true of the management structures. Despite the proliferation of coordination structures – in response to Member State mandates for performance improvements – there remains no single body, at this moment, that would provide coordinated managerial or governance oversight for operational activities to reduce and mitigate risk in transitions.
30. A mismatch between funding and desired outcomes: If Member States accept that the desired outcome is more coherent activity to reduce and manage risks, the reality that current, radically different funding **streams across the UN’s operational activities provide rigid incentives that operate against the Organizations’ ability to collaborate and integrate.**
31. The absence of system-wide operational evidence: There are many anecdotal assumptions, for example, about the effectiveness of coordination. There is a near-total absence of analysis built on clear baselines and theories of change, that demonstrate the positive impact or relative impact of any particular model over another, or even of coordination itself. The fact that the UN does not operate in a unified manner means that evaluations are primarily at the project level, very rarely at the entity level, and never at the level of the collective response of the United Nations to a single event. This is not solely a flaw of the United Nations system; performing such work in situations of crisis is tremendously difficult. But it poses fundamental challenges to defining policy to drive better operational activities.
32. Across all of these factors, it becomes an unfortunate truth that ad-hoc, or band-aid solutions may create their own problems that may be worse than the symptoms they purport to address. Indeed, as the 2012 paper observed “*there are simply too many policies, too much to implement and report on, in pursuit of an objective that may or may not materialize.*”
33. In defining a wicked problem, C. West Churchman argued that for the existence of a moral principle: “whoever attempts to tame a part of a wicked problem, but not the whole, is morally wrong.”³⁷ It would appear unquestionable that solving the problem of improving outcomes in the aftermath of a crisis, or even the slightly lesser challenge of bridging the humanitarian-development divide meets the definition of a wicked problem.

34. Accepting this raises a challenge to Member States. The 2016 QCPR must address systemic issues. This is because it must respond to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. But it is also because it should recognize that it is dealing with a “wicked” problem, and should accept the attendant realities of:
- a. limited high-quality evidence to inform and shape policy directives;
 - b. the idea that the system is reaching the limits of the potential of voluntary steps towards coherence; and,
 - c. the risk that additional measures that do not solve the systemic problem could at best fail to improve outcomes, and at worse, exacerbate the underlying problems.
35. Against this backdrop, in their June 2015 meeting, the UNDG Working Group on Transitions recognized the emerging “need for a more strategic QCPR, which moves away from terms such as ‘transition from relief to development’ ”³⁸ and for form to follow function. This in part reflects the slight shift in the 2012 QCPR which recognized the “complex, non-linear” nature of moving out of crisis.
36. But this could also be seen as another request from the governors of the United Nations to embrace the need for change. As was asked in the ECOSOC dialogue: *What are the new functions that the SDGs will require of the governance of the UNDS? Can these functions be performed through incremental changes to the system, or is a fundamental re-think required?*³⁹

III. BREAKING DOWN SILOES: REFORMS AT THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE 2030 AGENDA

37. The preamble to the 2030 Agenda states clearly that “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”⁴⁰ This marks a sea-change – the recognition that peace is both a precondition for development as well as a development outcome in its own right.⁴¹
38. The universality and breadth of the 2030 Agenda have implications for “transitions from relief to development” that go beyond the obvious linkages to Global Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. The issue of the “last mile” – or reaching those that were left behind by the MDGs – is critical to achievement of the 2030 Agenda.⁴² In 1990, one-fifth of the global poor lived in fragile states.⁴³ The most recent projections suggest that approximately half of the global poor now live in states affected by conflict and violence.⁴⁴
39. A significant portion of the operational activity of the United Nations already occurs in contexts where peace operations are present.⁴⁵ The location of the global poor and the

demands of the 2030 Agenda suggest that this may continue to be the case. The three internal reform processes all reflect this, in part.

THE HIGH-LEVEL INDEPENDENT PANEL ON PEACE OPERATIONS

40. In their recent comprehensive review of UN field missions, the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations recognized this link, and called for the UN to address ‘chronic challenges’ facing the UN family in integrating their efforts in mission settings.⁴⁶ The panel also recommended that “UN agencies, funds and programmes advocate for and prioritize inclusive and equitable development activities as an essential contribution to conflict prevention.” As noted earlier, achieving increased coherence goals will require systemic thinking and change, rather than repeating the encouragement for integration that is found in the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Reviews of 2004, 2007 and the 2012 QCPR.

REVIEW OF THE PEACEBUILDING ARCHITECTURE

41. From inception, it was hoped that the Peacebuilding Architecture would act as a bridge from relief to sustainable peace and development.⁴⁷ The 2015 review suggests, however, that this “gaping hole” in the UN’s institutional machinery has not been filled and that fragmentation continues.⁴⁸ The review urges more focus on the timing and management of transitions as a whole, and in rejecting the sequential idea of peacebuilding contributes to the idea that relief, development and peacebuilding must be employed simultaneously and complement each other.

THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT

42. The World Humanitarian Summit, scheduled for 2016, would appear to present an opportunity to address many of these issues. The recent Synthesis Report from the Global Consultation process for the Summit offers relevant language, calling for “A new framework of cooperation among humanitarian, development, climate change and peacebuilding actors to manage and find solutions ...built on long-term commitments [and] making simultaneous use of all instruments, underpinned by shared risk and context analysis and joint, outcome-oriented planning.”⁴⁹

THE SENDAI FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION 2015-2030

43. The timeframe for the Sendai Framework mirrors the SDGs. The Framework itself, with its call for “integrated and inclusive economic, structural, legal, social, health, cultural, educational, environmental, technological, political and institutional measures that prevent and reduce hazard exposure and vulnerability to disaster, increase preparedness for response recovery, and thus strengthen resilience” reflects the appeal for more cohesive approaches. The breadth of the demands, however, also underlines the challenges.

44. The desired outcomes from Sendai, which are 1) To understand disaster risk, 2) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk, 3) Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience, and 4) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction,” also echo the shift towards a risk-based approach.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS AND THE AGENDA 2030

45. Arguably, all of these efforts could be seen as dismantling the idea of preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding as separate phases, and the institutional siloes that have been created to cater to each separate phase.⁵⁰ Agenda 2030 arguably brings the political process of dismantling these siloes to a head through the simple recognition that peace requires development and development requires peace. There is no separation. *But linking the idea of a holistic agenda to operational implications is much more complex.*

46. Statebuilding has become a dominant paradigm in the international response to conflict. A new book by the Brookings Institution on reaching the poorest of the poor, and the only in-depth exploration so far of the links between the relief-to-development agenda and Agenda 2030, explores the theory of statebuilding. It describes the intrinsic tension created by the fact that: “the ability of the *central* state to earn legitimacy depends on its demonstrated capacity to deliver services *locally*.”⁵¹ This has operational implications; the book argues that the engagement in fragile states must be “geared toward bridging the gap between state institution building and improvement of local livelihoods.”⁵²

47. Case studies within this book highlight the need to treat risks across the different pillars of the United Nations response.⁵³ In Afghanistan, the sustainability of development gains driven significantly by aid are in jeopardy because of the “failure to improve the political and security environment.” In Sierra Leone, the political and security transition has been successful, but the lack of development gains has “increased the threat to longer-term peace.”

48. Again, this has concrete operational implications – and the authors argue both for shifts in aid allocations “to peacekeeping and state-building objectives, specifically law enforcement, the judicial system, job creation, and infrastructure” and for delivery mechanisms that use country systems, deliver faster, and foster institutions while incorporating better risk management.

49. In short, concrete ideas are beginning to emerge for how to improve overall performance with respect to meeting the SDGs, how to reach the most poor, and how to bridge the humanitarian/development divide. But these remain early ideas, and must be carefully considered in the context of the conceptual challenges outlined earlier – particularly the caution that small fixes may not serve a larger goal.

IV. 2012-2015: CONTINUED EFFORTS TO MAKE CHANGE

A. Improved coherence within the United Nations

50. The limited time-frame and resources available for this paper precluded the possibility of a systematic and/or system-wide assessment of changes that have been made to implement the 2012 QCPR. Nonetheless, a number of concrete steps have been taken including, but not limited to.
- a. Increased use of Integrated Strategic Frameworks, and the 2014 release of a new Integrated Assessment and Planning workbook (an update to the former Integrated Missions Planning Process guidelines);
 - b. Improved partnerships between the UN and World Bank, ranging from work in Columbia and Lebanon to greater collaboration through the joint UN-WB thematic trust fund on emerging issues, such as fragile cities;
 - c. Development of a 2013 policy on UN transitions for mission drawdowns or withdrawals.
51. And while a more exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this paper, all signs suggest that efforts to improve coherence are moving steadily forward and producing results. In 2014, for instance, results from the UNDG coordination support survey suggested that two-thirds of country team members in countries where missions were present “were of the view that there had been a significant increase in coherence.”⁵⁴
52. This is not to say that all areas have improved equally. The evaluations of Delivering as One have shown mixed, and by all accounts limited, successes. They have found that transaction costs increased in many cases, and duplication/fragmentation had only reduced a little. The 2012 Delivering as One evaluation concluded that “while its efforts at reform are mostly positively assessed, bolder measures may be required to put the United Nations on a more comprehensive track of reform, including rationalization of the number of United Nations entities; reform of mandates, governance structures and funding modalities; and a new definition of the range of development expertise expected from the United Nations system.”⁵⁵
53. Issues around interoperability played a significant role in these challenges to Delivering as One (DAO). The 2012 evaluation assessed that the limited mandates of country offices to change procedures and incompatible systems across organizations had a negative effect, and noted that time-consuming processes were required to achieve any change, and both support from higher levels and coherent/consolidated management information systems were largely absent. There is evidence of a lack of significant improvement on the issue of interoperability.⁵⁶ The 2015 report on implementation of the QCPR reaffirms this, stating that “progress toward the harmonization of business practices at the country level remains slow.”⁵⁷ This may be the subject of a separate input to this process, but it has implications for transition situations, where rapid interoperability is critical to allow for the principle of comparative advantage to be used to allow the system to operate more efficiently.⁵⁸

54. The DAO evaluations have also highlighted other key issues, particularly with the RC system. 'One Leader' was judged, in 2009, as problematic as the Resident Coordinators had no authority over agency heads (horizontal accountability).⁵⁹ The 2015 implementation report on the QCPR echoed this, stating that that "The mutual accountability between the Resident Coordinators and United Nations country team members for United Nations Development Assistance Framework results needs further reinforcement." Members of the UNDG continue to express reservations over the RC/Resident Representative firewall, and saw little progress in vesting the RC with real authority and accountability in the system which remains deeply vertical in character.⁶⁰
55. Coherence between development activities and peace operations also does not appear to have improved. Although there is no hard evidence, the overwhelming indication from interviews with serving peace operations officials was best captured in the depressed articulation of a senior peacekeeping official who said "The UN Country Team is less of a partner than they ever were. And we need them more than ever." This is a one-sided assessment; but the continued funding issues of the Development Operations Coordination Office both speak to the operational challenges of UNCT support to peace operations, and to a lack of interest from Member States in paying the costs of improved coordination.
56. A joint UNDP-UNFPA-UNICEF-WFP informal consultation in 2014 that examined country-level experiences observed that they provided "mixed value in terms of programme coherence, indicating that the countries surveyed did not consider that the documents [common country programme documents] had contributed to the coherence, efficiency and effectiveness of the UNCT at the implementation, reporting and evaluation stages."⁶¹ And although there is increasing evidence of efforts to incorporate resilience and risk management into programming, perhaps best exemplified by the Sahel Strategy, the early indications are that implementation challenges will continue.
57. These findings suggest that the UN may be approaching the natural limits of voluntary coordination. This reflects the 2015 edition of the State of the Humanitarian System when it says that: "We may have reached the limits of what jury-rigging new mechanisms for planning and coordination onto [the current] structure can accomplish."⁶² Without the fundamental changes called for by the 2012 input paper – particularly those related to better defining responsibility and accountability, as well as around joint planning, funding and risk management – it is unclear how this situation will improve. The risk of continued small improvements having a negative effect was highlighted by a major external review of the UNDS, which noted that increasing horizontal accountability does not harmonize efforts because it merely *adds to*, rather than replacing, vertical controls.⁶³

B. Improved financing for transitions

58. The non-linear progression of transition “presents tensions and trade-offs between the need to provide rapid support to efforts of implementing peace and saving lives, while at the same time supporting the development of sustainable state structures.” Financing, and its flexibility, is critical in support to transitions yet, according to the last major study on this topic, “overall support to transitions remains inadequate.”⁶⁴
59. In particular, funding for priorities related to the G7+’s Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals on inclusive politics, security and justice are held to be particularly under-financed. Between 2007 and 2011, funding for these goals made up less than 10% of total estimated development assistance related to recovery.⁶⁵ In paragraph 30, above, we highlighted how *McKechnie and Manuel* had stressed the critical nature of funding these areas.
60. The UN has demonstrated one instance of significant improvement in its practices – where in the UN Integrated Mission in Timor Leste (UNMIT), in 2012/2013, funding from approved mission resources was channelled to UNCT members to promote early UN integration at mission start-up.⁶⁶ There was no evidence to suggest that this has happened since, or that the practices that enabled this have been captured and shared.
61. The role of the Peacebuilding Fund is central to the UN in transitions. Over two-third of the PBF is directed towards peace-operation settings.⁶⁷ The positioning of the PBF within the Secretariat is argued, by the UN, to have created natural connections with DPKO and DPA, and between DPA and UNCTs, while implementing primarily through members of the UNCT.⁶⁸ In the recent Peacebuilding Architecture Review, the Peacebuilding Fund was considered to be a major asset to the PBA in general, due to its ability to provide rapid, flexible funding and its propensity to taking both political and financial risks.⁶⁹
62. The same review highlighted, however, the “marked imbalance between the allocations available for peacebuilding and the global funding either for humanitarian response... or for peacekeeping.” The report also points to a continuing trend of supply-driven project funding, in addition to a slight propensity for risk aversion in conflict-affected contexts.⁷⁰
63. But the PBF is a rare glimmer of good news. The ratio of development-financed recovery pooled funds to bilateral assistance is 1:25, compared to 1:10 for humanitarian assistance. Development-financed pooled funds are, moreover, often much smaller.⁷¹ As the UN has acknowledged, “UN pooled funds that are expected to support...transition[s] from crises to development either do not exist or have been established long after the crisis.”⁷² Where they do exist, they are too small to act as a centre of gravity for “improving UN coordination, coherence and integration.”⁷³

64. With respect to financing of sudden-onset disasters, moreover, DRR-related spending is just a small fraction of overall development financing. As noted in paragraph 22, the benefit to cost ratio for disaster risk reduction ranges from 3-15 to 1, with projects in flood prevention producing significantly higher numbers – averaging 60:1.⁷⁴
65. There is no one way to fund the transition from disaster to development. Good practice in funding transitions points in particular to the need for longer-term, predictable (i.e. multi-year) mechanisms. Pooled Funds such as the CAP/HPC, which create a joint platform for funding and prioritization of needs and coordination of implementation, have been highlighted as positive examples.⁷⁵ Currently, however, only around 11.5 percent of all development-related non-core resources are currently being pooled, with no significant upward trend.⁷⁶

V. FINDINGS

66. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its holistic approach linking human development, environmental sustainability, and lasting peace, makes questions of coherence even more important. As the UN Working Group on Transitions recognizes in a recent note on the peace-humanitarian-development nexus in key post-2015 reviews, processes and frameworks, “the scope, complexity and sheer interconnectedness of today’s problems have surpassed the ability of the UN and Member states to address them individually.”⁷⁷
67. Our reviews of practice, to the extent possible within our timeframe, suggested that the core findings from the independent report prepared for the 2012 QCPR remained entirely accurate.⁷⁸ The full range of relevant issues to risk management are impossible to fully capture in a short paper. The operational gaps identified by the last sufficiently deep and exhaustive study, of 2006, also to remain true.⁷⁹
- a. A strategic gap – there was little evidence of strategy that encompassed political, security, development and humanitarian tools across bilateral and multi-lateral actors; and no framework for prioritization.
 - b. A financing gap – instruments are neither flexible nor dynamic enough.
 - c. A series of capacity gaps – in leadership capacity; in implementation capacity; in sheer availability of civilian resources, and in a lack of training for purpose.
68. The lack of fundamental change is, therefore, the first central finding of this paper.
69. The second major finding is that the system is of Member States making, and therefore can only be changed through their collective will.
70. In the SDG Declaration, Member States claimed to see value in an “adequately resourced, relevant, coherent, efficient and effective UN system.”⁸⁰ But, simply put, this does not appear to be the case. This paper has diagnosed:
- a. A mismatch between the prescription for improvement and the problem;

- b. A mismatch between funding and desired outcomes;
- c. A mismatch between governance, structure and task;
- d. The structural flaw that leads to no single body that could provide coordinated managerial **or** governance oversight for operational activities to reduce and mitigate risk in transitions;
- e. The absence of system-wide operational evidence;
- f. The idea that, in the face of all of these facts, the UN is approaching the natural limits of voluntary coordination.

71. Going back to the framing of this paper, this leaves us with two basic conclusions:

- a. Risk management, in transitions, is a truly wicked problem: Moving beyond where the current situation and incremental improvements that may have negative overall effects will require systems thinking and systemic change.
- b. The big problems have not been fixed: A 1994 report on the coordination of activities in Rwanda pointed to the “impossibility of combining coordination functions with other responsibilities” and asserted that “coordination cannot rely solely on personalities, goodwill and intellectual leadership.”⁸¹ Arguably, this has not really changed.

72. These challenges must be framed in the context of the SDGs, which ask: *What are the new functions required of the UNDS? Can these functions be performed through incremental changes to the system, or is a fundamental re-think required?*

VI. IMPLICATIONS

73. The primary implications of this paper are strategic, rather than operational. If Member States want better outcomes, they must accept the extent to which the system reflects their interests and desires, and shape their system accordingly. The United Nations, by charter, serves the people. By practice it serves Member States.

74. The strategic limitations of the UN system are a key feature of this paper. Recognizing these, rather than pretending that they do not exist, would help the UN. A clear articulation of competitive advantage, is critical to this.

- a. Such an articulation should also recognize that the UN could do so much more if it worked better with others. This was a major theme of the un-implemented Civilian Capacities Review, and echoed in the 2015 AGE Review of Peacebuilding, which stated that “the United Nations must better define the scope, content and rules that frame its partnerships with other major stakeholders, be they global, regional or local, public or private.”
- b. This should also be seen as an opportunity. Middle-income countries, at all ends of the scale, may both wish to learn from other experiences about managing such risks and share their own valuable knowledge. Finding a strategic and limited role for the UN in encouraging such exchanges, through new forms of

development cooperation including South-south exchanges, could both help the UN to demonstrate its continued relevance and to better implement Agenda 2030.

75. This does not mean that there are no operational opportunities. But, given that voluntary coordination is approaching its upper limit, then solely advocating for further incremental improvement would be intellectually dishonest. Yet there are two major areas where operational guidance from the QCPR may remain relevant, irrespective of the strategic discussion required above:

- a. A move away from coherence as a desired end-goal, to the articulation of outcome-driven goals, might help the QCPR to actually shape the system.
- b. The core issue of evidence based policy making is critical. There is a need for serious and sustained investment in empirically-tested policy options that provide:
 - i. Mechanisms to support evidence-based decision making through the UN system and its partners, including a robust repository of good practice and an understanding of where evidence can best be used.
 - ii. Steps to allow and enable a strategic discussion of failure at all levels of the organization. This, in particular, recognizes the immense difficulty of managing risks to sustainable development in conflicts and disasters, and will allow Member States to better share and work together towards common outcomes;

76. There is no doubt that the UN is at a point of change. The Member States have a choice: use their instruments to help their organization remain relevant, or not. The QCPR cannot hide behind its operational focus; it is an essential instrument in providing a clear expression of Member States' desires for their United Nations. Can Member States come together in support of their agenda, to build the United Nations they called for?

VII. REFERENCES

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¹⁴ It is worth noting that ODA can still remain highly influential in crisis countries, where in cases such as Mali, ODA amounts to almost 40% of the domestic budget, and is roughly equivalent to other financial inflows.

¹⁵ Jenks and Jones 2013 p. 77. “In five countries – Zimbabwe, Somalia, Angola, Eritrea, and Sudan – the funds spent by or through the UN on development account for more than 25% of all ODA spending; in Zimbabwe, the number reaches 37%. In a further six countries the UN’s share is between 15% and 25%: in Myanmar (for now), Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Afghanistan. In the remaining countries, the UN share runs from just under 15% to as little as 2% in the Republic of Congo and 3% in Haiti. The average across fragile states is 15%. When humanitarian spending is added in, the numbers are somewhat higher; in some cases (Sudan, Chad) reaching above 60%, but on average totaling 26%.

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⁷⁸ These are, restated, as follows:

- a. There have been genuine efforts to increase in-country coherence and efficiency by, inter alia, conscious efforts to incorporate lessons learned and policies developed over the last few years.
- b. Such field-level efforts are all the more laudable when one considers the many challenges in pursuing a coherence agenda in transition contexts
- c. The credibility gap between rhetoric, practice and impact also stems from the sheer number of policies that the UN staff in country offices are asked to implement, and the related transaction costs.
- d. Coherence and efficiency are undermined by the persistent gap between responsibility; capacity; accountability and authority to implement reforms and bring the system together for more effective results.
- e. RC/HC skills, functions and responsibilities are at times ill defined and insufficiently tailored to transition contexts.
- f. The current planning approach for UNCT in transition does not always promote coherence beyond the document produced.
- g. Funding for coherence in transition contexts is inadequate, yet the current discussion includes many – contradictory – claims.

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