



Preparations for the General Assembly's 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy review of UN operational activities for development

Three-part seminar series

Seminar 1: Emerging issues in UN development operations

SUMMARY

"The international community is looking at various possibilities for shaping the UN development agenda beyond 2015. The UN system will always be part of the solution, but it may need to reinvent itself, in order to stand up to today's challenges "

H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser

President of the sixty-sixth session of the UN General Assembly

As part of the substantive preparations for the General Assembly's 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Office, supported by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, are partnering in the organization of two seminars and a retreat aimed at promoting informal exchange of views among Member States and other stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities facing the UN development system.

The first seminar in this series was held on 13 February 2012 and hosted by the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations. The topic for discussion was *"emerging issues in UN development operations"*. Participants included Permanent Representatives and other senior officials from some forty Member States and a number of senior representatives and experts from UN entities in the development and humanitarian fields.

Opening session

The opening session featured statements by H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly; H.E. Mr. Desra Percaya, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council and Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Indonesia to the United Nations; Ms. Helen Clark, Administrator of UNDP and Chair of the UN Development Group; and Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

H.E. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the General Assembly, highlighted that operational activities for development account for nearly two-thirds of all system-wide activities of the United Nations system. Hence, the General Assembly's upcoming



comprehensive policy review will directly impact a large part of the work of the organization.

The President of the General Assembly also noted that few would have predicted the enormous changes that have taken place in the broader environment of UN operational activities for development since the last review in 2007. A forward-looking reflection on emerging issues in UN development operations is therefore most timely as Member States embark on the QCPR exercise later this year.

H.E. Desra Percaya, Vice-President of ECOSOC, expressed the view that the UN development system is at an inflection point, where continuing with business-as-usual will risk the organization losing its relevance in the emerging development cooperation landscape. The same risk applies to ECOSOC as well. The Council, for example, needs to play a more effective role in closing the coherence gap that exists in policy-making on UN development operations at the central level. Discussions in ECOSOC also need to become more evidence-based and issue-driven, with stronger participation of national policy-makers, if the work of the Council is to have adequate impact.

Helen Clark, Administrator of UNDP, speaking as undg Chair, expressed the view that the QCPR is far from being an abstract exercise. It is an opportunity for the GA to update the mandate of the UN development system—and even reinvent it—in light of the changing environment in which the UN system operates since the last review in 2007.

The undg Chair enumerated the vast agenda to be considered during the upcoming QCPR: a rapidly changing policy environment; funding pressures stemming from the global financial crisis; differentiating the relevance and unique contribution of the UN development system; forging partnerships with a growing number of development actors; the increasing number of developing countries graduating from low- to middle-income status; the approaching 2015 deadline to achieve the MDGs; and the growing number of crisis and post-conflict countries. All these factors set the context for the 2012 QCPR, in addition to future drivers of change that will stem from the upcoming Rio+20 conference, the post-2015 development agenda, and follow through on the outcomes of the Busan High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness.

Sha Zukang, Under Secretary-General of UNDESA, emphasized that the goal of the 2012 QCPR is a simple one: “a more relevant, effective and efficient United Nations, one that is better prepared to meet the needs of developing countries.” The QCPR presents an opportunity to reflect upon critical questions for the work of the UN development system, such as whether the heavy reliance on non-core funding is the most effective and sustainable way of mobilizing resources, or how can we best meet the growing demand for UN support while enhancing its impact at the country level?

The issue of sustainable development has become a central priority for the United Nations and over the coming years can be expected to become firmly entrenched in the core mission of the organization. The realization of this mission will influence the work priorities of the UN system for development at country-level. To achieve tangible progress in this



area, there is need for greater integration of the normative work and operational activities of the UN system. The Under Secretary-General also reaffirmed the commitment of UNDESA to facilitating a transparent and effective consultative process for the 2012 QCPR as well as providing Member States with objective and evidence-based analysis to facilitate decision-making.

Emerging issues in UN development operations

A. Key change factors

The session began with a presentation by **Bruce Jenks, former UN Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the UNDP Bureau for Partnerships**. He highlighted four main dimensions of change impacting on the role of the UN development system in international development cooperation.

(a) The role of fast-growing middle-income countries in global development cooperation

Two key dimensions characterize this change. Firstly, the voice and influence of several middle-income countries such as the “BRICS” (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) is increasing in response to their rapidly growing economic power. This change in international relations among Member States is leading to calls for reform of intergovernmental decision-making processes at the global level. For the UN development system, it will become critical for its continued relevance in global development cooperation to position its work strategically in light of this new reality.

Secondly, whereas the old development model was based on the concept of developing countries graduating to higher-income status, today’s picture is significantly more complex. Even within developing countries that have graduated, or are about to graduate, to middle-income status, the incidence of poverty remains high. The income status of a country may therefore not be the only issue to consider, but also its capacity to address the multifaceted challenges of poverty. Addressing the increasing divergences between least-developed countries (LDCs) and middle-income countries when it comes to access to development cooperation resources should therefore be accorded high priority at the global level.

(b) The shift from traditional development cooperation to global public goods

The adoption of the Millennium Declaration in the year 2000 saw the evolution of a global framework for achieving what can be described as essentially national objectives (MDG 1-7). Although this interpretation may be contested, the key point is that a global framework for the pursuit of national objectives is a different proposition to that of global public goods. The emerging global challenges have instead a dual dimension of requiring action at both national and global level. Accordingly, there is a subtle, but important, difference between the traditional perspective of aid, versus that of global public goods in the new development cooperation environment. This may require the international community to rethink what official development assistance can be spent on, particularly if contributions to global public goods will be defined as part of each country’s responsibility.



Based on this perspective, four main areas of global public goods were identified which have specific relevance and significance for the future role of the UN development system in international development cooperation:

- (i) The concept of resource scarcity and planetary boundaries;
- (ii) The large number of countries in crisis and transition from relief to development;
- (iii) The internationalization of health threats, risks and consequences; and
- (iv) The phenomenon of the illicit sector (or what has been called the “dark side of globalization”).

(c) Transformation in the state-market-individual relationship

The changing nature of the relationship between the state, the market and the individual, has altered in a major way the current development cooperation landscape. In key areas of global development cooperation such as those related to sustainable development, including climate change, and health, the involvement of the private sector has become an important factor to be recognized. This heightens the need for the UN development system to better understand the role of the private sector as the “engine of development” and the importance of fostering more effective partnership with this rapidly growing actor in international development cooperation.

The role of individuals and civil society organizations in public policy-making at the national and global level has similarly undergone a transformation in the recent past, in no small measure due to the advances in information and communications technologies. More recently, the rise of social media has led to major direct transformative effects on development processes at the country-level.

(d) Growth of new institutional actors in development cooperation

The most significant development in today’s global development cooperation landscape is probably the exponential growth in new institutional actors that even a decade ago were either non-existing or seen as marginal players. Whether it is the Group of 20, new foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative, global networks in areas such as technology and health, the emergence of new economic powers, or a multitude of new civil and professional organizations, international development cooperation will require new forms of dialogue among these actors in the future, particularly with a view to forging better understanding among them on key issues, concepts, principles and working modalities.

These changes in the global development cooperation architecture are posing a fundamental challenge for the UN development system particularly in terms of strategic positioning. Part of the repositioning of the UN development system will undoubtedly involve significant strengthening of partnerships with the new development actors.

The dialogue among participants echoed the view that the changing global development cooperation environment will require the UN development system to adapt if it is to continue to remain relevant. In this context, it is important not to fall prey to the misconception that the institutions and operational systems of the UN development system are too complex and entrenched to make the necessary improvements possible.

It was highlighted that an enduring feature of the UN system throughout its history has been its ability to periodically transform itself in response to major shifts in the global environment. It was stressed that addressing key emerging global challenges will require greater focus on the strategic positioning of the UN development system. The current debate on the strengthening of the UN development system tends to focus more on issues related to operational effectiveness. While those issues are important, strategic repositioning of the UN development system is likely to assume even greater importance in the next few years. It was essential to approach the QCPR as a defining moment to rethink strategically what the UN system should do – and to not get entrenched in a heavy negotiation process.

It was suggested that the repositioning of the UN development system would need to revolve around realignment in six key areas: functions, funding, staffing, partnerships, organization and governance.

Other key issues highlighted during the general discussion:

- ❖ There is a highly legitimate role for traditional development cooperation in the context of LDCs, especially where trade and investment flows do not leverage the national economy to the same extent as in other environments;
- ❖ The UN development system cannot become complacent but should continuously search for ways to remain a “partner of choice” for programme countries;
- ❖ In order to maintain its relevance, the UN development system needs to position itself as an important development partner in the emerging paradigm of global public goods;
- ❖ An important area of comparative advantage for the UN system is to serve as a provider of high-quality data and knowledge for use by various constituents;
- ❖ A more competitive global development cooperation environment calls for better articulation of the comparative advantage of the UN development system. Thus, on the one hand, the QCPR should be “obsessed with what is happening outside the UN system”. However, this idea can be turned upside-down in the sense that it is equally valid to define a smaller set of priorities and even contemplate to discontinue some of the activities and thematic issues;
- ❖ The strategic repositioning of the UN development system must clearly define how to meet demands of stakeholders for greater development effectiveness;
- ❖ Change in the strategic positioning and modus operandi of the UN development system will require critical mass of support from Member States and UN entities. The



QCPR process can provide the impetus for this discussion, with a view to building broad-based support for the necessary improvements.

B. The role of the UN system in crisis and post-conflict countries

In the second half of the session, **Rima Saleh, former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and former Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Chad** discussed the key challenges facing the UN system in crisis and post-conflict countries.

In recent years, the development challenges of such countries have moved to the top of the international agenda. Today, over 1 billion people live in crisis or post-conflict countries, with none of them likely to achieve a single MDG by the 2015 deadline according to the 2011 UNDP Human Development Report. Youth, children and women are the most vulnerable groups in these societies who in turn endure the most hardship and suffering. Populations in these settings are often subjected to a life of pain, fear, suffering and misery where opportunity is a rare exception. It is in these circumstances where the UN system can make a huge difference in the life of ordinary people at the country-level.

The 2007 General Assembly review of operational activities recognized the importance of helping countries to transition from relief to development. In crisis and post-conflict countries, the UN system has put in place various tools and practices that are critically important to the transition process such as more formal coordination mechanisms for ground-level operations, improved communications among UN entities, and procedures for transfer and handover of development programmes to national actors.

The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, agreed to by a number of countries and international organizations at the recent Busan High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, is an important milestone in this effort. The New Deal recognizes the need to improve current ways of working of international development partners in crisis and post-conflict countries.

Several lessons are emerging from the experience of the UN system in crisis and post-conflict countries, including the following:

- ❖ The principle of inclusion in the modus operandi of development partners, particularly in terms of how programmes and activities are designed and implemented is of paramount significance in crisis and post-conflict countries. The participation of authorities at all levels of government and all regions within country is central to sustainability and national ownership of development programmes and national development plans;
- ❖ Engagement of civil society organizations must happen from the outset, especially if buy-in is expected during the transition process;
- ❖ Capacity development must be embedded in all transition processes from the start, focused on building resilient communities with the ability and capacity to anticipate and bounce back from external shocks and recurring adversity. Outreach to women and civil society generally, including in remote areas, is of critical importance;



- ❖ Transition from relief to development is not a linear process and one must recognize that humanitarian aid, development assistance and recovery processes often need to take place simultaneously;
- ❖ Post-conflict situations are difficult because of the multiplicity of actors, both UN and non-UN, involving political, military, security, humanitarian and development actors;
- ❖ Post-conflict situations require carefully tailored and calibrated responses, as each approach differs substantially from one situation to another; and
- Transition environments require a full rethinking of risk management, such as how to analyse conflict and its various dimensions of risks.

The record of the UN system in transition environments reveals important progress and achievements but also the need for further action and commitment to manage risks at national, regional and global level. It is important to continue the dialogue initiated at the Busan High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and the 2011 Monrovia International Dialogue on Peace Building and State Building.

The QCPR is a key opportunity to reflect on the advances made as well as the lessons learned in UN development operations in crisis and post-conflict countries, especially from the more recent experiences. The most salient lessons being the critical importance of capacity-building of national partners, commitment and collaboration from concerned governments, continued dialogue to give practical application to principles of working in transition environments, the participation of women and other marginalized groups in development processes, applying human-rights-based approaches to programming, and staffing of UN teams with skills sets appropriate to post-conflict and transition countries, including training to enhance the effectiveness of staff in these environments.

Other key issues highlighted during the general discussion included:

- ❖ Regional dimensions and strategies are important in helping countries deal with transition. Regional UNDG teams have an important role and should be reinforced and accountable;
- ❖ Communication and collaboration among all actors at national level is critical, including with donors and NGOs;
- ❖ The priorities for development cooperation in transition contexts must be consistent with those of the government. The various donors and development actors must harmonize the messages they give to the host country;
- ❖ Ensuring continuity of resources in transition setting remains a challenge;
- ❖ The UN has a comparative advantage in working in crisis and post-conflict countries in a sense that the organization is present in the country before, during and after the transition. The UN's mandates on peace and development are complementary and various parts of the system must work together whether there is an integrated peace keeping mission, or not.