

Functions and Impact of the UN Development System¹

The General Assembly resolution 70/1, *“Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”* underscores several transformative shifts, which call for fundamental reflection on the role and functions of the UNDS. These shifts include:

- **Universality.** “These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike.”
- **Scope.** “This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance.” It “goes far beyond the Millennium Development Goals. Alongside continuing development priorities such as poverty eradication, health, education and food security and nutrition, it sets out a wide range of economic, social and environmental objectives. It also promises more peaceful and inclusive societies.”
- **Integration.** The goals are “integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development. Reflecting the integrated approach that we have decided on, there are deep interconnections and many cross-cutting elements across the new Goals and targets.”
- **Addressing inequality and leaving no one behind.** Member States pledged that across the agenda “no one will be left behind.”
- **A people-centred and planet-sensitive process, making sustainability an overarching development paradigm.** The Member States pledged, “We commit to making fundamental changes in the ways that our societies produce and consume goods and services”, to sustainably manage our planet’s natural resources and take urgent action on climate change. “We will work to build dynamic, sustainable, innovative and people-centred economies, promoting youth employment and women’s economic empowerment and decent work for all.” There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination.
- **Giving reality to “we the peoples.”** The Member States agreed, “Our journey will involve governments as well as parliaments, the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people.”

At its core, the SDGs highlight a clear “development disconnect” despite progress under the MDGs. In pursuing the 2030 Agenda, Member States expressed resolve that they are **“determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path.”** In Paris they also emphasized the urgency of addressing climate change and agreed a strong initial agenda of action. These broad commitments and ambition will require the UNDS to move from the more limited perspectives of MDGs (implementing sectorial programmes and projects) to an integrated sustainable development vision of universal reach, with its functions meeting the differentiated needs of individual countries at the global, regional and national level.

¹ The Co-Chairs of the Independent Team of Advisers (ITA) led the process of drafting the paper, with inputs from ITA members and a research team. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent consensus among all ITA members. Additional viewpoints from ITA members are available in a separate compendium. The ITA Co-Chairs would like to thank all ITA members for their invaluable contributions to the paper.

The operational functions of the UN Development System are predicated on, and driven by, globally agreed norms, standards, conventions, agreements, resolutions and declarations. In essence, the UNDS entities help Member States implement global norms and standards, while also addressing global challenges that require collective actions. The functions are also driven by various strategic plan objectives, country-demand and crisis response, as well as by supply-side factors such as the preferences of funding partners and availability of funding.

Currently, UNDS functions vary in coverage, priority and intensity. Some functions of the UNDS – for example, reviewing compliance with the Convention on the Rights of People with Disability – are universal. Other functions – such as policy advice on poverty reduction or programme support for humanitarian assistance – are typically context and region / country- specific (Figure I and also Annexes I and II). There is growing recognition that UNDS should not just use the income criterion only but rather use broader measures to differentiate its functions in various country contexts.

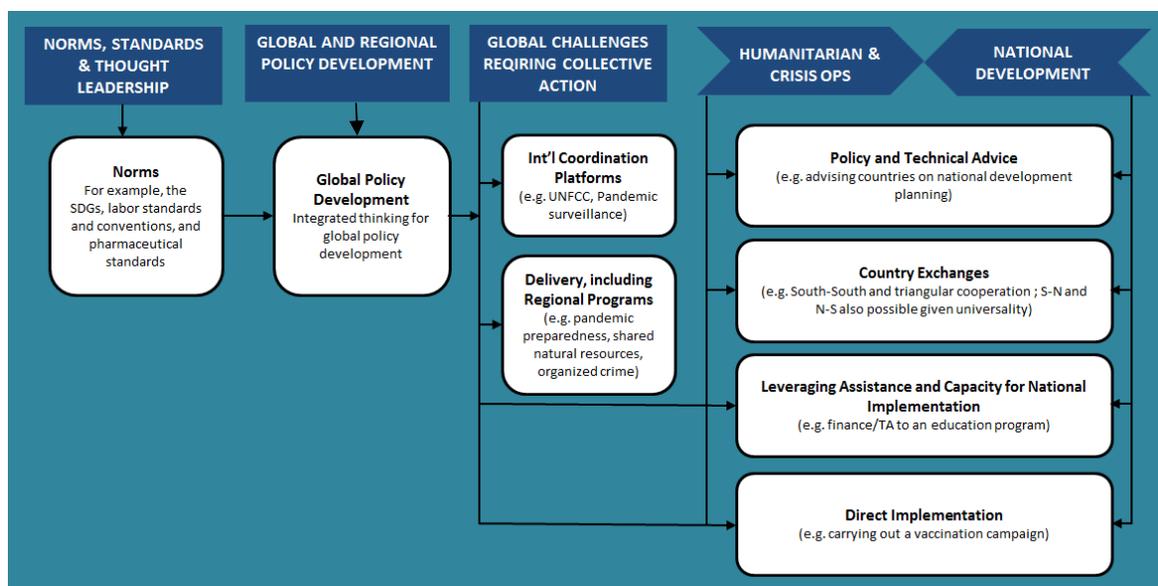


Figure I: UN Development System

While each UNDS entity performs these functions in varying coverage and intensity, their contributions are not necessarily coordinated and or integrated both within and across entities. The functions of policy advocacy, policy advance, capacity development and programme implementation at all levels need to be integrated and mutually reinforcing to support realization of an integrated sustainable development agenda, avoiding unnecessary overlaps of mandates and functions. The functions are even less coordinated and integrated across entities within a country. The UNDS therefore needs to fully align and integrate policy advice, data and review, policy advocacy functions both within and across entities to foster sustainable development worldwide. It would also need to strengthen linkages between national, sub-regional development, humanitarian and crisis operations to improve international policy coordination and effectively address global challenges that require collective action. Given the need for full alignment with sustainable development objectives and priorities, the UNDS should be re-branded United Nations Sustainable Development System, UNSDS, or the UN Universal Sustainable Development System, UNUSDS or such other name that will signal sustainability being the primal focus of the UNDS in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

I. The 2030 Agenda and the Functions of the UN Development System

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an over-arching mandate for all UNDS entities to support and catalyze the realization of the universal and comprehensive sustainable development goals. The UNDS would need to re-prioritize, specify and integrate many of these functions within and across entities to make them more relevant and effective for the Member States. Greater clarity and specificity about the mandates of agencies, funds and programmes should enable UNDS entities bridge existing gaps and avoid costly overlaps. The UNDS should build upon what already exists, yet respond to the new Agenda's call for new approaches, and ensure maximum coherence and efficiency. It should also help catalyze political commitment and action. The changes must take place both at the global, regional and national levels to ensure that the UNDS functions are fully aligned to support the SDG agenda.

A. Global and Regional Levels

i. Global and regional policy development functions.

In the context of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the UNDS would need to prioritize global and regional policy development. In particular, the policy development function would require the UNDS to:

- Provide thought leadership on the substantive and operational dimensions of SDG's, including in the contexts of setting and propagating norms, standards and frameworks. Develop options for policy integration and coherence between the economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as the interaction between individual SDGs. For example, policies for adaptation to climate change should also address the imperatives of poverty reduction and social inclusion;
- Strengthen UNDS global, regional and country level coordination of South-South and Triangular cooperation to promote peer learning and uptake of best practices
- Identify and respond to differentiated needs and vulnerabilities of various country categories at global, regional and country levels taking cognisance of universality of SDGs;
- Identify and address key policy and operational changes necessitated by the shift from MDGs to SDG's (universality, growth patterns, integrated thinking, relations among UNDS entities);
- Facilitate the further evolution of intergovernmental/multilateral dialogues, agreements and institutional cooperation in the field of sustainable development, with due consideration given to the global role of ECOSOC and HLPF as well as that of regional commissions at the regional and interregional level the need for simpler and more aligned functions/roles and responsibilities of the top UNDS policy organs to minimize duplication and overlaps.
- Strengthen capacities to provide early warning emergencies and risk assessment at national, global and regional levels. Availability and sound analysis of economic, social and environmental data will allow UNDS entities to pre-empt crises, undertake mitigation measures and reduce the need for humanitarian interventions.

ii. Functional grouping of UNDS entities around areas of collective outcomes in the 2030 Agenda

- The UNDS entities would need to better structure and manage the plurality of entities in the light of agreed outcomes, as first step towards fully integrating the UNDS (details in the

governance paper coming later)

- The UNDS entities should “deliver as one”, undertaking joint efforts to achieve outcomes, rather than expanding the intermediation of aid. Funding arrangements need to be a driver for coherence, not for competition.

iii. Effective utilization of regional mechanisms

The UNDS must acknowledge the rising significance of the regional dimension and the growing role of regional commissions in many areas of the policy development. This would require the UNDS to:

- Elevate the status of the regional Bureau offices for effective high level interactions with regional leaders.
- Utilize and empower regional mechanisms and platforms;
- Increase support in policy implementation delinked and unrelated to financial contributions, taking into account differentiated country needs.
- Re-prioritize and enhance support for generating, processing, monitoring and dissemination of data, analysis and review of the progress on SDGs. The Regional Commissions assume the function and responsibility to develop and monitor regional indicators for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These should consist, at the start, of no more than 10 to 12 indicators.

iv. Synergies between UNDS and IFIs

- The substantive work (hard/infrastructure vs. soft/capacity development), and funding modalities (loans vs. grants) of the UNDS and the IFIs complement each other well. The UNDS should therefore strengthen synergies between the UN system and the international financial institutions (IFIs), in particular those of the Bretton Woods system.
- The Global Environment Facility (GEF) can be considered as a good practical example.
- Synergies can be developed not only on the system/global level, but also on the regional level, e.g. by partnering of the regional development banks with the Regional Economic Commissions.

v. Integration of UN operational functions for development at the global level

There is a clear need for greater integration of the operational activities of UNDS entities at the global and regional level, without necessarily undermining the policy or operational independence of these entities. Addressing multi-dimensional, cross sectoral and cross border challenges will require a UNDS integrated, not just at the national level, but also at the regional global level. Integration at the national level will remain difficult to achieve, without some degree of integration at the regional global level. Integration at the regional global level will also enable entities to respond more effectively to global challenges that require collective action in the areas of climate change, migration and pandemics.

Options	Pros and Cons
A system-wide, evidence and science- based, globally relevant framework for the 2030 Agenda, that will map the functions – review, policy advocacy, policy advice and programme support - of a UNDS entity to specific SDG outcomes; specify how the functions of a UNDS entity will draw on the expertise available in other entities and how their own functions will	<p>The development of such a framework will entail substantial investment and time-commitment from the UNDS entities, which may not be easy to mobilize.</p> <p>The framework can also end up being a “wish-list” for all UNDS entities to include their preferred functions and activities.</p>

<p>contribute to the realization of the results pursued by other entities; c. Identify how the UNDS entities would allocate their core and non-core resources to support joint functions and activities on the ground; and d. Define a common results framework to ensure a clear linkage between functions, funding and results, with the share of each results achieved by a UNDS entity.</p>	
<p>The UNDS entities define their core functions independently and explain how their core functions will support the functions of other entities and at the same time help Member States realize the SDGs.</p>	<p>This will also require a central coordination and clearing mechanism to determine which core functions can be integrated across entities to maximize their impact on SDGs. The option will be equally costly and time consuming to implement.</p>

vi. Integration of humanitarian and development functions

The humanitarian-development dichotomy presents a challenge to align the functions of the UN Development System. In recent years, the demand for humanitarian assistance has grown exponentially, leading to a larger share of international resources flowing to humanitarian activities. While the UN operational assistance for development (UN-OAD) has also grown in recent years – albeit at a slower pace than before – there is a sense, particularly among the programme countries, that humanitarian assistance is diverting resources away from development, largely because humanitarians are operational in protracted crises, whereas development actors are not. The key is to ensure that development interventions, especially through national and local actors, are prioritised in these contexts. There is also a generally shared view that the UNDS needs to bridge the humanitarian-development divide to ensure that these two critical functions of the UN system go hand in hand to foster peace, stability and sustainable development. At the same time, the growing focus on humanitarian needs must ensure that it does not divert resources or dilute the focus on development priorities. A more rational alignment of humanitarian and development functions is necessary to ensure that humanitarian assistance is delivered in the context of broader sustainable development priorities and avoids chronic short-term perspectives. It is also necessary to prevent de-prioritization of development, which can escalate humanitarian crisis in future and strengthen capacities and readiness of UNDS entities to address global challenges that require collective action, which typically transcends the humanitarian-development divide. The UNDS should nevertheless maintain its capacities to respond rapidly to an acute crisis.

The efforts to integrate humanitarian and development functions face a number of practical challenges. Development assistance is provided under longer-term strategic plans, while humanitarian supports typically follow shorter and unpredictable planning cycles. They also differ in their institutional arrangements and rely on different funding modalities.

Options	Pros and Cons
<p>Implement joint planning and implementation strategies for humanitarian and development programmes at the global level.</p>	<p>This will require strong leadership and new institutional arrangements to bring the two parts of the UNDS together, which may be hard to achieve without strong political support from all</p>

	Member States. This is likely to face significant resistance from implementing agencies, as this would intervening period inevitably delay crisis response and increase costs for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.
Humanitarian and development entities design and implement “transition plans”, with sufficient flexibility, to allow timely phase-out of humanitarian assistance and phase-in of development work in specific country contexts.	Such transition plans will be difficult to execute in the absence of a mechanism to objectively enforce the transition from humanitarian to development activities. Development actors should work together in crisis setting and design and implement common strategies.
Include humanitarian issues in UNDAFs and/or develop joint global guidelines on how to cooperate and build linkages in different country contexts.	UNDAF cycles may not necessarily correspond with humanitarian needs, which are typically unpredictable. UNDAFs should nevertheless plan/anticipate effective response to a crisis and include some options emergency relief/unpredictable needs/spikes in need.

B. Country level

Assist countries at their request in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly with regard to the challenges presented by universality, comprehensiveness and policy integration

- i. The UNDS entities should assist countries, at their request, to build the appropriate capacities and give the necessary support to countries in developing their implementation strategies for the 2030 Agenda. (NDIS-2030, i.e. Nationally Determined Implementation Strategies for the 2030 Agenda). The UNDS support should include determination of a base line – including assessment of the level of available funding and additional resource requirements – of departure and modalities for a “prompt start.”
- ii. The UNDS should assist countries in developing the requisite investment budgets for the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on resourcing finance and other means of implementation. In this context, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) which constitutes an integral part of the 2030 Agenda provides important entry points,
- iii. The UNDS should facilitate the creation, development and diffusion of new innovations and technologies and associated know-how, including the transfer of technology on mutually agreed terms. It should promote the development and use of information and communications technology infrastructure, as well as capacity-building, particularly in least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, including rapid universal and affordable access to the Internet. It should promote access to technology and science for women, youth and children. It should further facilitate accessible technology for persons with disabilities.

Specific country level functions

a. Vi. Country-specific policy advice to support implementation of integrated policies for SDGs

A growing number of developing countries will expect the UNDS entities to provide policy coherence and capacity development support for implementing the ambitious SDGs at all levels and by all actors. In particular, there needs to be greater emphasis on integrated policy coherence/coordination in middle-income countries. The SDGs represent a complex set of goals that cannot be isolated from each other. The UNDS entities, while drawing on their specialized knowledge and global reach,, should not provide policy advice on one goal or on one set of related goals to the host government, without taking into account how the pursuit of one goal complements or undermines progress in others. This means that stand-alone policy advice will not only be irrelevant for countries, but they can also be potentially detrimental.

Function	Pros and Cons
<p>The policy advice from UNDS entities would need to be evidence-based, data-driven, objective and credible, requiring this function to be fully integrated at the national, regional and global levels under one UN logo and funded with core resources.</p> <p>This will require strengthened and re-positioning of current staff capacities at all levels to lead and facilitate consultations among UNDS entities to form country-specific positions on inter-related issues of growth, poverty, inequality employment and decent work, health, mitigation and climate change.</p>	<p>The scaling up of UNDS capacities to provide integrated and system-wide policy advice would require significant investment in its human resources, which may not be readily available. The limited availability of core resources will constrain the ability of UNDS entities to acquire capacities and provide policy advice. However, the UNDS entities at the country level should take advantage of expertise in regional levels, particularly in the Regional Commissions, to provide policy advice to the Member States.</p> <p>Without significant improvement in the quality of policy advice, UNDS entities run the risk of losing credibility with the Member States.</p> <p>Country-specific policy advice may run the risks of ignoring cross-border or regional implications of particular policy option, which may undermine GCRCA and international policy coordination.</p>

b. Vii. Integrated data collection, analysis and review mechanism

The UNDS entities would need to re-prioritize and enhance its support for generating, processing, and dissemination of data, analysis and review at the country level. Given that SDGs include 321 indicators, the UNDS entities will need to invest significantly in their own capacities and also in the capacities of their national partners – particularly in national statistical authorities – to ensure that data are properly collected, analyzed and reported so that policy advocacy, policy analysis and programme implementation functions of the UNDS entities are evidence-based. A “prompt start” initiative using a limited number of indicators for which data are readily available should allow an “early harvest” for reviewing progress.

UNDS should also facilitate multi-stakeholder review of progress in sustainable development, supported by data and sound analysis. The multi-stakeholder reviews should aim to forge stronger partnerships and not pit one against the other. Also, such reviews should engage independent experts, not just development activists and advocates, to ensure that the process facilitates necessary shifts in policies and supports new policy development.

Function	Pros and Cons
<p>The data, review and follow-up function of the UNDS should be fully integrated at all levels under one UN logo and supported</p>	<p>It may not be easy to mobilize additional core resources to build national and UNDS capacities for data and review and put pressure to divert existing core resources. Regional</p>

with core resources, to ensure neutrality and credibility	<p>Commissions must enhance support for national and regional level capacity building for SDG monitoring.</p> <p>Improving cost effectiveness of current UNDS operations and reorienting some of the existing resources may also help to make necessary resources available.</p> <p>Even if core resources are available, the UNDS entities may not fully integrate their data, review and follow-up functions as it may entail high opportunity and transaction costs for them to re-prioritize system-wide monitoring and early warning. UN Regional Commissions should play an important role in strengthening system-wide early warning mechanism.</p>
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c. Viii. Convening, policy advocacy and outreach

Policy advocacy and convening by the UNDS entities will be particularly essential since the SDGs are not current currency in people’s perceptions and there is even less understanding among policy-makers and stakeholders about the structural transformations that entails the SDGs. The UNDS must leverage its convening power to bring all stakeholders to the table and also fully integrate policy advocacy functions, taking into account the strong inter-linkages among various SDGs. A vaccination campaign by WHO, for example, should be integrated with the education campaign of UNICEF or UNESCO. Currently, a majority of UNDS entities perform their policy advocacy, communication and outreach functions independently, often competing to reach the same audience. This not only undermines the clarity, depth and resonance of their messages, but also imposes a huge financial burden on the system. Policy advocacy functions can also play an important role to facilitate partnerships within and across countries, including Private-Public Partnerships, South-South and Triangular Cooperation. This is particularly important to ensure that the UNDS does not solely rely on traditional ODA to fund its operations on the ground. Private sector entities as well as national and regional development banks have a bigger role to play in facilitating SDG implementation. UNDS should engage with national and regional development banks and call on them to expand their contributions in the area of resource mobilization, and further urge relevant international public and private actors to support such banks in developing countries. Policy advocacy functions can play an important role in leveraging ODA and expanding the resource envelope for operational activities.

Function	Pros and Cons
<p>The integrated policy advocacy functions of all UNDS entities – coordinated at each level under one UN logo – should be mostly funded by core resources to ensure the objectivity and neutrality of UN policy advocacy functions.</p> <p>The implementation of a fully integrated policy advocacy, communication and outreach function is likely to be cost neutral in the sense that integration will entail substantial cost savings for all entities.</p>	<p>Integration of policy advocacy function is likely to face considerable resistance from UNDS entities that typically use independent policy advocacy and outreach to mobilize non-core resources.</p> <p>Smaller UNDS entities may fear that their policy advocacy functions will be subsumed in the messages from larger UNDS entities, unless it is coordinated in such a way that is considered impartial to all UNDS entities. UN Regional Commissions can play an important role in strengthening and integrating policy advocacy functions for the entities at the different levels.</p>

ix. Targeted country specific programme implementation, supported by non-core resources

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda will also require improved and tailored support for programme implementation from the UNDS entities, particularly in the least developed countries where resources and capacities will remain scarce during the implementation period. While the demand for resources for programme implementation is likely to grow in low income and the LDCs, they are likely to diminish in a large number of countries particularly in higher middle income countries. As such, the overall resource requirements for programme support may not substantially increase during the SDG implementation period. The programme implementation functions of the UNDS entities should be integrated, to the extent possible, taking into account the varying programming strength and expertise of funds, programmes and specialized agencies. The UNDS entities should also have transition plans to shift to national implementation modalities in all country contexts to ensure national ownerships and support national capacities for implementation. This is critical for long term sustainability of the impact of UNDS programme support.

Function	Pros and Cons
<p>UNDS entities should gradually move from programme implementation to policy advice and capacity development, as countries acquire capacities for implementation.</p> <p>UNDS entities should periodically assess the capacities of national partners and make necessary adjustments in their implementation modalities.</p>	<p>Many programme countries, particularly the LDCs, are likely to resist the shifts away from programme support and implementation.</p> <p>A premature shift from programme support may stall or undermine progress in sustainable development.</p>
<p>Integration of programme support and implementation will require some agencies to take lead, while others contribute human and financial resources.</p>	<p>This may be hard to implement given the current trends and challenges in pooling of inter-agency financial and human resources. It is often very difficult for a UNDS entity to avail the services of an expert in another entity because of the prevailing complexity in cost-sharing arrangements.</p>

C. Recommendations

Successful Implementation of these recommendations will also require commensurate changes in governance, funding, institutional arrangements, capacities and partnerships, which are presented in subsequent papers.

Strategic emphasis

- The UNDS should be re-branded as the UN Sustainable Development System (UNSDS) or the UN Universal Sustainable Development System (UNUSDS).
- The UNDS should develop a strategic framework to integrate and link the operational activities of various entities and ensure that UNDS interventions are cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional, while taking into account the linkages between national and regional development and global challenges that require collective action.
- Strategic frameworks could be developed either globally or by functional grouping in support of the 2030 Agenda.
- The UNDS should provide thought leadership to: a. global and regional policy development on substantive and operational dimensions of SDG's; b. develop options for policy integration and

coherence between the economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as the interaction between individual SDGs; c. Identify and respond to differentiated national needs at global, regional and country levels; d. facilitate the further evolution of intergovernmental/multilateral dialogues, agreements and institutional cooperation in the field of sustainable development, with due consideration given to the role of ECOSOC and HLFP as well as that of regional commissions at the regional and inter-regional level. Strengthen the UNDS global, regional and country level coordination and facilitation of South - South and Triangular cooperation to promote peer learning and uptake of best practices.

- The UNDS should scale up and prioritize its functions, using its core resources and under one UN logo, to provide universal policy and technical advice to the Member States on how to integrate the cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional SDGs in national development strategies.
- The UNDS should elevate its regional bureaus, locate them at regional headquarters, utilize and empower regional commissions and other mechanisms and platforms to effectively integrate its functions and realize common outcomes, including drawing on regional mechanisms to address global challenges requiring collective action.
- The UNDS should assist countries at their request in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly with regard to the challenges presented by universality, comprehensiveness and policy integration, including support for a. designing coherent, nationally Determined Implementation Strategies for the 2030 Agenda; b. determining a base line of departure and modalities for a “prompt start”; c. identify resource requirements and the requisite investment budgets for the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on resourcing finance and other means of implementation; d. facilitate access to and development of science and technology in countries and regions lagging behind; and e. strengthen capacities to provide early warning against emergencies and risk assessment at national, global and regional levels.
- While its role in global and regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda is key, the UNDS should strengthen national capacities for implementing development programmes in order to enhance national ownership and contributions.

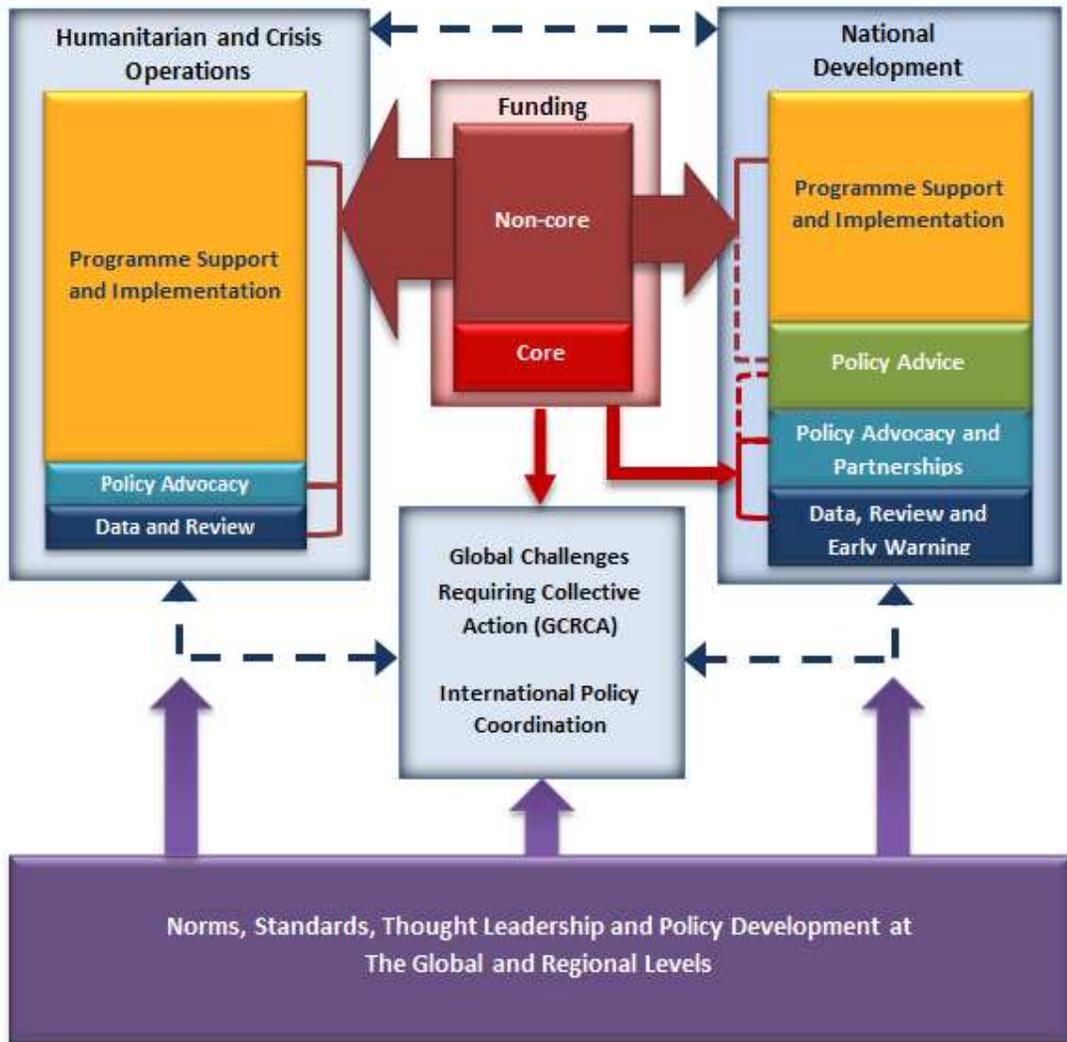
Addressing fragmentation

- The UNDS should consider functional grouping of its entities around the areas of collective and strategic cross-cutting outcomes in the 2030 Agenda (further analysis to follow in papers on governance and organizational arrangements).
- The UNDS should integrate programme implementation at the country level, to the extent possible, taking advantage of the comparative strength and expertise of each entity.
- The UNDS should achieve greater coherence and synergies between its humanitarian assistance and development efforts, to maximize the development and sustainability impact of humanitarian assistance and also to enhance the capacities of UNDS to respond to global challenges that require collective actions.
- The UNDS should integrate its function, using core resources and under one UN logo, to strengthen national capacities for data collection, review and early warning system to make sure that its policy advice and policy advocacy functions are sufficiently analytical and evidence-based.

Partnerships and synergies

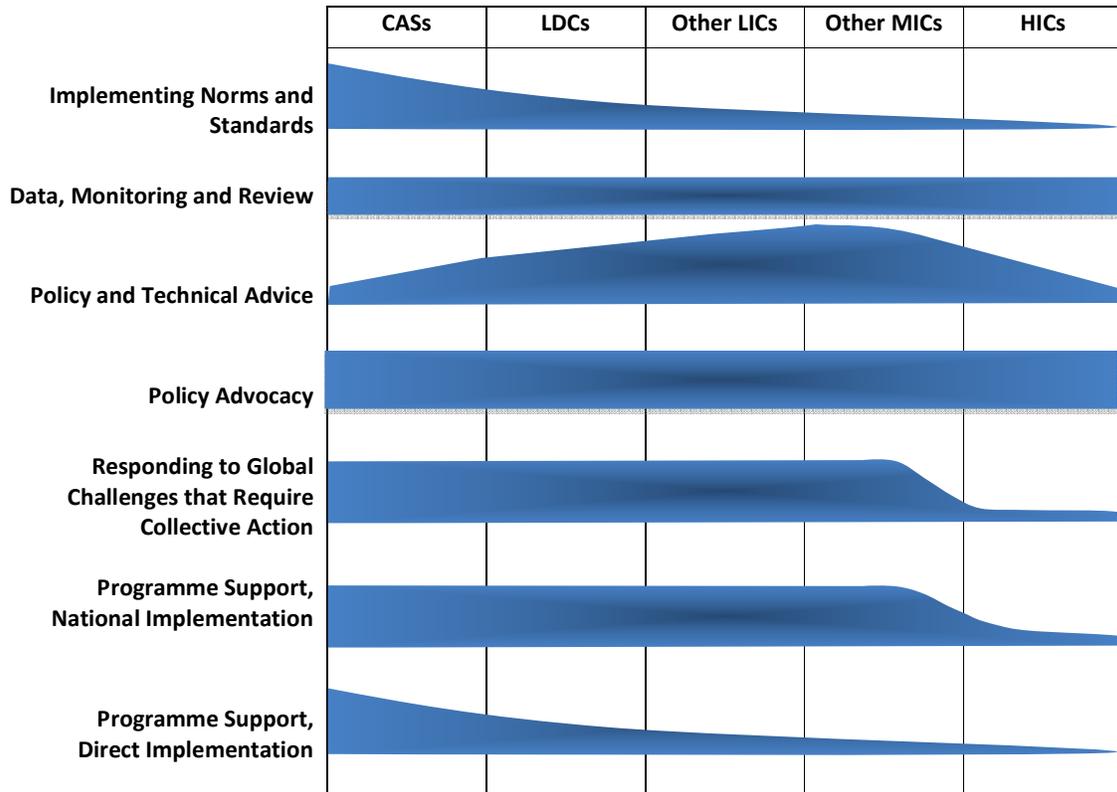
- The UNDS should strengthen partnerships, particularly with the IFIs, national and regional development banks and private sector, to deliver sustainable development outcomes.
- The UNDS should use its convening capacity to facilitate voluntary peer and partnership reviews at national, regional and global levels as well as among UNDS entities, with a view to strengthen knowledge sharing on the 2030 Agenda implementation and challenges.
- The UNDS should leverage its convening power and undertake policy advocacy functions, using core resources and under a one UN logo, to enhance its visibility, voice and leverage but also to forge stronger partnerships.

Annex I



The current UN Development System

Annex II



UNDS functions and selected mode of delivery in different country contexts