



2011 ECOSOC OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES SEGMENT

Informal summary

Panel discussion on “Strengthening the leadership of the United Nations Resident Coordinator: Role of accountability frameworks, resources and results reporting”

03:30 p.m. – 6:00 p.m., 15 July 2011, Geneva

In his opening statement, the Vice-President of ECOSOC, H.E. Mr. Gonzalo Gutiérrez Reinel spoke of the central role of the resident coordinator (RC) in coordinating a very complicated UN system. He outlined how the UN system has strived to make the resident coordinator system work better as well as the challenges that remain, namely, the fact that RCs represent the UN without official accreditation; they coordinate without resources and formal authority, and oftentimes must rely on personal leadership to achieve organizational goals. He called on the UN system to ensure that the RC has access to the authority and resources to lead and coordinate the UN country team and accounts to the government.

Presentations

Ms. Helen Clark, Administrator of UNDP (moderator) began by highlighting that at times in which “all must seek to achieve more with less”, the effectiveness of the RC system is central. When the RCs and Country Teams are empowered, decision-making is streamlined and there are clear lines of accountability laid out, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency of the UN at the country level are improved. The empowerment of RCs does not mean prescribed roles, but the ability to use their skills to lead teams. Towards that direction, the first step is to have a pool of talented people to draw RCs from. She added that, after thirteen years, RCs and UN country teams (UNCTs) are working better together and more often than not sharing the burden of coordination, thanks to the efforts made by the UN Development Group (UNDG) to improve the RC system, which were highlighted in the authoritative report of the Secretary-General.,

Additionally, UNDP has established 51 UNDP Country Director posts. Ms. Clark also acknowledged the importance of resources provided by Member States to support the RC system, and the fact that UNDP funds all the RCs and most of the related costs. She added that UNDP would work together with UNDG agencies to undertake burden-sharing more systematically.

Mr. James Rawley, UN resident coordinator in Egypt focused his presentation on the role of RCs and country teams in helping countries advance in their development agenda and the MDGs. He referred specifically to his experiences as resident coordinator in Egypt before and after January 2011, to convey how the current arrangements produce relevant strategic support in pursuit of national demand driven outcomes.

Before the uprisings, he explained, Egypt was on the path towards becoming a middle income country. The government was committed to the MDGs, but there was a lack of a coherent national vision of development and national priorities, and of alignment between these and the international development agencies, as well as declining international support. To address this, the Country Team prepared the Cairo Agenda for Action on Development Effectiveness, which included a situation analysis, the prioritization of the challenges identified, efforts to strengthen result based management, and an action plan. After the uprising, Egypt needs more capacity development. The UN responded by putting together the UN Strategy in Support of Egypt's Democratic Transition for 2011-2012, based on analytical work done by many UN agencies for the UNDAF.

He concluded by saying that the UN has demonstrated agility and flexibility in “staying ahead of the curve”, which has been possible due to the support of the Egyptian government, other governments, long-term investments of the UN in Egypt, and a country team committed to “working as one”. The UN Country Team in Egypt has demonstrated that measurable progress can be made, that the system needs to remain engaged with middle countries and that, with progress in areas such as streamlining of business procedures, Results-based Management and greater coherence, the UN performance can go “from good to great”.

Mr. Robert Piper, UN resident and humanitarian coordinator in Nepal began by highlighting the three trends that shape the future of the UN Development Group (UNDG)'s work and relevance at the country level. First, most of the Governments are today more than ever capable of managing their own sectoral programmes. In this sense, Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAPs), basket funds and other on-budget assistance, Government-managed sectoral programmes are “the way of the future”. Second, there has been exponential growth of competent, local non-government institutions which can provide good quality technical support to the government. This translates into the UN becoming an expensive option in the development assistance arena. In response, the UN must be sure that “when and where it works, it is strategic and at the high end of the value-chain”. Third, governments are moving towards a new set of development priorities, which include horizontal, cross-cutting issues. For the UN's development work, this means that the UNDG must increase its work horizontally, across current institutional borders in order to address the multidimensional development challenges. If it can do this, it will be uniquely qualified to assist governments.

He noted that the role of the Resident Coordinators (RCs) is to make the UN country Teams (UNCT) able to adapt to the new demands against this backdrop. Leadership - in the form of recognition from peers that the RC is bringing something valuable to their work- is essential. The UNDAF should be the document that directs the relationship between the UN and the Government, and its results and measurable success will lead to coherence and unity within teams and the UNDG.

Using the specific case of Nepal, Mr. Piper outlined several lessons learned:

- a) The peace process demonstrated that a properly resourced RC system can help bring coherence even beyond the UN agencies.
- b) The Nepal Support Strategy brings peacebuilding, humanitarian and development planning and analysis into a single integrated RC/ Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) Office, and demonstrates that a properly resourced RC system can help manage transitions.
- c) In addressing Nepal's natural hazard profile, the links between RC and HC roles have been especially useful in bringing about a common work plan across institutions and governments to address risks.

He concluded by presenting the following recommendations:

- a) Programme country Governments can raise awareness among their Prime Ministers, Ministers of Planning and other officials that the UNCT is especially suited to assist with horizontal challenges.
- b) Donor Governments should shift more funding streams to more thematic, horizontal structures. What is needed is not more funding, but structures better suited to tap into UNCT's advantages today.
- c) Member states must be more ambitious about UN reform, not necessarily adding new organizations or funds, but re-organizing current investments to ensure that the UN is able to stay current with the demands.

Ms. Jan Beagle (Deputy Executive Director, UNAIDS and Co-Chair of UNDG Working Group on Resident Coordinator System Issues) spoke about steps taken by the UN Development group (UNDG) and UNAIDS to create an enabling environment at the country level, by addressing challenges around people, systems, and resources.

- a) People: Wearing "multiple hats" means that the Resident Coordinator has to lead without formal authority, based on consensus, and to build a team and a collective result engaging a broad range of partners. As a result, management and leadership competencies are now being looked at closely to ensure that people can actually carry out the position. There have also been efforts to improve the gender balance and diversity among RCs.
- b) Systems: mutual accountability and knowledge management systems are critical. Ms. Jan Beagle gave the example of UNAIDS, which features a joint budget and results and accountability framework, working at the country level under the leadership of the RC. These modalities of arrangements are the essence of the power of the RC system. She also stressed the need to share good practices, and to mobilize knowledge across sectors in a fast and agile way.

- c) Resources: She highlighted the need to have consistent and predictable funding, and lower transaction costs. Results are being seen from streamlining and harmonizing the way the UN works together. She added that where the RC is involved in supervising business issues as well as programmatic ones, there are positive results, and suggested that the UN country team business operations plan should be built at the same time as the UNDAF. The pooled funding mechanisms and multi-donor trust funds help towards enhancing coherence and are catalysts for further conversations around allocation of un-earmarked funding.

Interactive discussion

Belgium, Nepal, Slovenia, Brazil, France, Ghana, Egypt, Australia, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, FAO and ILO intervened from the floor.

Delegates commended the efforts to organize the panel which “gives confidence in the system”. Several delegates underscored the central role of the RC system in making possible country-level coordination. One delegate reminded the panel that the motto for “Delivering as One” is “in unity lies strength”. He underlined the importance of the resident coordinator (RC) and the agency heads in the correct operation of “Delivering as One”.

Strengthening the leadership of the RC is essential. It is important to grant the RC access to technical resources of all agencies and more authority over programme resources. The commitment, competencies and dedication of RCs are key to success. Meanwhile, additional funding has been conducive to coordination efforts. Funding for coordination thus needs to become part of the core budget of the UN operational system. On joint funding, the “one size fits all” approach must be avoided.

The RC serves as an important contact for governments, the UN and other stakeholders. The UN system coherence at the country level should be led by the RC, matched by a coherent Government. The RC’s role should go beyond UN internal coordination efforts, and must include strong coordination with partner countries and the donor community. There were calls for greater coherence between humanitarian and development actors.

There was general consensus that the RC should gain leadership by being strategic and inclusive. UNCTs are now faced with increasingly complex challenges, which, even if appearing vertical, are always horizontal and involve multiple sectors. Competition for funding among UN agencies at country level was noted. In this sense, it is essential that UNCTs work together to strategically set priorities to move forward. The RC’s role in this process cannot be overemphasized. To make delivery more effective and more accountable, leadership and incentives are the stepping stones. In terms of leadership, the RC has everything to gain by being inclusive enough to bring together all strategic issues and make agencies feel comfortable with the direction set.

On harmonization of business practices, concern was expressed that there is the desire to equate it to cost savings, but the value of harmonization in the RC system can lie more in gaining and developing effectiveness.

The following questions were addressed to panelists:

1. To what extent extra funding was really the key in promoting coherence and can core resources play the same role as non-core funding in this regard? How should the UN system explore further possibilities of using budget support, and what role could the RC play in using this modality?
2. Is the current accountability framework for the RC useful and what can be done to improve it? What is required in terms of guidance to make sure that the RC system becomes operational and benefits from appropriate incentives?
3. Are resident coordinators coordinating or facilitating the coordination of activities that include stakeholders beyond the UN system, such as other governments and NGOs? How can collaboration with the bilateral system be strengthened?
4. How can the RC help implement the mandate of the specific agencies? What role can UNDP play in preventing or mitigating competition for funding? What is the role of specialized agencies and what are the specific challenges in involving specialized agencies beyond funding? How can the RC's appraisal of agency representatives be improved?
5. How can the RC's role and the humanitarian coordinator's (HC) role be best brought together?
6. What has been achieved in simplification and harmonization of business practices?
7. One delegate asked for clarifications on the linkages between the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council and the RCs work on the ground. In this context, the delegate also asked how the recommendations that the government accepts from the UPR are implemented, and how the UPR is incorporated into the reflection the UN.
8. Another delegate asked about the possibility of a sub-regional network in West Africa to accompany regional economic groups and promote accountability.

In response, panelists offered the following comments.

Coordination and costs

Coordination is the responsibility of all staff, including at the technical level, and they must all be able to work in teams and contribute to partnership building. However, it was felt that the work of RCs requires a lot of coordination but all is done through good will. In this sense, "the RCs do what they can and where they can".

The development issues that the UN deals with demand platforms that bring all stakeholders to the table. For example, the situation analysis carried out in Egypt was widely distributed and can be used by NGOs and any development partner to understand the key development challenges. Promoting results-based management is also key because NGOs find a role in helping to achieve results. It was warned that coordination beyond the UN must be done carefully to maintain universality and avoid conveying to the government the wrong signal that the UN is a donor.

In order to support the implementation of the mandates of specialized agencies, coordination has to be decentralized so that agencies can lead sectoral projects. But, results will not be achieved if the agency doesn't have the minimum capacity at country level.

Harmonization leads to effectiveness even if it doesn't necessarily save costs. Cost savings will not come from coordination, but from clustering of activities and joint programming.

Standardizing procedures is more about achieving better quality of services and building a culture of working together.

Funding

Overall, the level of core resources falls far short of the real needs. “Core resources allow only a small footprint, while non-core resources allow to be ambitious”. In particular, funding for organizations to undertake small strategic work is lacking when it comes to horizontal programmes. If UN organizations don’t have the critical mass to participate in strategic policy work, “someone else fills the vacuum”. In reality, the obstacle is not only a lack of resources, but a structural one where it is hard for RCs to weave together resources at the country level because they are allocated to specific sectors, which explains the necessity to find a new way to channel resources to the countries.

On budget support, the UN system can help in capacity assessment by identifying technical and operational areas that may need reinforcement. There is no convincing argument for the UN to provide budget support where donors can do it directly and more cost-effectively.

There is need to move to a new funding model for coordination. The contribution of the MDG Fund (MDG-F) was acknowledged. The MDG-F catalyzes joint programs. In this context, agencies were called upon to use resources on multi-sectoral problems. If agencies work closer together in programming, there should not be competition for resources, since programs could be designed in a way that includes each one’s strengths and competencies.

Management and Accountability system

Mutual accountability remains work in progress. For example, following the extensive work that go into the UNDAF, there is the risk that agency programmes are not coherent, and the RC needs to have the option of reporting on the performance of the agency heads. Having agency-specific programs at the country level peer-reviewed by country teams, and reducing the specific reporting responsibilities that each agency has, were considered as a promising solution. Meanwhile, it is also important to make sure that training and job descriptions reflect the skills required for the RC today.

RC’s empowerment ultimately comes from RCs gaining respect, not from their functions on paper. It was felt that the current *management and accountability system* is solid enough, allowing RCs to feel empowered. There are plenty of systems and the challenge is just to implement them.

Cross-fertilization between the roles of resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator (HC)

The coexistence of the HC/RC functions offers an opportunity to bridge development and humanitarian work. For example, in Nepal the humanitarian community recognizes that it is not strong in capacity-building or long-term goals, both of which are strong sides of the development

work. The next steps should focus on harmonizing reporting instruments and clarifying the relationship and roles of the UN and the World Bank.

Regional dimension

There must be further development of the regional level of the UNDG in order to make sub-regional networks possible. Resource scarcity was cited as one of the obstacles towards that direction. The importance of regional programming is widely recognized, but it remains weak due to funding constraints. Solutions can be explored in the context of the upcoming GA review of UN system's operational activities (QCPR).

Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council

Some RCs have been asked to support the UPR and the implementation of its recommendations. For instance, in Egypt, the RC assisted the Government in preparing the review and moving forward in implementing its recommendations. The UNDAF has taken up recommendations emanating from the UPR. During the UPR, the RCs are increasingly required to be spokespersons about sensitive issues that they used to stay away from, which also demonstrates the trust placed on the RCs.

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