

ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system in the context of the post-2015 development agenda

Background Note

Workshop 4 – Capacity and impact & partnership approaches

Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination
Department for Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations

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1. Introduction and definitions

In ECOSOC resolution 2014/14, the Council decided to convene a transparent and inclusive dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system¹ in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, including the interlinkages between alignment of functions, capacity and impact, funding practices, governance structures, organizational arrangements and partnership approaches.

The objective of this background note is to review how the capacity, impact and partnership approaches of the UN development system have evolved over time, as well as the likely implications of the post-2015 development agenda and other major drivers of change. This note should be read in conjunction with the UNDG paper that provides the details of various initiatives in these areas.

The three main terms covered by the paper are defined as follows:

Capacity

Capacity refers to the people, systems and culture of the entities that make up the UN development system. Capacity can also be understood as the UNDS efforts to advance national capacity development. But, for the purpose of this exercise, capacity is defined as the ability of the UN development system to deliver on its mandates.

Impact

Impact refers to the lasting results that are achieved with the support of the UN development system, especially at country level. Impact is therefore to be understood as the long-term change affected by the UN development system in pursuance of its goals and mandates.

Partnership approaches

Partnership approaches deal with how the entities work with one another and more particularly how they work with external players, whether public or private, in pursuit of the longer-term change UNDS seeks to achieve. Deliberations on partnership approaches require reflection on both the capacity of the UN development system to catalyze, enter and engage in effective and accountable partnerships at scale, and the change they to bring in the path towards sustainable development.

2. The evolution of capacity, impact and partnership approaches

(a) Capacity

There are a few notable trends over the last couple of decades regarding the kind of capacities that the UN development system requires to operate in various contexts. First, The UNDS is frequently called upon to undertake humanitarian operations. In the 1970s, there were perhaps 2 or 3 countries where UN performed these functions. Currently, the UN has 31 humanitarian coordinators spread throughout the globe. Second, the activities have shifted more and more towards project management, implementation and resource mobilization. Third, shift towards narrow focus impacted on the capacities for policy advice, normative and collective action. However, it has to be acknowledged that despite this shift many organizations made special efforts to remain engaged in these activities. Fourth, many developing countries moved to higher levels of income. They require

¹ The term 'UN development system' has appeared regularly in General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions since 1995, but has never been formally defined at the intergovernmental level. Member States have instead relied on a definition developed in the context of the annual reporting of the Secretary-General, where the term 'UN development system' is considered to include the 34 UN entities that receive contributions for operational activities for development

different type of support from the UNDS. Numerous initiatives are currently ongoing to enhance the capacity of UN development system and its staff to meet the changing needs of programme countries. The UNDG paper on capacity, impact and partnership approaches provides extensive analysis and examples in this regard.

(b) Impact

While defining and measuring the impact of UNDS work is challenging, there is broad based recognition that UNDS makes a difference at the country level by performing its mandated functions. At the same time, surveys conducted by DESA in the context of the QCPR process show that programme country governments continue to see room for improvement in the support of the UN development system for impact in the long run.

Country teams' report is evaluated against the UNDAF at least once in the 5-year UNDAF cycle. In DaO countries, it is recommended that such reports be prepared on an annual basis. The quality of UNDAF reporting has been improving with more reports structured around UNDAF/One Programme outcomes.²

However, a 2014 survey of UN Resident Coordinators found that country teams in only half of programme countries with an UNDAF or One Programme arranged for its evaluation in the last 5 years. Efforts to evaluate and assess system-wide results and impact at the global level have not made any headway. Dual results reporting at country and headquarters levels remains a challenge. This includes difficulties in harmonizing agency and system-wide country level results reporting, linking country team reporting to national development results and measuring the impact of the work of the entire UN system. As reflected in the UNDG Plan of Action for Headquarters, introducing a system-wide template for UN country results reporting will help address the issue of separate and often uncoordinated reporting.³ Some member states have proposed a system wide reporting framework, which also needs to be considered.

(c) Partnerships

Ever since the establishment of the United Nations, the concept of partnership has been important in defining division of labor among UN entities and other actors involved in addressing a particular issue. Also, since the beginning of this century, partnerships have become a significant component of the work of many, if not most, UN development system entities. Today, most UN organizations have a partnership bureau, a partnership senior adviser or a partnership focal point. Most entities have recently completed, or are currently engaged in a discussion with their respective governing bodies on the adoption of a partnership strategy.

At the global level, the UN Office for Partnerships serves as the gateway for public-private partnerships in support of the MDGs. This includes the UN Fund for International Partnerships, which, as of the end of 2013, channeled cumulatively approximately \$1.3 billion, supporting 544 projects and programmes implemented by 43 UN agencies in 124 countries.

UN development system entities are also actively involved in establishing partnerships at the global level, which include Every Women, Every Child, Sustainable Energy for All and many more. However, there are a number of challenges that the entities face in terms of procedures, rules and lack of system-wide guidelines.

The international community has increasingly recognized the importance of and partnerships to harness the strengths of all actors in the field. Never before has the power of partnerships at the

² http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/pdf/desa_rc_survey_analysis_2014.pdf

³ A/70/62 – E/2015/4.

global, regional, local and sub-national level been acknowledged as the way to ensure means of implementation. At the same time, there is a need for an oversight platform to ensure that these partnerships are aligned with the UN principles and development goals.

3. Lessons learned

1. The capacity of the UN development system is constantly evolving in response to changing needs and capacities of programme countries. However, form has not always followed function. A significant shift towards project management and implementation has affected the multilateral advocacy, policy, normative and collective action functions and the effectiveness of the Organization's upstream technical cooperation support to Member States.
2. Many UN development system entities have, or are in the process of, developing specific tools, instruments and indicators to measure the impact of development efforts;
3. There is a widely acknowledged need for system wide reporting framework and this idea needs to be explored further.
4. There is a need to overcome the barriers to establishing partnerships by changing the incentive structures and processes.
5. The growing volume and diversity of partnership approaches in the UN development system at different levels make it important to establish system-wide standards and principles in this area, with a view to ensuring that all initiatives are harnessed in support of UN goals.

4. Post-2015 era: *implications for capacity and impact & partnership approaches*

There is growing recognition that the ability to shift seamlessly from a specialized, functional organizational model to an integrated one in response to the demands of the post-2015 development agenda will require the UN development system to develop stronger capacities to pool knowledge, resources and expertise. and for cross-sector collaboration, for ultimate impact and relevance of the UN development system.

In keeping with the normative objectives of the UN, over the coming years the development system must emphasize its goal of ensuring the dignity of all human beings, wherever they live. No one should be left behind. The elimination of poverty and achievement of sustainable development are the central focus of the post-2015 development agenda. These twin objectives coupled with peace, security and human rights require an integrate approach by the UNDS.

(a) Capacity

For the UN development system, the strong normative content of the SDGs, as well as the unavoidable complexity of its means of implementation, suggest there will be a need to strike a new balance between normative and operational. This will also require different and new skill sets among the staff at global, regional and country levels.

This means that the UN development system will need to attract, retain and build a modern workforce for the changing environment, grounded in a stronger common UN identity and shared values. Staff and leadership must be able to work with mandates that are increasingly cross-programmatic and encompass the main pillars of the UN. Competencies such as systems-thinking, teamwork, cultural sensitivity, and respect for diversity will be increasingly important. UN leadership is increasingly wearing multiple hats – as RC, HC, and DSRSG – leading and managing complex environments where peace and security, human rights, humanitarian and development activities are increasingly interlinked. and must be properly equipped and supported to do so.

Greater focus is needed to expand opportunities for younger staff members, as well as for women and people from key populations, including the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. Increasing the diversity of the UN development system workforce is both a matter of equity, and a programmatic enabler.

The performance management, compensation, and administrative systems of the UN development system must also support such a modern, mobile and diverse workforce. Recognition of good performance, strengthened linkages to career development and clear recognition of contributions to common or joint UN endeavors will be key as will encouraging integrated and coherent approaches in staff work plans and performance appraisals.

(b) Impact

The UN development system has created many tools and systems over the past fifteen years to enhance its impact at country level, including bringing more coherence to its efforts. Such tools and systems include the common country assessment, the UNDAF, and, most recently, the Standard Operating Procedures for delivering-as-one countries. A significant number of programme countries have already adopted DaO, although the extent to which all the SOPs are being applied is currently quite variable.

A key challenge at the country level is to respond appropriately to the diversity of priorities and needs at the country level. DESA Surveys and reports have highlighted the perception of programme countries that their existing capacities and systems are generally under-used by the UN development system. Governments and RCs have noted the limited use of national capacities in the areas of procurement, financial management, monitoring, reporting and evaluation. This issue has to be addressed.

Instilling an effective results-oriented culture rooted in results-based management within the UN development system will be vital and implies a shift away from compliance with rules and regulations pertaining to processes and activities. Developing and sustaining a more strategic and coherent results culture, including for cross-agency collaboration, is essential. It requires strong leadership, adequate capacities and skills and an enabling environment to discuss both good and poor results, not only within UN organizations but also their governing bodies. It also requires removing disincentives such as the growing dependency on non-core resources.

(c) Partnership approaches

In view of the changing development landscape, changing needs of developing countries and the growing number and types of players in the development space, the UN development system will need to enhance and enlarge its approach to partnerships. This will enable it to contribute optimally to the transformative and complex post-2015 development agenda.

The UN development system will need to convene multi-sector and issue-based partnerships, aligned to normative values and standards and good governance principles. This would facilitate effective collective responses to global development challenges and mobilize country-level investment. The configuration and scope of these partnerships may well vary depending on the issue being addressed, the comparative advantage of different actors, and the specific country and global context.

Looking forward, new types of transformational partnerships are needed, where the UN development system plays a leveraging rather than an implementing role. The UN development system will need to define parameters and criteria for multi-stakeholder partnerships that link global change to local impact. Member State and national ownership is of the essence. There is scope to adapt policies, rules and regulations to make the UN more “user-friendly” for external players, facilitate participation of non-state actors in the work of the UN development system, and ensure transparency of efforts. There have been calls for inter-governmental to oversee these partnerships.

5. Selected discussion questions

1. How will the post-2015 development agenda shape the expectations of Member States, particularly programme countries, about the capacity of UN development system entities?
2. How will the post-2015 development agenda affect the balance between the normative and policy support and service delivery function of UN development system entities? Can the service delivery function be phased out in some programme countries?
3. How to ensure that the UN development system is able to capitalize on the knowledge and expertise that resides in different entities through more cross-sector collaboration in the post-2015 era?
4. How can the UNDS measure the impact of the contribution of the Organization as a whole to national development efforts in programme countries in the post-2015 era?
5. How to ensure that partnerships undertaken by UN development system entities are established in support of UN goals? How to promote enhanced system-wide coherence in partnership approaches by entities of the UN development system? What resources and skills are needed in order for the UN development system to play a more active leadership role in leveraging partnerships at different levels?