

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

Summary by the Vice-President of ECOSOC

Workshop 1: Functions 17 April 2015, UNHQ New York

I. Overview of presentations

Vice President of ECOSOC, H.E. María Emma Mejía Vélez urged participants to focus their contributions on the emerging functions of the UN development system in the context of the post-2015 development agenda. In 2015, the UNDS faces a historical juncture, where its capacity for change and repositioning is being tested again. Therefore, the Vice-President emphasized the importance of a cooperative and open approach among Member States as they worked closely together to meet this challenge.

Resource persons presented key findings and messages from the three background documents prepared for the workshop by UN DESA, UNDG and independent experts.

Mr. Navid Hanif, UN DESA, spoke on the evolution of functions of the UN development system over time, and drew implications for the emerging functions of the UNDS in response to growing global interdependencies and the integrated nature of the new development agenda. There are key drivers of change which must shape any repositioning of the UNDS. First, support to developing countries is becoming increasingly complex and diverse, requiring the system to respond in a wide range of areas. Second, the UNDS is increasingly being called upon to minimize risks and build resilience in situations of conflict prevention, relief and/or recovery. Third, the UN system is expected to provide support for policy integration. Forth it should leverage partnerships. To perform these functions, the UNDS must build on its existing strengths while developing considerable capacity, flexibility and expertise in these increasingly complex contexts.

Ms. Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, the Chair of the UN Development Group ASG Advisory Group, noted that an integrated development agenda needs an integrated UNDS, and expressed the hope that Member States will help to make this transformation possible. She also emphasized the importance of “field realism” and on-the-ground perspectives when thinking about functions. The UNDG is committed to channeling real-time perspectives from country-level operations into the ECOSOC dialogue so that that the UNDS can enhance its ability to respond to the challenges and opportunities of new and emerging development priorities and needs.

Mr. John Hendra, Senior Coordinator, “UN Fit for Purpose” for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, stated that functions must be driven by the mandate and purpose of the UN Development system, as well as be mutually reinforcing, integrated and adequately financed. He also highlighted the need to balance the different functions of the UNDS, including the UN’s normative role, and support to national priorities and ownership; the UN’s direct service delivery role, and provision of upstream policy support; and providing comprehensive support across a variety of roles and functions – versus the need to prioritize and focus, particularly in the context of resource constraints. Changes in UNDS functions so far have been driven by changing normative standards, changes across the pillars of the UN system, and as a result of internal reform efforts and initiatives.

Mr. John Burley, independent expert and co-author of the independent background paper on functions, emphasized the need to think holistically about UNDS functions, which are not simply operational but also include important work in the area of policy advice, analysis and capacity-building. He argued that the post-2015 development agenda provided a good opportunity to bring together the normative and operational streams of the UNDS for a more unified, effective approach to achieving sustainable development.

Mr. Khalid Malik, independent expert and other co-author of the independent background paper on functions, stressed four key drivers of change that would impact on UNDS functions in the post-2015 context: (i) the recalibration of global power, which is still in motion; (ii) the fact that connectivity and globalization are not only increasing risks but also raising expectations among populations; (iii) the tension between universality and differentiation and how shared, global problems are effectively shared collectively; and (iv) the interconnectedness of the SDGs, their challenge to institutional and policy coherence, and the subsequent demands this creates for good-quality data and information. He stressed the importance of greater coherence between the wide array of global development actors (the UN is still *the* essential universal organization) alongside the need for strategic consolidation of both functions and institutions (the UN cannot nor should not try to do everything).

Mr. Antonio Molpeceres, UN Resident Coordinator in Chile, joined the discussion via video-link from Santiago. He highlighted the potential role of the UNDS in a high middle-income country like Chile. Like many emerging and high middle-income countries, Chile has changed dramatically in the past 25 years, meaning that innovation and continued adjustments have been critical to ensuring the added value of the UNDS support to its development objectives. Currently, the UNCT has an important role to play in promoting innovative thinking in public policy and providing policy advice and analysis on pressing MIC concerns, such as tackling inequality, promoting South-South and triangular cooperation, strengthening democracy, and risk management.

II. Functions in the post-2015

Clear strategic intent and aligning of form and funding to functions

Functions are the foundation for the broader discussion on the longer-term positioning of the UNDS and inter-linkages with other critical alignment variables (e.g., funding, governance, organizational arrangements, capacity and impact). Clear strategic intent for UNDS functions will drive consideration of all issues and their alignment to deliver on the expectations of the post-2015 development agenda.

Focus on the UNDS absolute advantages within the broader development architecture

In light of the increasingly important role of many outside development actors with notable strengths, there is broad agreement that the comparative advantages of the UNDS should guide consideration of its functions in the post-2015 context. These include the UN's normative role; universal legitimacy; neutrality; global reach; and convening power. In addition, in an era of global economic uncertainty and austerity, financial resources are and will likely continue to remain limited for the UNDS. The UNDS cannot do everything, and a lack of focus will only undermine its effectiveness and distinct strengths. This implies that a discussion on UNDS functions should equally focus on what the UN should not do as what it should do.

Broad sets of functions depending on differentiated national priorities, needs and capacities

The functions of the UNDS in each country would need to be differentiated, based on national priorities, needs and capacities. In that regard, participants identified a number of functions grouped in the following broad sets:

- 1) Direct operational support: which include service delivery, monitoring progress towards the SDGs, technical assistance and evidence-based, strategic policy advice;

- 2) Transfers: capital transfers and financing, technology, innovation and knowledge transfers including data & statistics, thought leadership, normative transfer;
- 3) Indirect functionality: capacity development; support to South-South , South-North and triangular cooperation; integration (both functional integration, and market integration); and influencing other actors' behaviour (partnerships, leveraging and engagements of all stakeholders);
- 4) Broad Protection Function: protection, promotion of human rights, functions in the context of vulnerabilities, and protection in the context of global development challenges

III. Key Principles underlying functions

National ownership and priorities are the bedrock for the UNDS at country level

National ownership and national development priorities are and remain the guiding principles for UN functions and activities. The role of the UNDS is to provide coherent and integrated support to countries in achieving the SDGs and post-2015 agenda based on their national development plans and priorities.

Promoting integrated, multi-dimensional and coherent approaches to sustainable development

The proposed SDG framework for the post-2015 agenda recognizes and builds on the interdependence among development goals as well as among countries. In addition to ensuring an overall approach that integrates the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) UNDS functions should build synergies across the three pillars of the UN mandate— development and humanitarian assistance, peace and security and human rights.

Ensuring flexibility and adaptability in a rapidly changing global landscape

The UNDS has demonstrated its ability to adapt to changing circumstances in the past and will need to continue to do so in the future. New and emerging development challenges will continue to challenge the UNDS to find new ways of responding to crises and ensuring a path to sustainable development. The UNDS will need to have built in adaptability and flexibility as part of its longer-term positioning, especially in such a rapidly shifting global landscape. Equally important will be the ability of the UNDS to adapt its functions according to context.

Strengthening the regional dimension

Delivery, support and implementation tools at the national level can be of limited use when it comes to trans-boundary crises. By strengthening its regional dimension, the UNDS could strengthen both domestic and multilateral efforts for effective and sustainable action against challenges that surmount national boundaries. This is considered a potential critical element for the UNDS to further develop, and one worthy of additional consideration as part of its longer-term positioning, in view of the importance of the regional dimension in terms of capacity building for and reporting on the post-2015 development agenda

Inviting perspectives from UN frontline actors and other partners

The perspectives from the ground will be essential to forthcoming discussions on the longer-term positioning of the UNDS.. It is important that the views of colleagues in regional and country offices as well as governmental partners from capitals, and non-state actors bring in their perspectives to the dialogue.

IV. Emerging priorities

Consolidated, mutually-reinforcing and coherent planning, implementation and reporting frameworks to enhance integration of normative and operational roles

Reflection on the post-2015 development agenda offers the UNDS the opportunity to bring its normative and operational strands closer. Member States need support to translate global norms and standards to different national contexts and realities. In that regard, a key function of the UNDS is to support Member States with models of consolidated, mutually-reinforcing and coherent frameworks against which to plan, implement and report in a post-2015 world. This is a pressing concern of many developing countries, as the diversity and fragmentation of programming and reporting requirements (e.g., Istanbul Programme of Action, the Samoa Pathway, Sendai framework), can create considerable burdens and undermine achievement.

Leveraging the unique expertise and resources of UNDS to support implementation, tracking progress and knowledge-transfer

Globally, one of the UNDS' most important role continues to be providing support to Member States to implement internationally agreed norms, standards and goals to tackle common challenges, and facilitate global reviews of progress through the provision of high-quality, evidence-based data and analysis. The breadth and depth of the UNDS knowledge base and expertise is truly unique, and could be better leveraged. At country level, the function of the UNDS in terms strengthening capacities for statistics and data will be especially critical for tracking progress on the implementation of the new development agenda. The UNDS has already begun experimenting with more cohesive data services by, as an example, providing integrated support to national statistical bodies conducting surveys and data analysis, and big data. In addition, the UN has a potentially big role to play in relation to technology sharing and transfers between developing countries and relevant regional and global institutions (e.g., the Technology Bank).

Further reflection is needed on the role of the UNDS in middle- and high-income countries

The universality of the post-2015 development agenda requires further reflection on how it will translate into UNDS functions in middle- and high-income countries (MICs and HICs). The role of the UNDS in least-developed and low-income countries as well as in conflict-affected countries will remain unarguably the highest priority of UNDS functions in the post-2015 era. Current funding realities and the fact that MICs constitute the largest group of Member States call for the role of the UNDS to be further articulated in light of the differentiated capacities, priorities and needs, particularly in relation to service delivery, policy advice and technical assistance. How will the UNDS adapt to these realities? To this end, Member States requested for an analytical background paper on the UNDS role in middle- and high-income countries.

Strengthening South-South, South-North and triangular cooperation

Demand for UNDS support to South-South and triangular cooperation is increasing. The current, project-based approach of the UNDS's support to of South-South cooperation is limited in scope and needs to be further strengthened. The UNDS support in that regard could benefit from a clear longer-term vision and greater sustainability, especially in relation to facilitating knowledge and technical transfer as well as South-South, South-North and triangular exchanges on innovations.

Embedding sustainable recovery into humanitarian and development action

Protracted crises in need of longer-term support from the UNDS have become much more common in recent years. The UN needs to be capable of providing coherent support to sustainable recovery through enhanced coherence and integration between operational activities for development, humanitarian assistance, disaster-risk reduction, peacebuilding and resilience efforts. Bridging the emergency-development continuum, including by building on integrated peace missions, will be a crucial area for improvement going forward.

Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

Partnerships will be critical to deliver the new post-2015 sustainable development agenda, and a key role of the UNDS will be to use its convening role and broad knowledge base to leverage, broker, build and sustain them. In that respect, a critical feature in post-2015 will be the use of UNDS resources to unlock and serve as catalyst for private sector. Intensive engagement with a wide range of actors, from the private sector, civil society, foundations and academia alike, will be imperative to remain relevant in the post-2015 development landscape, ensuring necessary and appropriate oversight. There should be a concerted effort to better articulate the relationships and conditions under which the UNDS will collaborate with non-state actors .

V. Moving forward

Looking ahead, it is clear that business as usual is not an option. It is time for a re-birth of the UN development system, with a focus not on the “low-hanging fruit” but on the desirable fruit.

Proposals put forward for further discussion include the following.

Income is an imperfect means to categorize countries, so there may be need to gravitate towards clusters of needs and thematic issues, ranging from example from fragility and vulnerability, to human development status, impact of climate change and natural disasters, and levels of inequality. The role of the UNDS in middle-income and high-income countries needs in-depth reflection.

The UN system must reflect on the implications of the universality of the post-2015 development agenda, and respond to the increasingly differentiated country capacities and needs. The need to differentiate clearly between a universal agenda and a universal presence was emphasized. They are not one and the same.

The issues of efficiency, effectiveness, coordination and coherence remain critical elements for a UNDS that can successfully deliver. Some 45 Member States have adopted the voluntary “Delivering as one” (DaO) approach, and some countries are adopting elements of the Standard Operating Principles (SOPs) which underline the DaO model. Yet, there are still significant issues around coherence, effectiveness and efficiencies that cut across all areas of the Dialogue which must be addressed for the system to be better fit for purpose, whether incrementally or otherwise.

One proposal was put forward for a more integrated model through the creation of a system-wide strategy which would be relevant for all 34 entities of the UNDS, serve as the missing link between the individual UN entities’ strategies in support of system-wide coherent coordinated results, with ECOSOC and the HLPF monitoring its progress. Some participants, while agreeing with the desirability of such a framework, expressed skepticism at its feasibility.

It will be critical for the whole international community to be fit-for purpose. Political attention and commitment to a strong UNDS at the forthcoming adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, in September, will be critical. The outcome of the Summit should include a strong call for making the UN fit for purpose. Such a strong message could help in giving impetus to the second phase of the ECOSOC Dialogue.