

SWEO/2025/001 Summary Report



Overview

This system-wide evaluation on "progress towards a new generation of United Nations country teams (UNCTs)", conducted between August 2024 and May 2025, provides lessons and insights on two key elements of the United Nations development system's repositioning, which was proposed by the Secretary-General in 2017, and mandated by Member States in 2018 ([A/RES/72/279](#)).

The repositioning aims for the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to be the "most important instrument for the planning and implementation of United Nations development activities in each country". This evaluation, therefore, is exploring:

- i. **Derivation and alignment:** the extent to which UNSDG entity programmes are "derived from" and "align with" Cooperation Frameworks
- ii. **UNCT configuration:** the extent to which UNCTs are able to (re)configure to deliver shared results in response to the priorities set out in Cooperation Frameworks

The evaluation provides independent analysis on how these reform elements have been implemented and examines their contribution to the wider goal of a more coherent, effective, efficient and accountable United Nations development system.

The findings are based on the analysis and triangulation of multiple data sources, including consultation of more than 500 key informants, data collection in 21 countries, large system-wide survey datasets and over 1000 documents gathered from across the United Nations system at country and global levels.

The evaluation confirms that the vision for a "new generation of UNCTs" remains highly relevant. The 2018 development system repositioning has resulted in many important improvements, notably more coherent analysis and planning, widespread appreciation for the reinvigorated Resident Coordinator system and increased participation of non-resident entities in UNCTs. These provide an important and necessary foundation on which to build, and there are individual examples of behaviours and approaches that match the ambitions of the reforms. However, overall, Cooperation Frameworks have not yet become the most important instrument for planning and *implementation* at the country level. Similarly, UNCTs have not yet significantly reconfigured in line with Cooperation Framework priorities. While the United Nations development offer remains important and relevant, its collective offer and contribution has not been transformed by these elements of the development system repositioning. There remains a significant gap between the strategic intent and the operational realities.

Alignment and derivation: UNCT entity country programmes are broadly aligned with Cooperation Frameworks, but there is little evidence that the substance of those programmes is significantly affected by the Cooperation Framework and its preparation process. Derivation is a largely administrative exercise, and its compliance points and timeframes can cause friction.

UNCT configuration exercises conducted at the country level have expanded the engagement of non-resident entities in UNCTs. But the exercises are disconnected from entity decision points on country-level resourcing, and have not created more tailored, needs-based country presences or improved the ability of UNCTs to deliver Cooperation Frameworks.

Cooperation Framework implementation: Collective UNCT ownership and use of the tools intended to support implementation (including joint workplans, joint resource mobilization strategies and coordination structures) have been weak, limiting the potential for these tools to contribute to a more prioritized, strategic and coherent set of interventions in response to Cooperation Framework priorities.

Critical factors: The evaluation identifies critical interrelated factors that explain these findings.

These factors include: the limitations of the Cooperation Framework Guidance and Management and Accountability Framework; the design, analysis and planning focus of the systems established to support and monitor the implementation of the reforms; and the limited extent to which entities (at headquarters, regional and country levels) have fully integrated the ambitions of the reforms within their own accountability mechanisms and incentive structures.

Other factors relate to the broader enabling environment and systemic issues, including: limited transparency within UNCTs on work planning and resource mobilization; competition for funding; varying levels of programme country government engagement in the Cooperation Framework cycle; the governance architecture of the United Nations development system; and donor behaviour and funding trends.

Conclusions and recommendations: While these ambitious reforms are now at a critical juncture, this assessment does not suggest that ambitions should be lowered. The response to the evaluation needs to be realistic and pragmatic, but with clear intent to further the ambitions of the United Nations development system repositioning and not erode or dilute them.

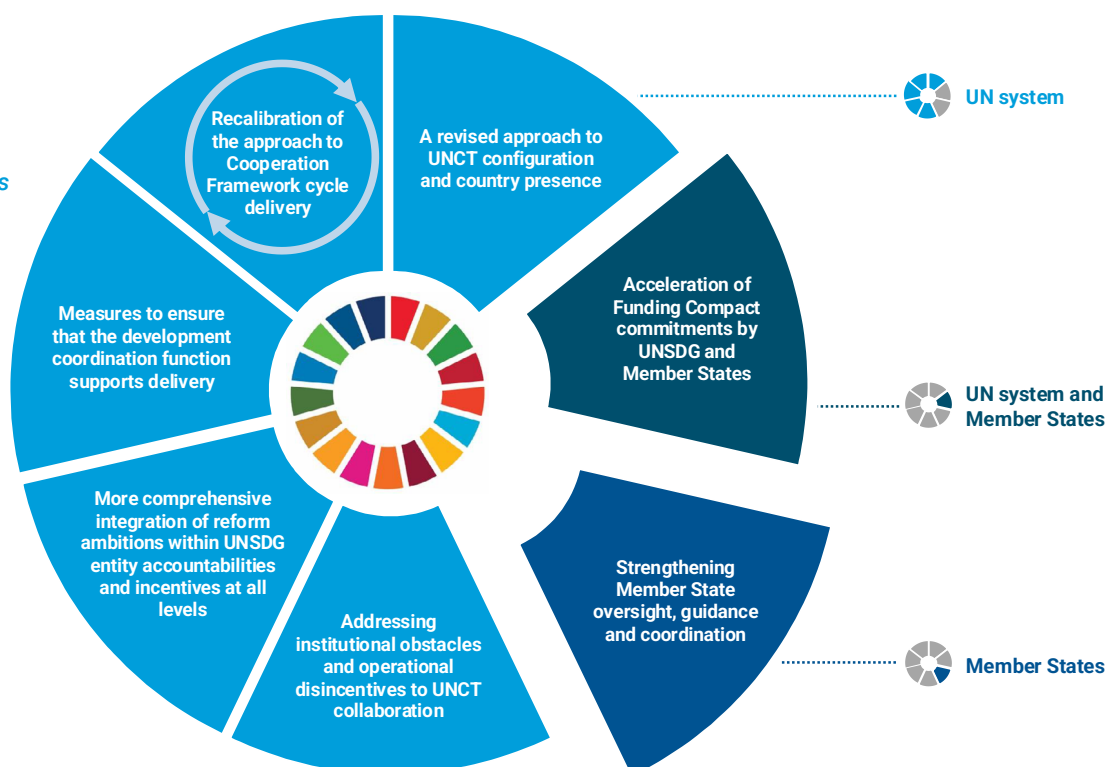
The evaluation conclusions identify the most important factors that explain the gap between strategic intent and operational reality and the corresponding areas where changes are necessary to realize the vision for a new generation of more coherent and effective UNCTs.

The evaluation's analysis reaffirms that leadership from different stakeholder groups will be necessary to drive change in what is a complex system. Action by Resident Coordinators and UNCT members is necessary but not sufficient: action is needed from staff at all levels of the United Nations development system.

Likewise, Member States, in their capacities as programme country governments, governing body members and donors, also have a key role to play.

The evaluation makes seven strategic recommendations (with sub-recommendations) to the UNSDG collectively, UNDSG entities individually, the Development Coordination Office and Member States (Figure 1). The evaluation team considers that maximum value will be obtained if all recommendations are addressed concurrently as a holistic set, and that the UN80 Initiative may provide acceleration opportunities.

Figure 1:
Overview of key conclusions and corresponding recommendations



Source: SWE0

Recommendation 1 - Cooperation Framework cycle delivery: The UNSDG should develop clear proposals for a recalibrated approach to Cooperation Framework delivery to strengthen implementation, ensure that the UNCT operates transparently throughout the cycle, reduce transaction costs and increase flexibility. The proposals should be focused on ensuring Cooperation Frameworks are "revitalized, strategic, flexible and results- and action-oriented" (as reiterated in A/RES/79/226 - OP 83) and should be informed by the conduct of a rapid review to identify the changes needed and define a clear way forward.

Recommendation 2 - New approaches to UNCT configuration: The UNSDG should take action to deliver on the strategic ambition for a more agile United Nations development system with a "needs-based, tailored country presence" to "ensure the best configuration of support" (A/RES/72/279) and provide capacity at the point of delivery. In doing this, the UNSDG should recommit to and deliver on the Secretary-General's proposals for "more creative models of physical presence" (A/72/684-E/2018/7).

Recommendation 3 - Guidance and systems for coordination: Support systems for development coordination should be rebalanced to facilitate implementation at the country level. The Cooperation Framework Guidance and Management and Accountability Framework should be revised to strengthen mutual accountability and transparency, to streamline systems and to reduce transaction costs for UNCTs.

Recommendation 4 - Accountability and incentives within UNSDG entities: UNSDG Principals should introduce and enforce changes within their entities to ensure that accountabilities and incentives at all levels are aligned with the ambitions of a new generation of UNCTs. These should drive greater transparency, mutual accountability and associated behavioural changes, including dual accountability of entity heads, within the UNCT.

Recommendation 5 - Addressing institutional obstacles: The UNSDG and its member entities should address priority efficiency and business operations initiatives to improve the enabling environment for collaboration within UNCTs and remove persistent institutional barriers and disincentives.

Recommendation 6 - Funding and joint resource mobilization: Member States and other funders are encouraged to improve the quality of funding available to the United Nations development system, including through flexible, core and pooled contributions. UNSDG entities are encouraged to develop more effective approaches to accelerate progress on Funding Compact commitments.

Recommendation 7 - Member State governance, oversight and coordination: The evaluation encourages Member States to provide more effective and coherent oversight and guidance with more consistent engagement on the collective performance of the United Nations development system (in accordance with A/RES/72/279 and resolutions on the QCPR); both through their engagement as programme country governments and in their roles in legislative and governing bodies.

Introduction

1. This evaluation on progress towards a new generation of United Nations country teams (UNCTs),¹ conducted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWE0), has a dual purpose of accountability and learning.
2. The evaluation responds to a request by the UNSDG Principals for an independent system-wide evaluation to examine two central elements of the repositioning of the United Nations development system at the country level. The evaluation explores, specifically, the: "good practices and opportunities for improvement on country programmes' derivation from, and alignment with, Cooperation Frameworks and UNCT configuration".
3. The evaluation is not an assessment of progress against the entirety of the reform agenda or the overall effectiveness of the United Nations development system. It does not provide an assessment or benchmarking of the performance of individual UNSDG entities or UNCTs. Rather, it is a holistic assessment of the contribution of two key reform elements to the goal of a more coherent, effective, efficient and accountable United Nations development system.

4. The reforms position the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework as "the most important instrument for the planning and implementation of United Nations development activities in each country" (Figure 2). This evaluation, therefore, explores:

- **Derivation and alignment:** the extent to which individual UNSDG entity programmes are "derived from" and "aligned with" the Cooperation Framework
- **UNCT configuration:** the extent to which UNCTs have been able to (re)configure to deliver shared results in response to the priorities set out in the Cooperation Frameworks

5. While these processes and their outcomes are at the centre of the evaluation, the assessment of progress required consideration of the wider reform agenda and the broader enabling environment.

Figure 2: Cooperation Framework cycle



Source: reproduced by SWE0, original from Cooperation Framework Companion Package

Context

6. The repositioning of the United Nations development system is arguably the most comprehensive and ambitious reform effort to date, aiming to provide more coherent, accountable and effective United Nations support to help Member States achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was initiated by Member States in the 2014-2016 Economic and Social Council "ECOSOC dialogues" and the 2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCP) resolution ([A/RES/71/243](#)). It was then taken forward by the Secretary-General in his reports on repositioning in 2017 ([A/72/124-E/2018/3](#) & [A/72/684-E/2018/7](#)), mandated in the 2018 General Assembly resolution [A/RES/72/279](#) and reinforced by resolutions on the QCP in 2020 ([A/RES/75/233](#)) and 2024 ([A/RES/79/226](#)).

1. On average, 19-20 resident and non-resident United Nations entities are led by a Resident Coordinator.

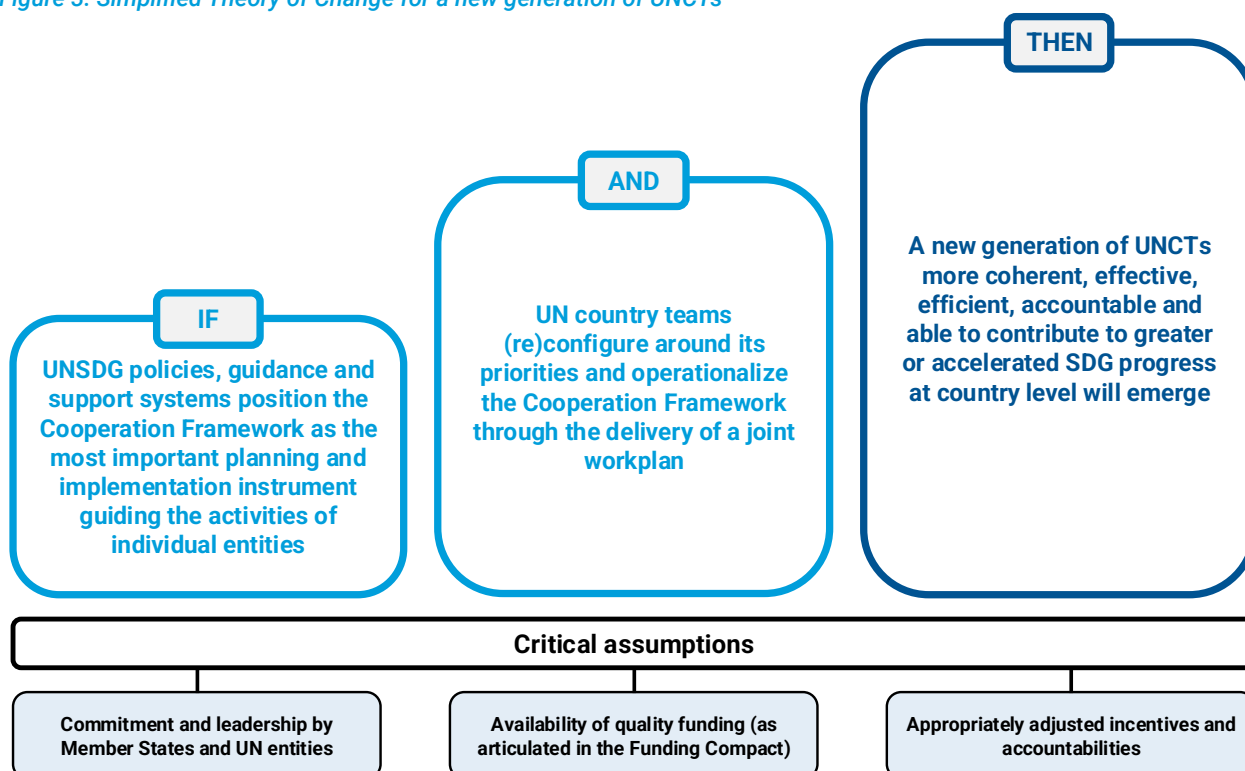
7. The reform package is broad. In addition to the elements at the core of this evaluation, it includes inter alia: the reinvigorated Resident Coordinator system (de-linked from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and reporting to the Secretary-General); the repositioning of the development system's regional level, in order to enhance use of its capacities and resources at the country level; the creation of the Development Coordination Office (DCO) at headquarters level to provide support to the Resident Coordinator system and UNCTs; the Funding Compact between the UNSDG and Member States; and important system-wide efficiency initiatives. Monitoring and formal reporting to Member States on reform implementation is provided by the Secretary-General's reports on the QCPR and the UNSDG Chair's reports on the Development Coordination Office.²

Evaluation features

8. **Scope:** The evaluation is system-wide, including member entities of the UNSDG and its secretariat (the Development Coordination Office) at country, regional and global levels in the period 2019 to 2025. Adhering to key principles of the UNSDG System-Wide Evaluation Policy – complementarity, subsidiarity and collaboration – it builds upon the existing evaluation and oversight work of UNSDG entity evaluation functions, the United Nations Secretariat's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and country-specific Cooperation Framework evaluations. It is focused on the collective results and system-wide issues that are not adequately addressed by these mechanisms.

9. **Analytical approach:** The evaluation took a theory-based approach, whereby the evaluation questions (EQs), data collection and analysis aim to assess progress against a theory for the realization of a "new generation of UNCTs". The core of this theory is summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Simplified Theory of Change for a new generation of UNCTs



Source: SWE0

2. Most recently [A/80/74-E/2025/53](#) and [E/2025/61](#) respectively. For previous reports see: [Guiding Operational Activities for Development | Economic and Social Council](#).

10. The evaluation takes a system-wide lens to holistically assess how this theory holds in practice and highlights key enabling or limiting factors (both internal and external).

11. **Participatory nature:** without compromising its objectivity and independence, the evaluation was conducted in close consultation with key stakeholders and users throughout. UNSDG entities were consulted on evaluation scope and design. Primary data collection methods were participatory, prioritizing and promoting inter-agency discussions. Briefings on emerging evaluation findings provided opportunities for their validation, and workshops were held with UNSDG and Resident Coordinator system representatives to discuss appropriate and feasible recommendations. The evaluation has sought to be outward facing, connecting when relevant with ongoing UNSDG and inter-governmental processes relating to United Nations development system repositioning.

12. **Data sources:** the evaluation took a broad sampling approach. Primary and secondary data were gathered and analysed across different stakeholder groups, and at country, regional and global levels of the United Nations development system. The findings draw on:

- Interviews and focus group discussions with 500+ key informants (United Nations system staff and external stakeholders including programme country governments and donors) at country, regional and global levels
- Country-level data collection in 21 focus countries (balancing typologies and regional representation) (see Figure 4)
- Review of relevant documentation gathered from 21 UNCTs and all 37 UNSDG entities (including existing independent evaluations)
- Re-analysis of system-wide survey datasets (including the UNSDG Information Management System and annual QCPR monitoring surveys of UNSDG entities, UNCT members, Resident Coordinators and programme country governments administered by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)³) collected between 2021 and 2024.

Figure 4: Evaluation focus countries



Source: SWE0

3. Number of respondents to QCPR monitoring surveys (2024): 122 programme country governments (one per country), 32 UNSDG entity headquarters (one per entity), 1041 UNCT members, and 129 Resident Coordinators.

Evaluation findings

Relevance and integration of key instruments

13. The evaluation finds that the [Cooperation Framework Guidance \(2019\)](#) and the [Management and Accountability Framework \(MAF\) \(2019, updated 2021\)](#), reflect the overall strategic intent of the United Nations development system repositioning. They support the ambition to introduce dual accountability models, focus on national priorities and further join up UNCT analysis, planning and reporting.

14. However, these instruments, which are the result of negotiation and agreement among UNSDG entities, lack clarity on the fundamental processes and expectations regarding country programme derivation from Cooperation Frameworks and UNCT configuration. Furthermore, as evidenced by subsequent findings, the evaluation considers that the design and execution of the repositioning has relied too heavily on the technical and administrative lever of new, inter-agency guidance, which, while necessary, is not sufficient to strengthen system-wide coherence, efficiency and effectiveness given the complexity and structural barriers within the United Nations development system.

15. Most UNSDG entities have taken steps to integrate elements of the Cooperation Framework Guidance and the Management and Accountability Framework into their own strategies, guidance and support systems. However, this adoption has been gradual and uneven, often amounting to parallel or additional considerations with qualification and caveats, rather than fully integrated commitments to new ways of working that are supported by change management strategies and approaches. This can result in confusion or tension between entity-specific instruments and responsibilities and those relating to UNCT membership and the Cooperation Framework cycle.

Country programme derivation from Cooperation Frameworks

16. UNSDG entities appreciate certain aspects of the Cooperation Framework programme cycle, especially the strengthened Common Country Analyses (CCAs). They increasingly understand that country programming instruments should derive from the Cooperation Framework rather than *vice-versa*. Large majorities of UNCT members report that their programmes are "derived" from (or "aligned" with) the Cooperation Framework. However, the evaluation finds that the practice of "derivation" is inconsistently understood, unevenly applied and, when followed, more administrative than substantive. This is primarily due to a combination of:

- The weak mechanisms established by the Cooperation Framework Guidance and the Management and Accountability Framework for the demonstration of derivation (limited to the verbatim use of the Cooperation Framework outcome statements)
- The very broad nature of the outcome statements in Cooperation Framework documents (to which almost any programme could be reasonably judged as aligned)
- The inconsistent and unclear expectation regarding the role of the Resident Coordinator in supporting or certifying entities' programme derivation from the Cooperation Framework.

17. Consequently, while country programmes of UNSDG entities are broadly aligned with the Cooperation Framework, there is little evidence that the substance of those programmes is significantly affected by the Cooperation Framework and its preparation process. This finding should not be read as a suggestion that UNSDG entity programmes are misaligned with national priorities – this is not necessarily the case. However, it does suggest that Cooperation Frameworks are not delivering a more focused, prioritized, and coherent United Nations development offer at the country level, as intended. For reasons highlighted in subsequent findings, UNSDG entities are incentivized to develop a broad Cooperation Framework that provides space for the incorporation of all mandates, the participation of all entities and the flexibility to adapt to opportunities presented by funding availability or government requests.

18. Concerningly, the process of deriving a UNSDG entity country programme from a Cooperation Framework has often been a source of significant friction between UNCT members and the Resident Coordinator due to the compliance points established by the Cooperation Framework Guidance and the Management and Accountability Framework and the competing timeframes between Country Programme Document approval by governing bodies⁴ and Cooperation Framework signature by the government.

19. The evaluation did find examples of effective practices and processes that contributed to stronger ownership of the Cooperation Framework by UNCTs and more substantive alignment in programming, including the more robust and participatory Common Country Analyses phase encouraged by the repositioning. Otherwise, strengthened alignment was often facilitated by Resident Coordinators and UNCTs stepping outside of the processes intended by the guidance and developing more flexible, context-specific approaches to analysis, strategic planning and programming.

UNCT configuration

20. The Secretary-General's proposals for repositioning the United Nations development system and the direction given by Member States in the key resolutions asked for the improved configuration of the United Nations development system at all levels. This was largely operationalized as a key step in the Cooperation Framework development process: the "UNCT configuration exercise" at the country level. The evaluation finds that UNCT configuration exercises may provide some useful information on entity footprints and staffing and have provided some new opportunities for the participation of non-resident entities in UNCTs. But they do not result in actual changes in country engagement: they do not generate actionable plans and do not function as a tool to improve the UNCT's capability to deliver the Cooperation Framework. There are a number of reasons why this is the case:

- The disconnect between these exercises and UNSDG entities' decisions about country presence and capacities, which are typically taken on different timeframes at regional offices than that of headquarters
- The limited agility of the United Nations development system to quickly reconfigure capacities at the country level (including limited availability of flexible or pooled resources that may enable this)
- The understandable interest that the country-level staff responsible for conducting the exercise have in retaining the existing configuration
- Sensitivity regarding consultation of the government on UNCT configuration (especially in relation to normative mandates).

21. UNCT configuration exercises have, therefore, also not contributed significantly to the separate but related repositioning aims of enhancing country-level access to the regionally located assets and expertise of the United Nations system and shifting the United Nations offer from project or service delivery to upstream, integrated policy advice, even where there is government demand.

22. Flexible systems to allow staff to be hosted and deployed on other entities' platforms or within the Resident Coordinator Office (RCO) exist but are little used. There are few examples of larger entities hosting, by mutual recognition, expert staff of smaller or non-resident entities.

Cooperation Framework implementation

23. Overall, the evaluation finds that UNCT ownership and use of the tools put in place to support Cooperation Framework implementation has been weak.

4. UNDP, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP).

24. **Joint workplans:** The "joint workplans" intended to operationalize the Cooperation Framework through contributions by entity-specific activities ("sub outputs") to the high-level Cooperation Framework outcomes, if complete, can provide a useful overview of the full United Nations footprint and a tool for coordination and communication. However, there is a lack of consistency in their scope and purpose. They are often a mere collation (often *ex-post*) of entity activities rather than being coherent and strategic and they rarely drive strategic coordination or meaningfully track progress toward achievement of strategic-level outcomes.

25. **Coordination structures:** In some countries, Cooperation Framework governance and coordination structures (often "results groups" under an overarching government-United Nations "joint-steering committee") serve as useful spaces to maintain focus on delivery. However, overall practice indicates that results and thematic groups have limited utility because they are seen as more focused on data collation (that is, compilation of existing activity into the joint workplans) than strategic delivery or identification of new, joint, or complementary initiatives. The strategic value of these groups and structures is further diminished when the participation of senior United Nations or government officials is limited.

26. **Monitoring, reporting and evaluation:** UNSDG entities' disparate results-based management metrics and systems mean that data submitted for the purposes of monitoring Cooperation Framework implementation and tracking results are problematic. The aggregation of all United Nations development activities in a country is a useful and necessary endeavour for the purposes of coordination and transparency to the government (provided through the annual UNCT results report since the repositioning). However, it is associated with very high transaction costs and "double reporting" by all stakeholders involved. Cooperation Framework evaluations are typically under-resourced and there is little evidence that they provide significant input into the design of new Cooperation Frameworks.

27. **Joint resource mobilization strategies:** While UNCT joint resource mobilization strategy documents mostly fulfil the requirements of the guidance, there is little evidence they contribute to financing the Cooperation Framework implementation. Joint resource mobilization efforts by UNCTs are limited, with the exception of proposals to global pooled and vertical funds and the establishment of some country-level multi-partner trust funds (MPTFs). Such mechanisms were found to have the potential to promote greater coherence and collaboration within UNCTs, sometimes leveraging non-resident expertise, but many key informants perceived a mismatch between the transaction costs involved and the volume of funding typically available.

Factors influencing the evolution of a new generation of UNCTs

28. The evaluation findings on the practice of "derivation", "configuration" and Cooperation Framework implementation are explained by a wide range of factors. Some relate to the specific approaches and systems used to execute and support the repositioning of the United Nations development system. Others relate to systemic issues and the broader enabling environment that has been addressed less directly in the repositioning. These are summarized in Table 1 and elaborated below.

Table 1: Summary of key explanatory factors

Specific mechanisms and support systems	Broader enabling environment / systemic issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance / MAF in action • Support systems for coordination • Leadership at country level • Leadership at headquarters level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency on work planning and resource mobilisation • Competition for funding • National engagement in the programme cycles • Governance architecture • Funding quality

29. **Cooperation Framework Guidance and the Management and Accountability Framework (MAF):** Practice at the country level shows that there are challenges in how the Cooperation Framework Guidance

and MAF are interpreted and used, with possible unintended effects. Despite intentions, the guidance is perceived as somewhat prescriptive, "one-size-fits-all", lacking flexibility for different country contexts and incentivizing a focus on demonstrating compliance. The MAF articulates accountabilities, but compliance with MAF commitments is weak, and the principle of UNCT members' dual accountability (to both UNSDG entity line manager and the Resident Coordinator) is largely theoretical. The roll-out of the Cooperation Framework Guidance and the MAF focused, understandably, on country-level changes and the responsibilities of UNCT members, with more limited and later attention to the important responsibilities of UNSDG entity regional offices and headquarters.

30. **Headquarters and regional support systems:** The Development Coordination Office's support to Cooperation Framework cycles, at headquarters and regional levels, is seen as focused more on the design stages, compliance points, monitoring and quality assurance, and less on the facilitation of meaningful implementation, and horizontal and external engagement. Mechanisms for engagement between Resident Coordinators and entity regional directors to support Cooperation Framework implementation are highlighted as a gap, with the most active regional mechanisms focusing on Common Country Analyses and Cooperation Framework quality assurance checklists.

31. **Resident Coordinator and UNCT member leadership:** Strengthened alignment and collaboration within the United Nations country team is frequently attributed to the leadership skills of UNCT members and Resident Coordinators, rather than the tools and processes put in place to support Cooperation Framework implementation. The de-linked, impartial Resident Coordinators are especially appreciated for the entry points they provide to senior levels of government, their ability to convene donors and governments and their potential to shape collective agendas.

32. **Headquarters and regional leadership:** UNSDG entities' commitment to the reforms is weaker at headquarters and regional levels than at the country level. Practice varies across the system, with smaller and non-resident entities generally demonstrating stronger buy-in to the repositioning due to the enhanced opportunities for engagement at the country level that it can offer to them. But, overall, UNSDG entities have not instituted the necessary incentives and accountabilities within their own structures to change behaviour and ways of working at the country level. There is confusion in relation to the global function of UNDP to support its repositioning as an "integrator": for example, whether this means UNDP is offering SDG integration to the country as a service or as an integration platform for the UNCT. In both cases the precise division of labour with the Resident Coordinator's Office would be unclear and has not been defined, seven years into the repositioning.

33. **Competition and transparency within UNCTs:** A major impediment to the realization of a new generation of UNCTs is competition for funding and a lack of real-time transparency over workplanning and resource mobilization within most UNCTs. This is driven by existing incentive structures within entities, short-term and project delivery-based business models and donor behaviour, and runs counter to the collaborative ethos envisaged by the repositioning. These dynamics impede the development of joint strategies and joint programmes and the leveraging of resources and expertise from across the United Nations system to deliver maximum and longer-term impact in response to national priorities.

34. **National engagement in Cooperation Framework cycles:** Programme country governments are highly appreciative of the strengthened "whole of government – whole of UN" agreement provided by the elevated Cooperation Frameworks. However, the extent to which governments engage actively in the governance and coordination of the Cooperation Framework cycle (both the design *and* implementation) is a key factor in driving greater alignment and more coherent implementation of UNSDG entity activities at the country level. The degree of this engagement varies significantly by country and context.

35. **Governing bodies:** The repositioning of the United Nations development system did not initiate reform of the entity-specific governing bodies. These arrangements are considered by many stakeholders to impede the extent to which UNSDG entities can fully integrate the reforms. Despite efforts by some Member States to

use their "entity governing body" membership to reinforce the reforms, UNSDG entity governing bodies tend to prioritize entity-specific mandates, visibility and results-attribution over system-wide results and reinforce the repositioning changes only to a limited extent.

36. **Funding:** Donor behaviour and funding trends have a strong influence on the effectiveness of the reforms at the country level. Donor representatives at the country level have varying degrees of understanding of the reforms and the intended status of the Cooperation Framework. Many value the Resident Coordinator as an entry point, but few have been guided by their capitals on how to engage with the repositioned United Nations development system. Very few donors use the Cooperation Framework as a guide for funding decisions. Bilateral approaches by UNSDG entities to country-level funders and vice versa remain the norm.

37. The development system repositioning recognized the key importance of funding quality and included a global Funding Compact between Member States and the UNSDG. Progress on Funding Compact commitments – particularly the availability of core, flexible and pooled funding – has been very limited ([E/2025/53/Add.1](#)). Persistently high levels of earmarking continue to present a significant impediment to optimal UNCT configuration and coherent implementation of Cooperation Frameworks over multi-year periods.

Conclusions & recommendations

38. The evaluation concludes that the vision for a new generation of UNCTs remains highly relevant. Some aspects of the reforms have improved the quality and coherence of UNCTs. There has been notable improvement in the inclusivity, cooperation and collaboration in joint analysis and Cooperation Framework design. The reinvigorated Resident Coordinator system is widely appreciated by United Nations and programme country government stakeholders. There are examples of behaviours and approaches that match the ambitions and spirit of the reforms. The repositioning has also made some important and necessary changes to how the United Nations development offer is organized at the country level, and many of the key foundations for a new generation of UNCTs have been established.

39. In the areas of programme derivation from the Cooperation Framework and UNCT configuration, however, overall progress has been incremental and is far from achieving the vision of a significantly more strategic, coherent and agile United Nations development system offer to countries. Good practices and innovative approaches do exist, and the United Nations development offer remains broadly aligned with and relevant to national priorities. However, the Cooperation Framework has not yet become the "most important instrument for the planning and *implementation* of United Nations development activities in each country" and UNCTs have not yet significantly "re-configured" in line with Cooperation Framework priorities. These central elements of the United Nations development system's repositioning at the country level cannot be said to have resulted in the intended fundamental shift: they do not yet ensure that the United Nations collective offer is more than the sum of its parts or that it provides an optimal contribution to SDG progress at the country level. There remains a significant gap between the highly relevant strategic intent and operational realities. The evaluation identifies a variety of reasons for this, including systemic and structural limitations, and some of these were identified as critical in the Secretary-General's proposals for repositioning in 2017, for example, fragmented governance arrangements and funding quality ([A/72/124-E/2018/3](#) & [A/72/684-E/2018/7](#)).

40. The ongoing repositioning of the United Nations development system is arguably the most far-reaching and ambitious reform of the system to date. The level of decentralization and complexity in the United Nations development system has made, and continues to make, system-wide coherence objectively challenging. The 37 entities that constitute the UNSDG have distinct mandates, varying degrees of autonomy and their own entity-specific accountability lines. The repositioning introduced new systems and structures within a very short timeframe. There was little time to pilot and test new guidance, systems and structures before they were applied globally. The application of these new systems has also been to some extent voluntary. These factors made the repositioning extraordinarily challenging, and the complexity of the change processes required to achieve the reform informs many of the evaluation's conclusions. While these

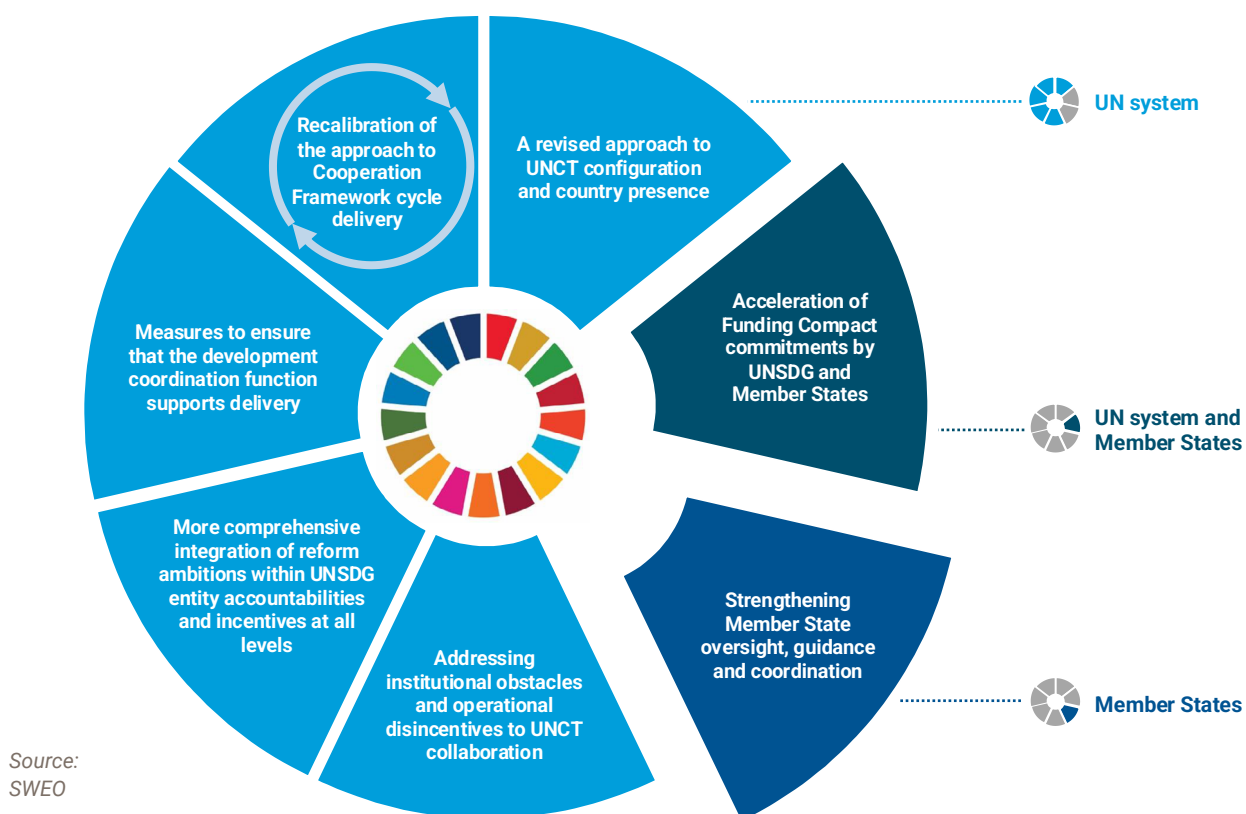
ambitious reforms are now at a critical juncture, this assessment does not suggest that ambitions should be lowered. The response to the evaluation needs to be realistic and pragmatic, but with clear intent to further the ambitions of the development system repositioning and not erode or dilute them.

41. The evaluation's analysis reaffirms that leadership from different stakeholder groups will be necessary to drive change in a complex system. Action by Resident Coordinators and UNCT members is necessary but not sufficient: action is needed from staff at all levels of the United Nations development system. Likewise, Member States, in their roles as programme country governments, governing body members and donors, also need to take action.

42. As explained in section 1.3, without compromising its ultimate independence, the evaluation engaged in a consultative and participatory process with United Nations development system stakeholders to validate the conclusions and support the development of a holistic set of recommendations.

43. The evaluation reaches seven conclusions related to the key factors that explain the gap between strategic intent and operational reality. Change is needed in all these areas to better realize the vision for a new generation of UNCTs that are more coherent, effective, efficient and accountable and more able to contribute to increasing progress towards the SDGs at the country level. Reflecting these conclusions, the evaluation makes seven recommendations to the UNSDG (collectively), UNSDG entities (individually), the Development Coordination Office and Member States (Figure 1).⁵ The evaluation team considers that maximum value will be obtained if all recommendations are addressed concurrently as a holistic set.

Figure 1: Overview of key conclusions and corresponding recommendations



Cooperation Framework cycle delivery

44. The evaluation concludes that country-level activities of UNSDG entities are broadly "aligned" with the Cooperation Framework. However, there is little evidence that the substance of their subsequent interventions

5. The order in which the recommendation areas are presented in this report is not indicative of prioritization.

is significantly affected by the Cooperation Framework and its preparation process; other factors are of greater significance. The ambition for UNSDG entity country-level activities to be derived from and aligned with the Cooperation Framework is relevant, necessary and increasingly understood. However, in practice, "derivation" is largely an administrative rather than a substantive exercise and the current mechanism can cause friction within UNCTs. After Cooperation Frameworks are signed, UNCT ownership of the "toolkit" designed to facilitate coherent implementation (including joint workplans) is typically very weak: tools, processes and coordination structures generate high transaction costs and add limited value. Transparency and mutual accountability within UNCTs are limited and competition for resources persists. The evaluation recommends a recalibrated approach and different mechanisms to achieve the necessary step change required to deliver on the reform ambitions for more substantive derivation and alignment.

Recommendation 1: The UNSDG should develop clear proposals for a recalibrated approach to Cooperation Framework delivery to strengthen implementation, ensure that the UNCT operates transparently throughout the cycle, reduce transaction costs and increase flexibility. The proposals should be focused on ensuring Cooperation Frameworks are "revitalized, strategic, flexible and results- and action-oriented" (as reiterated in A/RES/79/226 - OP 83) and should be informed by the conduct of a rapid review to identify the changes needed and define a clear way forward.

Timeline: Q4 2025–Q1 2026

Several mutually reinforcing changes are required to strengthen substantive alignment and facilitate coherent implementation and delivery of collective results. These changes should shift the balance from design, quality assurance and compliance monitoring to Cooperation Framework delivery. There is a need to improve transparency and mutual accountability among UNCT members, reduce transaction costs, and enable flexibility and adaptation to context.

Sub-recommendation 1.1: To enhance the effectiveness, accountability and collective impact of the UNCT, the UNSDG should redefine the approach to Cooperation Framework implementation.

The aim should be to progressively increase the extent to which UNCTs provide more integrated, strategic and transformative development support over time, taking account of the following points:

- i. The Cooperation Framework design process should be a lighter and swifter exercise than in current practice. The Cooperation Framework should continue to provide a high-level articulation of the multi-year UNCT "offer" in response to the Common Country Analysis and national priorities; but it should no longer be required to provide a comprehensive results framework for all existing and anticipated activities.
- ii. UNSDG entities should continue to demonstrate how their country programming instruments, and country-level activities align with the Cooperation Framework (see sub-recommendation 4.1) and should engage the Resident Coordinator and UNCT when developing their country programming instruments. However, the formal requirement for Resident Coordinator to confirm the derivation of Cooperation Framework outcomes should be discontinued (and replaced by measures proposed in sub-recommendation 1.2).
- iii. The joint workplan should be reformulated (and renamed) to become a more focused operational plan for a smaller number of more strategic UNCT responses targeted to the highest national priorities,⁶ delivered through appropriate combinations of joint and coordinated programmes, integrated policy advice, investment strategies, and enhanced partnerships with non-United Nations development partners. It should no longer encompass all United Nations activities or attempt to create a

6. As an example, these may be designed around the "transitions" and "transformative pathways" or other identified entry points to maximize SDG acceleration: [UNSDG | Six Transitions: Investment Pathways to Deliver the SDGs](#).

single United Nations results framework which seeks to connect every activity to the Cooperation Framework outcomes as "sub-outputs".

- iv. The Resident Coordinator should have a leading role in facilitating the implementation of the reformulated (and renamed) joint workplan, including leading on coordination, engaging with external stakeholders and supporting the joint mobilization of quality funding and financing (see recommendation 6, ii).
- v. Annual UNCT results reports should continue to provide transparency on the total United Nations contribution in the country but might also spotlight the achievements of the reframed joint workplan. The requirements for Cooperation Framework evaluations should be revised to ensure that they provide more robust assessments of UNCT performance and collective results.

Sub-recommendation 1.2: To maximize synergies, reduce duplication and promote more substantive alignment, the UNSDG should commit to, and be accountable for, greater mutual transparency in relation to all aspects of country-level activities, including funding streams. All UNSDG entities should share their current workplans, or equivalent documents, (including resource mobilization plans) with the Resident Coordinator and UNCT, allowing Resident Coordinator Offices to provide the UNCT with a mapping of active interventions. This provides transparency on the extent of entities' substantive alignment in real time and throughout the Cooperation Framework cycle, shifting the focus of accountability from programming documents and the design phase to the implementation phase.

Sub-recommendation 1.3: To ensure enhanced responsiveness to each country's specific context, United Nations country teams and Resident Coordinators should have the flexibility to adapt elements of the Cooperation Framework cycle to fit their specific context (building upon common minimum requirements). For example, there should be flexibility for the UNCT to determine what coordination mechanisms are needed to drive collective delivery.

UNCT configuration

45. The evaluation concludes that the tools deployed to review and optimize the configuration of UNCTs have had limited impact. They have not been equal to the ambition for a significantly more agile and flexible approach to UNCT configuration envisaged by the Secretary-General's proposals on repositioning the development system. They have not led to significant changes in UNCT composition or capabilities, with the exception of providing improved access to UNCTs for some non-resident entities. The UNCT configuration exercises at the country level are occasionally valued for providing a mapping of the UNSDG footprint and capacities. However, they have been largely ineffective in adjusting configuration, principally because UNSDG entities do not make significant decisions on resourcing either at the country level or at the same time as the Cooperation Framework is designed.

46. There are also more fundamental and systemic issues that explain why the United Nations development system is not currently well placed to reconfigure around the priorities of a Cooperation Framework. These issues are illustrated by the lack of progress in the regional-level reforms (specifically, the intention to significantly enhance the contributions of regional assets and expertise to UNCTs through Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) structures) and by the slow progress in the overall shift anticipated from project delivery to upstream policy advice. A more agile and coherent development offer that is responsive to country-level priorities requires a move away from traditional approaches to physical presence and current business models.

Recommendation 2: The UNSDG should take action to deliver on the strategic ambition for a more agile United Nations development system with a “needs-based, tailored country presence” to “ensure the best configuration of support” (A/RES/72/279) and provide capacity at the point of delivery. In doing this, the UNSDG should recommit to and deliver on the Secretary-General’s proposals for “more creative models of physical presence” (A/72/684–E/2018/7).

Timeline: Q4 2025–Q4 2026

The UNSDG needs to consider, collectively, how it can provide, with greater agility and flexibility, the required capacities at the country level to respond to national priorities. The evaluation notes that UNSDG entities are already reconsidering their business models, including capacities at the country, regional and global levels. It is important that UNSDG entities use this opportunity to collaborate and take joint decisions to optimize the configuration of capacities to meet country-level priorities to minimize gaps, reduce duplication and maximize synergies across the global UNSDG footprint.

Sub-recommendation 2.1: The UNCT configuration exercise, as a mandatory step in the Cooperation Framework cycle, and typically a one-off moment at the country level, should be discontinued. It should be replaced by more comprehensive mapping of the full footprint and capacities of the UNCT, which enhanced transparency standards and improved information management systems should provide (see sub-recommendations 1.2 and 3.1).

Sub-recommendation 2.2: Decisions on UNCT configuration to respond to the Cooperation Framework should be elevated to dialogue at the relevant level of decision-making, while remaining grounded in the response to national priorities and requests of the host government. This should encompass the resident and non-resident capacities needed to deliver the Cooperation Framework, engaging Resident Coordinators and entity regional and headquarters directors (as appropriate) and facilitated by the Development Coordination Office. This formal dialogue should take place at the start of Cooperation Framework implementation and should be subject to regular review.

Sub-recommendation 2.3: The UNSDG should collectively establish creative models for short-term and long-term physical presence at the country level, which may include: revision or clarification of options for hosting and representation of UNSDG entities within other entities or in Resident Coordinator Offices, system-wide expert rosters and surge capacities, or fee-for-service models. Progress in delivering system-wide efficiencies (see recommendation 5) would facilitate the introduction of these kinds of changes.

Guidance and systems for development coordination

47. The evaluation concludes that the frameworks, guidance and support systems that support the repositioning of the United Nations development system do not focus sufficiently on the coherent implementation of Cooperation Frameworks. They are more focused on the design stage of the Cooperation Framework and give less attention to supporting coherent delivery or to addressing barriers to coordination and coherence. The support systems were developed at pace, retaining some legacy functions, systems and tools that were used prior to the reforms.

48. Now is the time to revisit them to better reflect evolving requirements and provide greater flexibility and responsiveness to the country context. Development coordination support systems need to focus less on guidance and process, and more on facilitating delivery, seeking to build on and expand existing good practice and addressing barriers. A recalibration of the development coordination function is necessary to ensure that it adds greater value to the work of UNCTs while minimizing transaction costs.

Recommendation 3: Support systems for development coordination should be rebalanced to facilitate implementation at the country level. The Cooperation Framework Guidance and Management and Accountability Framework should be revised to strengthen mutual accountability and transparency, to streamline systems and to reduce transaction costs for UNCTs.

Timeline: Q3 2025–Q3 2026

Sub-recommendation 3.1: The UNSDG should revise the Management and Accountability Framework and Cooperation Framework Guidance as necessary to provide greater clarity in critical areas identified by the evaluation. Most importantly, revisions should set clear expectations in relation to horizontal and collective accountability and establish minimum standards of transparency in relation to all aspects of country-level activities, including sharing of entity workplans and resource mobilization plans (see sub-recommendation 1.2).

Sub-recommendation 3.2: The Development Coordination Office should review its operations and staffing at all levels to shift the focus to the delivery of collective results. Further:

- i. At headquarters and regional levels, the Development Coordination Office should reorient focus towards the facilitation of implementation, horizontal engagement with UNSDG entities and external partners, and away from vertical quality control, monitoring and compliance; it should prioritize sharing learning and good practice with UNCTs; and it should routinely review and adapt systems and processes to ensure they have the desired impact when applied.
- ii. At the country level, a more flexible and bespoke approach to the Resident Coordinator Office composition in response to context should also be considered.
- iii. The Development Coordination Office should continue to prioritize the deployment of Resident Coordinators with high quality leadership skills and ensure that performance management and support systems incentivize their outward-facing, agenda-setting, convening function.

Sub-recommendation 3.3: To enhance the contribution of regional capacities to the implementation of Cooperation Frameworks, the UNSDG should review regional support structures and coordination mechanisms and develop clear proposals to improve responsiveness to requests for support from UNCTs and programme country governments.

Sub-recommendation 3.4: UN DESA and the Development Coordination Office, in line with QCPR [A/RES/79/226](#), should rationalize and streamline the monitoring frameworks for the QCPR and the Resident Coordinator system results framework and associated United Nations system-wide monitoring frameworks, ensuring that these are more strategic and focused on the achievement of results rather than the design stage and compliance with process.

Accountability and incentives

49. The evaluation concludes that weak accountabilities and incentives for collective action are among the key factors limiting progress towards the vision of a new generation of UNCTs. While entities have demonstrated their adoption of reform elements to varying extents, these elements have generally not yet been fundamentally integrated into their internal accountability structures. Accountability mechanisms and incentives continue to encourage UNSDG entity staff to raise funds for, provide visibility to, and attribute results to, their own entity rather than working in a more effective and integrated way to deliver on collective results.

50. The Management and Accountability Framework is relevant and necessary. However, it is not enforceable and compliance remains weak in some key areas. It is also undermined by stronger countervailing

entity-specific priorities, accountabilities and incentives. The collaborative and coherent ways of working intended by the reforms, are, at all levels, frequently seen as "extra work", or "additional" to core responsibilities, and they are widely considered to impose additional transaction costs and, at times, create unnecessary friction.

Recommendation 4: UNSDG Principals should introduce and enforce changes within their entities to ensure that accountabilities and incentives at all levels are aligned with the ambitions of a new generation of UNCTs. These should drive greater transparency, mutual accountability and associated behavioural changes, including dual accountability of entity heads, within the UNCT.

Timeline: Immediate and ongoing and by Q4 2026

A combination of measures is needed to strengthen accountability and incentives to encourage entities to better integrate the spirit and the letter of the United Nations development system repositioning. This is based on recognition that the vision of a new generation of UNCTs cannot be achieved by the actions of UNCT members alone, as acknowledged by the Secretary-General in the 2017 repositioning reports. A renewed focus on robust accountabilities and stronger incentives for a more coherent and agile United Nations development system is required at all levels. This includes at the levels of UNSDG Principals, regional directors and entity heads and staff at the country level. To be effective in changing behaviours, measures need to be integrated into existing systems and structures.

Sub-recommendation 4.1: UNSDG entities should ensure that global strategic plans, results frameworks and business models are aligned to fully integrate development system reform ambitions. They should clarify relationships between entity-specific priorities and system-wide performance (including how they will demonstrate substantive alignment with, and contribution to, Cooperation Frameworks) and create high-level accountability for joint work and collective results.

Sub-recommendation 4.2: UNSDG entities should embed reform-related accountabilities and system-wide indicators in performance management systems at all levels (specifically, including senior leadership compacts at executive head-level, as well as regional and country-level staff) and remove accountabilities and incentives that run counter to reform ambitions.

Sub-recommendation 4.3: At the country level, UNSDG entities should fully and systemically open UNCT member performance appraisal processes to input by the Resident Coordinator. More broadly, all UNSDG entities should institutionalize 360-degree appraisal for all staff to seek inputs from key United Nations colleagues to strengthen mutual and horizontal accountabilities and promote collaboration.

Institutional obstacles that impede effective collaboration

51. The evaluation concludes that institutional obstacles within the United Nations system disincentivize or impede collaboration and joint work and constrain the realization of the vision for a new generation of UNCTs. While business operations and efficiencies were not a focus of the evaluation, they emerged from the analysis as a critical enabling or constraining factor.

52. Greater efforts are necessary to harmonize and simplify business operations and processes. Persistent institutional barriers to effective collaboration need to be removed. The UNSDG needs to accelerate efforts to provide a stronger enabling environment for joint programming and integrated and agile support at the country level. Ongoing processes, such as the "UN80" Initiative, and existing forums, including the High-Level Committee on Management and the UNSDG Business Innovations Group, also provide opportunities to identify and drive the implementation of priority actions.

Recommendation 5: The UNSDG and its member entities should address priority efficiency and business operations initiatives to improve the enabling environment for collaboration within UNCTs and remove persistent institutional barriers and disincentives.**Timeline: Q3 2025–Q4 2026**

Further integration and harmonization of services is required across functional areas including human resources, procurement, administration, information and communication technology, logistics and finance, as well as harmonization (or interoperability) of systems that support planning, implementation, management, monitoring and reporting, taking into consideration the following:

- i. The UNSDG Business Innovations Group should identify and drive uptake of priority measures to remove persistent barriers for collaboration and personnel mobility for a more agile United Nations development system at the country level.
- ii. Full application of the principle of mutual recognition should be made within the United Nations system through the implementation of the recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit ([JIU/REP/2024/4](#)).

Funding quality

53. The evaluation confirms that, as anticipated in the Secretary-General's proposals for repositioning, the quality of funding received by the United Nations development system is a critical enabler of progress towards the vision of a new generation of UNCTs. This was agreed in the 2019 Funding Compact and its 2024 update. However, progress has been limited. High levels of earmarked funding continue to limit the ability of UNCTs to respond strategically to national development priorities and increase transaction costs, fragmentation and competition among UNSDG entities. In the current context, there is a significant risk that funding pressures will exacerbate competition and fragmentation. Joint and pooled funding provide incentives for innovative joint programmes, but volumes are insufficient. Greater progress on Funding Compact commitments would alleviate some of the key challenges highlighted by the evaluation.

Recommendation 6: Member States and other funders are encouraged to improve the quality of funding available to the United Nations development system, including through flexible, core and pooled contributions. UNSDG entities are encouraged to develop more effective approaches to accelerate progress on Funding Compact commitments.**Timeline: by Q4 2026**

Decisions on the provision of core, flexible, pooled and multi-year funding to the United Nations development system primarily rest with funders, and processes for funding the United Nations development system are complex and diverse. Rather than simply calling for greater volumes of quality funding, the evaluation identifies specific measures for Member States, UNSDG entities and the Resident Coordinator system to accelerate progress on relevant Funding Compact commitments.

Sub-recommendation 6.1: To better align funding decisions at the country level with Funding Compact commitments, Member States may consider reviewing their internal resource allocation processes and take steps to ensure that all their staff who engage with the United Nations development system are fully aware of these Compact commitments.

Sub-recommendation 6.2: Resident Coordinators should play a better recognized and supported leadership role in joint resource mobilization for the UNCT, to convene UNSDG entities, national stakeholders and funders

around the priorities of the Cooperation Framework, including through better use of country-level funding dialogues as a key tool (see recommendation 1.1 ii).

Sub-recommendation 6.3: UNSDG entities should develop more effective approaches to accelerate progress on Funding Compact commitments at the country level.

Member State governance, oversight and coordination

54. The need for improved horizontal oversight of the United Nations development system is well established. It was noted in General Assembly resolutions on the QCPR ([A/RES/79/226](#) and [A/RES/75/233](#)) and highlighted by the Secretary-General in his proposals for repositioning the system. Member States have a fundamental role in guiding operational activities for development: through their engagement as programme country governments; in their capacity as members of UNSDG entity governing bodies; and through the different types of funding they provide.

55. The evaluation concludes that, in general, Member States have not held UNSDG entities sufficiently accountable for delivering on the vision of a new generation of UNCTs. It confirms that current governance arrangements present obstacles to effective oversight of system-wide performance and collective development results. More consistent and coordinated Member State engagement is key to ensuring that UNCTs are accountable for coherent delivery of the Cooperation Frameworks in line with national priorities. Member States also need to sharpen their demand and provide stronger guidance for a more coherent and integrated UNCT offer at the country level to deliver on collective Cooperation Framework results.

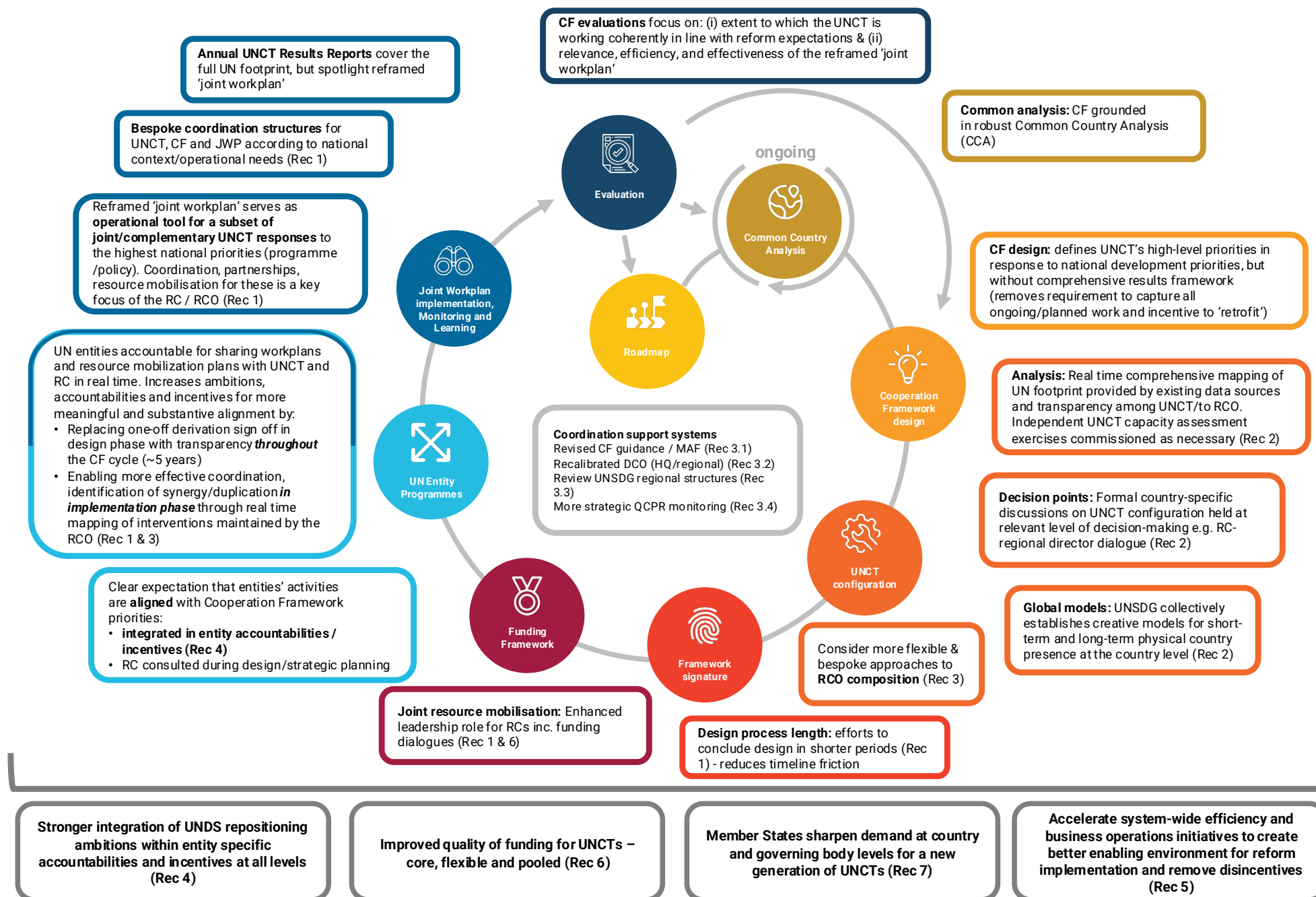
Recommendation 7: The evaluation encourages Member States to provide more effective and coherent oversight and guidance with more consistent engagement on the collective performance of the United Nations development system (in accordance with [A/RES/72/279](#) and resolutions on the QCPR); both through their engagement as programme country governments and in their roles in legislative and governing bodies, taking into consideration the following suggestions:

- i. Programme country governments are encouraged to set out clear expectations and to hold UNCTs to account for the collective action and results delivered throughout the Cooperation Framework cycle.
- ii. UNSDG entity legislative and governing bodies are encouraged to enhance ways of working to more clearly and consistently hold UNSDG entity leadership to account for their performance in responding to the ambition of the reforms; and for implementation of the recommendations made by this evaluation.
- iii. Member States are encouraged to consider how to provide more effective and coherent oversight and guidance in legislative and governing bodies to encourage the United Nations development system to make greater progress on the reform ambitions, ensuring that there is consistency in their engagement and messaging.

Opportunities for adjustments include: responses to the 2023 report of the Joint Inspection Unit on governance and oversight provided by the New York Executive Boards ([JIU/REP/2023/7](#)), and consideration of the strengthened role for ECOSOC in oversight of the development system ([A/RES/78/285](#)).

56. Figure 5 provides visual a representation of how the recommendations of the evaluation contribute to a recalibrated approach to Cooperation Framework delivery and better realization of the vision for a new generation of United Nations country teams.

Figure 5: Contribution of recommendations to a recalibrated approach to Cooperation Framework cycle delivery and new generation of UNCTs



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