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Mission Impossible? Country-Level Coordination in the UN Development System

Max-Otto Baumann

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Abbreviations

ARC	Assessment of Results and Competencies
CEB	Chief Executives Board for Coordination
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (United Nations)
MAS	Management and Accountability System
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
RC	Resident Coordinator
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN DOCO	United Nations Development Operations Coordination Office
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

The sportsman who fails to coordinate the movement of his limbs will not excel; the orchestra in which the instruments are not in sync produces cacophony; the doctors who do not talk to each other risk their patients' lives. Although coordination is never the art itself, it always is a basic element of success. This also holds true for the United Nations (UN) development system, where in every developing country, on average, 18 funds, programmes, specialised agencies and other entities need to be coordinated in their development activities. The improvement of coordination has been a central theme in the current process of reforming the UN development system; the goal is to resolve long-standing organisational problems, but also to reposition the UN more adequately to deliver effectively, efficiently and coherently on the 2030 Agenda. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has made improvements of the Resident Coordinator system the centrepiece of his reform proposals presented in early 2018.

This discussion paper aims to contribute to the ongoing reform discussions by providing a snapshot of coordination in the UN development system, supported by an analysis of the weaknesses in the UN's coordination structures and processes. The last set of major studies on UN country-level coordination dates back more than four years now. However, the UN has, in the meantime, introduced several new tools to improve its coordination. This calls for a fresh look at how the UN performs regarding coordination at the country level and what challenges still persist. This discussion paper is based on 32 interviews in five developing countries as well as on an evaluation of country documents and other sources, among them the new Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review monitoring surveys from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The discussion paper assesses UN country-level coordination against the UN's own standards, which are enshrined in its guidelines for the Resident Coordinator system and its "upgraded" version of the Delivering as One mechanism. Notwithstanding clear evidence of how committed individuals achieve significant coordination, the paper nevertheless arrives at a critical assessment of UN development cooperation. On core aspects of coordination – the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) process, information-sharing, Results Groups, joint programmes – the UN falls short of what would be needed to effectively coordinate its work on the country level. Coordination is still less a modality for working together for better UN performance, but more of a burdensome, extra activity that is detached from what agencies perceive as their core tasks.

To explain the gap between ambition and reality, the discussion paper adopts a rational choice framework that shows how organisational structures incentivise, or disincentivise, actors to engage in coordination. From this perspective, the limits of coordination lie not only in the lack of authority of the Resident Coordinator, but equally in the lack of an organisational environment that would incline agency heads and staff to play their complementary roles in making the Resident Coordinator system work. Focussing specifically on four areas, the paper reconstructs how (a) the lack of provisions for coordination, (b) weak accountability systems, which are not focussed on coordination, and to a lesser extent (c) limits in staff capacities and (d) administrative hurdles such as non-compatible administrative systems hamper UN internal coordination at the country level. Summarising the findings, one could state that coordination in the UN exists as an idea and is propped up by guidelines, but that it has not been sufficiently embedded in UN structures that incentivise staff behaviour.

The analysis does not stop at UN internal factors. What role do member states play in facilitating or complicating coordination? Looking at three factors in that regard – (a) the mandates they provide, (b) the funding they offer and (c) the ownership they exercise – the discussion paper finds that member states have, on all three points, fallen significantly short of supporting coordination: The General Assembly’s recent mandates on coordination are significantly weaker than those issued in the 1990s, and the Secretary-General, under whose leadership the Resident Coordinator system is managed, is today ascribed less authority to manage the system than before. On funding, member states have stopped supporting the “One UN Funds”, which were meant to give Resident Coordinators a carrot to bring the UN Country Team of agency heads together. On ownership, which is more a responsibility of host governments, an often lackadaisical position towards the UN also does not help to hold the UN accountable on coordination; in one of the five countries visited, the exception that proves the rule was observed.

The paper then offers recommendations for improving coordination. It argues that the Secretary-General’s reform proposals point in the right direction, but they miss part of the picture by focussing almost exclusively on the most prominent features of UN country-level coordination, specifically the Resident Coordinators (more authority) and the UNDAF (a more rigorous exercise). So the Secretary-General’s proposals need to be complemented with some attention to the incentive structures under which agencies and their staff operate. If the Resident Coordinator system is to be strengthened, then the organisational ecosystem around it also needs to be adjusted. With that purpose in mind, the author suggests nine actions:

1. Mandates: Conduct a study on the mandates by the General Assembly for the Secretary-General and Resident Coordinators to engage in system-wide coordination. This discussion paper should also analyse the complementary mandates for the agencies, as given both by the General Assembly and the boards.
2. (Vertical) accountability to member states: Merge the boards of the funds and programmes to bring the reporting lines together on the global level and give member states a consolidated oversight structure that disposes them towards looking at the UN development system more holistically.
3. (Horizontal) accountability to Resident Coordinator: Review and revise accountability mechanisms to give them a stronger, more explicit focus on coordination. Resident Coordinators should have a role in appointing agency heads.
4. Collective accountability: A set of realistic indicators of UN country-level coordination should be defined, based on the Standard Operating Procedures. Such indicators could also become the basis for a standardised section on coordination in the mandatory UNDAF evaluations.
5. Capacity: Reduce the overall burden of coordination and concentrate it on functions and thematic areas where it matters most. Coordination functions and platforms should be bundled in a significantly strengthened Resident Coordinator office; the working groups should also be integrated into the Resident Coordinator’s office.

6. **Administrative barriers:** Efforts to harmonise agencies' business systems should not be limited to either the pursuit of operational efficiency nor the country level. Full harmonisation of agencies' business systems is probably unfeasible, so the way forward lies in the development of system-wide templates from which agencies can choose and which they need to mutually recognise.
7. **Member states' role:** As board members, member states should use their direct influence to demand more coordination efforts by their respective agencies. To ensure a harmonised approach across agencies, member states should base their interventions on agreed policies. Coordination should be dealt with in strategic plans.
8. **Ownership:** To make ownership a driver of better coordination, host governments should not be shy about holding the UN accountable on coordination. They are well-positioned for that role, as they have the knowledge, political power and a direct interest in coordination. Assessed funding for the Resident Coordinator system could activate their interest in value for money.
9. **A code of conduct for member states:** To raise awareness about coordination among member states and to incentivise behaviour that is conducive to a functioning Resident Coordinator system, a code of conduct should specify what member states – both donors and host governments – should do, or not do, to support UN coordination.

1 Introduction

The sportsman who fails to coordinate the movement of his limbs will not excel; the orchestra in which the instruments are not in sync produces cacophony; doctors who do not talk to each other risk their patients' lives. Although coordination is never the art itself, it is always a basic element of success. This also holds true for the United Nations (UN) development system, in which, on average, 18 entities in every developing country need to be coordinated to avoid costly overlaps, glaring gaps and missed opportunities to exploit synergies. Member states have long recognised the need for improved coordination among UN agencies on the country level. Two years ago, using the impetus from the new 2030 Agenda, they once more requested that the UN operate in a more “coherent, coordinated and integrated manner” (UN General Assembly, 2016a, p. 3). In response to this, the UN Secretary-General put forward an ambitious and comprehensive set of reforms in which he proposed “significant adjustments” of UN coordination structures and mechanisms (UN Secretary-General, 2017a, 2017b, p. 4).

The purpose of this report is to provide an up-to-date snapshot of country-level coordination in the UN development system that might serve as an input to ongoing reform debates. Past examinations and commentaries, of which there are many,¹ have mostly arrived at critical assessments regarding UN coordination. A major review of the UN's Delivering as One mechanism – an initiative from 2006 that aimed to boost coordination at the country level – concluded in 2012 that this mechanism “could be more accurately described as Delivering *as if* One” (UN [United Nations], 2012), meaning that the practice of coordination had not been significantly boosted by this reform.

Does this diagnosis still hold today? There have been no major studies of the UN development system since 2012, although the UN Development Group (UNDG) – the association of 32 UN entities that provide operational activities for development – has made significant efforts to implement, refine and advance Delivering as One in the meantime. Notable innovations in 2014 were the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which are a comprehensive set of rules for coordination that operationalise the rather abstract Delivering as One principles. As part of that innovation, thematic “Results Groups” were introduced at the working level to perform substantial coordination functions in thematic areas. In 2015, a new accountability tool was launched, the so-called Assessment of Results and Competencies (ARC) mechanisms for Resident Coordinators (RCs) and agency heads. Delivering as One has also spread geographically, from 26 countries in 2010 to 56 countries today (UNDG [United Nations Development Group], s.a.).

Given these developments, a fresh look at UN country-level coordination appears timely. This discussion paper does not claim to rival the rigor and comprehensiveness of earlier major studies on UN coordination. It does not present a systematic then-and-now comparison. The paper instead provides a snapshot of UN country-level coordination that is selective in terms geographical coverage and aspects of coordination. However, this paper attempts to go beyond previous evaluations by focussing specifically on the structural incentives for coordination and by also looking more explicitly than previous studies have

1 Most notably the UN (2012), Lindores (2012) and Mahn (2013).

done at the role member states play in supporting or complicating UN country-level coordination.

The discussion paper specifically seeks to answer two sets of questions:

1. What is the level of UN coordination at the country level? How well do agencies work together under the RC system and the Delivering as One approach?
2. How can coordination be explained? What is the role of UN structures on the one hand, and member states on the other hand, in enabling or obstructing coordination within the UN?

The first set of questions are answered on the basis of criteria that are derived from the UN's own rules for interagency coordination. Measuring coordination against the UN's own standards makes for a firm methodological basis and should facilitate the discourse with practitioners over the findings of this report. The downside of this approach is that the UN's existing coordination regime – its implicit purpose, its level of ambition, its rules – will be taken as the reference, although it might need to be adjusted to new circumstances and demands. The paper reflects on this issue in the conclusion, given its finding that the UN is currently falling far behind its own standards of coordination. One option to close the gap between expectations and reality could be to reduce the coordination burden by consolidating the UN's field representation, as the Secretary-General implicitly proposed in his reform report (UN Secretary-General, 2017c).

The second set of questions probes factors that explain the failure/success in coordination. To do so, the paper is informed by a rational choice approach that focusses on how administrative structures provide (dis-)incentives for self-interested actors to behave in a way that supports or complicates coordination. Four such structural factors are analysed: provisions for coordination, accountability, capacities and administrative systems. The main conclusion is that UN coordination currently exists mainly as an expectation that is attached to the RC, but it is not sufficiently mainstreamed into UN entities' administrative structures. The rational choice approach is also applied in order to analyse member states' role regarding UN coordination. In the area of funding, it is widely recognised that the practice of earmarking has drastically shaped UN development cooperation in many aspects. This merits a closer look at how member states impact coordination, specifically through the mandates they provide, their funding practices and how they exercise ownership. The paper concludes that member states – given their inclination to place their interests regarding their level of control over the common cause of a well-coordinated and collectively owned UN – in general do not provide the kind of support needed for the UN to coordinate itself at the same level that they express in diplomatic statements in New York.

The purpose of looking at “inside” and “outside” factors of UN coordination is not to apportion blame to one side or the other. The two areas can be expected to be closely intertwined, as, for example, organisational self-interests are reinforced by member states that prefer to deal with UN agencies separately. However, it appears worthwhile to separate the two areas of influence and disentangle them as much as possible to arrive at a realistic picture of UN coordination. Having said that, the ultimate responsibility for coordination rests with member states, which are not only influencing the UN through their day-to-day interactions, but which have also established the structures under which the UN operates – structures that

make coordination an almost impossible mission for RCs and other country-level staff, who must endure one study after the other focussing on their failure to deliver as one.

This discussion paper is based on field research in five developing countries (Ethiopia, Liberia, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan²), in which 32 interviews with 38 UN field representatives from a number of funds, programmes and specialised agencies (as a shorthand, these will be referred to as “agencies”) were conducted.³ Interview partners were mostly agency heads or senior leadership. The report also draws on publicly available UN country documents from these five countries, in particular evaluations. As additional sources, UN reports, surveys and expert literature on the entire UN development system were analysed and used to embed the findings in the larger discourse of UN studies.

2 Research design

Coordination shall refer to the harmonisation of the policies and activities of two or more agencies with the goal to increase the effectiveness or efficiency of their development work (see Klingebiel, Negre, & Morazan, 2017, p. 146). Such coordination can take place at different levels or stages, from analysis to programming and implementation. It can also vary in depth, ranging from the exchange of information, so that “the efforts of one do not stymie the efforts of another” (Woods, 2011, p. 5), to joint activities that involve common programming, shared funding and joint implementation. The latter go beyond mere coordination and could more adequately be described as cooperation, but those activities shall be subsumed under “coordination” here, in line with the conventions of the UN reform discussion.

If we think of coordination as a spectrum – where on one end there is the ad hoc exchange of information, and on the other there are entities working together in a well-integrated way – then Delivering as One seems to be firmly set on the ambitious end of the spectrum. The concept of Delivering as One was introduced in 2006, and although it comes across as an invention, it basically bundles a range of ideas that had been recommended in similar form for decades. According to Delivering as One, the UN should operate under “one leader, one programme, one budget and, where appropriate, one office” (UN General Assembly, 2006, p. 11). The elements of Delivering as One, as shown in Table 1, aim to achieve a level of coherence not dissimilar to what a single institution would be expected to produce.

If Delivering as One is the “software” of coordination, specifying what needs to happen, then the RC system is the “hardware” on which it runs. It was initiated in 1977 when the UN General Assembly created the position of the RC, who, as the Secretary-General’s designated representative, is tasked with coordinating the UN’s development activities on the country level (UN General Assembly, 1977a). The RC system has been continuously evolving since then and is now established in 129 developing countries around the world (UNDG, 2016a). The RC is the leader of the UN Country Team (UNCT), which brings together the agency heads of all UN agencies that are active in the country. The RC system is not entirely detached from the global and regional coordination mechanisms of the UN.

2 Interviews in Sudan were conducted by phone.

3 See list of agencies in the annex.

At the global level, the UN Development Operations Coordination Office (UN DOCO), which is part of the UNDG, plays an important role in developing technical guidelines for the RC system and Delivering as One, such as the SOPs, but does not engage in policy coordination at the country level. At the regional level, the UNDG plays a role in oversight and support for the RCs.

Table 1: Core elements of the Standard Operating Procedures

- **The One Programme** unifies the UN system under one national development strategy/plan and is underpinned by integrated policy positions and services, and real-time monitoring through joint work plans;
- **The Common Budgetary Framework**, with all planned and costed UN programme activities presented transparently in one place, provides a shared view of the UN's contribution as a whole to the country;
- **The One Fund (optional)** provides performance-based support to the UN's integrated policy approaches;
- **The One Leader** and the UN Country Team (UNCT) leadership, is based on mutual accountability, with an enhanced co-ordination function led by the Resident Coordinator, involving all of the UNCT in team leadership, to carry responsibility for the role and results of the UN in the country;
- **Operating as One** provides options to build ever more cost-effective common operations and service support; and
- **Communicating as One** facilitates coherent messaging and advocacy on normative and operational matters, and a consistent and teamed-up strategic dialogue with host countries.

Source: UNDG (2014a)

2.1 Assessing coordination

To assess the level of coordination, the discussion paper adopts four criteria, which are derived from the UNDG guidelines that constitute the Delivering as One approach. In principle, the assessment could just be taken from UNDG information; the UNDG provides a permanent monitoring of SOP implementation that offers an almost real-time overview of the state of affairs in UN coordination (UNDG, s.a.). However, I chose to have my own look at how coordination is practiced. The UNDG information on implementation is based on self-reporting and provides little insight into the reality of coordination. It asks, for example, if Results Groups are established (possible answers are “fully”, “partially” and “no”), but it provides little information about how often these groups meet, if participation in them is satisfactory or how substantial their work is. The formal UNDG guidelines and the research presented here relate to each other much like stating in a CV that a language is spoken and then testing the language skills in a conversation. This provides a more realistic snapshot of UN country-level coordination.

In defining the concepts and indicators for coordination, a selective approach is needed that identifies key elements of coordination. The UNDG guidelines on the SOPs are around 50 pages long (UNDG, 2014a) and include many links to even more detailed descriptions. At the same time, the SOPs focus more on process and less on coordination functions (e.g. the guideline that Results Groups should have annual work plans does not specify what kind of coordination functions these work plans are to fulfil: Are they to provide transparency on what agencies do, or achieve a sophisticated interlacing of agencies' activities?). This paper gives

more weight to the substantial side of coordination, which is perhaps more implied than specifically spelt out in the SOPs.

I assess coordination in four categories, which are described in Table 2 and introduced in more detail in the following sections. These four categories, albeit selective, cover the most important levels and dimensions of Delivering as One: The UN Development Assistant Framework (UNDAF), developed every four years, is the centrepiece of coordination; it contains the UN’s strategic priorities and details on how the UN plans to address them. The UNDAF indicators test the UN’s ability to coordinate *ex ante* on the leadership/programming levels. The category “working groups” refers to the working-level machinery that reports to the UNCT; it typically comprises the Programme Management Team, the Operational Management Team and below them a range of around a dozen Results Groups. This category tests the ability to sustain a substantial working-level coordination over the entire UNDAF period. Information exchange is the basis of all coordination; this category tests the depth of coordination. The fourth category refers to a specific modality of coordination, “joint programmes”.⁴ Joint programmes are not SOPs, but UNDG guidelines promote them as valuable tools for coherence, and they are the most substantial form of coordination; joint programmes test the UN agencies’ ability to work together very closely and engage in joint activities.

Table 2: Indicators for measuring UN interagency coordination at the country level	
Category	Indicators
UNDAF	+ Collaborative, substantive process of making it + The UNDAF document is the guiding star for the agencies - The UNDAF process is seen as a formality and extra workstream - The UNDAF is assembled from already established agency plans The document is forgotten after use
Information exchange	+ Comprehensive, up-to-date and relevant information + Organised exchange of information - Selective information-sharing Subsequent, rather than antecedent information-sharing
Results Groups	+ Regular meetings and full participation + Strategic discussions on priorities and problem-solving activities + Systematic coordination activities - Lack of attendance by entities - Low level of participation No or irrelevant work plans
Joint programmes	+ Share of money spent on joint programmes + Few practical hurdles and smooth implementation - Few resources dedicated to it Coordination efforts outweigh benefits
Source: Author	

4 Joint programmes are defined as “a set of activities contained in a joint work plan and related common budgetary framework, involving two or more UN organizations and (sub-) national governmental partners” (UNDG, 2014b, p. 3). A joint programme always has a steering committee, a joint work plan and a common budget.

It is often remarked upon that the UN's coordination mechanisms need to be flexible for specific country circumstances. In a small country such as Sierra Leone, the UN system will probably work differently than in a large country such as Ethiopia, a post-crisis country or a stable middle-income country. The coordination model that is reflected by the four criteria introduced above focusses on core aspects of coordination and should thus be able to cover all situations. Variation will be in the set-up of the Results Groups, in the size and content of joint programmes, and in the relationships to non-UN actors, but not in the basic rules and processes of Delivering as One. A similar remark holds for the level of coordination that is to be achieved: Do all UNCTs need to strive for the same depth of coordination? Probably not. UNDG standards do not specify the range of acceptable variation, and the UNDAFs of the five countries analysed also do not define an appropriate level of coordination. So this discussion paper applies the abovementioned framework to all countries, conscious of the unsettled normative question of what level of coordination the UN should aim to achieve, depending on the country context.

2.2 Explaining coordination

What determines failure or success in coordination? At first sight, coordination is simply a matter of organisational arrangements: A Resident *Coordinator* is established, and he/she will coordinate; the UN Development Operations *Coordination* Office is created, and it will coordinate; the Chief Executives Board for *Coordination* convenes, and it will coordinate. There is no dearth of “c” entities in the UN development system, but as success in coordinating the UN's fragmented and decentralised system of entities has been limited, coordination cannot be explained only by the role of coordinators. To get the full picture of coordination, the analyst's attention must also extend from coordinators to those that are being coordinated. For these others, coordination is just one aspect of their work, and often agency heads and staff will find themselves under forces that direct their behaviour towards other ends than coordination.

To analyse the institutional context of coordination, the discussion paper is informed by the framework of rational choice institutionalism (Shepsle, 2008). In this framework, behaviour is explained by the interaction of self-interested actors and the incentives provided by structural context. Actors are conceptualised as the *homo economicus*, that is, not moved by social expectations and lofty goals, but by their own fixed interests. For the purposes of this paper, the interests of agency personnel shall be assumed to be income, reputation, career and operational liberties. Institutions, on the other hand, are sets of rules, roles and procedures that provide incentives for actors, thus constraining and generating their behaviour. Thus, although the term “choice” refers to subjects that make choices, the agency of actors is understood to be an “embedded agency” (Thornton & Ocasie, 2008, p. 103), which is mostly determined by structural incentives. This approach helps to turn attention away from normative accounts of coordination – in which failure to coordinate tends to be explained by the failures of individuals to do the appropriate or “good” thing – and towards the UN's organisational structures that either support or complicate actors' coordination activities. Organisational structures are often not homogenous. Overlapping structures and different principals can make for conflicting incentives. The failure to coordinate then results from a situation where agency structures are not aligned with, and are also stronger than, system-wide coordination structures.

The four criteria in the first part of Table 3 spell out an ideal scenario in which administrative structures incentivise actors to engage in interagency coordination: There need to be provisions for coordination (rules and mandates); there needs to be accountability (including sanctions for non-compliance) based on these rules; there needs to be sufficient staff capacity for engaging in coordination; and there should not be administrative barriers that could complicate and stymie coordination. The first two are drivers of coordination; the second two could be described as permissive factors.

Table 3: Concept for explaining UN country-level coordination	
Dimension	Effect on coordination
System	
Provisions for coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision-makers and staff at the country level have orders and rules to coordinate. - They enjoy sufficient authority to make relevant decisions without the need to consult headquarters.
Accountability	- Members of the UNCT are effectively held accountable for their engagement in coordination – both horizontally towards the RC and vertically towards agencies’ superiors.
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entities have sufficient staff resources to deal with the workload of coordination without compromising agency core tasks. - Coordination processes are lean enough to allow for participation.
Administrative systems	- Administration systems are sufficiently harmonised or compatible enough to allow for coordination activities.
Member states	
Mandates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Member states provide strong mandates on coordination through General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) decisions. - Member states use boards to pressure entities on coordination.
Funding	- Donors use funding as an incentive for coordination, in particular by funding interagency activities and pools available to the RC.
Ownership	- Host governments demand unity from the UN, participation in programming and the provision of high-level oversight.
Source: Author	

Studies written by consultants on the UN’s organisational arrangement tend to assume that the UN is operating in a technocratic, non-political space. In reality, the UN is in virtually all aspects of its development activities closely tied to member states – through the formal mandates they provide, the ownership they exercise and the funding they provide (see Table 3). It therefore appears necessary to factor in the role of member states in enabling or obstructing coordination. Although member states have time and again expressed their desire to see greater coordination within the UN – most recently through the ECOSOC dialogue and the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)⁵ (UN General

5 The QCPR is the mechanism through which the General Assembly every four years reviews the UN development system, its structures and functions, and provides guidelines for how to address positioning itself to deal with ongoing and new challenges. The QCPR is therefore the ideal vehicle for reforming the UN development system in a step-wise process.

Assembly, 2016a) – their behaviour towards the UN is often ambivalent, as they also act in self-interested ways. In terms of theoretical background, this is the field of political-economy and principal–agent studies (Hawkins, Lake, Nielson, & Tierney, 2006; Jönsson & Tallberg, 2008), which both belong to the rational-choice paradigm. According to that literature, states found international organisations to bundle their resources and reduce transactions costs. However, the delegation of tasks and authority to international organisations is always balanced by member states’ desire to retain control – collectively, but also bilaterally. Internal coordination can limit member states’ choices, with limitations increasing as they work together more closely with the UN; conversely, member states’ bilateral interests will impact how the UN operates.

Both donors and host governments have in the past displayed an inclination for divide-and-rule tactics and for limiting the influence of other member states over the collectively owned UN system (Baumann, 2017; Klingebiel, Negre, & Morazan, 2017). Within a government, ministries might want to protect their special relationships with individual UN agencies. Also, “genuine disagreements about what works and where” can lead to a desire to closely control development activities, rather than delegating to the UN (Woods, 2011, p. 7). These and other interests are not necessarily served by a UN that speaks with one voice and operates as one, and they can manifest themselves in an unwillingness by member states to play the supporting roles that UN coordination requires (see second part of Table 3).

The purpose of analysing “inside” and “outside” factors is not to apportion blame to either the system or member states. This would be futile, as the structures under which the UN operates are mostly established, or at least approved, by member states anyway. However, separating and isolating these different determinants can help to identify the bottlenecks in the RC system, and thus make it easier to tailor reforms appropriately. The discussion paper also does not aim to pin down the one or two master causes that explain failure or success in UN coordination on the country level. The UN development system is too complex for such an exercise in methodological rigor. Rather, it attempts to reconstruct how the various factors described above impact the level of coordination.

2.3 Data

The empirical basis for the discussion paper is a triangulation of three sources. First, the paper is based on field research in five countries (Ethiopia, Pakistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan), in which 32 interviews with 38 UN representatives were conducted. I spent three to five days in these countries, except Sudan, where I did not obtain a visa (interviews were conducted by phone from Addis Ababa). The principle guiding the selection of these five countries was variety, though regional representation also played a role. The five countries that were chosen include low- and middle-income countries, post-conflict countries in which the RC is also double- or even triple-hatted as Humanitarian Coordinator and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, respectively, and they also vary in the implementation of the SOPs; one country, Sudan, has not formally adopted the Delivering as One approach.⁶ It is important to note that these five countries are not cases in a

6 In practice, there is very little difference between the RC system and Delivering as One. Delivering as One and the SOPs are built on mandates by the General Assembly that hold for all UN country teams,

comparative study. A couple of interviews in each country do not allow for delving deep enough into the country-specific coordination systems to make valid inferences about differences. Nor was that the purpose of this discussion paper, which is interested in the UN's structural incentives for coordination, which should be the same across different country contexts and coordination modalities. Second, the paper draws on UN country documents such as the UNDAFs, UNDAF evaluations and other material available on the websites of the UN. These sources were also analysed for the sample of these five countries only. Last but not least, a range of relevant reports, surveys and expert literature was analysed to embed the findings from the field research in the larger picture of UN coordination. I specifically draw on three recent United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs surveys (UN DESA, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), in which 110 RCs as well as staff from headquarters and programme countries participated. These surveys are more critical than UNDG reports on coordination in the UN development system (see UNDG, 2017b), but are also based on self-reporting.

2.4 Limitations

The field research of this discussion paper was limited to five countries, which is a small sample compared to the 56 countries that have requested the UN to operate according to Delivering as One rules. The number of interviews per country varied a lot, and I felt that this was partially because of some reluctance in engaging with researchers (one country did not issue a visa, meaning that interviews were conducted by phone).⁷ The paper did not focus on the RCs and coordination in the high-level UNCT meetings, but rather on the working level; this might cause a bias in the findings, in the sense of underestimating the overall performance of the RC system. The discussion paper also does not measure the effect of coordination, but works with the premise that better coordination according to UNDG rules automatically leads to better outcomes. I did not speak to headquarters and governments (requests for interviews were not answered), but nevertheless tried to account for their perspectives through survey material. As always, there are many ways to cut the cake; I chose not to focus specifically on individuals or interagency competition – two factors which others will consider as totally sufficient for explaining all that works (the committed individuals) or is wrong (the competition) with UN coordination.

not just countries that have adopted Delivering as One (UNDG, 2016a, p. 6). Delivering as One makes a difference insofar as it raises the expectation of coordination, especially through the RC.

7 I contacted nearly all agencies in the five countries. Requests to 85 field offices (including the RC offices) resulted in 32 interviews. Countries varied significantly in their openness towards the researcher; in one country I had just one interview (though that was partially because the visit coincided with a natural disaster that made interviews impossible); in another country, I was asked not to be included in a field research approach that involved individual interviews.

3 Snapshot of coordination in the UN development system

In this section, I present an assessment of the level of coordination in the UN development system. The findings are based on interviews conducted in the five countries selected for this research. As stated above, the interviews can only provide a snapshot in terms of geographical scope and the coverage of coordination aspects. Coming to conclusions was not straightforward: Interviewees offered starkly different accounts, often within the same country. This variance can partially be explained by the size of agencies (smaller ones being more critical) and the roles of interview partners (group leaders were more positive than members). Apart from that, it also suggests that coordination is less driven by institutional provisions and more by persons and circumstances. Nevertheless, a somewhat consistent overall picture emerged from the 32 interviewees, and findings from the recent QCPR monitoring surveys also support this interpretation: Although the UNDAF process and the exchange of information were assessed rather positively, the performance of the working group system and the experiences with joint programmes were perceived more critically.

3.1 UNDAF process

According to the SOPs, the UNDAF should define a “clear division of labour” among agencies, “drive joint and comprehensive UN work planning”, and bring agencies into “mutual accountability” (UNDG, 2014a, pp. 11-13). When asked to score the UNDAF process on a scale from zero (where the UNDAF is a formality without practical consequence) to ten (where the UNDAF is the strategic document that directs the work of the UNCT), interviewees ranked the UN in their countries between seven and eight.⁸ Explaining their assessment, interviewees pointed to the inclusive and work-intensive process in the UNCT of drafting the UNDAF. These documents indeed are quite comprehensive, elaborate and, incidentally, also highly professionally designed – products to be proud of. Yet, a few others were much more pessimistic and ranked the UN as low as three, basing their critical assessment on the failure of the UNDAF mechanism to effectively bring agencies together (or keep them apart) through a sound division of labour. According to the QCPR monitoring survey of programme country governments, only 5 per cent “strongly agree” and 58 per cent “agree” that there is a clear division of labour among agencies (UN DESA, 2018c, p. 43). Supporting this somewhat sobering assessment is the fact that most interviewees acknowledged that the UNDAF was assembled more from agencies’ submissions than flowing from the Common Country Analysis and an effort in joint programming. My questions about how agencies adjust their country programmes to the UNDAF were rather unfruitful. Therefore, the UNDAF and country programmes still appear to be mostly separate workstreams, as other studies have also found (Linklaters, 2016, p. 31), which undermines mutual accountability in the UNCT. Some observers have concluded that agencies see the UNDAF mostly as a platform for visibility and a “funding wish list”, but not as a binding agreement (Lindores, 2012, p. 127).

⁸ This ranking should not be taken as an objective measurement; it just reflects subjective assessments by interviewees. The exact same question was used, but interviewees can still interpret it in different ways.

3.2 Information exchange

Sharing of information is the rock-bottom basis for coordination and for communicating with “one voice” to both the RC and external partners. Ideally, UNCT members are well-informed about current and, more importantly, planned activities of other group members, so that the group can discuss adjustments for the sake of coordination. In all five countries, the exchange of information was described as “pretty good” at a level of around seven. Interviewees were mostly satisfied with the level of transparency regarding what was going on elsewhere in the UNCT. Yet, I also found limits on the exchange of information. Informal exchanges of information were rated consistently higher than organised information-sharing; this speaks to the existence of a team spirit, but informal exchanges are not a proper basis for transparency and mutual accountability. In one of the five countries visited for this research where the government was particularly inclined to dispute inconvenient facts and numbers, interviewees reported that information-sharing was mostly done in informal ways. Furthermore, I heard in all five countries that information exchange was strategically selective – sensitive information regarding project planning and resource mobilisation (areas where coordination matters most) is usually not shared if there is a concern that other entities might exploit the information to their advantage. This indicates that coordination takes a backseat to competition. Given this, my own overall assessment on information exchange would be more critical, perhaps a five out of ten.

3.3 Results groups

On the working level, the Results Groups are supposed to translate the UNDAF into work plans, and work plans into reality “through coordinated and collaborative planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation” (UNDG, 2014a, p. 13). The assessments regarding Results Groups were much more sombre, around four to five (again, on a scale from zero to ten), meaning that these groups were not deemed to be sufficiently effective. Globally, only 44 per cent of UNCTs had “fully established” and 31 per cent had “partially established” Results Groups in 2015 (UN DESA, 2016a, p. 15). Having such groups does not mean that they are also effective. Problems start with participation. According to my interviews and analysis of UNDAF evaluations (Hagona, 2015, p. 22), group members often fail to show up, or agencies send low-level staff. One group leader complained that in a two-year period she was unable to convene the group even once because the quorum had never been achieved. Most stated that usually fewer than half of the group members appeared. To address this, the UN in Ethiopia set up a system to check attendance and report absences at the UNCT level – an arrangement that might be replicated elsewhere. More important than attendance, I heard of no evidence that Results Groups have the kind of strategic discussions and coordination activities that would address issues such as duplications, overlaps and filling gaps. According to the QCPR survey on Resident Coordinators, 49 per cent of RCs reported in 2015 that, in their country, none of the Results Groups had established work plans (UN DESA, 2016a, p. 17). My conclusion is that, on the working level, just as in the UNDAF process, coordination is mostly an epiphenomenon rather than a way of working together. Some interviewees also questioned the purpose of the Results Groups.

3.4 Joint programmes

In theory, joint programming should, as a side-effect, lead to the identification of development challenges that require more substantial collaboration by certain agencies. A division-of-labour approach might work for most cases, but where the success of one agency depends in direct ways on the work of another agency, these two might need to collaborate more closely. The existence of joint programmes can therefore be taken as an indicator of a functioning coordination machinery. No norm has been set so far by the UNDG about what an appropriate share of joint programmes as part of the overall activities for development should be, but current numbers appear to be below reasonable expectations. Globally, the funding going to joint programmes has averaged around 1 per cent in recent years, making joint programmes nearly a peripheral phenomenon in UN development assistance (UN Secretary-General, 2017c, p. 12).⁹ My interviewees' experiences with joint programmes were mixed. It was estimated that, in setting up joint programmes, around 70 per cent of the time is invested in sorting out operational problems relating to business systems and only 30 per cent on programming. The workload was described as "huge". Representatives from smaller agencies still emphasised that it was worth doing it, but others were more reserved and lamented that there was a lack of evidence on the practical benefits of joint programmes. One UNDAF evaluation (United Nations Children's Fund, 2012, p. 10) noted that joint programmes, which are meant to bring agencies together, can also become a platform for competition over the distribution of resources. If smaller agencies see them as an opportunity to access funding and perhaps also increase their visibility in the UNCT, this would explain why bigger agencies that strive towards the same goals are wary of joint programmes. This indicates that competition still takes a backseat to coordination.

Overall, the conclusion is that the level of coordination remains far below what UNDG rules envision. This diagnosis is not to deny significant improvements in coordination following the introduction of Delivering as One and thereafter. I have met plenty of dedicated individuals who are committed to working together and, in fact, also achieve a lot. However, just as often I heard that the entire RC machinery is rather dysfunctional, and that coordination is more of a formality than a way of working. Some might object that it is too early for such final judgments on Delivering as One, which is still a new initiative in many countries and evolving as a concept, but the "work in progress" excuse does not hold. I asked my interview partners about recent changes and improvements regarding coordination processes, but the best things I heard were comments about other countries where this or that interesting innovation had been introduced. Some interviewees even opined that Delivering as One was falling apart, which is a theme I will pick up later.

9 However, according to UNDG information, the number of joint programmes increased by 14 per cent in 2015 to 365 globally (UNDG, 2017b, p. 14).

4 Organisational hurdles of coordination

Regarding organisational hurdles, there are many. Major reports on UN coordination as well as UNDAF evaluations bring to light a multitude of factors that have direct effects on coordination. The closer one looks into country-level processes, the more issues that will appear. Extended stays in the five countries selected for this discussion paper were not an option for this research, given the limited resources. So rather than following an open-outcome procedure that would have emphasised differences among the five countries, the approach selected here is a different one: An attempt was made to reconstruct the four basic structural factors that impact coordination in all programme countries and that have been selected on theoretical considerations, as described above.

4.1 Formal provisions for coordination

One can only expect UN staff to coordinate if there are rules proscribing coordination and if these rules are well-known to everybody. Coordination under the RC system is regulated by the SOPs and other UNDG guidelines, which are all readily available on the UNDG website. However, to be effective, these rules need to be appropriately elaborated, communicated and reflected in the complementary rules and incentives of the agencies to whom staff owe their allegiance. Putting oneself into the shoes of agency staff, how much are practitioners aware of coordination rules? Moreover, how do the SOPs and associated guidelines fit into the larger picture of agency-specific goals and incentives?

Starting with the general awareness of coordination rules, a first observation is that in none of my interviews was reference made to any SOP. Occasionally, I noted a startling ignorance of specific rules and terminology. Previous studies found that staff often lack a clear understanding of coordination rules and procedures as established by the UNDG (JIU [Joint Inspection Unit], 2016, p. 17). This might be a problem of communicating rules to field offices around the world – perhaps efforts of making rules known to practitioners are insufficient, or some UNDG guidelines are just too long and detailed to be absorbed by field staff who have more urgent tasks on their plates. At the same time, some coordination guidelines are also remarkably thin. The UNDG guidelines for Results Groups, for example, are just one page long and aspirational in tone (UNDG, 2014a, p. 13). They show a goal, but not a path towards it. They hardly clarify what group leaders and participants owe to each other and what they are supposed to achieve together. This might partially explain why some interviewees questioned the value of these groups.

Communicating and enforcing coordination rules is the responsibility of the agencies that have agreed to them in the UNDG. One way to do so are job descriptions, so that coordination becomes a part of staff appraisals. On this matter, the QCPR survey provides a problematic finding. Regarding job descriptions of agency heads, it finds that only 38 per cent of RCs report that for “all entities” (18 per cent) or “most entities” (20 per cent), the “job descriptions of UNCT members, as heads of entities, recognise the role of the RC” (UN DESA, 2018a, p. 37). However, even where coordination is part of the job portfolio, it is given so little weight against other tasks that agency heads frankly admitted that they can easily shrug it off – in fact, this might explain the discrepancy in the QCPR survey. There is no data on job descriptions for staff. Most interviewees reported that coordination is part of their job descriptions, and in an assessment might be given a weight of around 10 per

cent. Although nobody questioned the need for coordination, it was often problematised as a “distraction” from core tasks – nothing which could serve to advance careers. One UNDAF review states: “The continuity of the PMG [Programme Management Group] work is a real challenge that will not be overcome unless agencies task their deputies and senior programme staff to take on their responsibility as members of the PMG” (United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone, 2011, p. 54).

A third issue regarding provisions is the delegation of decision-making authority to the country level. Field offices need flexibility to adjust development activities to the necessities of coordination without the time-consuming process of obtaining headquarters’ approval. Here, the message is mixed. According to interviews, field representatives appear to enjoy overall sufficient authority, although some cases were reported where getting headquarters’ consent had delayed and complicated processes in the field. However, the limits on decision-making authority – regarding, for example, procurement – appear to be reasonable and do not stifle coordination, as some expert literature suggests. According to the QCPR survey, 86 per cent of field representatives “strongly agree” (15 per cent) or “somewhat agree” (71 per cent) that they enjoy sufficient decision-making space (UN DESA, 2018a, p. 41). Nevertheless, delegation is unfinished business; the UN DESA survey also confirms that delegation varies between areas¹⁰ and agencies, and that this complicates interagency coordination. In addition to that, having delegation policies is not the same as using them. According to a recent study on common business services, a large gap exists between headquarters’ policies – where significant progress in harmonisation has been made – and what appears to be known about them on the country level (Voigt, 2016). This again supports the conclusion that, although provisions for coordination may have been made, they may not be sufficiently communicated or incentivised by agencies.

4.2 Accountability

Accountability refers to a situation in which an individual must justify their actions to somebody. To assess an accountability regime, one needs to ask who is accountable to whom, for what, and how failure to perform according to given rules is sanctioned. Accountability is an instrument to incentivise a desired pattern of behaviour. Some UNDG rules described above can serve as a basis for “vertical” accountability within agencies, if incorporated into job descriptions; but we have seen that this form of accountability for coordination is weak in comparison to other core agency tasks, including fundraising. This section focusses on “horizontal” accountability mechanisms that have been created as part of the RC system and that hold for agency heads only.

Accountability in the RC system is regulated by the overarching Management and Accountability System (MAS) of the RC system and, as part of that, by the ARC, which was agreed upon in 2015.¹¹ These mechanisms are complex, but the two basic principles are clear: Mutuality, which means that RC and UNCT members assess each others’

10 The report looked at authority to (i) delegate funds to joint programmes, (ii) use joint work plans instead of separate agency work plan, (iii) substitute joint UN report for annual agency country report (UN DESA, 2016b, p. 27).

11 For details, see UNDG (2008, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

performance regarding agreed goals in order to ensure full ownership of the RC system by the UNCT; and linkage with agencies' own performance appraisals, to which the assessments from the ARC exercise serve as an input. The RC is appraised by the UNDG Regional Team, also partially based on input from the ARC.

So how effective is this system of mutual accountability and assessments in bringing the UNCT together on coordination? The finding from the five countries visited for this research is that accountability, as provided by the MAS and the ARC, is probably a negligible incentive for coordination (with one qualification, however: The ARC mechanism is still new and might not have taken hold yet). None of the three RCs interviewed attributed any significance to the accountability system as a tool to incentivise coordination. UNDG data show that the practice of RCs contributing to UNCT members' performance assessments is exercised selectively; in just 35 out of 107 countries did the RC contribute to performance appraisals of "all" (17) or "most" (18) UNCT members in the past 12 months (UN DESA, 2018a, p. 37). Although mandatory in theory, at least in one instance I heard that the practice of the RC contributing to appraisals is done upon invitation. The accountability system also looks weak from the other side. Agency heads also did not attribute much weight to the accountability system and saw the whole exercise as a formality; one opined that it was just about "ticking boxes" and had no practical influence on how agency heads guided their agencies.

The accountability system suffers from several deficiencies that might explain its practical weakness. First, the mutuality can lead to "quid pro quo" arrangements in which UNCT members and the RC both avoid criticising those on whom their own assessment depends. Second, the entire framework is not focussed specifically on coordination. Performance is not appraised against either the SOPs or UNDAF implementation. The process instead assesses teamwork and leadership qualities on overarching goals such as "SDG [Sustainable Development Goal] advocacy" or "strategic partnerships" (UN Development Operations Coordination Office, 2016) and the spirit of coordination demonstrated by agency heads.¹² Third, there is no sanctioning power behind the process, as evaluations are sent to agencies' regional directors (whose interest in coordination is limited). Assessments are not made public, which is understandable, as they focus more on individuals than agencies, but it removes another incentive to take the process seriously.

Specifically, for the RC, assessments are conducted by the UNDG Regional Team, although the RC is formally accountable to the Secretary-General, whose designated representative is the RC. However, that accountability chain is long – via the Regional UNDG, the director of UN DOCO, to the UNDG Chair, a position that has been occupied by the Deputy Secretary-General since 2017. Appraisals will only move beyond the regional UNDG level and further upward if assessments are disputed at each stop. This means that the RC performance is almost never reported to UNDG leadership, although copies of evaluations are routinely filed with UN DOCO. Thus, an RC is, in practice, more accountable to the UNCT than to central UN management.

12 The strongest criteria regarding coordination reads: Agency head "enables realistic adjustments to plans; effectively challenge and support colleagues to generate cross agency opportunities which leverage Country Team impact" (UNDG, 2016c, p. 5).

Apart from individual accountability, which is covered through performance assessments, the UNDAF process also has provisions for accountability that hold for agencies and the UNCT as a whole. According to the MAS, agencies have reporting duties to the RC on how they implement their respective UNDAF elements. The QCPR survey indicates significant shortcomings in reporting on resource mobilisation and programme implementation (UN DESA, 2018a, p. 37). The entire UNCT under the leadership of the RC is accountable to the host government, and the basis for that are annual reports and the final UNDAF evaluations. Again, the UN DESA survey finds that just 60 per cent of host governments receive such result reports, which are required by the SOPs (UN DESA, 2018c, p. 34).¹³ UNDAF evaluations are conducted in only around one-third of all cases in which they should be conducted. Whatever the reason,¹⁴ this does not speak to strong accountability to host governments.

Even where UNDAF evaluations are conducted, they appear to be more an exercise in UNCT self-reflection and learning than a tool for establishing accountability to UN superiors or governments. Evaluations are not reported to UN leadership or boards, and although coordination efforts are usually assessed in UNDAF evaluations, there is no standardised approach for doing so; UNDAF evaluation guidelines are just advice to analyse “the processes that have led to results or non-achievement of results” (UN Evaluation Group, 2011, p. 10). It is no surprise, then, that a meta-study about UNDAF evaluations concludes, perhaps a bit harshly, that their quality “does not even meet minimum standards or norms for a robust evaluation” (JIU, 2016, p. 20). Assuming that the self-reporting on SOP implementation cannot even remotely be taken to establish accountability, the author concludes that there is currently no systemic and effective evaluation of the UN’s coordination efforts at the country level that would allow UN top leadership and governments to hold the RC and the UNCT accountable.

4.3 Staff capacity

Coordination comes with costs – for work time, meeting spaces, infrastructure, expertise, etc. This is a relatively opaque aspect of coordination, as these costs are not reported to boards, and studies or surveys on this topic are rare. There are the costs of work time spent in coordination meetings – these should not be too high, given the infrequent meetings of Results Groups and other bodies. However, the workload related to coordination, and the associated monetary costs, probably go well beyond the time spent in meetings. The process of preparing the UNDAF, which normally takes 14 months (UN Secretary-General, 2018, p. 65), is work-intensive, and so is the establishment of joint programmes and other forms of joint activities. In addition, although formal Results Groups meetings may be rare, as we have seen above, the work and communication around them can be considerable, or rather,

13 However, according to undg information, which is based on self-reporting, 68 per cent of UNCTs produced country-result reports in 2015 (UNDG, 2017b, p. 27).

14 It might be cost issues, as a UNDAF evaluation is estimated to cost around \$100,000 (JIU, 2016, pp. 7-8). But the JIU report concludes that “such a low rate of compliance cannot be explained exclusively by inadequate resources” and suggests that “overlap and duplication among United Nations agencies with respect to competing evaluation priorities and reports” might also play a role here (JIU, 2016, p. 19).

would be considerable if these groups operated according to plan – for its members, but even more so for group leaders.

Many of the interviewees saw coordination as being quite burdensome, and some estimated that about one-third of their work time is dedicated to genuine coordination tasks. Although this number needs to be treated with some scepticism (it is hardly consistent with the finding of dysfunctional Results Groups), it nevertheless comes close to the results from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) workload survey from a couple of years ago, according to which around one-fifth of the work time of UN country staff is dedicated to coordination activities (Ronald, 2011, p. 10). Representatives of smaller entities told me that they were unable to attend all the required coordination meetings because of staff limits. One interview partner complained that the entire RC coordination machinery had become “an albatross around our neck”, stifling the work of the agencies.

The finding that smaller agencies cannot fully participate in the RC system – or Delivering as One for that matter – because of limited staff capacity is already significant. It invites some comments. Obviously, a simplification of coordination processes could help to reduce the workload for coordination. However, an excessive workload can also result from a botched approach to coordination, as this anecdote from the area of common business services suggests:

Concretely, this author has witnessed 12 procurement staff sitting around a table drafting, *together*, the Terms of Reference (ToR) for a common Long Term Arrangement (LTA). [...] The 12 procurement staff could in 12 different rooms have written 12 ToRs instead of 1, and in much less time. And these professionals all thought they were following UNDG guidelines to harmonize. (Voigt, 2016, p. 6)

This example might be indicative of a more general problem of the RC system: If the UNDAF is indeed an additional process rather than a substitute for agency-specific programming, it would also generate extra coordination costs. This leads to the hypothesis that a malfunctioning RC system that does not operate as one drives coordination costs up, whereas well-executed coordination might save costs. Having said this, another aspect that needs to be considered is the benefit of coordination. Any agency head needs to think about how to best use their staff's work time. Regarding common business services, the potential savings from harmonisation can be relatively easily spelt out, and there should in most cases be a commanding business case for cooperation,¹⁵ although vested interests of operational staff might point in other directions (Voigt, 2016, p. 15). Unfortunately, the payoff from policy coordination eludes monetary quantification. Coordination disasters can always happen, such as building two schools in one small town, but what is the reward for successful coordination? With no systematic evaluation on coordination efforts, there is little incentive to work together and coordinate. No surprise then that most agency heads would rather direct their staff to focus on resource mobilisation.

15 In Ethiopia, the UN envisioned savings from harmonised business operations of around \$27 million over the next UNDAF period, with transaction costs of around \$2 million. The UNDG report on results of coordination has numbers for some other countries that demonstrate the potential for savings through business operations strategies (UNDG, 2017b, p. 62).

Coordination capacities are particularly limited for the RC. The UNDG cost-sharing provides for two staff members (assistant, driver), but with additional voluntary funding, the typical RC office has around three or four staff members (Dalberg, 2017). Although all interview partners recognised that their respective RC and their own office accomplished a lot, they also admitted that a more substantial form of policy coordination was not to be expected from such small offices. This situation is only getting worse. Increasing coordination demands – from Delivering as One to ever-more field offices and higher expectations in the context of the 2030 Agenda – require greater capacity. If the RC office really was to lead the UNCT like a prime minister/president leads a government, then a rough estimate would be that the RC office needs around the same number of staff members that the average field office has – just as the prime minister’s administration in any government is roughly the size of the ministries.

4.4 Administrative structures

Although there is a clear business case for the harmonisation of business structures, it is less clear to what extent the broader issue of agency-specific administrative structures (in areas such as human resources, insurance policies, IT systems, common finance systems, etc.) is an impediment to coordination at the country level. Is full administrative harmonisation required to allow agencies to work together? How far can Delivering as One proceed before the lack of shared administrative structures begins to hold the UNCT back?

I received mixed messages during the interviews about this aspect of coordination. The majority position was that agency-specific administrative structures do not constitute such a big problem for coordination. When I asked open questions about coordination hurdles, none of the interviewees brought this issue up themselves. Only when asked specifically about the lack of harmonised business structures did a variety of issues emerge. A minority took the position that a lack of harmonised administrative structures was no hindrance at all, stating that “if we really want to work together, there is no obstacle”. This observation is supported by another study on common business systems that concludes that “if there is a will, there is a way” (Voigt, 2016, p. 18). Others recognised that the lack of shared business systems was, in fact, a problem, but then found it difficult to elaborate specifically on the problems that they or their colleagues had ever experienced.

However, there was also a small number of interviewees who did provide some insights, mostly regarding joint programmes. One interviewee estimated (and others readily agreed) that in setting up a joint programme, just around 30 per cent of the time went into policy matters, whereas 70 per cent was spent on sorting out technical interagency issues, sometimes in a torturous year-long process. Examples of hurdles included such mundane issues as classifications of hardship regulations, entitlement regulations for consultants and the sharing of vehicles for common field visits. UNDAF evaluations have also pointed to agency-specific monitoring, reporting and results-based management requirements as obstacles to joint activities (Hagona, 2015, p. 10). Again, these issues can be solved, but in most cases they have become a deterrent for even trying. Conversely, interviewees expressed the belief that harmonisation of administrative structures would lead to more joint programmes.

The considerable variation in opinions regarding the role of administrative structures might be explained by different experiences. Joint programmes are comparatively rare, as we have seen above, whereas most coordination activities take place on the level of programming and with the purpose of achieving a division of labour. This would mean that only when it comes to joint operations that require the sharing of services, infrastructure, funds and methodologies do these sorts of problems emerge. As one analyst notes, in such cases agencies still “tend to interact with each other as if they are high-risk, third-party entities for which the full extent of organizational control mechanisms must be utilized” (Voigt, 2016, p. 21).

5 Member states’ impact on coordination

As much as coordination is framed as an organisational challenge for the UN, member states also have a role in supporting or obstructing it. The General Assembly clearly affirms that “national Governments have the primary responsibility for their countries’ development and for coordinating [...] all types of external assistance, including that provided by multilateral organizations” (UN General Assembly, 2016a, Art. 4). As Delivering as One was never formally adopted by the General Assembly, but continues to be voluntary and flexible in its implementation, the guarantee for its effectiveness lies at least partially with member states. The Delivering as One “pilot” countries advanced it, with UNDG support coming later. Donors were expected to support Delivering as One through appropriate funding. All member states play a role in shaping the organisational structures under which the RC system and Delivering as One operate through their mandates. However, as stated above, from a political-economy perspective, member states – both recipients and donors – must weigh the benefits of coordination with the political costs of reduced bilateral influence that come with a fragmented system (Baumann, 2017). This merits a closer look at how member states’ behaviour impacts UN coordination.

5.1 Mandates

Like any other international organisation, the UN operates according to formal intergovernmental mandates. Since intergovernmental decision-making can be excessively political in the UN, mandates are important, as they enshrine member states’ consensus and provide a firm legal foundation for the system’s activities. Citing mandates and demonstrating alignment with them could be said to be the UN’s own form of political correctness. So, the first question needs to be: What mandates have member states given the UN to coordinate? Mandates can originate from the General Assembly and the boards, and they can refer to policy (what to do) and authority (the power to implement) (Table 4).

Table 4: Member states' mandates to the UN regarding coordination		
	Policy	Authority
General Assembly	QCPR resolutions include comprehensive mandates but are weak compared to earlier mandates from the 1990s.	Neither the UN Secretary-General nor RCs have been given the requisite authority to coordinate.
Agency Boards	Although coordination is brought up in board sessions, strategic plans and board decisions do not mandate agencies to engage in coordination and adapt their systems accordingly.	Boards are reluctant to let heads of agencies delegate decision-making to the country level, as they give priority to control.
Source: Author		

Coordination has been a central theme in the General Assembly, but current mandates are weak by historical comparison. They do not set targets but require only efforts (such as “improving the UNDAF” or “strengthening the division of labour”); they suffer from qualifications (such as “where appropriate” in the SOPs); they advise rather than request (such as “should” regarding the principle of mutual recognition of best practices); they are lopsided, as they address one side only (such as “ensuring information-sharing” as a mandate to the Secretary-General, without complementary mandates to the entities). I found just one mandate in the current QCPR, agreed in 2016, that could be counted as a specific order addressed to the agencies (the request to “record details of efficiencies achieved through collaborative procurement and report them to their respective governing bodies”) (UN General Assembly, 2016a, § 66).

Most UN practitioners would probably respond that this is the way the UN works, but historical comparisons refute this version of UN fatalism. In the 1990s, the General Assembly had a significantly more muscular approach to mandates, requesting agencies in binding language to do very specific things. A mandate such as this was typical: “Develop common guidelines for staff performance appraisal for the funds and programmes, including ways of assessing the contribution of staff members to United Nations system coordination” (UN General Assembly, 1996, § 37). Elsewhere, I have argued that today’s political conflicts between industrialised and developing states in the UN have reduced the General Assembly’s ability to issue strong mandates (Baumann, 2017). Both sides now appear to prioritise their bilateral relationships in the UN and the prerogatives that come with that (see below on funding and ownership), rather than investing in the common interest of a strong multilateral organisation. Reasons for that might include the strengthening of the UN through increased funding over the last two decades, and with that implications for national sovereignty; the increased level of political self-awareness of Global South states; and the strengthening of bilateral ties with the UN over the years.

The same observation and interpretation applies to the delegation of authority. The last two QCPR resolutions (UN General Assembly, 2012, 2016a) did not provide mandates for the Secretary-General that go beyond writing reports, except two or three feeble mandates of the

sort “continue to strengthen ...”¹⁶ Again, this is in significant contrast to the 1990s, when a resolution by the General Assembly would boldly “[r]equest the SG to ensure that the provisions of the present resolution are fully implemented by all the organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system” (UN General Assembly, 1993, § 52). It appears that, at that time, the Secretary-General was ascribed much greater authority not only over funds and programmes, but also over the specialised agencies. Regarding the latter, there is, in fact, a clear legal foundation for coordination through the UN: All specialised agencies have agreements with the UN that explicitly oblige them to fully participate in UN coordination mechanisms.¹⁷

Although never intended to be fully-fledged, self-contained organisations, the funds and programmes have grown up, which makes coordination in the UN family difficult, while the legal potential for coordinating the specialised agencies appears to have been forgotten as well. The General Assembly today, in marked contrast to the 1990s, also puts the prerogatives of boards above UN system-wide coordination. In the past, it had no qualms about issuing binding mandates to boards.¹⁸ All of this weakens the authority of the Secretary-General to hold the system together, and by extension that of the RCs representing him on the country level. De facto, the UNDAF agreements that are signed by participating agencies are now the formal basis for coordination under the RC system – not the mandates of the General Assembly.

If authority has moved to the boards, what role do they play in mandating complementary coordination for their respective agencies? An analysis of board documentation suggests that member states do admonish agencies to participate in UN coordination, but their statements in that regard are brief, few and unspecific, and so do not convey high priority.¹⁹ Coordination is not incorporated into strategic plans, apart from one or two ceremonial sentences, meaning that coordination is not of strategic importance for the agencies. There were no board decisions in 2017 on coordination matters.²⁰ The boards could be much more specific in translating QCPR mandates and UNDG rules derived from them into specific

16 The 2016 QCPR arguably has strong mandates in § 56, but they are immediately qualified by the following § 57, in which the Secretary-General is requested to provide analysis on them, suggesting that he does not yet have a mandate for implementation.

17 Agreements were analysed for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (UN General Assembly, 1977b), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) (UN General Assembly, 1985) and the International Organization for Migration (UN General Assembly, 2016b).

18 Compare the language from two resolutions. The one from 1995 reads: “Reaffirms that the governing bodies of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system should take appropriate action for the full implementation of the present resolution, and requests the executive heads of those funds, programmes and specialized agencies ...” (UN General Assembly, 1996, § 55). A mandate from 2016 typically comes with a qualifier such as “subject to the approval of their governing bodies and without impacting programme delivery” (UN General Assembly, 2015, § 44).

19 Board documentation from 2017 was analysed for UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and UNIDO.

20 Board decisions in 2017 were analysed for UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UN Women and the World Food Programme (WFP). There is, of course, the common chapter in the strategic plans of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNOPS that mandates collaboration between these agencies on common issues, but this common chapter does not orient the agencies specifically towards the RC system or Delivering as One.

mandates for their respective agencies, like they do, for example, on the issue of cost-recovery, which is dealt with extensively in strategic plans. Absent all this, agencies' leadership is under little pressure from member states to take coordination seriously.

Another observation in that regard is member states' reluctance to allow agency leadership to delegate sufficient authority to field offices – a precondition for coordination. Boards regularly focus on fraud prevention and, thus, require agencies to demonstrate a tough stance on accountability. The Secretariat's entities, for which the General Assembly provides oversight, are particularly restricted with “controls systems [that] in many instances does [*sic*] not allow for common business operations” (Voigt, 2016, p. 27). Further orienting incentive systems away from coordination are results-based management and reporting systems that ensure accountability to the boards (Lindores, 2012, p. 35). Taken together, it is inherently difficult for agency heads to elevate coordination to a top priority, even in situations where the practical value of coordination is clearly understood.

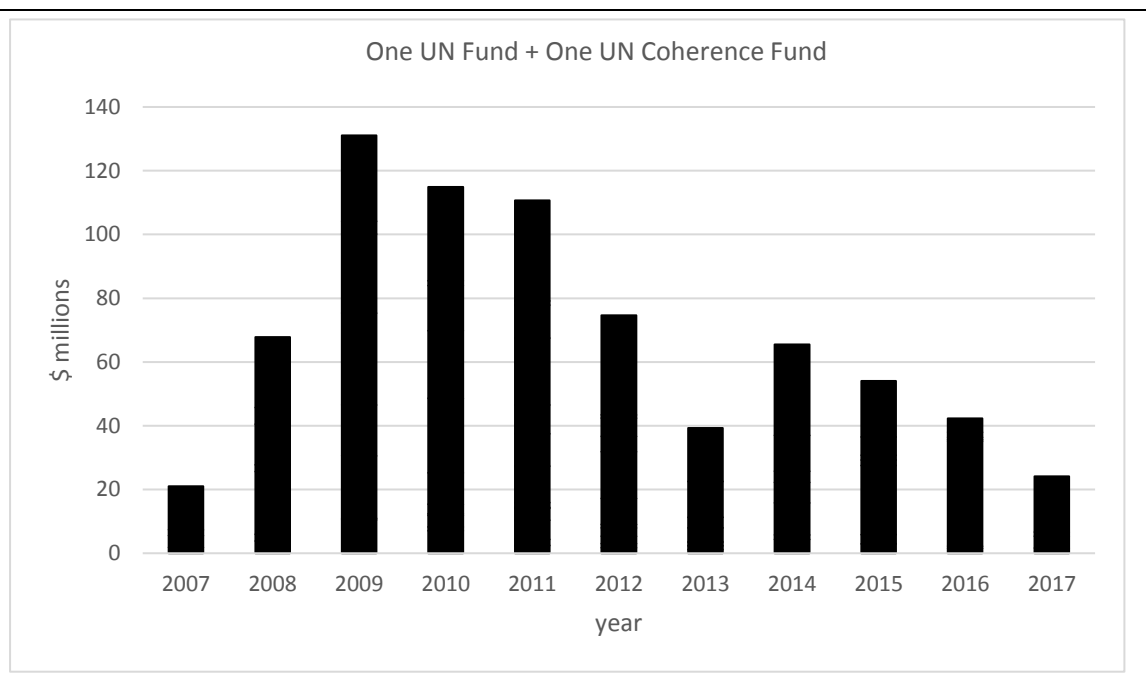
5.2 Funding

Funding is a major driver of any international organisation's activities. If aligned with UN structures, it can support coordination, but it can also undermine the RC system by fuelling interagency competition (Weinlich, 2014). The evidence from the five case studies suggests that current funding patterns by and large do not support coordination under the RC system or Delivering as One.

The architects of Delivering as One made sure to harvest the integrative potential of funding by providing the RC with financial carrots to incentivise coordination and fill gaps in UNDAF budgets. Thus, the so-called One UN Funds at the country level were a core part of Delivering as One, but they have withered since. Of the five countries, only two had One UN Funds,²¹ and both significantly decreased not long after their inception. This reflects the global trend. Just 13 out of the current 56 Delivering as One countries have established One UN Funds in the first place. For these, donors have virtually stopped funding the One UN Funds, as Figure 1 demonstrates, thus taking an important coordination tool away from Resident Coordinators. Although Figure 1 just shows data for One UN Funds, the overall funding picture does not change much if other UN country funds, such as “coherence funds” or “transition funds”, are included.

21 However, in some countries, such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Peacebuilding Fund and other pooled funds provide similar functions as the One UN Funds.

Figure 1: One UN Funds



Source: UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (<http://mptf.undp.org/>)

Donors’ reluctance to support pooled funding mechanisms stretches beyond the One UN Funds. Although increasingly more resources are mobilised at the country level, donors have never fully embraced funding arrangements that distribute funding to multiple agencies. According to the Secretary-General’s funding analysis, the global share of pooled funding has been virtually constant at 6 per cent, out of which 1 per cent goes to joint programmes (UN Secretary-General, 2017c, p. 14). In Pakistan and Ethiopia, interviewees reported that donors were no longer pushing for joint programmes as they did in the past (with the exception of the Scandinavian states, which still support this funding modality). Their conclusion was that the UN should move on and try other funding arrangements. With such funding patterns, donors are not signalling a desire to see the UN work in a coordinated way.

The reasons for donors’ reluctance to contribute to pooled interagency funding have not been well researched. Pooled funding inevitably invites bureaucracy, which might be one reason, but it also raises control problems. Donors must share decision-making with host governments, which might want to use these funds for political purposes, or at least refocus them on other development priorities than those agreed to; they also have “no direct recourse with the participating organization in the case of nonperformance or improper use of the funds” (Downs, 2011, pp. 34-36). In Ethiopia and Pakistan, which both have strained relationships with donors, the relative share of all pooled funding was much lower (0.4 per cent in both, excluding humanitarian funds) than in the smaller countries Liberia and Sierra Leone (10.6 per cent and 10.7 per cent, respectively).²² This might be a coincidence, but it also points to a causal link between pooled funding and regime type.

²² My own analysis is based on data from the UN Multi-Donor Trust Fund Office and information from the UN country presence.

The RC system also suffers from insufficient funding of the RC offices through the UNDG cost-sharing mechanism. A recent study put the finger into the wound by pointing out how, on the one side, funding for the RC system has declined over the years, whereas on the other side, the need for coordination keeps rising (Dalberg, 2017). Ultimately, it is the member states that decide through boards (for the agencies) and the General Assembly's fifth committee (for the Secretariat's entities that are funded through the UN regular budget) what amount UN entities may, or should, contribute to funding the RC system.

Regarding the effect of earmarking, my findings confirm its derogatory effect on coordination. As agency heads are under immense pressure to meet fundraising targets, either to expand or – given the trend of declining UN contributions – to fight for organisational survival, coordination takes a back seat. In theory, earmarked funding can be mobilised based on – and with the purpose of – supporting the UNDAF as well as country programmes that should be derived from the UNDAF. Asked about agency rules or mechanism that would ensure such an alignment of earmarked contributions with UNDAF or country programmes, my interviewees were unaware of any. A UNDAF evaluation concluded that, according to interviews in the country, the UNDAF “played no role whatsoever in their [donors'] relations with the UN” (Hagona, 2015, p. 18).²³ As a result, coordinated agendas become significantly distorted over the UNDAF period.

5.3 Ownership

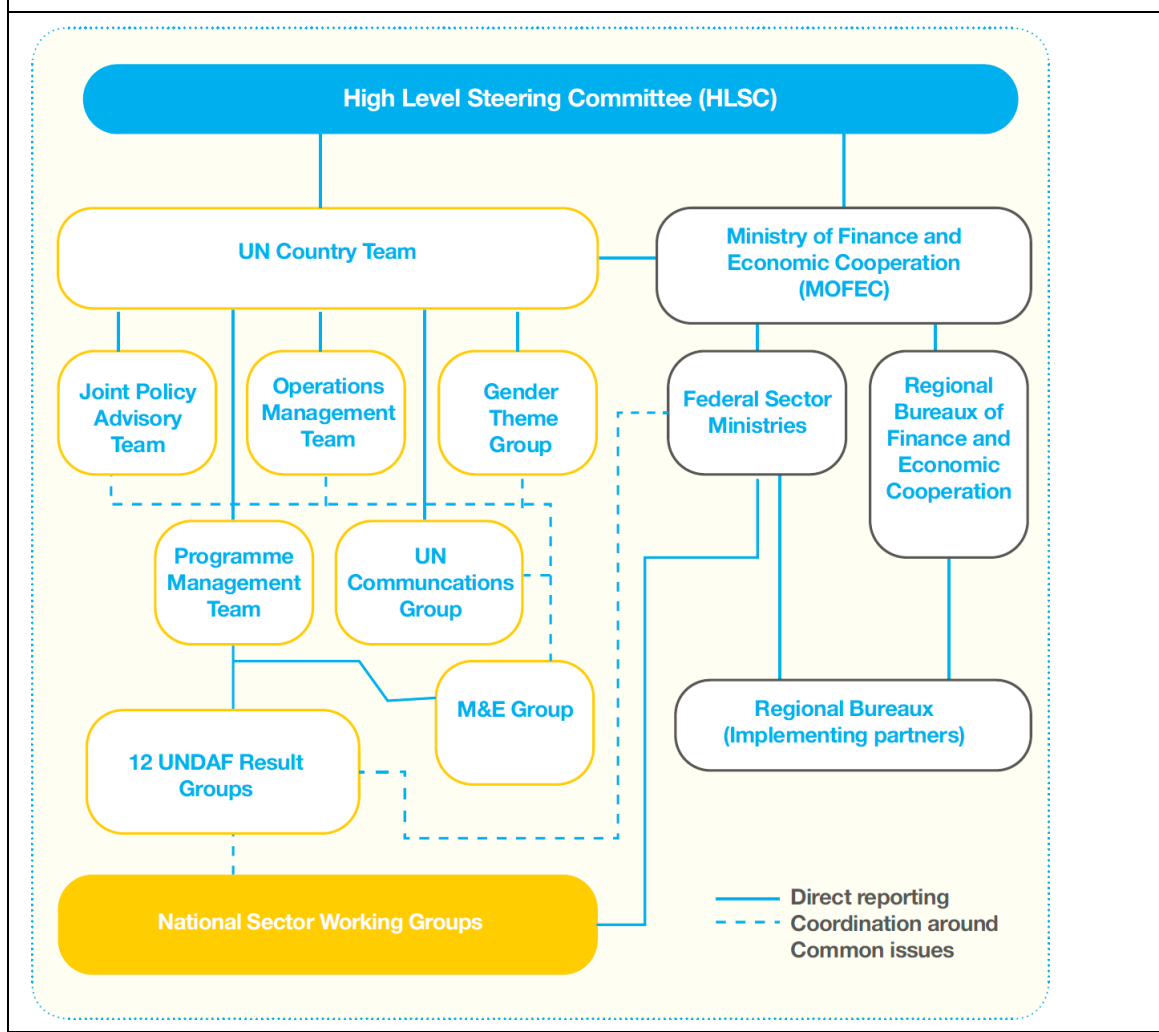
Better ownership by developing countries of UN development activities in their countries has been a long-standing concern at the UN. Documents from before the era of *Delivering as One* stressed “the need for [operational] activities to be undertaken at the request of interested recipient Governments” (UN General Assembly, 2004, p. 2). When *Delivering as One* was established, it was specifically designed to also offer greater ownership for host governments (Fegan-Wyles, 2016). However, the flipside of that is that the *Delivering as One* mechanism now depends at least partially on host governments exercising that ownership in a responsible and suitable way. UNDG guidelines do not specify the roles of host governments (as the UN cannot regulate its member states), but it is easy to derive some rules from them: The UNDAF requires the host government's participation and stamp of approval; the steering committee requires a substantial role in oversight; annual reports to the government require that the government holds the UN accountable; and above all, the host government needs to interact with the UN mainly through the RC and curb its ministries' tendency to maintain bilateral ties with UN agencies.

According to surveys, host governments have an interest in interagency coordination, as they are concerned about the UN's effectiveness and efficiency in their countries (UN DESA, 2016c, p. 38). From a political-economy perspective, however, coordination rivals other

23 This might, however, also point to failures of the UN to speak with one voice. The same evaluation also reports: “One donor stated that he was visited by several UNCT members in the past two years, but did not recall a single time that UNDAF was mentioned or their cooperation and partnership was sought for its support” (Hagona, 2015, p. 41). A related finding is lack of transparency: In only two of the five countries (Pakistan, Sierra Leone) did the UNDAF provide information about the chairs and members of results groups, meaning that a coordination-minded donor that seeks an entry point into the RC system will have difficulties identifying who coordinates which cluster.

interests of host governments, if it does not simply overburden the governments' capacity to engage with development partners. Host governments might have an interest in preventing too "united" a UN presence in their countries that can close ranks and pressure the government, thus the recourse to divide-and-rule tactics. A multitude of UN partners with overlapping mandates allows them to select and pressure agencies. Finally, governments might conclude that engaging with the UN could alienate the donors behind the UN, and thus negatively impact external funding. Interview partners acknowledged that these interests were at play, but they were reluctant to elaborate on them, either because it is a highly sensitive issue or because they did not see it as a major problem. However, even without explicitly addressing this subject, it nevertheless appears that there is considerable variation in how governments relate to the UN.

Figure 2: The Delivering as One structure in Ethiopia includes the government, even in its formal depiction



Source: United Nations Country Team Ethiopia (s.a., p. 43)

In one country, Ethiopia, the government maintains particularly close contact with the UN, which it considers to be an important tool for advancing the country's development. The government exercises its oversight function not only in the steering committee, which meets twice a year, but also on the level of the working groups. The Delivering as One structure is closely aligned with the government's own structure (Figure 2), and this further supports

coordination. Above all, interviewees agreed that the government had very clear development plans and expected its international partners to align themselves with them. Interviewees saw this kind of clarity on the government's side as being very "helpful" for UN coordination, as it establishes a clear point of reference. It also makes the UN more "demand-driven",²⁴ although the UN in Ethiopia is not immune to the effects of earmarked funding.

In Pakistan, the government appears to have adopted a more lackadaisical position towards the UN, which has the effect of letting the UN off the hook. Some interviewees could not even remember when the steering committee had met last, if at all. Government involvement in working groups was described as minimal and taking place on an ad hoc basis. Something similar happened in Sudan – a country under sanctions both by the United States and the European Union – where the UNDAF evaluation concludes that a lack of government participation in UN processes was a major factor in making the UNDAF dysfunctional, as UN staff had become disillusioned about coordination (Hagona, 2015, pp. 18-20). In Pakistan, as a large middle-income country with nuclear weapons, this attitude vis-à-vis the UN might have to do with the UN's relatively insignificant size in terms of expenditures. However, as in Sudan, being indifferent to coordination does not mean that the government is not involved; in both countries, it appears that there is strong, direct and bilateral control, which also holds for Ethiopia. When governments keep a very close eye on UN activities, this can reduce the operational space of the UN to analyse, plan and implement according to the imperatives of coordination.

Table 5: Comparison of country expenditures from the UN^a and the World Bank^b in 2016 (in \$ millions, 2016)					
	Ethiopia	Liberia	Pakistan	Sierra Leone	Sudan
UN	969.1	154.4	542.0	163.2	589.1
World Bank	953.9	151.7	1,237.0	53.5	N/A
Sources: ^{a)} Economic and Social Council (2018); ^{b)} Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (s.a.)					

In small countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, the challenge instead seemed to be that the governments, although engaged at the senior leadership level with the UN, do not actively participate in the RC system. One reason given for that was the lack of capable staff in the ministries, although interview partners also acknowledged that the government was probably not eager to pick fights with an essential development partner, as that could risk alienating donors. One factor explaining host governments' positions towards the UN might be the financial footprint of the UN, as compared to other multilateral organisations. It is economical for a host government to focus its attention on the biggest donors. Table 5 shows how the UN compares to the World Bank in the five countries visited for this research. In

24 Given the regional proximity, it was pointed out to the author that governments in Rwanda and Tanzania were even more proactive in demanding coordination; in Rwanda by insisting on a division of labour, according to which UN entities can only be active in three sectors and must be silent partners in others; in Tanzania, the government pushed for a common country programme document bringing together at least four agencies (UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WFP) (UN Tanzania, 2010).

Pakistan, the UN spends less than half the amount than the World Bank, whereas in Ethiopia the expenditure levels are roughly the same.

One observation that holds for all five countries is that ministries still maintain strong direct contacts with UN agencies (see also Dalberg, 2017, p. 55). Some interviewees described such bilateral contacts as perhaps a bigger hurdle for UN coordination than the UN's own organisational hurdles. The problem here is that agencies have their hands tied in coordination meetings when all their activities are fixed in plans that are signed by the government. In all five countries, interviewees also reported that they spend more time with host governments than with donors or their UN colleagues from other agencies, which is probably appropriate, but this further illustrates the point that coordination without host government involvement is futile. Extending this line of thinking a bit, one could hypothesise that ownership, which is a prerequisite for development, can in certain regards also constitute a kind of bilateralisation, which has very similar effects as earmarking (focus on short-term activities, fostering relationships, doing the popular rather than the pragmatic things, introducing uncertainty, defending or conquering turf).

6 Conclusion and recommendations

Before I turn to recommendations, here are some general conclusions on UN country-level coordination that summarise the findings of the discussion paper. To start with, the UN clearly falls short of meeting its own standards for coordination as enshrined in the SOPs and other guidelines, which are based on mandates from General Assembly resolutions. To bring this diagnosis to a head: There is no evidence that the RC system and Delivering as One significantly affect *what* agencies do, *how* and with *whom* as compared to hypothetical situations where coordination is not institutionalised but driven by individuals. The conclusion from an earlier study, namely that Delivering as One “could be more accurately described as Delivering as if One, given the fact that each UN organization has its own governance structure, mandate and culture”, very much appears to remain valid six years later (UN, 2012, p. 83).

Delivering as One today exists primarily as an expectation that is propped up by a set of UNDG rules, but that is not supported by the structures of the UN development system. Agencies have not sufficiently adjusted their administrative structures to the requirements of the RC system and Delivering as One. Nor have important system-wide elements of Delivering as One, as recommended by the Panel for System-wide Coherence, been implemented (integration of boards, strong central management, One UN Funds). As a result, centrifugal forces (mainly competition for resources) are, by far, greater than the centripetal forces of integration.

Member states also do not play their part in providing the mandates, the funding and the ownership required for UN coordination to work. Given the direct influence member states exert on the UN (in particular, large donors and host governments), it appears futile to expect change from the UN without addressing, or even resetting, how member states relate to the UN. The fragmented structure of the UN development system reflects member states' choice to give priority to control over multilateralism, and the organisational coordination efforts cannot bend this political reality. If coherence was the top priority, member states could have built a more integrated UN development system; as Woods remarks, “coordination in

development assistance is almost always used to describe activities which paper over a failure more deeply to cooperate” (Woods, 2011, p. 6). We would not discuss coordination if member states were to fund the UN through one central account, relying on just one agency.

Although this discussion paper focussed on the country level, the analysis of incentive structures leads back to the headquarters level. Headquarters do not appear to be the enthusiastic supporters of coordination they claim to be when they speak at ECOSOC occasionally, although there are differences. The QCPR survey shows that host governments have noticed significant variance in agencies’ willingness to participate in UN coordination (UN DESA, 2016c, p. 40). Reluctance to embrace coordination, and the variance at the country level, point to weak incentives for agency leaders to promote coordination. It appears that both member states and UN leadership have, in the past decades, allowed agencies to develop a notion of sovereign-like autonomy. The appointment of the Deputy Secretary-General to the position of UNDG Chair might at least symbolically help to reign in this notion. Bringing the development system closer under the political authority of the Secretary-General might help to remind agencies to what extent they are part of the UN family.

This discussion paper measured UN coordination against existing standards that constitute the RC system and Delivering as One, and that are derived from past mandates by the General Assembly. For reformers, the logical impulse would be to close this gap. However, any attempt at reforming UN coordination should also be guided by reflecting on the purpose of coordination, from which the RC structure and functions are derived. Table 6 provides some options regarding the purposes of coordination and associated coordination functions. The new thing about the 2030 Agenda is the interconnected nature of the SDGs, which would imply coordination functions that can ensure a sophisticated interlacing of agencies’ individual contributions. For efficiency, the emphasis would be on reduction of duplications, overlaps and common business services. For greater impact – either to assert UN values on the country level or to be able to compete with other development actors such as the World Bank or consultancy firms – it is necessary to speak with one voice when required. Offering coordination for government and non-UN actors would imply a shift to more knowledge- and platform services. However, for all three cases, coordination capacity needs to be strengthened. An adjusted RC system might be leaner than it is now, but it needs to be able to deliver as one where the chosen purpose temporarily or thematically requires it.

Table 6: Coordination purposes and associated functions	
Coordination purposes	Coordination functions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Addressing the integrated nature of the SDGs - Pooling resources, capacities and knowledge for greater development effects and UN authority - Greater efficiency and saving resources - Increasing the UN’s competitiveness vis-à-vis other development actors - Supporting country-coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interlacing of activities regarding time, space and content - Reducing duplications, overlap, using synergies - Checking for negative effects (“do no harm approach”) - Providing analysis and knowledge-functions - Creating transparency of what is done - Authoritative decision-making - Joint programming and/or implementation - Ensuring a division of labour
Source: Author	

Last but not least, it is necessary to consider counterarguments in the case for coordination. Agencies tend to see coordination as a burdensome extra process because it detracts from, and interferes with, their fundraising activities. Fundraising is indeed one of the founding purposes of many agencies and should not be so quickly dismissed. So there is a trade-off between funding and coordination; giving priority to the former means accepting the imperfection of some duplications and overlaps for the sake of an economically thriving system. However, the philosophy of independent agencies that prosper through competition may be defeated by the observation that competition no longer leads to increases in voluntary funding, while the negative side-effects are growing. In a survey, a majority of government officials from developing countries did not see competition – as it currently exists – as healthy and desirable (UN DESA, 2018c, p. 45). Another counterargument for coordination comes from the cost of coordination. However, better coordination does not necessarily create more costs, to the contrary: The current RC system is comprehensive, decentralised and work-intensive and achieves too little for its relative size. A more centralised coordination system, in which coordination functions are bundled and attended to by specialists in the RC office, might well be both more effective and cheaper than the current system.

6.1 Recommendations

In his reform report of December 2017, the Secretary-General proposed a range of reforms for the UN development system, and specifically for the RC system (UN Secretary-General, 2017b). Proposals include positioning the UNDAF as “the single most important UN country planning instrument in support of the 2030 Agenda”; strengthening mutual accountability, with a role for the RC in appraising the performance of UNCT members; and establishing a reporting obligation by UNCT members to the RC on UNDAF implementation – all these issues are already well enshrined in UNDG rules, so the Secretary-General’s intention is probably to better enforce these rules (in line with the mandates of the QCPR from 2016 that demanded these things). Other proposals are innovative in today’s context, such as the proposal to make the UN country presence more flexible, with the implicit goal to consolidate the UN field presence; to increase the RC’s independence by taking UN DOCO out of UNDP, placing it under the Deputy Secretary-General and shifting some regional UNDG functions to UN DOCO; and to fund the RC system from the regular budget.

Against the background of this discussion paper, these reform proposals are sensible and can be endorsed. They reflect recommendations that experts have been making for decades.²⁵ Yet, the Secretary-General’s reform proposals miss part of the picture. All his reforms are focussed on the most prominent, or even popular, features of the RC system, specifically the RC (“needs more authority”) and the UNDAF (“needs to become a more rigorous exercise”). However, they mostly neglect the structural incentives under which the RC system operates, and, in particular, the complementary role that agencies must play. To

25 See for example a JIU report from 1992 that discusses proposals to reposition the RC as the executive arm of the Secretary-General, responsible for designing a “single, coherent, and integrated UN country programme”, in the words of the UNDP administrator at that time (Prokofiev, 1992, p. 9).

be fair, the Secretary-General's report does offer something on the factors analysed in this paper, but these proposals are neither central to the report nor sufficiently specific.

This paper's analytical focus on incentives suggests a different set of changes that might complement the Secretary-General's proposals. If the RC system is to be strengthened, the incentive systems for all actors partaking in UN coordination need to be adjusted as well. Most of the following proposals are not easy, in the sense that some technical adjustments here or there would miraculously facilitate better coordination. Reforms will not work unless they change the structures and incentives under which agencies, their staffs and member states operate. However, some proposed changes regarding member states' behaviour towards the UN could very well be classified as "low-hanging fruits", as policy-makers might call it, with significant potential for improving coordination. The author suggests nine actions:

1. On mandates: Conduct a study specifically on the mandates for the Secretary-General and the RCs to coordinate UN agencies. This discussion paper should answer the questions about what mandates exist, how they are implemented and how they match with the RC system. Equally important, this study should also look at complementary mandates for the entities, as given by both the General Assembly and the boards, to engage in system-wide coordination. Such a clarification of the legal basis of UN coordination could help to better exploit existing mandates and to identify limits that need to be addressed.
2. On accountability to member states: Merge the boards of the funds and programmes – as has been suggested in one form or the other by the Panel for System-wide Coherence (UN General Assembly, 2006), the Independent Team of Advisors (2016) and the UN Secretary-General (2017b) – to bring the reporting lines together on the global level. This would also give member states an oversight structure that disposes them towards looking at the UN development system in a more holistic manner, rather than supporting agencies' autonomy. A common, independent Secretariat serving the agencies could be a start.
3. On accountability to the RC: To strengthen the RC's coordination authority, existing accountability mechanisms should be revised to have a stronger, explicit focus on coordination, as specified by UNDG rules; the principle of mutual accountability should be revised towards a one-way accountability of agency heads to the RC, whose accountability to the Secretary-General needs to be more direct; the RC should have a role in appointing agency heads that goes beyond "informing the [...] leadership profile of UNCT members" (UN Secretary-General, 2017b) – for example, having the right to interview and propose suitable candidates as well as to veto their appointments.
4. On collective accountability: A set of realistic indicators of UN country-level coordination should be defined, based on the SOPs (which are informed by QCPR mandates). Such indicators could also become the basis for a standardised section on coordination in UNDAF evaluations. More transparency on coordination would be an incentive for the UNCTs to work together; it would also make coordination successes more visible and help UNCTs to learn from each other. A UNCT's self-reporting on SOP implementation does not provide a valid and objective picture of UN coordination.
5. On capacity: Reduce the overall burden of coordination and focus it on functions and thematic areas where it matters. The default option should be a division of labour, with

joint work in areas only where SDG interdependence dictates it. More coordination functions such as analysis, transparency, fundraising and common business services should be bundled in a significantly strengthened and appropriately mandated RC office to relieve coordination-related workloads in agencies. An increase in the RC office staff from three to five, as suggested by the UN Secretary-General (2017b, p. 17), is probably not sufficient to give the RC the soft power he/she is expected to wield over the UNCT (the Secretary-General's estimate is based on proposals by RCs, and thus on the status quo, not on his own vision of coordination). The working group machinery should also be integrated into the RC office, operating under the RC's direct leadership and with support from the RC office's staff; its focus should be on providing coordination functions rather than serving as inclusive platforms for the agencies. All coordination needs to be rooted in leadership and expertise, not in meetings.

6. On ownership: To make ownership a driver of better coordination, host governments should not be shy about holding the UN accountable on coordination, as envisioned by *Delivering as One*. They are well-positioned for that role, as they have the knowledge, political power and a direct interest in coordination, which they could benefit from most in the end (Woods, 2011, p. 13). Middle-income countries could be asked to contribute funding to a reinvigorated RC office in exchange for better coordination. Assessed funding for the RC system, as proposed by the Secretary-General, is also an excellent way to activate host governments' interest in an efficient and effective UN development system.
7. On administrative barriers: The development of common business operations should be driven forward, as the UN Secretary-General proposes (2017b, p. 13). Operational officers that have achieved exceptional efficiency gains on the country level could be seconded to UN DOCO to help scale-up innovations – a small integration fund could help facilitate this. However, efforts to reduce coordination hurdles should not be limited to either the pursuit of operational efficiency nor to the country level. The administrative systems of agencies also need to become compatible in areas such as human resources, financing and IT systems. The full harmonisation of agencies' systems is probably unfeasible, so the best way forward might be the development of system-wide templates by the UNDG from which agencies can choose and that they also need to mutually recognise (Voigt, 2016).
8. On member states' role: As board members, member states should use their direct influence to demand more coordination efforts by their respective agencies. This does not require much: They could simply ask specific questions in board sessions about how agencies contribute to the RC system. To ensure a harmonised approach across agencies, member states should base their questions on agreed policies – these could be developed by a group of reform-minded states or through ECOSOC, as suggested by the UN Secretary-General (2017b, p. 25). Coordination should be dealt with in strategic plans and include issues such as job descriptions, appraisal systems, delegations to the country level and the harmonisation of business systems.
9. Finally, a code of conduct for member states: To raise awareness about coordination among member states and incentivise behaviour that is conducive to a functioning RC system, a code of conduct should specify what member states – both donors and host governments – should do, or not do, to support UN coordination. Such a code of

conduct would also establish some mutual accountability between member states, who own the UN collectively. Apart from setting goals for core- and pooled funding, as already envisioned in the UN Secretary-General's proposal for a funding compact (2017b, p. 31), this could involve inter alia: taking the UNDAF into consideration when the UN is engaged for project work, channelling communication with agencies through the RC, and requesting as well as acting upon UN evaluations.

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List of interviews²⁶

Entity	Number of interviews
UN DOCO	2
Resident Coordinator	3
UNDP	2
UNICEF	1
UNFPA	2
WFP	1
UNOPS	2
UNODC	1
UN Women	3
UN OCHA	2
FAO	2
UN-Habitat	1
UNAIDS	2
UNIDO	1
WHO	3
UNCDF	1
Donor Embassy	3

26 All interviews were based on the assurance that interviewees would neither be quoted nor identified. I only provide overall numbers of interviews per agency, as in some countries I had only one (Sierra Leone) interview and do not want to expose interview partners that have volunteered to speak to a researcher in a country context where such contacts might not be encouraged.

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