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Research Report

Post 2015: what it means for the United Nations development system

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Post 2015: What It Means for the United Nations Development System

Summary

No longer are development agendas framed primarily by traditional aid structures: the post-2015 agenda will involve not just governments, but also the private sector, civil society and individuals. The High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda has coined the phrase of a “global partnership” in this respect.

To prepare the ground for implementation of the new agenda, the member states of the United Nations (UN) will be called upon to agree the implications for the UN Development System. What does the post-2015 agenda mean for the UN Development System?

The timing for this debate is right. With several reform processes of the UN Development System taking place simultaneously, there is strong momentum for change:

- The post-2015 agenda that is to follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)– linked with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be negotiated through an inter-governmental process – will bring about a new sense of purpose and direction within the UN Development System.
- The follow-up to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”) will see the creation of a High Level Political Forum (HLPF) to permanently anchor the debates at the political level.
- The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN is set to revise its functions and structures as part of a long-term reform process.

However, these processes are currently segregated and not directly linked to each other. In order to result in a co-

herent overall outcome, it therefore seems necessary to provide a closer linkage under a uniting and coherent “vision” for the United Nations Development System. This vision should have three dimensions:

- **What:** Using the HLPF, member states should translate the post-2015 agenda into a system-wide mandate for the UN Development System that details its purpose as a complement to other actors.
- **How:** The post-2015 agenda is about the recognition that development challenges such as population growth, economic inequality, water shortages and volatile financial markets are increasingly interrelated and global. A set of reforms should therefore be undertaken in conjunction with the elaboration of the future mandate so that the UN Development System can fulfil its mandate supported by a cohesive institutional organisation.
- **Means:** Finally, there is a need to initiate discussions about the future funding of the UN Development System in line with the broadened mandate and reformed structure. What the post-2015 agenda requires is a dramatic shift in perspective to go “beyond aid”.

In order to build up the necessary support and momentum for substantial reforms of a funding structure “beyond aid”, stakeholders will need a clear understanding of the specific role that the UN Development System would be playing in the post-2015 agenda, and assurances that the UN Development System “House” is well prepared to deliver. A sequenced approach meets these concerns.

The United Nations Development System and the post-2015 agenda

The international community is reshaping how to conceptualise international development after the year 2015. This post-2015 agenda is driven by the search for a successor framework to the MDGs and the follow-up to the Rio+20 conference on Sustainable Development, where the decision was taken to negotiate concrete SDGs. Defining overall goals for post-2015 is necessary – but it is only the first step. The international community needs to start preparing the ground for implementation.

The post-2015 agenda calls for action by the public sector, private enterprises, civil society and individuals alike. This has recently been confirmed again in the report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 agenda entitled “A New Global Partnership”. As the world is slowly moving towards post 2015, there is a vital need to specify respective contributions. What does the post-2015 agenda mean for the UN Development System?

Unravelling the mandate of the UN in development

The UN Development System suffers from a blurry profile. The 1945 Charter defines the purpose of the UN in the field of development only in broad terms. Member states have traditionally spelt out this mandate in a decentralised manner through the different executive boards of the entities that make up the UN Development System. Prior to the year 2000, further *general* guidance emanated from the “UN Decades of Development”. Since then, the MDGs and other development goals have been the system’s main guideposts. However, the MDGs are not specific to the UN Development System and they have never been translated into a system-wide mandate that details its purpose as a complement to other actors.

Contours of the UN in development

The UN Development System is made up of more than three dozen funds, programmes and specialised agencies, which generally provide capacity-building in specific and confined areas of activity. Because member states have opted for a sectoralised system of management, the relationships among the different entities are generally characterised by coexistence and loose coupling. This carries the dual burden of fragmentation and complexity. In a nutshell, the UN Development System has compartmentalised how it handles development challenges. This setup proved feasible throughout much of its history, but it is increasingly inadequate in the face of interconnected global phenomena.

UN Development System’s role in the post-2015 agenda

The UN Development System has at its disposal the necessary tools to both reverse the fragmentation trend and fulfil an integrated and harmonised approach to sustainable development. The UN remains the only truly universal global entity, unlike other contemporary inter-

national players. It has high input legitimacy, which is a fundamental ingredient for the acceptability of outputs and services, and a demonstrated capacity for convening multiple stakeholders to pursue common objectives. Most crucially, however, it has an absolute advantage in the close linkage between operations and norm-setting that sets it apart from other actors. Accordingly, the UN Development System, in principle, seems well placed to address the practical underpinning of the transformation towards the post-2015 agenda, and in particular the formation and operationalisation of a normative foundation to guide operations geared towards sustainable development.

Preparing the UN Development System for the post-2015 agenda

The post-2015 agenda compels UN member states to more clearly define the respective role of the UN Development System. This endeavour concerns the fundamental functional dimensions of “What”, “How”, as well as the “Means” of achieving them.

Benefits of a system-wide mandate

During the Rio+20 conference in 2012, the international community decided to establish a High Level Political Forum to permanently anchor sustainable development at the political level. The Forum also presents a suitable opportunity to fill the gap left within the UN Development System by the expiring MDGs. In order to address the challenge of a blurred profile, member states could use the new Forum to agree on a system-wide and guiding mandate with validity for the UN Development System as a whole. Accordingly, at the Forum, member states could resolve to adopt sustainable development as a system-wide mandate to guide the work and future evolution of the UN Development System in the post-2015 world. Under this scenario, the Forum would offer crucial orientation with regard to the “What”, i.e. the specific contribution of the UN Development System, which would ideally be revised in regular intervals of four years. In a nutshell, the HLPF would for the first time be “setting” the necessary boundaries for the functioning of the UN Development System and firmly and prominently position it in the post-2015 agenda.

Put the UN house in order

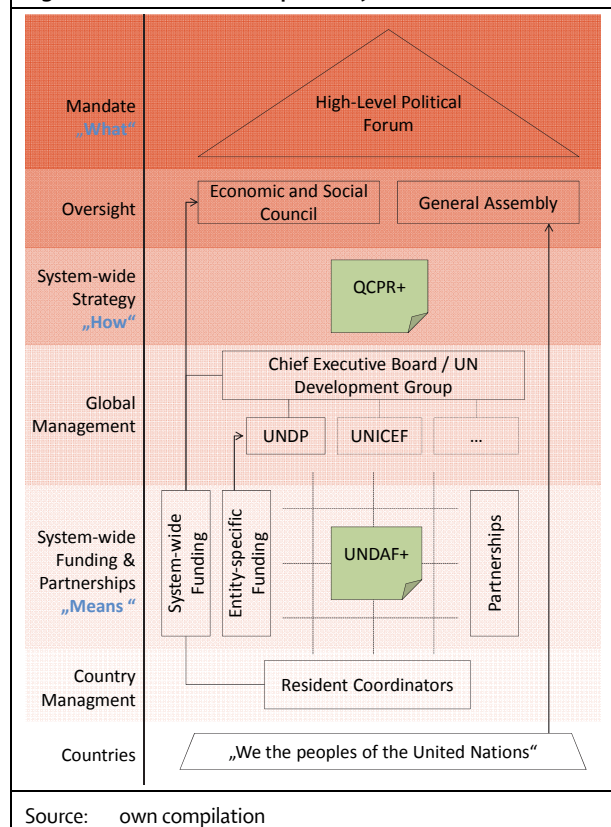
In order to contribute to meeting the challenges posed by the post-2015 agenda, the international community will ask the UN Development System to get better prepared. For this contribution to be more successful, the UN Development System should institute the following incremental institutional reforms (overview in Fig. 1):

- **Link strengthened oversight and management:** To ensure that a decentralised UN Development System will coherently “Deliver as One” in support of the system-wide mandate, there is a need to strengthen and link structures for inter-governmental oversight

and interagency management. The Economic and Social Council already has all the necessary characteristics to take on the role of system-wide executive board; it only lacks the mandate. On the interagency side, the UN Development Group, which forms part of the Chief Executive Board, remains a relatively weak structure because of its insufficiently defined legal status, and therefore it is not yet fully perceived as an appropriate interlocutor of system-wide managerial tasks. It moreover has only limited capacity for decisive action as a result of weak authority vis-à-vis the executive boards of the funds, programmes and specialised agencies. Having an established interplay between the system-wide governing body and the interagency manager would establish clear lines of accountability at the core of the system to align with the post-2015 agenda.

- **Decentralise operations:** The UN Development System should strengthen decentralisation efforts in order to meet the specific challenges that countries face. Reforming the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs+) and creating a stronger role for the UN Resident Coordinator will ultimately ensure that national priorities are met. If the UNDAF were to be established around a few core system-wide competences, the allotment of tasks to respective agencies could be guided by the system-wide mandate. This requires a Resident Coordinator with enhanced managerial authority to allocate funds within country programmes in a manner that complements the system’s goals.
- **Create accountable partnerships:** The private sector and civil society have increasingly important contributions to make in achieving the post-2015 agenda. With the consent of host countries, the UN Development System should assist national governments in setting up an enabling environment in which UNDAF can strengthen ties with both civil society and the private sector. At the same time, the UN Development System and recipient countries should also seek clarity on the roles of private stakeholders, like those that are part of the UN Global Compact, in support of global partnership initiatives. It remains essential that operating partners be regulated by applying standard procedures, implementing integrity measures and securing due diligence in order to ensure that partnerships do not undermine the principles of sustainable development in the long-run.
- **Small reforms with big impacts:** Often dismissed as a technicality, member states are quick to overlook reform that targets operational business practices. Such reform includes harmonising software usages and packages, enhancing knowledge-sharing systems across agencies and establishing interoperable enterprise resource planning. These technical reforms would invariably increase the ability of entities to communi-

Figure 1: The UN Development System “House”



cate with one another and enhance the cohesive operation of the system.

Envisioning a system-wide funding

The UN Development System relies largely on supply-driven, headquarter-centred and agency-oriented funding, which stipulates fragmentation. In order for the here-listed reforms of mandate and institutions to succeed, it therefore seems necessary that changes are grounded in an equally reformed system-wide funding mechanism. Without committing to an improved funding mechanism that supports a decentralised and demand-driven approach to development while maintaining a clear centre of guidance on sustainable development, efforts will be undermined.

In the last 20 years, the share of core contributions to the UN Development System entities has been rapidly diminishing, with virtually all increases being earmarked contributions. Even these core contributions are fundamentally not of a system-wide nature, because they relate to specific agencies’ mandates and depend largely on important member states’ funding priorities. The few attempts at truly system-wide funding have all been based on voluntary contributions. This undermines the possibility of system-wide funding that can support a system-wide approach to sustainable development.

Member states therefore have to recognise that a demand-driven model of funding is a *sine qua non* for the UN

Development System to adequately contribute to the post-2015 agenda. More fundamental reform in funding will however not occur without a dramatic change in perspective. In particular, what is needed is a collective effort in overcoming the recipient-provider discourse that reinforces the North-South dichotomy in UN circles. Concrete steps should furthermore be taken to broaden and diversify donor bases and reduce reliance on a limited number of member state donors that primarily contribute earmarked funds. How to accomplish these objectives has been much debated. Albeit implications are far-reaching and would require substantial efforts at persuasion of sceptical governments, the model of a financial transaction tax pushed by the European Union within Europe offers one possible model. But taxpayers and authorities can be convinced to move in this direction only if they have a clear understanding of the specific role that the UN Development System would be playing in the post-2015 agenda and that the "House" is well prepared to deliver. Whatever mechanism is chosen, member states must necessarily commit themselves to innovatively broadening and diversifying the funding basis of the UN Development System "beyond aid".

Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

To bring the three functional dimensions of the "What", the "How" and the "Means" of the UN Development System together requires an appropriate instrument through which member states can pursue far-reaching reforms. Despite its arduous title, the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) has become a key platform for the debate about the future of the UN Development System. Negotiated every four years, it aims to im-

prove organisational efficiency, effectiveness and operational harmonisation to ensure that the UN Development System is upholding its normative aims.

The QCPR therefore seems the right vehicle to evolve into a more system-wide strategic document or a QCPR+, similar to a "corporate strategy" for the UN Development System.

Conclusions

For the UN Development System to adequately contribute to the post-2015 agenda requires an informed political willingness by member states to position the UN Development System as a relevant actor. Part of this willingness is the realisation that the fragmented structure of the system impedes a truly important role. A possible way out would seem to be the strengthening of the system's institutional setting and a way of working in response to a clearly spelt out system-wide mandate. Putting this vision into action would require the following steps:

- 2013–2014: member states implement the 2012 QCPR Resolution with a focus on strengthening the system-wide functions and structures.
- 2015–2016: declaration of a system-wide mandate for the UN Development System to guide the next QCPR+.
- 2017: an international conference to consider a system-wide "beyond aid" financing to support the new mandate.

If member states upgrade the QCPR into a "QCPR+", it can function as a comprehensive system-wide strategy to better ensure that the UN Development System can cohesively contribute to the post-2015 agenda.

This briefing paper is part of the DIE series "post 2015". See our homepage for previous issues (www.die-gdi.de)

Disclaimer: Views expressed here are solely those of the authors.

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