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## New rules, same practice? Analysing UN development system reform effects at the country level

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# New Rules, Same Practice?

## Analysing UN Development System Reform Effects at the Country Level

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Bonn, February 2022

Max-Otto Baumann and Silke Weinlich

## Contents

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2 Methods and approach</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3 UNDS reform and the collective offer</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4 Key findings</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1 Collective offer: institutional change	8
4.2 Collective offer: substantive change	12
4.2.1 SDG integration: weak analysis and a lack of shared concepts provide an insufficient foundation for SDG integration	12
4.2.2 Cross-border work is still limited and ad hoc	14
4.2.3 Normative work: LNOB and taking a stance for human rights – increased support, yet uneven outcome	16
<b>5 Discussion of findings: three syndromes that hamper the collective offer</b>	<b>18</b>
5.1 The “my agency first” attitude persists	19
5.2 Diversity within country teams creates impediments for integration	20
5.3 Business models undermine collective results orientation	21
<b>6 Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>21</b>
6.1 Upgrade the value of the UNDS as a collective	22
6.2 Manage diversity within UN country teams and turn it into a core UNDS strength	23
6.3 Towards business models well-suited for sustainable development	24
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Annex 1: Overview of interviewees</b>	<b>29</b>

## **Figures**

Figure 1: The collective offer and UN Development System reform	5
Figure 2: Word cloud on coded perceptions of UN staff on the role of the Resident Coordinator	10

## **Tables**

Table 1: Implementation set-up of the UN country team in Georgia	9
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## **Boxes**

Box 1: Interviewees' responses to the question regarding the extent to which they perceive the UN country teams working together as a family	12
Box 2: Understandings of Sustainable Development Goal integration detected in interviews and the concept advanced by UN guiding documents	14
Box 3: Voices on cross-border work from interviews	15
Box 4: Voices on "leave no one behind" and normative advocacy from interviews	17

## Abbreviations

CCA	Common Country Analysis
LNOB	leave no one behind
MAF	Management and Accountability Framework
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
RC	Resident Coordinator
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDS	United Nations Development System
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group



## Executive summary

With its unique multilateral assets, the United Nations Development System (UNDS) should be playing a key role in assisting governments and other stakeholders with their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But this requires change. Despite improvements in recent decades, too often the UNDS has continued to act as a loose assemblage of competing entities, undermining its effective support for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation. This is all the more relevant as the world is seriously off track for meeting the commitments of the 2030 Agenda in many areas. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has set many countries back in their development and exacerbated inequalities.

The UNDS has been undergoing an extensive reform – that was decided on in 2018 and has been implemented since 2019 – to provide more coherent, integrated support in line with requirements of the 2030 Agenda to United Nations (UN) programme countries. What effects have the reforms yielded at the country level?

This paper presents the main findings, conclusions and recommendations from our research on UNDS reform implementation. It does so with a focus on reform-induced changes towards what we call a strengthened, collective offer at the country level. We distinguish an institutional and substantive element of the collective offer. The institutional element in our concept comprises the enactment of rules, mechanisms and processes for cooperation within UN country teams. The substantive element refers to the functions and services a country team offers to a country.

Overall, our research shows that reform implementation is moving the needle on the quality of the collective offer. In particular, with regard to its institutional element, we observed that the reform has fostered change in how UN country teams work together that is in line with what the 2030 Agenda demands. Institutional changes allow for increased cross-organisational and cross-sectoral coordination, which could potentially lead to increased policy coherence. But while we see substantial progress, it remains incomplete, fragile and subject to structural limitations. A more critical picture emerges with regard to change in the substantive component of the collective offer in the areas of SDG integration, cross-border work and normative approaches. While there were positive examples, we found little evidence of a systematic repositioning in these areas. The adjustment of the UNDS to the 2030 Agenda does not (yet) meet the expectations derived from the UN's own reform ambition.

Based on our analysis and the discussion of three syndromes that hamper cooperation within UN country teams, we formulate recommendations addressed at UN actors and UN member states, including both financial contributors and host governments.

**Upgrade the value of the UNDS as a collective:** To mitigate “my agency first” tendencies, it is important to reinforce incentives and accountability for joint work, collaboration and collective results, and to strengthen the narrative of what the UNDS as a collective actor can and should achieve.

**Manage diversity within UN country teams and turn it into a core UNDS strength:**

The reform is neither about subduing the singularities of individual UN entities and levelling out differences, nor about forcing cooperation for the sake of cooperation. It is important to support and explore different ways that UN entities can combine their unique approaches into a collective offer.

**Towards business models well-suited for sustainable development:** The current dominant business model heavily rests on earmarked resources raised at the country level and is at odds with a strengthened collective offer for better SDG implementation. Action is needed to mitigate the role of earmarked funding and rebalance business models towards greater impact orientation.

## 1 Introduction

The United Nations Development System (UNDS) has always played a key role in supporting member states in their development efforts. To be able to continue this indispensable role, rooted in the universal multilateralism of the United Nations (UN), the UNDS needs to adapt its structures and functions to the changing global policy environment. The biggest of such changes in recent years was the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which advances a new definition of what constitutes successful development and, by implication, what effective external support to national development should look like. Key novelties of the 2030 Agenda are, among others, the indivisible nature of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their complex causal linkages that may span across borders and their normative thrust (UNGA [United Nations General Assembly], 2015) – manifest in the “leave no one behind” (LNOB) principle, which calls for the combatting of discrimination, exclusion and inequality and, more generally, the fact that 90 per cent of the SDGs are backed up by international human rights laws (UN [United Nations], 2021d, p. 63).

For the UNDS to meet the new challenges of the 2030 Agenda, selective, isolated support measures no longer suffice. The UNDS needs to provide a kind of support to host countries that is cognizant of and aims to enhance coherence across the SDGs, while also representing and working towards the realisation of the UN’s normative goals. The UN is, in principle, in a good position to do so: the 37 UN entities that constitute the UNDS cover all SDGs, and even from multiple thematic perspectives, while both the UN’s universal membership and its value system provide it with a high degree of legitimacy to advocate for and work towards respect for international normative frameworks (see also Jenks, 2017). In essence, then, the 2030 Agenda requires the various UN entities to draw strength, both technical and normative, from working together.

Coherence across the UNDS is all the more relevant as the world is seriously off track for meeting the commitments made in the 2030 Agenda in many areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has set many countries back in their development and exacerbated inequalities (UN, 2021e). Despite improvements in recent decades, the UNDS has too often acted as a loose assemblage of competing entities, rather than “delivering as one” (which was the slogan for a previous UNDS reform effort in the late 2000s, see UN (2012)). Under the pressure of this acute crisis, the UNDS has shown that it can overcome fragmentation and work together (UN, 2021c). Yet, challenges remain in extending collaboration from emergency response to the vast and complex area of sustainable development.

To meet the new challenges arising from the 2030 Agenda, UN member states began discussions on a major reform of the UNDS in 2014. Upon taking office, UN Secretary-General Guterres made this reform one of his priorities. After a long and intensive process of deliberation and consultations, a comprehensive reform package was decided in 2018 and implementation started in 2019. The reform builds on previous thinking about how to make UN development more effective, efficient and coherent (Hendra & FitzGerald, 2016; International Team of Advisors, 2016). Over the decades, the UNDS had evolved into a highly fragmented system with a weak central authority (Mahn, 2016) that depends on insecure funding (Baumann & Weinlich, 2021) and faces diverging interests and expectations from member states (Baumann, 2017; Weinlich, 2011). The reform is a multi-layered undertaking that induces complex changes across the whole system, at global, regional and country levels (Connolly & Roesch, 2020). However, the focus of the reform is

clearly on the country level, with the overall aim of improving the support UN country teams offer to programme countries. On average, 18 UN entities are part of a country team that provides a wide range of activities in support of the 2030 Agenda, from direct support to capacity development to functions, such as policy support and advice and advocacy. A UN Resident Coordinator (RC) is tasked with leading and coordinating UN country teams. The most important element of the reform has been to strengthen the position of the RC.

This paper presents the main findings, conclusions, and recommendations from our research on UNDS reform implementation. The research question is: to what extent has the reform led to a strengthened collective offer of UN country teams to programme countries? Such a change in the quality of what the UNDS brings to a country should manifest itself in both a higher degree of coherence and cooperation, and, on this basis, repositioned functions and services in line with the 2030 Agenda.

Six years into the 2030 Agenda, and two-plus years after reform implementation began, it is a relevant question to ask how the UNDS has made the needed adjustments for more effective sustainable development cooperation (see also Beisheim et al., in preparation). Not only is the UNDS, in budgetary terms, the largest multilateral development actor, which speaks to stakeholder interests in both donor and recipient countries, politically, it is also arguably the most central development player. Change in the UNDS, while meaningful by itself, can have an important signalling effect.

Our analysis is not the only stock-taking exercise regarding UNDS reform. Other relevant studies have come from the UN itself (UN, 2021c; United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, 2021; UNSG [United Nations Secretary-General], 2021b), donor-supported initiatives (MOPAN [Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network], 2021), and were commissioned by the UN (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021; Passarelli, Denton, & Day, 2021). Focusing on how the reform has been changing the UNDS support that is offered to host governments as required by the 2030 Agenda, our study provides a new angle to the debate. At a time when the upcoming 2022 intergovernmental negotiations are more about consolidation and fine-tuning of reform measures, this study may help identify more pressing issues.

In the following, this paper first introduces selected reform measures that are particularly important for the development of more coherent and sophisticated support to host countries. Then key findings of our research concerning both the institutional as well as the substantive part of the collective offer are presented. The last section draws conclusions and formulates recommendations directed at UN actors and member states. The overall conclusion is that we see significant progress regarding institutional changes but change on the substantive aspect of the collective offer is much more limited and scattered.

## 2 Methods and approach

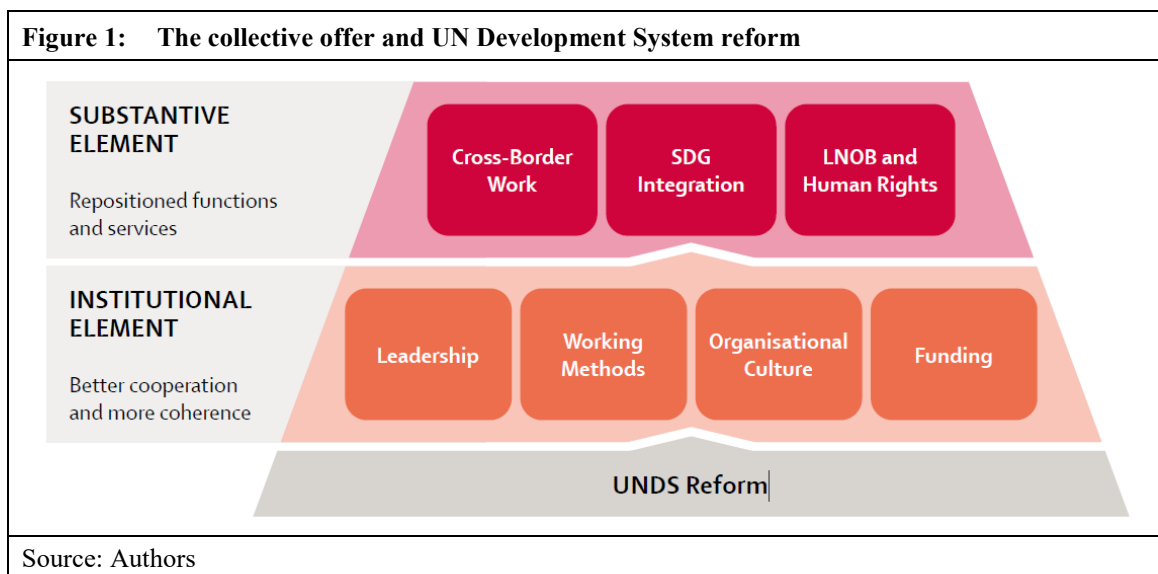
The main thrust of this paper is not to analyse if and how specific reform measures have been implemented, but whether there has been change in how UN agencies work together given the new requirements of the 2030 Agenda. To conceptualise the intended reform effect, we borrow from the UN the term “collective offer” (UNSG, 2019a, p. 26). The term has not been defined or elaborated on in UN documents. For the purpose of this study, we

understand collective offer to mean the coordinated support that a UN country team provides to host countries guided by a common strategy. Two elements are, thus, key: internal to the UN, the emphasis on “collectiveness”, which refers to the roles and contributions of various UN entities and their coherent bundling, and “offer”, which emphasises the outward orientation in the sense of support received by host countries.

Corresponding to this differentiation, we distinguish an institutional and a substantive element of the collective offer. The institutional element in our concept comprises the enactment of rules, mechanisms and processes for cooperation within UN country teams. The substantive element refers to the functions and services a country team offers to a country. For this, we focused selectively on three areas that we consider both particularly central for the 2030 Agenda and that are also closely linked to the UN’s multilateral assets, namely (i) SDG integration, (ii) normative support and (ii) cross-border approaches. These three areas also figure prominently in UN guidance documents that operationalise reform goals (UNSDG [United Nations Sustainable Development Group], 2019b, 2019g).

As Figure 1 shows, our assumption is that institutional changes induced by the reform are the basis for substantive changes. We maintain that more cooperation within UN country teams will – all other things (such as political context, personalities, funding, etc.) being equal – lead to an empowered, more coherent and sophisticated offer towards host countries. Such a strengthened collective offer will not directly translate into sustainable development, which remains the responsibility of the host country and is also subject to a range of international influences, but it describes the most the UN can do in its sphere of influence. A strengthened collective offer can be understood as an important reform outcome, which helps bring about the ultimate reform impact – progress towards sustainable development.

**Figure 1: The collective offer and UN Development System reform**



Source: Authors

The country sample for this study comprises four countries: Eswatini, Georgia, Côte d’Ivoire and Uganda. Our key selection criterion was the recent start of a new four-year programme cycle, given that it is in this critical phase that key reforms should manifest themselves. All four countries began a new programme cycle in 2021. Further aspects in selecting the sample were a clear focus on development (excluding countries with a large UN humanitarian or peacebuilding function), a mix of small and larger, low- and middle-income countries, as well as regional diversity. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is not

to compare UN reform implementation across country contexts; this paper does not present case studies on individual countries. Rather, we aim to identify common patterns in reform implementation across different country contexts.

This study draws on two main sources: interviews and documents. We conducted 52 online interviews with 56 interlocutors, mostly UN staff at the country level, including RCs and UN country team members, and heads of UN country offices. A small number of external stakeholders (member state representatives, World Bank staff) were also interviewed (see Annex I for an overview of interviewees). Two kinds of UN documents were systematically analysed for each country: the Common Country Analysis (CCA) and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (hereinafter referred to as the “Cooperation Framework”). Both are key vehicles for the reformed RC system. In order to validate and contextualise findings, additional interviews were conducted with the RCs in Indonesia, Kosovo, Timor-Leste and Uzbekistan (countries that meet at least some of our selection criteria) and with selected UN staff at the regional and headquarters level.

While a sample of four countries (or eight, if the additional sources are counted) can be considered typical for studies on the UN, it nevertheless is a small subset of the 131 programme countries in which the UN is present with an RC and a country team. This constitutes a limitation of our findings, as does the lack of interviews with government officials and other stakeholders from the countries concerned. Furthermore, our analysis focused on the programming phase, as implementation (including the translation of programmes into priority-specific action programmes) had only just begun in the countries of our sample. The underlying (untested) assumption of this methodological choice is that without the foundation of integrated programming, implementation will most likely be just as or even more fragmented.

### **3 UNDS reform and the collective offer**

While other elements of the UNDS reform aim to improve its efficiency, transparency and accountability (UNSDG, 2020a; UNSG, 2019b), the UN General Assembly mandated three reform elements to pave the way for a coherent and, given previous practices, more sophisticated collective offer: (1) strengthened RCs and RC Offices, (2) revamped programming and implementation instruments and (3) more flexible funding (UNGA, 2018).

Several reform measures strengthen the authority, independence and impartiality of RCs. The reform turned RCs into the highest-ranking UN officials in a country (UNGA, 2018, § 9); they are now directly accountable to the UN Secretary-General, which vests them with higher authority and should increase their political credibility internally as well as with host governments and development partners. Previously, RCs and their support structures were attached to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which was prone to causing conflicts of interest between their “system commitment” and their responsibility to advance UNDP interests. To enable separation from the UN’s largest development agency and help increase the RCs’ clout within country teams, RC Offices were expanded to include a minimum of five staff members (UNSDG, 2020a, p. 6). The accountability of heads of UN entities to the RC concerning their entity’s contribution to the collective UNDS’ efforts for implementing the SDGs has been strengthened in a revised Management and Accountability Framework (MAF) (UNGA, 2018, § 9; UNSDG, 2019d). Taken together,

the RC is put in a better position to bring the authority of the Secretary-General to bear on normative and coordination issues and provide the kind of high-level, strategic focus that is required for tackling transformational change towards SDG attainment.

As part of the UNDS, programming and implementation tools were revamped to allow country teams to develop a shared understanding of country needs, analyse cross-cutting issues, reduce gaps, overlaps and duplications within their work and identify synergies for cooperation (UNSDG, 2019g; UNSG, 2017, p. 12). At its centre stands the programmatic framework for the whole country team, the Cooperation Framework. Intended to be more binding and relevant than previous programming frameworks, the Cooperation Framework has been embedded in an elaborate analysis, planning and implementation cycle that should help country teams to develop and advise on integrated policies that tackle change in complex systems. A key element is the CCA that stands at the beginning of each planning cycle to “facilitate a common UN understanding of groups left behind, and underlying drivers of risks, vulnerabilities and needs” and to provide a sound analytical evidence base for the UN’s collective support (UNSDG, 2019g, p. 15).

Another integral part of the cycle is a reconfiguration of the composition of country teams – which UN entity is physically or remotely present in a given country (UNGA, 2018, § 2). This exercise serves the dual purpose of creating a leaner UN country presence that is at the same time better aligned with countries’ demands. In addition to the procedural modifications, country teams received a wealth of guidance to improve their support in a number of thematic areas identified as potential strong suits for the UNDS in SDG implementation: LNOB and human rights, gender equality, cross-border and regional activities, SDG financing, and an integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda (UNSDG, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019g, 2020b).

The reform also addresses the issue of funding (UNGA, 2018, § 24-29; UNSG, 2017, p. 34 ff.). Current UNDS funding patterns with large shares of earmarked funding are not only problematic because they fuel fragmentation. In its most dominant incarnation (funding earmarked for specific projects or programmes by individual UN entities), earmarking also orients UN entities towards donor countries’ demands; leads to a focus on small-scale projects of limited scope, duration and sustainability; and restricts flexibility (Weinlich, Baumann, Lundsgaarde, & Wolff, 2020).

Member states and the UN recognised this problematic situation and agreed on a funding compact that aims to improve the quality of funding (UNSG, 2019b). The share of flexible forms of funding is to increase, that is, core, pooled and agency-specific thematic funding – the kind of funding that is most conducive to an improved collective offer. Member states in particular agreed to substantially capitalise two multi-partner, pooled trust funds, namely the Joint SDG Fund and the Peacebuilding Fund. Both trust funds require UN entities to work together to access funding, hence, providing strong incentives for greater collaboration (Hendra & Weinlich, 2020). RCs were tasked to provide governance and oversight of such system-wide country financing instruments and help country teams to collectively raise resources to implement Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDG, 2019d, 2019f).

## 4 Key findings

Overall, our research shows that reform implementation is moving the needle on the quality of the collective offer. In particular, with regard to its institutional element, we observed that the reform has fostered changes in how UN country teams work together that are in line with what the 2030 Agenda demands. Institutional changes allow for increased cross-organisational and cross-sectoral coordination, which could potentially lead to increased policy coherence. But while we see substantial progress, it remains incomplete, fragile and subject to structural limitations. This finding is by and large in line with observations from other recent reports on UNDS reform (MOPAN, 2021; UN, 2021c; UNSG, 2021b). Adding to these other reports, our research presents a more critical picture with regard to changes in the substantive component of the collective offer. While there were positive examples, we found little evidence of a systematic repositioning regarding what country teams offer to programme countries.

### 4.1 Collective offer: institutional change

Institutional change comprises reform-induced shifts and modifications in the formal and informal rules and processes that shape cooperation within the UNDS and country teams. We used interview findings to assess what brings country team members together and allows them to work more coherently towards common objectives, and what drives them apart. Against the background of the reform measures introduced above, we analysed what has changed in terms of working methods, leadership and funding, but also took into account perceptions of the organisational culture within the UNDS.

#### 1. Mutual understanding, inclusiveness and collective approaches are fostered by the revamped programming cycle

As a general pattern, country team members found the revamped programming cycle to be more consequential than the previous iteration. The structured joint preparations and planning processes allowed for more intensive exchanges within the country team and provided an opportunity for the government and other stakeholders to bring in their priorities. Retreats were highlighted as helpful instruments to learn about each other's work, bring everyone together around a common purpose, and develop an appreciation of potential challenges in various geographic locations. Undertaking a CCA was appreciated as an internal UN learning exercise to produce in-depth and joint knowledge about country situations, although in some cases, time constraints led to a somewhat exclusive approach.

Smaller agencies and UN entities without a physical presence in a country felt better integrated into planning and programming processes compared with the situation before the reform. The number of UN entities that are signatories to Cooperation Frameworks went up. At the same time, there was no evidence for a leaner UN presence composed of those entities best placed for a focused UN collective offer, as intended by the reform.

Country team members reported that the new planning cycle allowed them to develop a better mutual understanding of what each entity does, where they are active and how they operate. Some country team members said they were able to translate that knowledge into the identification of synergies and opportunities to pool strengths and work together and



minimise duplications. As a consequence, joint activities, including joint programmes (a UN collaboration modality in which two or more UN agencies work together with joint funding), are said to have increased across the board. In particular, respondents from smaller UN entities appreciated joint programmes and joint funding opportunities, while several staff members from larger entities complained about disproportionate efforts for relatively modest sums of funding.

Many respondents expected that the implementation set-ups (result groups, thematic and programme support groups, see Figure 2) would help country team members to work towards common objectives and outcomes. At the same time, given also that all country teams began Cooperation Framework implementation in 2021, there was not yet evidence that (often considerable) extra efforts invested in cooperation within the country team would pay off in terms of better substantial results. Joint work plans had not yet been finalised at the time of our interviews.

<b>Table 1: Implementation set-up of the UN country team in Georgia</b>	
<b>Result groups</b>	<b>Thematic and programme support groups</b>
Effective, transparent and accountable institutions	Gender Theme Group
Equal and inclusive access to quality services	Joint Team on HIV/AIDS
Inclusive economy and human capital development	Human Rights Theme Group
Human security and resilience	Disaster Management Country Team
Environment and climate change	Theme Group on Youth Development
	UN Monitoring and Evaluation Group
	Operations Management Team
	UN Communications Group
Source: United Nations Georgia, 2020, p. 65	

2. RCs (with capacitated RC Offices) show leadership and provide space for country teams to come together as one system

All in all, country team members acknowledged the empowered role of the RC and their increased independence. Their role was deemed particularly helpful for formulating a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a finding that has been articulated in greater depth also by the UN’s own early lessons learned study on the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund (UN, 2021c). In particular, country team members from smaller UN entities referred positively to the separation of the RC position from the UNDP. RCs were credited with a more inclusive and balanced approach than before the reform, an approach that provides space for all UN entities to contribute with their expertise and mandates to the collective endeavour.

Figure 3 provides an overview of how country team members described the role of the newly empowered RCs. The entries show that RCs are appreciated for the role they play internally when it comes to providing the overall direction, helping UN entities pool their strengths and coordinate for greater coherence. At the same time, they are recognised as having a more significant role vis-à-vis the host government, development partners and other stakeholders, in particular when it comes to upholding core UN norms and values.

**Figure 2: Word cloud on coded perceptions of UN staff on the role of the Resident Coordinator**



Being in charge of the revamped programming cycles, and reinforced by the revised MAF, RCs, together with the newly capacitated RC Offices, helped steer country teams towards a more cooperative and coherent approach. However, several RCs reflected that this remains a difficult task that involves struggles among entities, for example, with regard to the prominence of entity-specific mandates in the defined outcomes or with regard to visibility.

Country team members as well as external partners observed that the RCs’ elevated diplomatic status and strengthened convening power translate into a more united and coherent appearance towards external partners and the government than before, although challenges remain. While many country team members appreciated that RCs would amplify their messages or speak up on their behalf, others, in particular those from larger UN entities, offered a more critical perspective. They voiced concerns that RCs and RC Offices limit their visibility, access to high-level government and development partners, and autonomy. While the MAF articulates expected approaches towards the engagement between RCs, RC Offices and UN entities, a number of doubts and differences in interpretation seemed to exist with regard to the exact division of roles under different circumstances. In particular, how the UNDP carries out its special integrator function in support of the 2030 Agenda seemed in need of further clarification.<sup>1</sup>

3. Funding patterns have not changed enough to allow country team members to overcome competition and boost integrated approaches

In all four countries, funding patterns were consistently observed to be a key barrier towards cooperation and coherence. While country team members found that some development partners specifically ask for multi-agency funding, they highlighted that single-entity funding and strong relations between individual country team members and development partners persists. UN entities continue to raise funds for individual projects or programmes; development partners and host governments continue to approach individual UN entities (see also Weinlich et al., 2020).

<sup>1</sup> In the reform resolution, UN member states mandated that the UNDP be “the support platform of the United Nations development system providing an integrator function in support of countries in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda” (UNGA, 2018, § 32).

Country team members reported that some joint resource mobilisation for the Cooperation Framework was taking place, facilitated by the RC and RC Offices. They appreciated the opportunities that pooled funds, such as the Peacebuilding Fund and the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund, presented. Yet, bigger entities stressed additional transaction costs involved in joint resource mobilisation. The majority of interviewees saw pooled funding as an enabling factor for coherence, yet some country team members were critical of the small amounts available.

These findings are in line with those of other studies that not only underline how critical funding for reform implementation is but also deplore insufficient changes in funding practices (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021; MOPAN, 2021). It seems as if financial contributors in particular have not held up their part of the Funding Compact – which constitutes an important part of the operative underpinning of the reform. The Funding Compact, in turn, has not developed into the kind of partnership that would allow the UNDS to plan strategically, offer coordinated and integrated approaches, act quickly and leverage more finance, as originally envisaged (for more details see Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021).

#### 4. Allegiance to individual UN entities and entity-specific working methods continue to hamper cooperation and coherence

Across all four countries, a majority of country team members and all RCs voiced their understanding that more cooperation and coherence is necessary. At the same time, they reported that there is an uneven understanding of the reform and its objectives across the multiple levels of the UNDS and within different categories of staff.

Despite changes prompted by the reform, corporate policies continue to hamper collaboration at the country level. Not all country team members have their internal planning processes aligned with the Cooperation Framework cycle. Differing agency programming and funding processes make joint work difficult and cumbersome. Country team members also complained about additional administrative layers introduced by the reform, for example, when it comes to reporting systems such as UN INFO<sup>2</sup> which have not replaced entity-specific requirements.

Incentive structures still nudge country team members towards raising the profile of individual entities, often to the detriment of a more collective approach. Staff appraisal systems were mentioned as key incentives that still emphasise entity-specific objectives, including the ability to raise funds and provide visibility. Despite inclusion of performance indicators for collective work, the incentives and reward system for UN staff to work in an integrated manner with colleagues from other entities is still limited. It seems it is not in line with what would be necessary to fully engage in cross-organisational, cross-sectoral work that seeks to increase the synergies and minimise the trade-offs across the different dimensions of sustainable development.

While the newly introduced lines of accountability and division of responsibilities between RCs and country team members were mentioned as crucial for a more coherent approach,

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2 UN INFO is an online planning, monitoring and reporting platform that tracks the contributions of UN country teams to implementing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (see <https://uninfo.org>).

there were several examples of unclear division of labour, uneven application practices and enforcement gaps.

<b>Box 1: Interviewees’ responses to the question regarding the extent to which they perceive the UN country teams working together as a family</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doesn’t really feel like a family, or maybe like a “family with competitive siblings”.</li> <li>• “Even in most beautiful families you can have ‘family’ and competition.”</li> <li>• “We are one family, yet siblings compete.”</li> <li>• “We are sister agencies, but you don’t have to like your sibling equally much.”</li> <li>• “This family thing doesn’t apply much to UN country teams, rather to agencies, like, the UNICEF team is working like a family.”</li> <li>• “We see more competition than a collaborative partnership approach.”</li> <li>• “In country team X, there is much less competition than in other countries.”</li> </ul>

While several country team members reported that overall, competition over funding and visibility within country teams was addressed by reform measures, only few perceived the competition as positive, and many underlined that it should be further curtailed. As Box 1 shows, the omnipresence of competition also coloured perceptions of an overarching UNDS culture. Asked whether UN country teams were working together as a family, many respondents stressed differences over similarities. Allegiance to specific UN entities remains strong and continues to be fuelled in multiple ways.

## 4.2 Collective offer: substantive change

Substantive change in the quality of the collective offer comprises reform-induced shifts in the functions and services that the RC and UN country teams provide to support a country in its implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As discussed above (Chapter 2), our analysis focused on three areas, SDG integration, normative functions and cross-border work – areas that are key to the 2030 Agenda and in which the UNDS is well-positioned to make meaningful contributions.

### 4.2.1 SDG integration: weak analysis and a lack of shared concepts provide an insufficient foundation for SDG integration

The 2030 Agenda significantly raised the ambition for policy coherence to do justice to the interlinked nature of the sustainable development dimensions (Chaturvedi et al., 2021, p. 6). Not that coherence did not matter before – it very much did, for example, in the context of the aid effectiveness agenda (see Ashoff, 2015). However, with the expanded number of development goals, integration has become a touchstone for development cooperation. Integration in this context means taking into account synergies and trade-offs between SDGs, as different goals might have reinforcing, but also undermining, effects on each other (Chan, Iacobuta, & Hägele, 2021, pp. 27-28). Given that SDGs are interlinked in complex ways, SDG integration requires a systems approach rather than narrowly targeted, isolated interventions. Such a “systems-approach to sustainable development” is a key reform goal (UNSG, 2017, p. 49). With its different entities that often work across several SDGs, the

UNDS is in a unique position to advance such an integrated approach in its support to programme countries, both with regard to setting priorities and working across sectors and ministries.

For the UN, SDG integration has three elements: First, CCAs are supposed to identify the synergies, or “accelerators” (goals that have positive effects on other goals), and potential trade-offs between goals in a given country, and this analysis should then shape the Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDG, 2019a, 2019e).<sup>3</sup> Second, such an analysis must necessarily go hand in hand with a development approach “that targets systems – not just thematic sectors – to address all aspects of a complex challenge, including its root causes and its ripple effects across economies, societies and natural ecosystems” (UNSG, 2021a, p. 49). Third, taking complex interlinkages seriously requires tackling development at the strategic level. For the UNDS, this means strengthening its integrated policy advice, which, one might add, needs to be provided at a sufficiently “high level” to tap into those political forces that can bring institutions and stakeholders together on the side of host governments (Hendra & Baumann, 2020). Integrated policy is understood as “a deliberate approach to connect the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes across disciplines and sectors to produce an amplified, lasting impact on people’s lives” (Matthys, 2021).

Overall, we found that while the term “SDG integration” abounds in UN documents and rhetoric, the factual degree to which it is achieved, or even attempted, appears to be limited. The four CCAs and Cooperation Frameworks analysed for this study do not, or only at a highly aggregated level, explicitly identify and discuss accelerators and bottlenecks. To the extent that such analysis exists, it is unclear how it shapes the respective Cooperation Framework. None of the four Cooperation Frameworks formulate interlinkages in a strategic and action-oriented way. Although strategic priorities are formulated in a multidimensional manner that brings together the expertise of different UN entities, interviews confirmed that SDG integration was not an explicit guiding concern for the country teams when they designed their Cooperation Frameworks.<sup>4</sup> There were, however, approaches by two country teams aiming to enhance SDG integration in the implementation phase: one country team established a working group tasked with looking at linkages across the results groups and another country team introduced a system of rotating heads for these result groups to prevent the creation of new silos.

A separate finding, based more on interviews but consistent with the amorphous treatment of SDG integration in programming documents, is that there is no shared concept at the country level of what SDG integration means. We counted five different understandings of SDG integration, not including the official concept that UN guidance documents advance (see Box 2). All five concepts were more implied than clearly articulated. The broadest concept treated SDG integration as synonymous with SDG implementation, which reflects the fact that SDG integration should affect all aspects of development support, but which is unhelpful in terms of the focus required to target goal interdependencies. Against this background, the perhaps unsurprising conclusion that progress in shifting the UN’s

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3 There are instruments available such as the “iSDG tool” to assist practitioners in exploring synergies and trade-offs between goals.

4 This is in line with assessments by Ivanova (2021, p. 64); Passarelli, Denton, and Day (2021, p. 7); and Jenks and Kharas (2016), which point out that the UN is not well positioned in the area of SDG integration.

collective offer towards a “systems approach” with a greater role for integrated policy advice has been more ad hoc than systematic and transformational.

**Box 2: Understandings of Sustainable Development Goal integration detected in interviews and the concept advanced by UN guiding documents**

SDG integration remains an elusive topic with no shared understanding among practitioners, which may undermine collective action in UN country teams. In interviews, we detected five different understandings of what SDG integration is taken to mean in practical contexts:

- 1) Alignment of UN activities to SDGs.
- 2) Alignment of UN activities to national priorities.
- 3) Support to aligning national plans to SDGs.
- 4) Working on several SDGs simultaneously.
- 5) All activities and approaches that contribute to implementing the SDGs.

According to UN guidance documents, SDG integration “builds from a systems approach”. The key feature is complexity in the sense of causal links and trade-offs across SDGs, sectors and development challenges. SDG integration, thus, “requires [identifying] how important elements interact” and “which elements are most catalytic”; these are referred to as “accelerators” (UNSDG, 2019g, p. 21).

SDG integration is a particularly demanding and nascent field, where not only the UN, but also other development organisations are struggling to show progress (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2021). Externally constraining factors are national politics and capacities (see also Guerrero-Ruiz, Sachin and Schnatz, 2021). For the UN to advance SDG integration in a meaningful way it must sometimes act as a corrective force to national priorities: the UN would have to advocate for accelerators, compensate for certain gaps in national policies, and mitigate the side-effects of others. SDG integration in that sense is also a political function, and not just an analytical one (Brand, Furness, & Keijzer, 2021). Pushing too hard on SDG integration might come at the cost of alignment and ownership, two key aid effectiveness principles – and might pose serious problems to the UN as a development actor that is particularly close to governments. But there are also internal limits. For the RC to lead on SDG integration they must possess a substantial degree of coordination powers, which it appears country team members are unwilling to grant.

#### 4.2.2 Cross-border work is still limited and ad hoc

The 2030 Agenda highlights the fact that global challenges, like climate change, migration and issues around global health, require global collective action that considers dynamics across borders. With its global presence and regional networks on the one hand, and its multilateral mandates on the other hand, the UNDS has both the infrastructure and legitimacy to work across borders. Such cross-border work can take different forms. It can be about integrating transboundary and regional perspectives in UN country programmes so that country and (sub)regional development mutually reinforce each other (this thought can of course be extended to also include the global level). Cross-border work can also manifest itself in the implementation of specific programmes or projects across borders, be it on issues such as pollution, peace and security, or public health, to deal with cross-border interdependencies or simply achieve economy of scale benefits (see also Haug, 2021). While cross-border work is not new in UN development, the UNDS reform for the first time

made it a key element of functions expected from country teams. Formal guidance on Cooperation Frameworks prompts an analysis of relevant regional, sub-regional and transboundary dynamics and their likely impact on SDG trajectories (UNSDG, 2019g, p. 7). Such an analysis is expected to enable country teams to engage in improved and expanded cross-border policies.

Overall, we did not observe a significant increase in scope and scale of cross-border approaches. While there is an awareness of the potential importance of transboundary challenges among UN staff at country level and RCs in particular, there are few examples of a reinforced emphasis on cross-border approaches. While it needs to be acknowledged that for some countries or regions transboundary challenges are more pressing than for others, there is no country that is completely isolated from developments outside its borders. Attention to transboundary challenges should, therefore, be a universal feature of UN development work.

Collective planning and programming documents provided a mixed picture. While the eight CCA documents analysed for this study focus on transboundary challenges, in some cases according them high significance, the specificity (or level of detail) of the analysis is generally low, and in many cases restricted to issues of security and conflict. In turn, Cooperation Frameworks did not explicitly take up CCA findings, which, therefore, do not inform approaches and strategic outcomes, leading to a hardly actionable focus on transboundary challenges.

Many country team staff agreed that cross-border work should be intensified and were aware of the transboundary implications of their development efforts. Yet heads of agencies often found it difficult to explain how their development programmes are informed by, and contribute to, addressing transboundary challenges, or to provide examples of specific cross-border programmes and projects. There were no references to regional frameworks or any kind of renewed effort since the UNDS reform to develop a new generation of cross-border programming. At the same time, the majority of country team members underlined that the respective host country is their primary unit of reference towards which they feel responsible (see Box 3).

**Box 3: Voices on cross-border work from interviews**

- “If the objective of reform is to use all resources and be efficient, bordering countries should be more included.”
- “Cross-border [work] is really limited, it does not play a particular role.”
- “We work across borders with different countries. But I would say that this actually does not go at the level of the UN country team.”
- “As UN country team, very often you only focus on the country [...] this is where we need the regional entities and offices to bring the additional elements.”
- “The UN country team is a country team. We respond to country needs. We work on a country-based approach. Unless there is a clear cross-border priority or pillar in the national development plan, it is unlikely that you will see it as a Cooperation Framework priority.”
- “I work with various UN country teams in the region separately and I see the inability of them to work together.”

The country-oriented attitudes point to deep-seated challenges in boosting cross-border development approaches from within country teams. The UNDS' programming and accountability structures are geared towards individual countries and governments. This country-based operating model restrains its ability to work across borders: Cooperation Frameworks address policy priorities of host governments that might prefer a national lens, not least due to the often-high political salience of transboundary topics. Cooperation across two or more country teams presents a wide array of challenges, from the alignment of planning cycles over funding and the allocation of funds to the attribution of results. Against this background, it is already remarkable that each geographic region initiated flagship cross-border strategies and programmes (see, for example, UN, 2021a, 2021b). For cross-border work to become an integral and important part of the collective offer, further changes seem to be necessary.

#### 4.2.3 Normative work: LNOB and taking a stance for human rights – increased support, yet uneven outcome

The UN is the main international body for the agreement on key international human rights and other normative frameworks, and the 2030 Agenda is closely intertwined with human rights (Samarasinghe, 2021). One of its key principles, LNOB can be understood as a central tool for combatting discrimination, exclusion and inequality. The reform clearly intends to strengthen the UNDS' normative role and envisions country teams to promote, protect and defend UN norms and standards contained in international treaties, resolutions and declarations.<sup>5</sup> Where governments violate or fall short of their normative commitments, the UN is uniquely positioned to remind them of their duties and support them in adhering to them, be it publicly or behind the scenes. The RC system can provide added value mainly to the latter function. The newly empowered RC can draw strength both from unity within the country team and from the direct link to the UN Secretary-General.<sup>6</sup> Given the breadth of the UN's normative agenda, we selected two subtopics: the principle of LNOB and the ability to speak up on human rights violations. We deliberately left aside other important normative issues, such as gender equality or disability inclusion.

Overall, our findings are mixed; the quotes in Box 4 illustrate the broad spectrum of perceptions we gathered. Programming documents testify to a strong focus on LNOB and human rights issues yet fail to articulate a clear strategy on how country teams should collectively promote and engage on normative issues. While institutionally empowered through the reform, RCs are well aware of the practical limitations of their positions. Personal inclination and aptness to take a stand on human rights continues to play a large role.

Analysed programming documents display a keen attention to LNOB and human rights in general and are mostly good at identifying relevant marginalised and vulnerable groups.<sup>7</sup>

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5 UN guidance documents require “the empowered RC [to] lead the country team in pursuing a coherent, strategic engagement on the UN's normative agenda” (UNSDG, 2019g, p. 11).

6 Normative work in that sense goes beyond “the support to the [...] implementation of these instruments at the policy level, i.e., their integration into legislation, policies and development plans, and to their implementation at the programme level” (United Nations Evaluation Group, 2013), which is the UN's definition of normative work. It can also involve advocacy.

7 In some countries, the UN's Social-Economic Response Plans (SERPs) to the COVID-19 pandemic present perhaps the most comprehensive LNOB analysis anywhere to date.



However, with few exceptions, such analysis is by and large descriptive and does not systematically explore root causes of social exclusion. Cooperation Frameworks fail to articulate a clear strategy on how country teams would collectively promote and engage on normative issues. LNOB seems to be understood foremost as an allocation problem where the challenge is to geographically and socially identify relevant groups for targeted support.<sup>8</sup> This differs from a genuinely normative approach with a focus on rights instead of needs, on duty holders (state authorities) and on national policies as the most important root causes and levers for sustainable change.

**Box 4: Voices on “leave no one behind” and normative advocacy from interviews**

- “We are lucky to have the RC, who is very committed to human rights.”
- “When human rights violations occur, the RC actually goes out and makes the case. Quietly, diplomatically, but he does that.”
- “Now the RC can talk more freely, including at the political level, that is the change I have seen.”
- “I don’t think that we are loud enough. But if we speak too loudly, there could be protests next to the UN’s building.”
- “LNOB is known by everyone and is in everybody’s mind-sets, but a common strategy is not there [...] it has not reached that level so far.”
- “We don’t see that the RC Office has been leading on [various normative issues]. So basically, agencies have their own mandates and projects. [...] Frankly, I don’t see joint UN efforts on these issues.”
- “The EU and US ambassadors have been heavily involved in this [...] But for the UN, I think, our agenda here is [country X’s] agenda. [...] I think it’s important that we keep this neutral space for us.”

While the normative role of RCs cannot be disputed, interviews did not provide much evidence that RCs and UN country teams now act in a significantly empowered way compared with before the reform. RCs showed a clear awareness of their (perceived) limits when it comes to taking a public stance on human rights issues. Some displayed a more political understanding of their position and appear to try to push the boundaries more than others. Several RCs referred to the necessity of having multiple UN voices speaking up yet aligned to one message. Others drew distinctions between development issues and political issues, and included human rights violations, corruption cases, electoral problems in the latter, seeing these explicitly as more a concern for bilateral development partners. Another distinction was that for the RC, having the status of an ambassador, a quiet diplomacy approach was more appropriate than holding governments accountable publicly, an approach they associated more with human rights groups. This means that a significant part of the UN’s normative advocacy might actually take place behind the scenes, and examples were provided to that effect (in one case, the RC successfully intervened with the government to stop excessive police brutality in connection with pandemic-related social unrest).

Putting the normative agenda front and centre in a country team’s collective offer is subject to various difficulties. Many host governments are eager to underline that the RC – and the country team – are responsible foremost for development matters. Country team members

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8 Similarly, Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad (2018) found that in their voluntary national reviews on SDG implementation, countries tend to reinterpret LNOB as a social protection problem trying to end poverty rather than a human rights issue addressing root causes of inequality and discrimination.

might dislike a strong normative role of the RC that creates risks for their programmatic activities. Development partners might continue to see the UN as a project-implementer that can deliver results promptly, and, thereby, do not create an “enabling environment” for a strong normative role of the RC. It appears that this dilemma has not essentially changed more than a decade after Darrow and Arbour (2009, p. 458) pointed out that the “perverse incentives from the business of development [e.g., maintaining good relations with governments, completing projects in a certain time frame and funding] can run counter to human rights demands”.

## **5 Discussion of findings: three syndromes that hamper the collective offer**

The analysis of the substantive part of the collective offer demonstrates that the adjustment of the UNDS to the 2030 Agenda does not (yet) meet the expectations derived from the UN’s own reform ambition so far. Across all three areas of focus, there are examples of UN entities getting together to achieve more than they could alone. Yet, we detected very little systematic, much less transformational, change in how the UN works towards the goals of the 2030 Agenda. SGD integration and cross-border work remain largely aspirational. Normative advocacy through the RC was strengthened, but programmatic work still displays a strong drift towards an allocation-based approach rather than the tackling of root causes. It appears that the UN’s multilateral assets are not as effectively used to shape its collective offer to developing countries as they could be.

Our findings on the institutional elements of the collective offer are notably more positive. The strengthened leadership by the RC is recognised within country teams, though not universally welcome, and was particularly felt in the process of designing the Cooperation Frameworks. Country team members mostly reported a higher degree of cooperation and collaboration in this process, resulting in more coherent Cooperation Frameworks with a stronger focus on common results compared with earlier processes. However, the reform progress still appears fragile and incomplete. In a system still mired with problematic funding modalities, disparate and at times conflicting governing bodies and reporting structures, to cite just the most important impediments, drafting and, in particular, implementing the more coherent Cooperation Frameworks remains challenging. It is not a surprise that difficulties in the institutional element, where overall change is laudable, are translating into deficits in the substantive element in a more pronounced manner.

In the following, we adopt a systemic lens to highlight and review three more fundamental challenges that in our opinion need to be addressed to improve the institutional element, and, by implication, the substantive part of the collective offer. All three challenges have a clearly identifiable core and are connected with a range of other factors and causes and can, therefore, be characterised as syndromes. The three syndromes can be described as “my agency first”, “diversity defies unified solutions” and “business models undermine collective work”. All syndromes have in common that they cannot be solved at the country level alone but require a more holistic approach that addresses the basic parameters of how UN entities and the UNDS as such operate as well as how the UN’s stakeholders (most importantly host governments and financial contributors) relate to the UN.

## 5.1 The “my agency first” attitude persists

As the Secretary-General’s reports on the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) and the RC review outline, many UN entities have already adjusted their policies to reform requirements in areas ranging from business practices to job descriptions and staff appraisals (UNSG, 2021a, 2021b). However, a recurring theme in interviews was that the incentives for raising the profile of individual entities would compete with or even trump restraint in the interest of a more coherent, synergetic collective approach of UN country teams. There is a discrepancy between reported changes in entity-specific policies and harmonisation efforts and the observed ongoing push towards elevating individual entities’ visibility and mandates. For example, the MAF was strengthened as the central vehicle for a greater orientation towards a collective approach, but enforcement gaps remain. Interviewees highlighted this in particular with regard to MAF provisions on information sharing with regard to (collective) resource mobilisation and the patchy and often one-sided application of mutual performance appraisals (agency heads appraising the RC, but not the other way round). Old habits of raising earmarked funding for entities’ own programmes and projects rather than for joint activities persist. Nor are agencies or their staff ready to fully embrace reporting on collective results, which is seen as an additional administrative burden that deflects from agencies’ core business. “My agency first” also applies to host governments and donors: when they foster relationships with specific entities and engage them on specific single-agency projects, they undermine the UN’s internal efforts towards greater unity.

It still remains unclear to what extent many entities have implemented policy changes, how much weight collective priorities have gained in relation to agency-specific priorities, and how entities ensure that new policies take root at all levels. It is up to governing boards to hold individual entities accountable on adjusting to system-wide priorities. At the level of the General Assembly, the monitoring of reform implementation (through QCPR indicators) seems to focus more on the overall existence of changes rather than their quality.<sup>9</sup>

The implications of a “my agency first” approach are particularly evident in the Cooperation Framework. It appears overburdened by the (too) many priorities of individual agencies. The need for country programmes to be congruent with Cooperation Frameworks raises the stakes for individual UN entities. And the more Cooperation Frameworks gain importance, the more country team members may seek to be adequately represented in them. A potential solution to this dilemma from the point of view of country team members, but an entirely non-intended (and undesired) effect from a systems perspective, is that entities push for broad Cooperation Framework outcomes that can accommodate their mandates, but in the end reflect the broadest common denominator. This contradicts the idea of an integrated and focused UN offer. The “my agency first” syndrome explains, for example, the low priority given to SDG integration, which is not a priority of any specific agency but should emerge from the joint programming process. Similarly, on the role of external actors, greater demand-orientation in the sense of full alignment with host government priorities can reduce space for translating the independent analysis of the CCA into programmatic priorities. The need to satisfy the demands of external stakeholders, to which one could also count donors and governing boards, might stifle higher aspirations of country teams regarding SDG

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9 The Secretary-General recently announced that the UNSDG will prepare a reform checklist and reform score cards for greater transparency, which might provide more detail (see UNSG, 2021b, § 153).

integration, normative work, cross-border work and other areas that are key to the UN's collective offer.

## 5.2 Diversity within country teams creates impediments for integration

Reform implementation is not a mere technical implementation exercise but entails conflicts as costs and benefits are unequally distributed, creating (perceived) winners and losers. Some entities are (afraid of) losing access to government and funders, visibility, and the ability to focus on their mandates in unrestricted ways. These are typically the larger agencies. Others see benefits through greater reach through the RC, support by RC Offices, synergies with other entities, access to funding, improved offer to governments, and better development results. In particular, those agencies with no physical presence in a country and the smaller agencies see a positive cost-benefit ratio for themselves. Agencies also differ on other scales: their proximity to governments or financial contributors; their focus on either upstream or downstream work; their staff capacities and seniority in country, norm- and standard setting or operational functions; their funding patterns; and where they stand on the development-humanitarian spectrum. The consequence is that an approach to coordination that treats unequal agencies as equal is bound to lead to frictions and frustrations since there is no level playing field in this respect. Our study found, indeed, that support for the reform varies across entities depending on how they see their own cost-benefit ratio.

Reform progress will remain fragile as long as not all entities, in particular the larger ones, subscribe to the new model of working together. The underlying assumption of the reform is that a much greater degree of collaboration both strengthens the UNDS collectively and makes individual agencies more effective, to the benefit of the country they support. In practice, this assumption of the reform being a win-win game might be too ambitious, and for the time being, some consideration should be given to the question of how diversity – one of the key strengths of the UNDS – can be respected and utilised. Member states (both host governments and donors) are often not sufficiently sensitised to these questions, and even RCs can struggle to do justice to UN country team members and their specificities.

The question of diversity is particularly pressing with regard to the UNDP. Despite having been separated from the RC system, the UNDP continues to be a central part of the UNDS family. It continues to provide administrative support to the RC system and has been playing a crucial role in helping the UNDS to formulate a collective socio-economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With its mandate for fostering an integrated approach to the SDGs (including integrated national financing frameworks), the UNDP is, in theory, key to supporting the UN's collective offer. However, there appears to be a lack of clarity with regard to how the UNDP uses its integrator mandate. Our research suggests that the UNDP tends to see SDG integration as a service to be provided to host governments primarily, and by the UNDP directly, not to the UN country team or through it (despite the fact that the capacity of RC Offices was also strengthened for greater coordination services). We suggest that this double-structure poses a risk to UN country teams' collective offer, potentially relieving other agencies of their responsibilities regarding SDG integration and leading to an unclear division of labour concerning RC Offices.

### 5.3 Business models undermine collective results orientation

The reform aimed for transformative change in how the UNDS supports countries in their SDG implementation processes. This is not just about better cooperation and coherence but includes a repositioning of how UN entities work and what functions they perform on their own as well as together with others. Scattered improvement notwithstanding, our research found no systematic change in the substance of what UN country teams offer when assessed against UN guidance documents/frameworks and the requirements of the 2030 Agenda more broadly. Where change was observed, individuals and favourable circumstances seemed to play a key role. Individuals can now refer to the political will expressed by UN leadership to push forward, but structural impediments still loom large. One major structural impediment to greater collectiveness is partially self-inflicted: after more than two decades of competing for earmarked contributions raised mostly at country level, a business model has evolved for many UN entities that has clear commercial connotations. “Business model” in this context is understood as the way in which organisational rules combine impact and revenue, cost and asset structures. The current business model is based on opportunity-seeking behaviour that is in tension with a multilateral, mandate-driven way of operating. Too often it is also at odds with a strategic, impact-oriented approach at country level. Despite efforts from the 1990s onward to work at a more programmatic, policy relevant level, business models are attuned to and push the UN towards project work, earmarked funding, and the need to demonstrate quick and tangible results rather than long-term impact. Such practices result in fragmentation. They create the need for coordination and, at the same time, make coordination highly challenging, since they fuel competition and mission creep. They have repercussions on the composition of the UN labour force that often lacks specialised skills relevant for integrated policy advice or SDG integration (see also Weinlich et al., 2020). We, therefore, conclude that the currently dominant operating model is not aligned with the vision of a coherent and sophisticated collective offer, centred on high-level, integrated policy advice and committed to long-term sustainable impact.

Host governments and donors also bear responsibility for this state of affairs. Their governance at headquarters level has too often emphasised accountability and results-orientation over flexibility and sustainable impact. The kind of programmes and projects they demand and fund at country level too often push UN entities into the roles of implementers. It will be difficult for the UN to unfold a more sophisticated collective offer without member states also changing their expectations, practical demands, and funding opportunities for UN development support (see also Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021).

## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper, we set out to gauge the effects of the ongoing UNDS reform on a strengthened collective offer. It is important to put our findings and the analysis presented above in perspective. Large and fragmented systems like the UNDS are difficult to change. The reform, launched with the intention to make “bold changes”, is exceedingly complex and ambitious. Against that background, the changes we observed – in particular with regard to the institutional set-up – are significant and need to be acknowledged. Overall, reform measures propel the system in the direction of a strengthened collective offer.

Yet, when measured against the UN's own higher ambitions, we also find that progress is still limited, in particular concerning the substantive part of the collective offer. The vision of the reform is UN country teams that form a common understanding of the challenges for their host countries, prioritise areas for UN support informed by the UN's multilateral assets, and then provide well-integrated solutions – rather than aggregating the “collective” response from individual agencies' programmes. In the three focus areas chosen for this report, each representing a key aspect of the collective offer, we find that the UN is still a long way from achieving this vision. The gaps that remain might be teething problems, given that change in large organisations takes place on longer timescales in the absence of an overwhelming central authority. They might also partially be explained by our country sample, including its size, the unforeseen challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and our focus on planning rather than implementation.

However, the lack of evidence for the beginning of a systematic repositioning points to potentially more fundamental challenges, which we sought to describe using the three syndromes elaborated above. The ongoing high degree of fragmentation (including in the UN's governance arrangements), the problematic funding pattern, political economy issues of diversity that defy uniform solutions, and the dominant business models all set limits to the change that needs to take place at country level. Indeed, as part of his proposals on how to take forward the commitments of member states developed at the occasion of the UN's 75th anniversary, UN Secretary-General Guterres invited member states to revisit UNDS governance and funding arrangements (UN, 2021d, § 112).

Awaiting such fundamental changes should, however, not be used as an excuse. There remain plenty of opportunities for those interested in advancing the UNDS reform towards a better collective offer to countries with a view to the 2030 Agenda. Based on our analysis, we formulate the following recommendations addressed to UN actors and UN member states, including both financial contributors and host governments.

## 6.1 Upgrade the value of the UNDS as a collective

To mitigate “my agency first” tendencies, it is important to reinforce incentives and considerably enhance accountability for joint work, collaboration and collective results, and strengthen the narrative of what the UNDS as a system can and should achieve.

### **To UN member states:**

- Member states should raise the priority of the UNDS reform and invest efforts in a whole-of-government approach. The rationale, measures and required changes should be well known across line ministries and duty stations.
- Member states should clearly and consistently hold UN entities accountable for adjusting organisational policies to the requirements of the reform, both through governing boards and in their bilateral relations with individual UN entities. They should regularly demand transparency and evidence on how entities are adjusting their internal policies and how they contribute to collective results.
- Member states should put the RC system on a secure and sustainable financial footing, both to enable its work and to signal they fully support the reform goal of a cohesive

UNDS working collaboratively from a common agenda at country level. In the absence of a funding model based on assessed contributions, they should commit to adequate multi-year contributions.

**To UN actors:**

- All UN Entities should fully embrace the reform and adjust accordingly from headquarters over regional to country level and from job descriptions over administrative procedures to programming cycles. The United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) should periodically review the quality of these adjustments.
- UN entities could formulate tentative targets for joint activities and develop ideas on how a systems approach could be “mainstreamed” beyond specific indicators requested by the General Assembly. This should be part of internal communication and shared within the UNSDG.
- Similar to the UN’s Framework for socio-economic recovery, the UNSDG should invest more effort into what a reformed UNDS can do differently based on its shared values and principles and collect and share examples in this regard.

## 6.2 Manage diversity within UN country teams and turn it into a core UNDS strength

The reform is neither about subduing the singularities of individual UN entities and levelling out differences, nor about forcing cooperation for the sake of cooperation. It is important to support and explore different ways of how UN entities can combine their unique approaches into a collective offer.

**To UN member states:**

- Member states should ask UN country team members to form smart coalitions that draw on the unique strengths of entities and allow for differentiated participation in programming and implementation.
- Member states should ask for further clarification of the role and responsibilities of the UNDP with a view to making sure that the UNDP’s assets benefit the entire country team (and vice versa), in particular in the area of SDG integration, where any duplication between the UNDP and the RC system must be avoided.
- Member states should foster close relations with RCs and support the leadership role vis-à-vis UN country teams to uphold a strategic vision and direction instead of a lowest common denominator approach.

**To UN actors:**

- In particular, smaller agencies and agencies with normative mandates and expertise should explore different modalities of how they can more effectively bring in their assets to the collective offer. Correspondingly, larger agencies should state the potential benefits to be obtained from working together.

- To foster a better understanding of each other's specificities as well as UNDS commonalities, staff mobility within the UNDS should be enhanced.
- UN country teams should be encouraged to share and disseminate good examples of how synergetic, joint work leads to results, including information on working arrangements and funding modalities.

### 6.3 Towards business models well-suited for sustainable development

The current dominant business model heavily rests on earmarked resources raised at the country level and is at odds with a strengthened collective offer for better SDG implementation. Action is needed to mitigate the role of earmarked funding and rebalance business models for greater impact orientation.

#### **To UN member states:**

- Member states should engage UN entities on the basis of a country team's collective offer for better SDG implementation. To that effect, they should review their current engagement patterns at the country level for consistency with the collective offer and adjust accordingly.
- Member states should demand more sophisticated support from country teams geared towards long-term outcomes that are in line with the reform objectives developed in New York as well as with the necessity to integrate social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.
- Member states should align their country-level funding with the Cooperation Frameworks, reduce tight earmarking and provide funding to the UN's pooled funds (be it the SDG fund or country-based pooled funds) in line with their commitments in the funding compact.

#### **To UN actors:**

- UN entities should revisit their business models in light of what's needed for SDG implementation. Elements to consider might be a separation of (headquarters-based) resource mobilisation and (country-based) programming functions and measures to curb fragmented, short-term activities.
- Understanding, planning and implementing integrated approaches to the 2030 Agenda should receive more attention within the UNDS, and country teams and RCs should receive more support to that end in particular with regard to a better and greener recovery. A regular UNSDG survey (as part of the annual reports to the UN Economic and Social Council) could capture the UN's evolving collective offer.
- To facilitate more cross-border work, the regional level of the UN should be tasked to provide a common chapter with (sub)regional analysis to be inserted into CCAs in a given (sub)region. Cooperation Frameworks should be required to address at least one substantial transboundary challenge.



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## Annex 1: Overview of interviewees

Interviewee	Type	Côte d'Ivoire	Eswatini	Georgia	Uganda	Other	Total
WFP	UN	X					1
UNOPS	UN			X			1
UNIDO	UN	X		X			2
UNICEF	UN	X		X	X		3
UNFPA	UN	X	X	X			3
UNESCO	UN		X		X		2
UNEP	UN	X					1
UNDP	UN	X		X	X		3
UNAIDS	UN	X	X				2
UN Women	UN			X	X		2
RC Office	UN	X		X			2
RC	UN	X	X	X	X	XXXX	8
OHCHR	UN				X	X	2
IOM	UN	X		X			2
ILO	UN	X	X	X	X		4
FAO	UN	X	X	X			3
DCO	UN					XXX	3
UK	MS			X			1
Germany	MS			X	X		2
EU	MS			X			1
World Bank	MDB			X			1
Other	UN					XXXX	5
Other	MS			XX			2
Other	Civil Society				X		
<i>Total</i>		12	6	17	9	12	56