

# The UN's Development Function: Time for Renewal

Sanjay G. Reddy<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The United Nations' development function is vital to its purpose. Although the UN has many outstanding development achievements to its credit, its development-related organizations do not meet their full potential. They often do not work together, choose priorities that are well funded over those that have strategic potential, and fail to challenge or to shape development priorities and ways of thinking defined elsewhere. The UN should focus on activities to which its unique characteristics make it best suited and undertake changes that enable it better to act boldly, for example by acting as a convener of unruly but productive debates and by being a truth teller rather than a score keeper. The current process of reforming the governance of the UN's development function holds promise, even in the present difficult political conditions, but is a mere beginning.

**Keywords** Development · United Nations · UN Development System · ECOSOC dialogue · Independent team of advisors · Development cooperation · Aid

The UN's development organizations have recently been the subject of an unprecedented effort to diagnose their ills and initiate reforms. Nevertheless, they are likely to remain caught uncomfortably between hope and reality, asked to fulfil tasks for which its capacities are grossly insufficient, and undermined by diverse internal and external factors. The UN Development System<sup>1</sup> (UNDS) is a paradox: born

of noble aspirations to promote justice and the common-weal but strongly influenced by specific interests; born of historical currents and structural imperatives, but given shape by accidents; paying homage to holism but bedevilled by piece-meal efforts; having proliferated beyond expectations but wholly inadequate for its goals; an often ineffectual tool that is still the best suited to many tasks; possessing an identity apart from all nations and yet hopelessly trammelled by them; needing reforms but resistant to them; widely recognized and hardly known; roundly criticized and poorly understood.

The Independent Team of Advisors (ITA) to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, of which I was a member, examined the UNDS with a view to recommending reforms that could enable it adequately to support the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the broader 2030 Agenda.<sup>2</sup> Although the SDGs are ultimately a commitment of member states, it was reasonable to ask how well equipped the UN organizations concerned with development were to help further the goals, and what reforms could enable them to do so

<sup>1</sup> The definition of the UNDS, and the organizations which belong to it, is not altogether clear, despite the frequent use of the term, including in UN General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions. The term is often understood as referring to the collection of UN entities that conduct 'operational activities for development', but no definition has been formally agreed upon. The total number of entities conducting such activities is 42 in total, according to Burley and Lindores (2016), who specifically exclude the World Bank and the IMF from this count. They also provide a thoughtful description of the history of the use of the term, beginning with the report of Jackson (1969), and discuss the issues arising in the choice among alternative interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> The time and resources possessed by the ITA for this task were unfortunately very severely limited, making it difficult to collect adequate information about the system, let alone to study it adequately in order to come to fully reasoned conclusions.

✉ Sanjay G. Reddy  
reddysanjay@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Economics, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA



better. This note focuses on what directions should be taken in further reform of the UNDS following the recent landmark UN General Assembly resolution that was a culmination of the ‘ECOSOC Dialogue’ on the renovation of the system.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I will refer to the criteria that must be considered from a fundamental viewpoint when evaluating the UNDS and assessing prescriptions for its future.

## UNDS Reform: Principles and Practice

The question of what reforms are desirable pertains to the system as it exists. The principles that would be appropriate to appeal to if there were occasion to design it from scratch, or even to redesign it fundamentally, may not be the same as those that apply when dealing with the reform of the system as it is, taking note of the assets and liabilities, prerogatives and responsibilities, opportunities and constraints that shape what is incrementally possible and desirable by way of reforms. Further, although normative principles, legal and philosophical, as to what is to be held desirable in the interstate system, or as a matter of global justice, provide a necessary compass, empirical considerations—political, economic, social, organizational, and technical—determine what is possible. Concerns of feasibility must influence our picture of whether a particular pattern of the system is attainable or sustainable. There are diverse perspectives both in regard to the relevant normative principles and in regard to these empirical considerations. For this reason, there can be no academic blueprint for the exercise. A workable ‘overlapping consensus’ can only derive from a suitable debate in world society over what ought to be done and why. Concrete visions can provide inspiration for such discussion.<sup>4</sup>

The UNDS came into being without ever having been ‘designed’ but if a purpose were to have been conceived for it, what would this have been? Let us suppose the existence of good reasons for cooperation among countries to further development, including, although far from

exclusively, through the provision of development assistance (knowledge and resources) from more to less developed countries. The goal of development has been pursued through diverse instruments, both bilateral and multilateral. The case for the UN itself to be an operational development actor presumably turns on two considerations. First, that of whether and to what extent it is superior for countries to act in concert (‘multilaterally’) rather than acting independently, and second, on whether and to what extent the UN provides a superior means of doing so than other available means. If the actual pattern is any indication, the donor countries take a balanced view of the relative merits of acting together and independently, but treat the UN as a not particularly favoured instrument for their multilateral development activities.<sup>5</sup> It appears that in recent years, the resources allocated within the UN system to development relative to other areas, especially those associated with ‘firefighting’ (peacekeeping and humanitarian measures) may have also diminished.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The amount spent by the UN Development System has been estimated at \$26.7 billion in 2015 Adams and Luchsinger (2017), UN-DESA (2016) and 30.4 billion in 2016 (United Nations 2018). This estimate appears to be calculated by adjusting the total expenditure of each UNDS entity according to a proportion of its budget that is assumed to be spent on ‘operational activities for development’ (see Table 1 in the ‘Technical Note on Definitions, Sources and Coverage’ for United Nations (2018) available on [http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/pdf/technical\\_note\\_on\\_funding.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/pdf/technical_note_on_funding.pdf)). There is some doubt about the meaning and reliability of this estimate since it appears discrepant with figures from other sources (see next note). However, it can be compared to \$131.4 billion of bilateral official development assistance from OECD DAC countries in the same year (<http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/final-oda-2015.htm>). Amounts spent by multilateral institutions and by newer donors are both not included in this total. The World Bank Group alone made 55.7 billion dollars in loan and grant commitments in 2015 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/07/12/world-bank-group-support-tops-61-billion-in-fiscal-year-2016>).

<sup>6</sup> Data from the UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination (<https://www.unsystem.org/content/FS-F00-04>) show a very rapid increase in expenditure on ‘humanitarian assistance’ (rising from \$9.2 billion in 2009 to \$16.4 billion in 2016) as compared to ‘development assistance’ (falling from \$12.9 billion in 2010 to \$11.8 billion in 2016). As a proportion of total expenditures, development expenditures fell from around a third to a little more than a fifth. Development expenditures as defined by the CEB appear to involve a different basis for classification as compared to ‘operational activities for development’. While the CEB contains fewer constituent organizations than the UNDS, it is difficult to understand the large discrepancy in the estimated expenditure on development activities in the two cases (compare with the previous note) unless there is a difference in definition. The CEB defines ‘Development Assistance’ as ‘activities of the funds, programmes and agencies of the United Nations which have the specific purpose of promoting sustainable development in developing countries...distinguished from Humanitarian Assistance by focusing on long term impacts’ (<https://www.unsystem.org/content/financial-statistics-definition-terms>). Data on combined revenues and expenditures, necessary for a proper understanding of the UN’s activities, appear presently to be quite unsatisfactory.

<sup>3</sup> See General Assembly Resolution 72/279 (available on <http://undocs.org/a/res/72/279>) adopted on 31 May, 2018. This Resolution is a follow-up to General Assembly resolution 71/243 ([http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/243](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/243)), the culmination of the prior Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of the UN’s ‘operational activities for development’ and of the functioning of the UN Development System (<https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/what-quadrennial-comprehensive-policy-review-qcpr>).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of an ‘overlapping consensus’ derives from the work of Rawls (1993). It is taken here to refer to an agreement between those who are committed to different fundamental ideas concerning normative principles that rests not on their overcoming all of their differences but on the identification of workable shared principles to undergird public institutions that they can agree upon from their different perspectives.



The UN possesses specific features that set it apart from other potential mechanisms of collective action (for example, the Bretton Woods Institutions and the regional Development Banks) among donors. Some of these features may make the UN more attractive and others less so as compared to other intermediaries available to donors. These same features may have the same or the opposite effects from the perspective of recipients. It is the donors, however, who are in a position to determine the scale of the resources devolved through the different instruments. Among the features setting the UN apart are the following. First, the UN is perceived as a largely neutral body, in that it is seen as not systematically or strongly favouring particular national interests, at least when it comes to its development programs. Second, it is a body that reflects a role for almost all countries as constituent elements and thus is perceived to speak in a universal voice. Third, it is perceived as governed by a democratic ethos insofar as the countries that make it up all have representation in decision-making. Fourth, it has diverse concerns and objectives, including political, sociocultural, and economic elements, and as result it does not uniformly prioritize those of a particular kind (such as the economic) over others in its development or other activities. Fifth, it is perceived as having a progressive mission, aiming to create a better world and not merely to stabilize or maintain prevailing conditions. As noted, these considerations, taken individually or jointly, may cut both ways in terms of making the UN attractive or not as a development instrument. For example, it may be argued that the first three elements (which are subtly distinct but closely related) taken together lead to a culture of 'diplomacy' which permits dealing with difficult and conflictual situations as an honest broker, but perhaps as a consequence also leads to impasses in decision-making or to at times extravagant deference to individual member-states.

In practice, the UN is not a single entity but rather is a 'congeries' of diverse organizations, which are nominally functionally differentiated, but also often seem to act in overlapping or uncoordinated fashion. Specific bodies (e.g. funds, programmes and agencies) within it are also often perceived as being notably more competent or efficient than are others. In the 'marketplace' of development intermediaries, different UN bodies at times can compete for prerogatives and resources. What is the appropriate number of institutions and allocation of responsibilities among them? (As far as the author is aware, no major UN entity—Fund, Programme or Specialized Agency—has ever been closed.) More generally, what forms of reorganization and reform of the collection of organizations can add to the effectiveness of the UN as a development actor?

The ideas of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Jan Tinbergen (long associated with the UN) on the subject of

how best to arrange institutions to serve given objectives may be of some value here, see Tinbergen (1956) and the discussion of his ideas in Barry and Reddy (2008). If there are multiple distinct objectives of policy, then in general these can only be tackled by applying an equal or greater number of instruments. However, it does not follow that each policy instrument must be attached to a distinct institution. In principle, multiple instruments can be wielded by a single institution or multiple institutions can coordinate over the use of a single instrument. The appropriate allocation of rights and responsibilities among institutions will depend, in principle, on their respective thematic concerns and the degree of interdependence between these, on the manner and extent to which each instrument influences the outcomes in different domains, and on the efficacy with which different institutions are able to wield any given instrument. The different objectives of policy must in turn be related to a holistic conception of the ultimate ends. Both evaluative and empirical concerns must be taken into account, with the optimal number of institutions and the particular assignment of policy instruments to them depending on the specifics of the case. There cannot therefore be any permanent solution to such questions, whether within the UN system or beyond it. This is a reason periodically and substantively to review the workings of the entire system and the ascription of distinct roles to different institutions as well as the mechanisms of cooperation which are available and how they are employed. The current reform efforts are only a beginning.

Development is perhaps the quintessential example of a field in which there are deep evaluative as well as causal connections between domains, which generates a recurrent call for comprehensive approaches. Most recently, Agenda 2030 stated, 'The SDGs and targets are integrated and indivisible... It is important to recognize the link between sustainable development and other relevant ongoing processes in the economic, social and environmental fields'.<sup>7</sup> This recognition cannot, however, be viewed as implying that a 'mega-agency' could address all concerns in development. Instead, development actors should cultivate a sensitivity to the interdependencies that are present and develop methods, including forms of cooperation across thematic areas and institutions, that encourage taking note of these in practice. Applying this framework to the UNDS and its ability to deliver on the 2030 Agenda suggests a hard look at the competences of the respective institutions and their ability as well as inclination to work together where needed (of course, such a discipline of assessment could also be applied to the still broader 'ecology' of development agencies and organizations). By its very

<sup>7</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.



nature, an assessment exercise of this kind implies considering potential reorganization of the existing institutional scheme, including the allocation of resources, rights and responsibilities and the strengthening of capabilities and incentives (including to cooperate between organizations).

One of the issues considered centrally by the ITA was that the UN has an indistinct and ineffectual identity ‘on the ground’ as a development actor. Whether because specific UN entities loom larger than others in particular countries, because the UN’s role is often ‘behind the scenes’, because the UN entities are, even when considered together, overshadowed by other development intermediaries, or for other reasons, the UN as a whole often possesses little recognition as a development actor. More significantly than its failure to enjoy ‘brand recognition’, however, is that even the UN entities concerned with development within a country have often had a very limited propensity to work together (as suggested by assessments of the rather modest ‘Delivering as One’ initiative).<sup>8</sup> This problem is compounded further when the field is broadened to include humanitarian and human rights organizations, those concerned with peace and security, and others. The UN Resident Coordinator (RC) has typically had very limited authority and prerogatives, and, most often, no resources have been available for joint activities of UN entities in a country. The reforms recently proposed by the General Assembly seek partially to address these concerns, in particular by providing a mechanism for pooling resources for common activities and by requiring the RC to report directly to appointed staff in the office of the Secretary General. However, the proposed reform is embarrassingly handicapped by a lack of financing, as the idea of increasing assessed contributions for the purpose appears to have been rejected outright by certain influential member states. A so-called negotiated pledge, in which countries coordinate voluntary contributions, seems more feasible, but may also be difficult to realize. This gap is not merely one of financing but is between rhetoric and reality.

Other reforms are needed, in particular mechanisms for better integration between the UN’s Humanitarian activities and its Development activities, which are artificially sequestered in terms of both funding and functions (an issue which was specifically kept out of the brief of the ITA but is quite clearly damaging because of the many interdependencies between the domains). The cost of non-cooperation is visible ‘on the ground’ since short-term actions aimed at humanitarian relief often have long-term

implications that are inadequately recognized, and the lack of development activities can give rise to humanitarian imperatives. However, there appear to be considerable political sensitivities associated with the issue, since ‘development’ activities are often perceived as being an area in which the developing countries (‘G77+ China’) have greater influence and prerogatives, whereas humanitarian activities, financed to a greater extent through voluntary allocations, more greatly reflect donor priorities and sensibilities. A strict separation is no solution. A discussion, both political and technical, of how to bring about greater coordination is long overdue. The relation between human rights monitoring and advocacy and development activities is a related concern which needs fresh attention.<sup>9</sup>

The weakness of the UNDS is also closely related to its resource limitations. (While recognizing that money is a limited index of commitment, there is perhaps no better indicator of the failure of countries’ actual actions to comport with accustomed rhetoric, let alone the demands of global justice. See Reddy (2016) for, *inter alia*, a discussion of the inadequacy of current development finance for achieving the SDG Agenda.) One weakness is in the composition of UNDS resources: the greater part of the growth in resources in recent years, and a large share of the present total, is made up of ‘non-core’ funds, very often committed on an *a la carte* basis to individual projects and programmes favoured by particular countries (especially donors, but also often recipient countries, which often finance development programs in their own countries via the UN).<sup>10</sup> Current trends in development finance (specifically, the stagnation of aggregate aid flows, despite SDG commitments) and donors’ preference for development instruments that they directly influence, both suggest that it is unrealistic to anticipate a sizable increase in funds available to the UNDS.<sup>11</sup> An improbable amount of effort has gone in recent years into discussing and implementing efforts for UN organizations to share back-office functions, offices or other facilities (the previously mentioned and only partially successful Delivering as One initiative). But above and beyond such modest managerial innovations, a more important question concerns whether there is really a substantive common programme in a country,

<sup>8</sup> The Independent Evaluation of the Delivering as One initiative brings out the considerable difficulties involved in generating cooperation between UN entities (United Nations 2012). The discussion in United Nations (2018) does not suggest a great deal of further progress.

<sup>9</sup> The case of the UN’s role in Myanmar, where it has been accused of limiting human rights advocacy on behalf of the Rohingya in order to allow development activities to proceed, provides one stark recent example.

<sup>10</sup> Muttukumaru (2016), United Nations (2016) and UN-DESA (2016) (especially Figure 1).

<sup>11</sup> See Reddy (2016). See also the OECD DAC statistics on total ODA flows, which indicate almost stagnant ODA flows in recent years, once in-donor-country expenditures on refugees are discounted (see <http://www.oecd.org/development/development-aid-stable-in-2017-with-more-sent-to-poorest-countries.htm>).





despite the existence of a nominal shared document (the UN Development Assistance Framework, or UNDAF) that is meant to reflect one. Unfortunately, there often isn't.

It seems probable that the future of the UNDS is in undertaking activities that allow it to make best use of its differentiating features, such as its perceived universality and neutrality. Except in specific cases (e.g. post-war reconstruction) direct delivery of services is unlikely to be among these. Instead, activities that are 'upstream' such as early warning of threats to human security and well-being, and the coordination of responses to them, the convening of roundtables on specific policy issues and initiatives, the orchestration of peer and partner reviews on development experiences, and norm development through public deliberation<sup>12</sup> are more likely to be among these. Such efforts can potentially be integrated with Voluntary National Reviews of SDG initiatives and performance to make them more meaningful and to enhance innovation and accountability.<sup>13</sup> The UNDS can enhance these functions (some of which it already undertakes to various extents) nationally, regionally and globally. The UNDS is best positioned among development actors to offer a holistic view of progress or its lack in global development. However, to be effective it must go beyond being the mere keeper of the scorecard in relation to global goals, and both analyze and prescribe. The gross shortfall of current resource flows in relation to the actual requirements of achieving the SDGs provides one example of where emboldened truth-telling and advocacy functions are needed.

Recognizing the specific attributes of the UNDS helps to establish the rationale for its role in various national contexts, even outside of the Least Developed and 'Low Income' countries, where its continued presence as a development actor is generally recognized to be desirable. Many 'middle-income countries' (especially those that fall in the lower-middle-income category according to the World Bank's classification) have pressing and varied needs which go beyond resource transfers, as they have argued forcefully in the recent debate. In such countries, the UNDS can act as a catalyst for the identification, discussion and development of policy alternatives, and the coordination (not necessarily direct delivery) of technical cooperation. Complex problems influenced by and influencing multiple policy areas such as those associated with irregular migration, climate change, the drug economy or other issues, all require the establishment of expertise, forward-looking assessments, practical proposals, and

negotiated solutions, and can benefit from UN expertise and neutrality at the national, regional and global levels. Many of these may require creative ideas and alternative perspectives, which must be actively encouraged. The capabilities of the UNDS to coordinate, monitor, reflect and convene must be enhanced. In recent years, the withering of the UN's internal policy-monitoring and analysis capabilities has become evident to outside observers. (The heyday of UN influence over policy-relevant ideas, especially in the field of development, is rather distant now. On this distinguished history, see Jolly et al. (2009)). UN under-performance is related especially to inadequate or ill-applied resources, limited internal technical and intellectual competence, tendencies to bureaucratic self-reproduction and sclerosis, and a 'diplomatic' culture of avoidance of difficult issues and deference to forcefully asserted interests. The periodic evaluation of UNDS organizations must be made more substantive and consequential, by insulating it better from internal and external lobbying. This is likely to require root and branch innovations to the accustomed governance and accountability structures. An issue to be addressed in approaching such reforms is that the 'good' features of the UN (e.g. its perceived neutrality) are often closely linked to its 'bad' features (e.g. the influence of all countries over decisions, often to an extent that is crippling). There is no permanent solution to this conflict, but there are ways of managing it better. Regrettably, only modest measures have so far been under discussion, such as introducing more varied membership in UN boards (e.g. of independent experts unconnected to states). These reform ideas provide only a beginning.

Ultimately, the ability of the UNDS to contribute to global development will rest less in either expansion or efficiencies, and more in establishing a better portfolio of activities that is more focused and strategic. The UN must help to shape how we together think about and approach development processes, rather than on directly delivering services or executing projects. Such an approach will make the best use of its defining features, diminishing the extent to which they are weaknesses and enhancing the extent to which they are strengths.

## Conclusion

In order to renew its rationale and enhance its relevance, the UNDS must extend the reform process that has begun, if in fits and starts, and in an inhospitable political environment. Among the areas in which existing reforms ought to be consolidated and further reforms ought to be sought are the following three:

<sup>12</sup> The landmark global thematic Summits and Conferences of the 1990s on diverse social issues, in which UN organizations played the role of creating global 'democratic' moments, even if at the risk of manifesting an unruly rabble of voices, provide one pointed example of this role.

<sup>13</sup> See Reddy (2016).



- *Build Common Purpose* Enhance substantive cooperative activities among UNDS entities at national, regional and global levels, by creating institutional incentives as well as material support for developing an integrated programme and method of work, while also maintaining autonomy of individual entities to shape priorities and approaches. Provide financial resources for cooperative activities and for the system of independent UN resident coordinators reporting to the Secretary General. Similarly, break the wall between humanitarian and development activities in the UN system and develop concrete mechanisms for their integration where required, recognizing the independent importance of each.
- *Renew the System* Evaluate periodically, substantively and independently the rationale and justification for individual UNDS entities' existence and the allocation of roles among them. Reject narrowly managerialist approaches to the reorganization of the system. Recognize that the UN operates in a political space and that its interlocutors are countries, movements, and people, and not merely 'clients' to whom it presents a 'business' offering. At the same time, revise UNDS governance structures to diminish the paralyzing influence of the 'culture of diplomacy' and enhance the role of expertise and wider representation of voices, e.g. by opening membership on boards to non-state representatives. As a first step, a thorough independent study of the working methods and norms of the UN system as a whole and of its individual entities (recalling the earlier study of Jackson (1969)) should be initiated and tasked with making more specific recommendations than have been so far advanced.
- *Reshape the Focus* Lean towards a 'big' vision of the UNDS as a catalyst of development on national, regional and global scales and away from a 'small' vision of it as engaged in delivery of services to or on behalf of governments. Therefore, shift the UNDS portfolio of activities towards strategic ones. These can involve, for example, upstream technical and policy-formulation activities (requiring in turn to rebuild UNDS entities' function as centres of knowledge and expertise) or the convening of fora for public deliberation on national, regional and global scales. Renew the role of the UN as a convenor of deliberations and debates among diverse voices in national, regional and global development (not merely orchestrated institutional processes such as the development or monitoring of global goals). Focus on activities that take advantage most of the UN's distinctive characteristics, such as universality and neutrality. For example, assess the adequacy of the global system of development cooperation taken as a whole for achieving proclaimed

global goals. Be a truth-teller and not merely a score keeper.

Although some steps in these directions are being undertaken, much more is needed. In the current global environment, a general interest in supporting the required measures cannot be relied upon. Those member states that wish a capable UNDS must therefore adopt a leadership role. As the 70th year of UN development-related concerns and activities approaches, we must ask how the UN can go beyond established ways. Reforms of the UNDS should aim not merely to maintain the credibility of the UN as a global development actor, but to enable it to take centre stage in creating a better world.

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