

Background paper for member state briefing on the 19th of May 2014

How to make the UN development system "fit for purpose"?

Food for thought

Summary

The UN development system has a unique role and potential in the international development architecture. However, according to some, the UN development system is currently pulling below its weight. Issues pertaining to role and function, value added, a changing development landscape and funding are key to strengthening the outcomes of the UN's development work. Member states need to engage in a conversation about how to achieve renewal of the UN development system. The Post-2015 process offers an opportunity for member states to examine the status of the UN development system in relation to the global development challenges. In the spirit of the former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation offers to facilitate an informal conversation among member states geared towards the renewal of the UN development system.

Background

1. The UN development system is an invaluable actor in the international development architecture. The system holds a key role in the shaping of global norms and standards on issues pertaining to development and it has a near global reach in terms of its operational capacity. Equally important is the unmatched legitimacy held by the UN development system.
2. This being said it is important to recognize that nearly 60 years have passed since the UN development system was established. During these years the world has experienced significant developments. These are, among others: the emergence of new geopolitical constellations, the shift towards a multipolar global economy, changes as regards the incidence and distribution of poverty among and within countries, the emergence/identification of new challenges of a "global" nature or concern and the way in which the international community is attempting to address the multifaceted challenge of promoting sustainable development. As the only example of a truly global multilateral organization, the UN must be at the center as we address future global development challenges.
3. However, due to the fact that the UN development system has not kept pace and evolved sufficiently with the world surrounding it, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the system to take on this leading role. Instead, the UN development system is increasingly subject to critical scrutiny, diminishing financial resources and external judgments indicating that neither the system nor its individual parts are delivering on their mandates with enough efficiency and effectiveness.
4. As a response to external pressure and to a growing realization that the UN development system a) is not performing as well as it could, and b) may not be optimally geared to deliver on the next generation of international development goals, a discussion on how to make the system more "fit for purpose" has been initiated by the UN system and the member states. This is a process that should be welcomed by all stakeholders that recognize the potential value added of having an effective and well functioning UN development system as a key part of the international development architecture in the years ahead.

The opportunity created by the post-2015 process

5. The process of establishing the post-2015 development agenda offers an opportunity for UN member states and other stakeholders to examine, assess and position the UN development system vis à vis the global development challenges and the agenda through which to deal with them. The objective should not be to have all the answers by September 2015, but to use the opportunity provided by the post-2015 debate to raise all the necessary questions and to identify where there may be gaps or room for improvement in the way in which the UN development system functions and delivers results to its beneficiaries.

Some key issues that need to be addressed

6. It is the primary shareholders of the UN development system, its member states, that will decide whether, and if so, what elements that are to be discussed and decided upon as regards possible renewal of the UN's development work. With the intention to provide some food for thought – and to hopefully stimulate some discussion – the following elements are hereby introduced as possible issues/themes to be deliberated within the framework of the "fit for purpose" debate.
7. The relevance of what the UN development system has to offer. With the emergence of new development actors and initiatives it is important that the UN clarifies its value proposition in development. In a reality that is as resource strained as today's, the UN development system can rely on its moral authority and its legitimacy derived from the broadest membership possible. It also has to demonstrate a clear value added in relation to other actors and initiatives. At the heart of the matter is really the question of whether the UN development system is at present providing the right product(s) to its increasingly heterogeneous constituency (i.e. the member states and their citizens).
8. The UN development system and solutions to global challenges. Obviously the present system of international governance is struggling to deal with some large-scale global challenges such as: climate change, global energy availability, global health, international financial stability, global food security and inequalities. The UN system - with its strong tradition in developing international policies, norms and standards and forging global agreements on rules and regulations - has a particularly important and unique role to fill in this area. Over the course of the past ten years the UN has for example displayed its ability to mobilise issue-based alliances on particularly pressing issues (bird flu, food security, energy, health). Would a more institutionalised approach to such issue-based alliances be a constructive way forward for the UN in the development field? A discussion among stakeholders on the role of the UN development system in the provision of solutions to global challenges, most of which are captured in the current discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals, would serve to demystify some issues surrounding global public goods.
9. Closely related to the point above it would be natural to have a conversation among member states and other stakeholders about the role of the UN development system in different countries. It is clear that in supporting the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda, including its global goals and commitments, the UN will have to be active in significantly different country settings. The requirements placed on the UN development system cover i.a. monitoring the upholding of commitments under the global partnership and international agreements, supporting the implementation of international policies, norms and standards in various areas, providing policy support, providing traditional ODA, facilitating peace building and providing humanitarian support.
10. How to fund the UN development system in a way that provides the best incentives for results oriented implementation at country level? Current funding practices are not conducive to long term planning for the UN agencies, for transparency or broad based ownership among the member states. Neither do current funding practices facilitate inter agency collaboration, but rather tend to cause competition among UN agencies. A key

question is how to hold individual agencies accountable for their work according to mandates endorsed by their respective governing bodies while still promoting system wide coherence? Another is the predictability of resources in the UN Development System as well as burden sharing between contributors, as the system provides its advice and services to different countries.

11. The UN development system has always been, and will continue to be, dependent on partnerships with other actors. What is the state of the partnerships of the UN development system today, and how could they be strengthened so as to more effectively contribute to the implementation of the agreed international development goals and beyond? The definition of "partnerships" can of course be debated, but at the very least the exchange with civil society and private sector actors as key partners of the UN development system needs to be examined.

A proposal for the way forward

12. The concept of "fit for purpose" may have different meanings to different actors and is bound to raise questions among member states as well as among external stakeholders to the UN development system. In furthering the "fit for purpose" discussion, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation envisages that an informal process, aimed at achieving a shared understanding of the challenges as well as the possibilities for the UN development system, is required.
13. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, in promoting multilateralism and as a critical friend of the UN, is eager to facilitate such a conversation and process among member states and in close contact with the Secretariats. In the first phase by contributing to deepening the dialogue on specific challenges and the role of the UN in that connection. Studies and papers could be commissioned as the process moves forward.
14. The Foundation could arrange and facilitate periodic briefings for member states on various topics pertaining to the "fit for purpose" debate, thus providing support to the on-going process. The Foundation remains open to partnering with all actors who are keen on advancing an agenda for renewal of the UN development system.