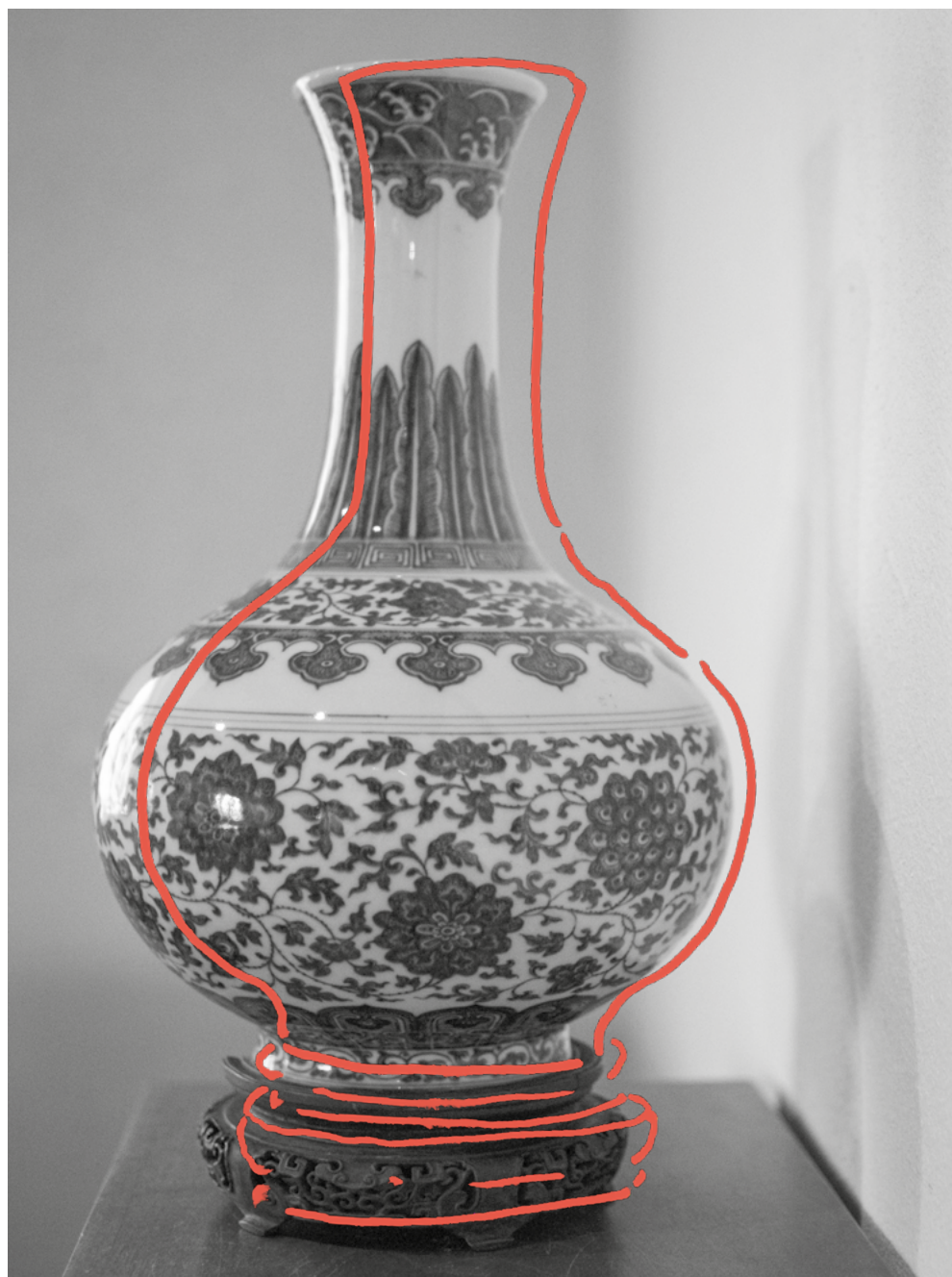


Pivoting for more dynamic impact – Enhancing UN development policy leadership during times of polycrisis

John Hendra



The Chinese vase. In 1955, Dag Hammarskjöld met with Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, to seek a diplomatic solution to a complex hostage crisis. Against all odds, Hammarskjöld succeeded in laying the groundwork for the release of the American hostages. He simultaneously made an unexpected friendship with Enlai, who gifted him this Chinese vase. John Hendra sees this kind of innovative and courageous leadership as a model for today's UN in its efforts to navigate the complex web of polycrisis. This vase may symbolise the blessing of finding and maintaining friendships in unlikely places.

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Today our world continues to suffer compounded polycrisis stemming from wars in Ukraine and Gaza, concomitant cost-of-living, food and fuel crises, an uneven recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, a debt crisis for many countries in the Global South and a burning climate crisis, to name a few. As noted at the recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Summit, even the most fundamental global goals – on poverty, hunger and education – are going into reverse while gender equality is now some 300 years away.

To be able to support countries most effectively, the UN's development policy leadership must not only be nimbler, but it must also be *deeper and more coherent* in terms of addressing underlying root causes. Substantively, the focus needs to shift from short-term transactions to maximising the UN's policy potential and its normative role for facilitating more sustainable transformations. On an individual level, UN leadership needs to emulate the key characteristics of principled leadership highlighted in the last *The Art of Leadership in the United Nations* report – that courage, along with humility, are the foundation for implementing new ways to practice UN leadership.¹

Principled, empathetic and innovative UN leadership

At a recent ODI dialogue on what leadership traits are required during polycrisis, participants highlighted empathetic listening and humility; understanding the interconnectedness amongst different crises; shaping the narrative around ethics and values; inclusive mindsets; and creating effective partnership strategies ('collective leadership').² As Mark Malloch-Brown, President of Open Society Foundations, said at the same ODI forum 'an age of polycrisis calls for a new generation of leadership able to recognize that "you cannot change the wind but you can bend the sail" as Kofi Annan put it – radical exercises in the art of the possible'.³

This tallies well with the four key ways in which the nine leadership behaviours in the UN System Leadership Framework manifest themselves: namely, systems thinking; co-creation within the UN system and with external partners; focusing on producing impact for the most vulnerable; and driving transformational change.⁴ It also resonates well with key competencies identified for 'fit for future' Resident Coordinators: (1) substantive skillsets in multisectoral policy capacity, navigating the nexus and leveraging development finance for SDG acceleration; (2) an appetite for risk-taking; and (3) high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence.⁵

An excellent example of such leadership during polycrisis was exhibited by the UN Secretary-General and the heads of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Through courageous leadership – and diplomatic ingenuity – a mechanism was established for the safe export of grain and related foodstuffs to global markets so as to help address hunger, mitigate global food insecurity and ensure the safety of merchant ships delivering grain and other agricultural products.⁶ Only too tragically, the war in Gaza has also presented a number of examples of UN leadership standing up and invoking the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights, perhaps none more striking than when the UN Secretary-General invoked Article 39 of the United Nations Charter in December, 2023.⁷

Coherent UN global and national policy frameworks

In terms of development policy leadership, the UN needs to drive greater alignment between robust, well articulated global policy frameworks and contextualised country-level policy responses to polycrisis, including the *now crisis of SDG acceleration* what with only

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15% of SDG targets on track half-way into the 2030 Agenda.

Such a focus worked well with the UN's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with the Strategic Preparedness Response Plan, UN Socioeconomic Framework and Global Humanitarian Response Plan all contributing to operational and policy coherence and leadership across the UN system. This approach also very importantly supported the normative leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) in health emergencies while ensuring that a global UN-wide Socioeconomic Framework informed country contextualised Socioeconomic Response Plans (SERPs), thereby contributing to a coherent and effective ‘One UN’ response to COVID-19 across the UNDS.⁸

In short, the UN's response to COVID-19 was relatively effective for multiple reasons, including: (1) a common sense of purpose defined by a set of common goals and collaborative focus generated by the emergency; (2) clear, robust and concise response plans, at global and country levels, around a limited set of common goals; and (3) availability of flexible and system-wide funding.⁹

A similar approach was initially taken globally in response to polycrisis through the UN's Global Crisis Response Group but fell short in terms of development of a well-articulated global policy framework and subsequent contextualization at country level. Hence, it will be important that the UN Development System's now stepped-up focus on major transitions, including those six transitions identified as entry points for creating systematic impact across the SDGs – (1) food systems; (2) energy access and affordability; (3) digital connectivity; (4) education; (5) jobs and social protection; and (6) climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – does not make the same mistake.

In order to do so, it is critical for UN leadership to ensure that global policy frameworks – including system-wide frameworks developed via the Chief Executives Board for

Coordination (CEB) and the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) – and accompanying investment strategies are robust and well-articulated and consistently communicated across the board, so that they also inform substantive, inclusive and effective policy responses at country level.

Each of these key transitions requires a consideration of multiple policy levers – ie actions that recognise the integrated nature of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. This helps ensure that, collectively, efforts are multiplicative and that all policy actors amplify each other's work. Moreover, since the SDGs are interconnected, so too are these six transitions. For instance, as significant contributors to greenhouse emissions, both energy and food systems are inextricably linked with climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.¹⁰

Addressing UNDS policy capacity gaps

The focus of the six transitions – and the critical mass of integrated policy expertise required behind each – should enable RCs and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) to better exercise the leadership required to deliver together to help countries unlock the deep transformations needed to achieve the Goals by 2030. But to be able to do so, not only leadership but also the depth of UN policy capacity will need to be addressed.

While UNCTs, and the broader UNDS, has substantial capacity and expertise in four of the six transitions targeted for SDG Acceleration – food systems transformation; decent jobs and social protection; education and skills; shifting the energy mix – greater UNDS technical expertise and policy capacity is quickly needed for the other two critical areas: the digital divide, connectivity and transformation; and the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

A recent updated review of the capacities and functions of the UNDS to accelerate progress on the SDGs conducted by Dalberg Advisors highlights that UNDS

expenditures in 2022 are the smallest for environment/climate and economic-oriented SDGs. This is the case even though these SDGs are among those furthest off track; among the areas most cited by UN Resident Coordinators as having gaps in expertise for the provision of integrated policy advice to Member States; and areas of the main concomitant crises with the exception of food security. This very much mirrors the results of the first Capacity Study conducted in 2017, the results of which were integrated into the Secretary-General's 2018 vision for the reform of the UNDS.¹²

In order to address these policy gaps, the updated Capacity Study recommends reprioritising how existing resources are deployed within UNDS entities to expand technical expertise required to deliver integrated policy advice and help Member States accelerate progress on the SDGs. In this context, the Capacity Study flagged that it is particularly important that leadership be exercised to create or expand pools of expert skills in the key transformative areas. This includes energy, climate and nature, education, food systems, jobs and social protection, and digital connectivity and for delivering on the 'engine room' actions needed for greater scale and impact through coherent policy frameworks, developing 'market-ready' projects, convening financing and building capacities.¹³

More dynamic UNDS policy delivery

It is not just the lack of technical and substantive capacity in key policy areas that holds the UNDS back – it's also *how* such policy support is delivered. As the Updated Capacity Study also highlighted, several UNDS financial and operating models are not designed to support building expert capabilities and deploying them effectively – and thus can inhibit creating more flexible UN country team configurations tailored to meet the needs of different countries. Current financial models and the lack of core financing also don't make it easy to deploy experts for short periods – whether from an entity's own HQs/ regional office or from a different entity that might have suitable expertise.¹⁴

For non-resident entities looking to deploy expertise to a country for substantial periods of time, there is uncertainty about whether hosting arrangements with the RC office or with another resident entity will allow them to be fully operational or to access administrative services easily. Going forward, the UNDS will need to enhance its leadership and understanding of the support Member States need, so that it can evaluate whether the business models, capacities and skills within the UNDS will continue to be fully 'fit-for-purpose' in the period up to 2030 and beyond.¹⁵

Similarly, as the recent UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) evaluation of RC system support to enabling coherent UN policy advice highlights, despite good performance there are structural impediments that hinder efforts for more coordinated action and integrated United Nations policy advice.¹⁶ Limitations on funding, both for the UN globally as well as for the RC system specifically, and obstacles relating to more seamless leveraging of policy expertise, will need to be addressed to realise the full potential of RCs in supporting integrated policy advice to host governments.

Ensuring that the UNDS has the necessary policy expertise and more nimble delivery options to provide integrated policy advice will enable better delivery on the outcomes of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks agreed with national governments. It will also be key that Member States exercise leadership during the upcoming Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) to strengthen their endorsement of UNDS entities' provision of quality integrated policy support.

Also, *how* the UNDS is funded remains critical. With approximately 60% of UNDS income in 2021 very tightly earmarked for specific programmes and projects, and only 19% for core resources, emphasis is inevitably on quick and tangible project-level results. This in turn introduces a short-term orientation and rigidity in project planning rather than what is required – long timeframes

and flexible approaches required for facilitating policy change.¹⁷ Additional core funding would also enable entities to build and deploy the necessary policy expertise.¹⁸

Conclusion

Beyond coherent policy frameworks, addressing capacity constraints, opening up the UNDS to more dynamic policy responses and ensuring more quality funding, at a time of polycrisis bold and courageous UN leadership is especially needed. Just as the UN showed great ingenuity in helping address the wheat/grain crisis through the 'Black Sea Grain Initiative', so too it must continue to partner more widely and mobilise the global and national policy leadership needed to help countries better deal with the myriad of crises that they face today.

As the world continues to battle some of the strongest headwinds seen for decades, it will be critical that UN leadership continues to 'bend the sail' to find more innovative ways to maximise all its assets in helping address today's polycrisis. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 'The Art of Leadership in the United Nations. Painting perspectives, staying true to principles', (Uppsala, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2022).
- ² ODI, 'Leading through crisis: what works and what doesn't', ODI discussion forum in Davos, World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, January 18, 2024 <https://odi.org/en/events/leading-through-crisis-what-works-and-what-doesnt/>.
- ³ ODI (note 2).
- ⁴ UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 'United Nations system leadership framework', CEB/2017/1 (Annex), 20 June 2017, <https://undocs.org/en/CEB/2017/1>.
- ⁵ See John Hendra, 'How can leadership by UN Resident Coordinators become truly transformative?', *The Art of Leadership in the United Nations: Painting perspectives, staying true to principles*, 2022, (Uppsala, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2022) pp. 104-109.
- ⁶ For more on the Black Sea Grain Initiative see <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative>.
- ⁷ Last used 35 years ago, the invocation of Article 99 allows the UN Secretary-General to draw the attention of the UN Security Council 'to any matter which, in his opinion, may endanger the maintenance of international peace and security'. Article 99 is used very infrequently and invoked explicitly even less so. Facing a severe risk of collapse of the humanitarian system in Gaza, he urged the Security Council to help avert a humanitarian catastrophe and appealed for a humanitarian ceasefire to be declared.
- ⁸ Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network, 'Lessons in Multilateral Effectiveness: More than the Sum of its Parts? The Multilateral response to Covid-19: Overview,' 2022.
- ⁹ Dalberg Advisors, Updated Study of Capacities and Functions of the UN Development System to Accelerate Progress on the SDGs, Final Draft, December, 2003, page 6.
- ¹⁰ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 'Six Transitions: Investment pathways to deliver the SDGs', (New York, United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2023), <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Six%20Transitions%20English.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Dalberg (note 9), page 3.
- ¹² A review of UNDS current functions and capacities in June 2017, in response to the 2016 QCPR's 'ask' of the Secretary-General, showed that the UNDS is yet to fully transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs and Agenda 2030. See Dalberg Advisors, 'System-Wide Outline of the Functions and Capacities of the UN Development System', Consultants Report, June, 2017.
- ¹³ Dalberg (note 9), page 7.
- ¹⁴ Dalberg (note 9), page 5.
- ¹⁵ Dalberg (note 9), page 5.
- ¹⁶ United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, Evaluation of Resident Coordinator System support to enabling coherent UN policy advice, Assignment No: IED-23-019, 20 December, 2023.
- ¹⁷ Max Baumann and John Hendra, 'Towards More Policy Advice: Maximizing the UN's Assets to Build Back Better', Briefing Paper 24/2020 (Bonn: IDOS, 2020).
- ¹⁸ Dalberg (note 9), page 8.