

Conducting ‘business as unusual’ in an era of urgency and polycrisis – the role of the RC

Resident Coordinators



Anubis. For Hammarskjöld, the Egyptian god Anubis was seen as the symbol of new ideas. He therefore made sure to keep this figurine on his desk, where it served as a constant re-minder to maintain an open-minded approach in his diplomatic endeavors. To address the UN's ongoing crisis of relevance and legitimacy in the contemporary world, the need for Anubis reemerges. For the UN to regain its credibility in global leadership the interviewed Resident Coordinators call for innovative leadership embodying courage, creativity, and a willingness to embrace change.

Photo: Gabriella Dahlman

This contribution is a summary of virtual informal dialogues between United Nations Resident Coordinators (RCs) facilitated by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in January 2024. The following UN officials participated: Louise Aubin, former Resident Coordinator Niger; Siddharth Chatterjee, Resident Coordinator China; Ozonnia Ojielo, Resident Coordinator Rwanda; and Maria José Torres, Resident Coordinator Chile. The contribution includes views voiced by these individuals but not all views are necessarily shared by all. It reflects only perspectives raised by the Resident Coordinators and there is no narrative added by the Foundation.

The views expressed in this article are those of the individual Resident Coordinators and do not necessarily reflect the view of the United Nations.

Perceptions of a diminished space and response capacity by the United Nations (UN) are pervasive. Behind the organisation's significant role and presence across the areas of humanitarian response, other arenas – notably those relating to peace and security – seem forlorn and devoid of real leverage and resources.

In a time of polycrisis, the moral voice of the UN can appear insufficient, if not powerless, against the impotence of the UN Security Council which many feel has lost its own moral compass.

Four Resident Coordinators working in different geographical locations and contexts engaged in a conversation to consider some of the critical issues they face as leading functionaries of a UN under increasing pressure.

Setting the stage: What does the world, and the UN's place in it, look like in 2024?

The UN is clearly at a crisis point. Considering the depth, breadth and nature of today's crises, the relevance of the UN is being questioned in ways that have little precedence in its history.

'Where is the UN?' one often hears. While the emergence of new multipolar structures of governance, and new structures of power such as regional blocks may bring a new sense of fairness and equality to solve today's pressing issues, it reflects a sobering reality for the UN and its architecture which seems inadequate or 'unfit for purpose' in the 21st century.

In this context, there is a rising anti-UN rhetoric with many across the globe distancing themselves from, if not challenging, UN agendas such the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and multilateral solutions, and spreading disinformation and misinformation about the organisation. While many people may still believe that the UN is the guardian of people's rights, doubts

and scepticism in the face of deteriorating global trends are multiplying.

Parts of the Global South are seemingly willing to reinterpret the hegemony of a liberal view of the world upon which the UN was built. There is also an emerging state rhetoric portraying the UN not as a rational actor seeking solutions through consensus, but as a strategising, calculating defender of the Global North's interests. This is coupled with emerging conspiracy theories from some actors on the 2030 Agenda. Simultaneously the space for reconciliation and for using traditional tools such as development to dispel these perceptions is shrinking.

The reality is that several Global North countries are unable or unwilling to uphold their Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) aid commitments and instead reprioritising budgets towards military expenditures and/or inward priorities. This will only exacerbate the fractures, leaving a UN caught in the middle. Blamed as impotent to shape donor decisions, or worse, for abetting this trend.

So, it is not a surprise to see some UN Member States turning to other structures and institutions for solutions, following the principle of subsidiarity. But from our perspective, this begs the question of whether these other structures and institutions will uphold UN values? They may serve some Member States' interests, but will they keep sight of 'We the peoples?'

Can the UN regain trust and the confidence to lead?

Despite, and perhaps because of the pushback, it is essential to remain ever so focused on UN norms and principles. UN leaders should continue to uphold core values and not allow the spotlight to be taken of any issue. This is a moment to resort to the values of the UN Charter. Of course, this requires political acumen for a

delicate balancing act in order to safeguard engagement with decision-makers, but these values are what gives the UN its credibility.

The UN must vigorously search for entry points with those who oppose UN agendas and try to understand the root causes of such opposition, instead of merely criticising it, with unconditional support being offered from both headquarters, UN peers and Member States to those of us who remain principled even in the face of acute resistance.

Responding to the multitude of challenges of today requires the courage to flip the orthodoxy, to conduct 'business as unusual'. Traditional solutions, even those employed 10 or 15 years ago, no longer apply. That is how fast the world has changed and this is how deep the mistrust in the UN is.

New ways of working and engagement are needed, spanning the entire innovation and modernisation toolbox, seeking better use of data, smarter use of new technologies, and outreach to new partners. This is why it is disconcerting to witness the criticism of the Secretary-General's reform agenda, decided by the Member States, which is designed to project and accelerate the UN's shift into a modern, fit for purpose organisation by disrupting our old ways of working. Member States need to give him their full support.

Engaged neutrality

The UN must practice engaged neutrality and integrity. In practice it translates into projecting UN norms as means to effect change and be accountable to people, not only governments. This is generally more understood by the humanitarian sector than by development actors. With development programs negotiated and aligned with government priorities, it is at times difficult for RCs to avoid the blind spots and keep the focus on peoples' aspirations, not just those of their government counterparts.

Legitimacy gives self-confidence, and legitimacy comes from the ability to intercede on behalf of the people through knowing them and their needs and aspirations. To know them, we have to be on the ground.

A self-critical view of how the UN works on people centered development through governance is needed – one that truly contributes to nation building and not just views the UN's engagement through a narrow project or programmatic approach, often couched and delivered through the technical and therefore innocuous capacity-building route.

Communicating frankly and strategically

We understand that this is all challenging – pressure against principled approaches abound. Resistance to pressures and criticism is risky, personally and institutionally. This is where good and active messaging and communication come into play. We need an honest articulation of what we do well and not so well.

On the one hand we need much better data and compelling stories of what works well in order to show tangible examples of UN successes. On the other hand we don't really speak to our limitations, to what we don't do or don't do well. As such, we create false expectations. We leave control of the UN narrative to others, including to detractors. By not speaking to our own limitations, we can't really express what is needed of others, lifting up their responsibilities and what they need to do to enable the UN to successfully exercise its designated leadership.

Hence, we need to communicate more strategically. The UN, and RCs, needs to articulate its unique role and strategic offering, not least to the countries they serve. We need to move away from 'our project...' speak and articulate how the UN works in a more complex world with more actors and address the anti-UN agenda and its trolls. Of course, we can only do so if we understand how the world functions, beyond the UN's usual partners, and beneath the surface. This is where the role of the RC is vital.

‘There needs to be a shift away from acting as project managers to becoming thought leaders.’

Resident Coordinator roles and responsibilities

The reform of the Resident Coordinator system was the boldest response ever undertaken to lift the UN's development offer. As such it needs support, from inside and outside the UN.

We know the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are off track, and the RC on the ground has an immense responsibility in affecting this trajectory. But for this responsibility to be fully assumed, it is important to understand that being the Secretary-General's representative on the ground is not merely a co-ordinating role. You must stand by the principles of the UN Charter and lead by impartiality, also in highly politicised and polarised situations. This requires backing. It is also essential with support in mobilising resources.

Fundamentally, the RC must play a strategic and visionary role, one that helps the country chart its way out of instability and/or towards the SDGs, and to position the UN's added value along this path. This is not just a matter of envisioning where the host country will be in ten years, but also what the role of the UN will be in that country in ten years. Then the RC must translate this vision into UN normative processes and operational frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).²

The RC can't leave that only to the Resident Coordinator Office, RCO or the agencies. From strategic decision and vision setting, they must then lead on strategic planning and vision implementation. Only then can the RC coordinate the operationalisation of such frameworks and strategies. Without these dimensions in place first, the role risks turning into one of patching and mending fragmented, projectised efforts which will not bring effective results.

Thought leadership

Today's urgent challenges and tasks demand that we move away from a fragmented, project-based mindset.

We need to think in terms of scale and at scale, about the big picture.

The fundamental question many RCs are still grappling to answer is what the UN's *collective strategic offer* is on the country level. Often, the UN footprint is very operational, projectised and even at the project level, the footprint is often small. There needs to be a shift away from acting as project managers to becoming thought leaders.

This speaks to one of the unique roles of the UN and its leadership – from the Secretary-General to the Resident Coordinators. We need to connect the macro with the micro, the global to the local. UN leaders have to find ways of bringing the scale of global ambitions formulated at global summits, in the UN General Assembly and other platforms, down to the national, local and regional levels by supporting actions that operationalise these ambitions.

In this regard, the new RC function and the new strategic framework at the country level, the UNSDCF, set the stage for higher and more strategic ambition and leadership.

What actions can we take, as Resident Coordinators?

The UN's crisis of relevance and legitimacy means that we must engage with a much more diverse set of actors and partners.

Today's problems are multidimensional and thus require complex, cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary solutions. Many more actors, not least private sector entities, have a role in this collective enterprise and in these incredibly complex times, sustainable development will not happen without their involvement.

It is up to us to make the proposition of the UN attractive for other stakeholders by magnifying the value of the UN's convening power, our ability to connect actors and

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issues, and to catalyse. This need for synchronisation means that programs need to be designed with these stakeholders in mind.

Sometimes building these relations can be challenging. We do not always speak the same language. But what is interesting is that many chief executive officers (CEOs) we engage with have quite a sophisticated understanding of the SDGs and can speak more clearly about them than many UN leaders.

This is an opportunity we must seize, notably with regards to SDG resourcing for example, where we see an increasing appetite for blended financing as a way to bring the private sector to the fore. We also see the need to engage local governments, and the sub-national levels of power and governance of, for example, mayors and governors. How do we bring value to them, at that level?

What does it take to do so?

First and foremost, it takes courage. Courage is a word used in our workshops, but then we often go back to being timid. An RC can survive and get the job done by being timid and do quite little.

But we must all dare to embrace change, otherwise the UN will be stuck in irrelevance. An RC must be willing to risk failure and the system needs to back up individuals who dared and failed. This includes the Secretary General's office and the Development Coordination Office (DCO), who must as well embrace change and new ways of doing business and forging new partnerships.

RC leadership is also about being entrepreneurial and innovative. The RC system needs a new spirit of enterprise. At the country level, we must be at the forefront of creativity, imagining or helping partners to find new pathways towards 2030 and what comes thereafter. We must embrace the potential of new technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), and not just see or speak to the dangers. This can, for example, help to shorten

time frames related to policy design, implementation and testing, and to generate new ideas.

The investment in UN leaders needs to start early, already at the P3 and P4 level, to promote these attributes. We also need flexible and sufficient resources, without which designing and implementing a strategic vision over a fragmented, projectised approach will remain difficult. This also means we need to continuously improve the identification and selection of Resident Coordinators. With the current demands of leading in times of polycrisis, more emphasis is needed on testing for authenticity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to navigate very challenging situations, connecting the dots and finding pathways through complexity.

The capacity to make strategic connections between issues must be a priority when selecting RCs. Hence also the need to create more effective peer support mechanisms, connecting RCs not – or not just – with former RCs from 10 or 15 years ago who may no longer have the understanding or the skillset to deal with today's challenges, but with other professionals facing similar situations and dilemmas.

Leading with urgency and in urgency requires a fundamental rethink of the leadership toolbox. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ United Nations, '*Charter of the United Nations, 1945*', (Paris, United Nations, 1945) <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.
- ² United Nations Development Group, '*United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework - Internal Guidance*', Edited Version – 3 June 2019, (New York, United Nations, 2019), <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/united-nations-sustainable-development-cooperation-framework-guidance>.