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Who Wants (To) Change?

A “Theory of Change” for the UN Development System to function as a system for Relevance, Strategic Positioning and Results

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This is an independent paper by John Hendra, Senior UN Coordinator, “Fit for Purpose” for the 2030 Agenda, and Ingrid FitzGerald, former Special Adviser, “Fit for Purpose”. The views expressed in this full paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations or the UNDG ASG Advisory Group. A summary paper version (1.0, 26 January 2016) was endorsed by the UNDG and is available at www.undg.org.

1. Introduction

“We can no longer afford to think and work in silos.”

– UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 25
September 2015

In the final outcome document of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States highlighted *“the important role and comparative advantage of an adequately resourced, relevant, coherent, efficient and effective UN system in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and sustainable development.”*¹ Member States underscored *“the importance of system-wide strategic planning, implementation and reporting in order to ensure coherent and integrated support to the implementation of the new Agenda by the United Nations Development System.”*¹ They also welcomed the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN Development System”, in the lead up to the 2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), to help set the direction for the UN Development System (UNDS) to effectively support implementation of the new sustainable development agenda.

The 2030 Agenda, together with the normative standards and frameworks the UN system is mandated to uphold, serve as the “what” – the *raison d’être* – for the UNDS’s work over the next 15 years. This paper focuses on “how” the UNDS can best support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The paper’s central hypothesis is that in order to provide the coherent, integrated support that Member States are calling for, and that the 2030 Agenda explicitly requires, the UNDS must better “function as a system” at the country, regional, and global levels. In line with this hypothesis, the paper presents a proposed “theory of change” for how the UNDS can better function as a system in the SDG era.

The need to function as a system – and the question of what it takes to do so – was underscored during the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN Development System”, which concluded in early June 2015. The first phase of the dialogue saw a call for a theory of change for how UN reform happens. This call was echoed in discussions during the UN Development Group (UNDG) Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) Advisory Group retreat held in late June 2015. This paper was developed in response to that call.

There is a strong sense of urgency around change in the context of the 2030 Agenda. In light of the rapidly changing international development landscape, and the many global challenges we face, if the UNDS is to continue to be relevant, ensure better strategic positioning, strengthen delivery of results and impact, and effectively and efficiently support implementation of a universal, transformative, integrated, rights-based agenda that truly “leaves no one behind”, then change is not optional, it is imperative.

As identified during the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, as well as by the UNDG ASG Advisory Group, there is a clear need to develop a robust and shared theory of change for how reform happens in the UNDS, and how the UNDS can better function as a system in support of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Such a theory of change is needed both to inform future reform efforts, and – just as importantly – to evaluate and measure progress and success. Past efforts to reform the UNDS to make it more coherent and integrated have been underpinned by implicit assumptions about what drives change and coherence in the UNDS – including mandates embedded in the 2012 QCPR, as well as in initiatives such as the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for “Delivering as One” (DaO). However, to date there is no explicit, shared, and robust theory of how or why change happens in the UNDS – or does not happen – or what the main drivers of integration and coherence are in the UNDS, making it more difficult to proactively plan for change, and measure results and impact.

The 2030 Agenda, and the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system” that will inform the 2016 QCPR, represent both an imperative and an opportunity to be more deliberate and strategic in designing future UN reform initiatives in support of system-wide integration and coherence. This paper makes the case that an important aspect of taking a more deliberate and strategic approach is to articulate a theory of change for how reform happens in the UNDS, and more specifically to identify the key drivers of change towards better functioning as a system. Such a theory of change will help to support and inform future change initiatives of the UNDG, and also help to inform UNDG inputs and preparations for the 2016 QCPR.

This paper sets out a rationale for such a theory of change, and some key elements that might be included. It is intended as a key input for the UNDG ASG Advisory Group, the broader UNDG and other key stakeholders. An initial draft (of 10 July 2015) was developed as the basis for consultation through a series of focus group discussions with UN staff at headquarters and in the field, held between July and October 2015. Feedback from these consultations was incorporated in the final version of the paper in January 2016, and comments received are briefly summarized in Annex A. The paper has also benefitted from ongoing discussion on theories of change and the need for greater integration in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the wider international development community, as well as from feedback from the UNDG ASG Advisory Group on the full paper in October 2015, and on a [summary version](#), which was endorsed by the UNDG in February 2016.

2. Definitions

Many UN Agencies and other development actors use theories of change in their planning and programming, as well as for evaluation purposes.⁴ The UN Evaluation Group defines a theory of change as a *“model that explains how an*

intervention is expected to lead to intended or observed impacts”, while UNICEF’s 2014 methodological note on Theory of Change states that a theory of change “explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts.”⁵ A 2015 ODI paper highlights that “a theory of change involves at its most basic making explicit a set of assumptions in relation to a given change process.”⁶

Theories of change are used in different ways by different actors. They can be used as a planning tool – an extension of a log-frame document that more clearly articulates assumptions and bottlenecks – or as a reflective tool to prompt discussion about political context, external influences, and implicit assumptions about how change does – or does not – happen in a complex system.⁷ They can be tools of learning, communication, and reflection, as well as accountability. The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion and reflection, but also to present a framework that could potentially be used to inform and measure change and impact. It therefore sets out to bridge both the ‘planning’ and ‘reflection’ approaches.

Secondly, what do we mean by a “system”? A system is a **regularly interacting, interdependent group [of organizations], that is a unified whole, and more than the sum of its parts.** Specifically, the UNDS is defined by the UNDG and successive UN Secretary-General’s reports on the QCPR as those Agencies, Funds and Programmes that receive contributions for operational activities for development – defined in turn as “those activities of the United Nations development system entities which promote the sustainable development and welfare of developing countries and countries in transition”, incorporating both longer-term development related activities as well as those with a humanitarian assistance focus.⁸ For the purposes of this paper, however, the UNDS can also be understood as a “complex system”, that is a **system of interacting components [entities] that react both to their environments and to one another, and are characterized by co-evolution, inter-relationships and dynamic, non-linear change.**⁹

Further, for the purposes of this paper, “functioning as a system” is understood to include greater coherence and integration in delivering the key functions that the UNDS will need to perform in order to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. As defined in UNICEF’s guide to UN coherence: “UN Coherence involves UN partners working together more closely to increase effectiveness (improved results), relevance (alignment with national priorities), and efficiency (reduced duplication and transaction costs) at country, regional and global levels.”¹⁰ The High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) defines integration in the context of the 2030 Agenda as “a coherent approach to policy making and implementation” across the three pillars of sustainable development, and highlights that stronger coherence is required around common objectives, desired outcomes, and operational efficiency – while noting that this does not necessarily mean structural integration.¹¹

As the UNDS is a complex system, working in an increasingly complex context, no single theory of change can hope to fully capture the challenges and complexity of how change in the UNDS actually happens, including in the very widely differing country contexts where the UN operates. However, a theory of change can help to identify key drivers of change, inform strategy and policy direction, and help to measure progress – including by more explicitly conceptualizing how different actors and stakeholders think change happens and the underpinning assumptions they hold – and testing and refining this against realities on the ground.

3. Principles and Assumptions

The main hypothesis of this paper is that **functioning as a system in a more integrated and coherent manner has in the past, and can in future, lead to greater relevance, improved strategic positioning, and increased impact of the UN development system,** including at the country level. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, functioning as a system is hypothesized to be essential for the UN to effectively support implementation of the SDGs. In this regard, functioning as a system is understood to entail much more than, for example, simply putting in place a global division of labor for the SDGs.

Further, there has been considerable discussion in the ECOSOC dialogue on the need for much greater integration between the UNDS and the peace and security and human rights pillars of the UN, in addition to humanitarian assistance, in support of the 2030 Agenda. Developing a theory of change for how the entire UN system can better function in an integrated and coherent fashion is a significant undertaking and beyond the scope of this paper. We therefore take as our primary focus the UNDS, while also highlighting some key inter-linkages with the other pillars of the wider UN system. Consideration should also be given to whether a theory of change for integration across the pillars is needed going forward and how that might be most effectively developed.

In this context, the approach to developing the proposed theory of change presented in this paper is underpinned by the following key principles and assumptions:

- Ideally, a theory of change should be developed in a participatory and interactive manner.¹² The proposed theory of change presented in this paper is therefore designed to be *iterative*. It aims to serve as the basis for discussion and reflection, in consultation with the UNDG ASG Advisory Group and other key stakeholders.
- As noted above, the UNDS is complex, and systems thinking and complexity approaches are more relevant and appropriate than a more linear causal approach to thinking about how change happens. A single theory of change for how reform happens in the UN development system is – inevitably – simplified and incomplete. This theory of change is therefore intended to be *descriptive* and *exploratory* – guiding, flexible, and adapted over time – rather than *prescriptive*.
- A robust theory of change would capture “what is” – the

reality of the current situation – as well as “what’s intended” – the changes that are intended or desired – and this theory of change aims to both reflect on the history and experience of the UNDS to date, as well as to look forward to and inform future reform efforts.

- If the 2030 Agenda and the UN’s normative mandate constitute the “what” – embodied in the QCPR – that frame the results and impact the UNDS will need to deliver, this theory of change aims to focus on “how” the UN can do so, in a more coherent and integrated manner.
- Further, the change that is needed must be primarily purpose driven, by the values and ideals of the UN and a universal, transformative and integrated sustainable development agenda. While fitness for purpose (including value for money) remains very important, this implies moving away from a top-down “command and control”, “structuralist” approach primarily focused on changing the “architecture”, to a values-driven approach to change. This in turn has implications for how and where the UNDS can best invest in change efforts going forward.
- The theory of change presented in this paper identifies key drivers of change that could potentially apply at all levels – country, regional and global – of the UNDS. However, to date, change efforts towards functioning as a system have been primarily focused at the country level, including through the “Delivering as One” initiative. The paper therefore focuses primarily on key drivers of change at the country level. Further discussion and consideration needs to be given to important differences in drivers and change factors at the global and regional levels.
- This theory of change is intended in the first instance to be internal to the UNDS, in order to contribute to developing a shared understanding of how change happens from the system’s point of view, in consultation with, and owned by, the UNDS.

4. Integration in the SDG era - the case for change

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a much more integrated approach by the international development community as a whole, and by the UNDS specifically. This was clearly highlighted by Member States in the final outcome document adopted in September 2015, which highlights that the SDGs are “*integrated and indivisible*”, and stresses that the “*interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized.*” Member States have themselves committed to achieving the three dimensions of sustainable development in a “*balanced and integrated manner.*” They call for “*integrated solutions*” and a new approach that is built on the recognition that “*eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the*

planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent.” They highlight the “*deep interconnections and many cross-cutting elements across the new Goals and targets.*” They call for follow up and review processes which respect the “*universal, integrated and inter-related nature*” of the Goals. And they highlight the need for “*coherent and integrated support to the implementation of the new Agenda by the United Nations development system.*”¹³

This call for greater coherence and integration has been echoed by Member States during the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system”. Member States highlighted the importance of the UNDS functioning in a coherent and integrated manner “as a system”, in order to effectively support Member States to implement, monitor and report on the SDGs. It was emphasized that functioning as a system would be critical given the transformative, integrated, and universal character of the Goals.

Against this backdrop, Member States highlighted key functions that the UNDS would need to perform, based on its comparative advantages, including: alignment of the full range of global bodies and initiatives with the SDGs; advocacy and convening capacity to coordinate realization of the SDGs at all levels; and support at regional and national levels for implementation, monitoring and reporting on the SDGs.¹⁴ Also highlighted were the UN’s critical normative and technical advisory function, provision of comprehensive support to Least Developed Countries and low-income countries and countries in humanitarian and conflict affected situations, and support to developing countries to address global development challenges. Emerging functions include strengthened support to South-South and triangular cooperation, leveraging partnerships for sustainable development, strengthened integrated policy advocacy, and fostering strategic innovations and learning in all development contexts. Member States consistently stressed that the UNDS would need to deliver these functions as a system in order to be effective, and that the next QCPR would need to be much more strategic, and apply to the full UNDS, to enable this. At the same time, Member States called for the UNDS to clearly identify when it should – and should not – function as a system, in particular at the global level, in order to maximize its added value.

In his speech to the Sustainable Development Summit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for institutions to become “fit for purpose”, stating that “*we can no longer afford to think and work in silos.*”¹⁵ In line with this call, and the expectations of Member States, discussions have been underway within the UN system since late 2013 on the changes the UNDS needs to make to be ready for the SDGs. In 2014,

the Chief Executives Board (CEB) set out five fundamental elements that the UN system will need to prioritize in its support to the new development agenda – universality, integration, equality, human rights, and the data revolution¹⁶ – and highlighted that the transition to a universal and integrated development agenda has institutional, financial and governance implications for the UN system. In his letter to Heads of Agencies in May 2014, the Secretary-General also stressed the need to invest in “an enhanced system-wide culture of collaboration and collective accountability that is focused on tangible results and country-level impact aligned with national strategies and priorities.”¹⁷

In sum, a transformative, universal, rights-based and integrated 2030 Agenda requires a transformative – and transformed – UNDS. The SDGs are much more integrated, cross-cutting, and multi-sectoral – not to mention complex – than were the MDGs. Where the MDGs did not demand coherence, the SDGs clearly do demand much greater integration and coherence. There is a clear presupposition in the SDGs, in the call of Member States in the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, and in the efforts underway in the UNDS to become more “fit for purpose”, that “the sum is greater than its parts.” The UNDS will be more effective in supporting implementation of the 2030 Agenda, if the UNDS itself functions more effectively as a system in an integrated and coherent manner. This is the hypothesis of this theory of change, which needs to be tested and verified in order to clearly identify when functioning as a system best adds value – at global, regional and country level.

Notably, experience shows that functioning as a system is particularly critical when addressing cross-cutting, multi-sectoral issues. For example, the independent evaluation of “Delivering as One” found that the DaO approach enabled the UN to be more effective in addressing and promoting complex cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and human rights.¹⁸ Integration and coherence efforts have also enabled the UNDS to strengthen normative-operational linkages: DaO enabled a more systematic approach to integration of normative work into development support. Further, functioning as a system has enabled the UN to articulate its offering and value added on specific cross-cutting policy issues such as nutrition and social protection.

Looking forward, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is itself a change project, and the UNDS will need both to invest in, and ensure strong leadership for, change at all levels. There is a strong sense of urgency around change in support of the 2030 Agenda and over 90 governments have already asked for UN Country Team (UNCT) support for SDG implementation. As this paper argues, the UNDS will need to take a values-led approach to supporting implementation of a values-based agenda, moving away from a top-down “command and control” approach, if the UN is to remain relevant and be a “partner of choice” for countries going forward.

Linked to this is the need to better balance the use of structural reform to drive change, with a focus on the substantive capacities, knowledge, leadership and mind-sets needed to deliver the 2030 Agenda. As discussed below, this also implies the need to create more space for, and invest in, innovation and experimentation, as well as to better understand – and be prepared to stretch – the appetite for risk within the system, and better support risk-takers at all levels.

5. Previous reform efforts: perspectives on change

While there is no single coherent and underpinning theory of change that sets out to explain how change happens in and to the UNDS and what drives it, past and current reform efforts by the UN and by Member States contain underpinning assumptions and perspectives about how reform happens and how best to achieve it. Some key examples are as follows:

i. Reforms introduced by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

The reforms that were initially introduced by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 1997 in his first year in office were designed to achieve better management and coordination across the UN system, and stronger human rights protection and peacekeeping operations.¹⁹ With regard to the UNDS, the Secretary-General’s initial reform package included: strengthening the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) as the UN Secretary-General’s representative in country, and leader of the UNCT; requesting all UN Funds and Programmes to draw up a country level programme document – the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF); and increased use of common premises (UN Houses) and common services at country level. At the global level the Secretary-General established the UNDG with the UNDP Administrator as Chair and called for more cohesive meetings of the various Executive Boards. Fairer financial burden sharing, increased core resources, and a new financing mechanism including voluntary contributions and negotiated pledges were also recommended.

The reforms introduced by Kofi Annan were designed to drive greater coherence and integration of the UN’s development work, and established the architecture for the UNDS at country level as we know it almost 20 years later – including common representation, common premises and administration, and prioritization of activities within a common, nationally owned, programme framework. As highlighted in the UN Secretary General’s 1997 report “Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform”, these changes were intended to achieve “greater unity of purpose, coherence of effort and flexibility of response” and were based on the understanding that “reform is a continuing process not a single event.”²⁰ With regard to development specifically, these reforms were designed to facilitate the UN funds and programmes, to function “in a more unified, cooperative and coherent framework as members of the United Nations family.”²¹

Figure 1: A generic theory of change for “Delivering-as-one” at country level

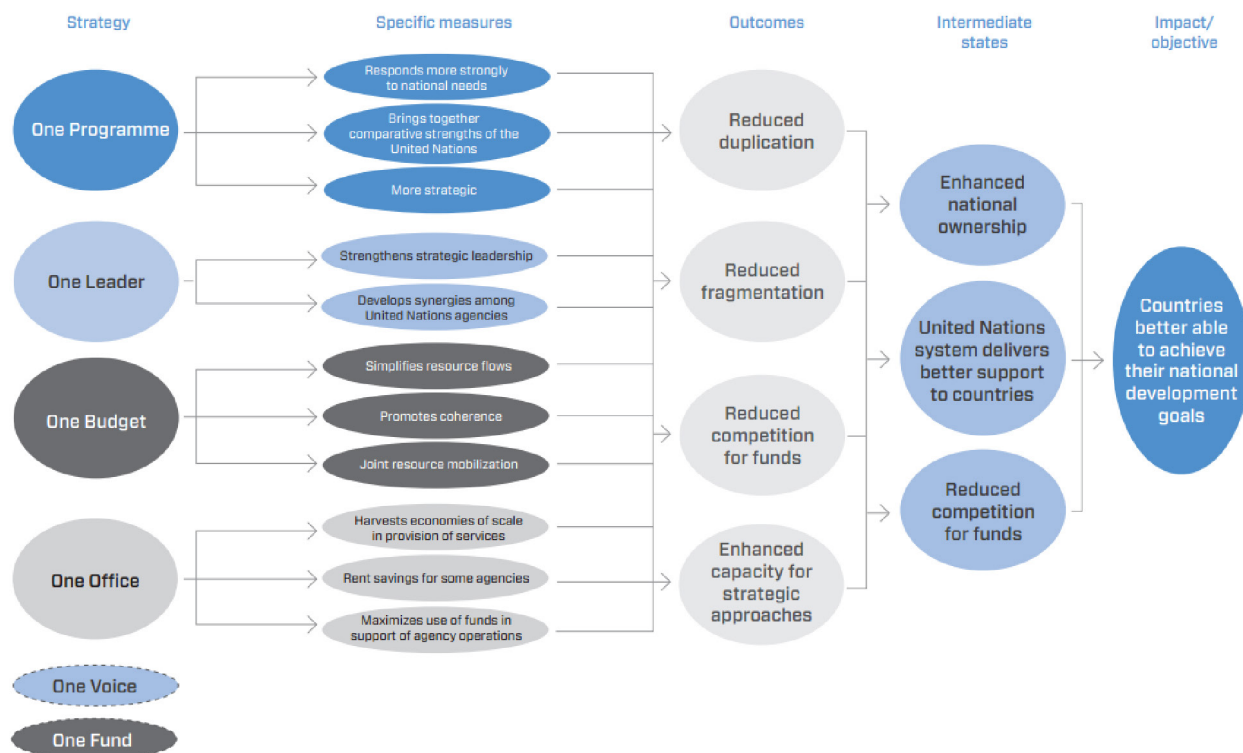


Figure One: Theory of Change, Independent Evaluation of “Delivering as One”.

Source: Independent Evaluation of Delivering as One

ii. The “Delivering as One” initiative

The DaO initiative includes:

- 1) The first generation (the DaO pilots), perhaps best documented in the independent evaluation of “Delivering as One”; and
- 2) The second generation – as set out in the SOPs for “Delivering as One”.

In 2006, the High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence recommended a package of reforms that were eventually partially taken up by Member States in five key areas: “Delivering as One” at the country level, harmonization of business practices, funding, governance, and gender equality and the empowerment of women,²² paving the way for the DaO pilots and the creation of UN Women. As originally conceived by the High-Level Panel, DaO was designed to achieve greater alignment with national planning, national ownership and leadership, effectiveness, and efficiency – including reduced transaction costs – through implementation of the “four ones” (One Programme, One Budget, One Leader, and One Office) by UN RCs and UNCTs. While there was no explicit theory of change for the DaO pilots, adoption of the “four ones” was posited to “advance a more coherent and therefore more

effective delivery of UN system assistance on the ground.”²³ Each pilot country interpreted the “ones” in different ways, adding elements such as “One Voice” and “One Fund”. A number of the pilots also developed implementation frameworks for the DaO initiative that set out targets and indicators for progress.

The independent evaluation of DaO identified the lack of an explicit theory of change for the DaO approach – a clear “strategic intent” – as a challenge for the pilots, in particular when it came to assessing and measuring progress.²⁴ The independent evaluation developed a generic theory of change (shown in Figure One). In sum, it posited that the “four ones”, and associated measures to be implemented under each, would collectively contribute to reduced duplication, reduced fragmentation, reduced competition for funds, and enhanced capacity for strategic approaches. This would in turn lead to enhanced national ownership, a UN system that delivers better support to countries, and reduced competition for funds – all contributing to supporting countries to be better able to achieve their national development goals. This is perhaps the most clearly articulated “corporate” theory of change currently available for the contribution that functioning as a system makes to relevance, strategic positioning and impact, at least at the country level.²⁵

“DELIVERING AS ONE”	
PILLAR	Core Elements
Overarching	<p>Joint oversight and ownership agreed between Government and the UN and outlined in agreed terms of reference for a Joint National/ UN Steering Committee (Generic terms of reference);</p> <p>Annual reporting on joint UN results in the UN Country Results Report;</p>
One Programme	<p>Signed UNDAF at the outcome level with legal text⁹ as appropriate;</p> <p>Joint Work Plans (of Results Groups), aligned with the UNDAF and signed by involved UN entities (this does not preclude agency specific work plans where required) (Tips and template for JWPs);</p> <p>Results Groups (chaired by Heads of Agencies) focused on strategic policy and programme content established and aligned with national coordination mechanisms (Generic Terms of Reference);</p>
Common Budgetary Framework (and One Fund)	<p>A medium-term Common Budgetary Framework aligned to the UNDAF/One Programme as a results-oriented resourcing framework for UN resources (Guide to the Common Budgetary Framework);</p> <p>Annual Common Budgetary Frameworks (as a part of the Joint Work Plans) updated annually with transparent data on financial resources required, available, expected, and to be mobilized (Tools and materials);</p> <p>A Joint Resource Mobilization strategy as appropriate to the country context (with the option of a One Fund duly considered) approved by the UNCT and monitored and reported against in the UN Country Results Report;</p>
One Leader	<p>Strong commitment and incentives of the UNCT to work towards common results and accountability through full implementation of the M&A system and the UNCT Conduct and Working Arrangements;</p> <p>Empowered UNCT to make joint decisions relating to programming activities and financial matters;</p>
Operating as One	<p>Business Operations Strategy¹⁰ endorsed by UNCT is highly recommended, adapted to local needs and capacities, to enhance operational oneness processes through eliminating duplication of common processes to leverage efficiencies and maximize economies of scale;</p> <p>Empowered Operations Management Team (chaired by a Head of Agency);</p> <p>Operations costs and budgets integrated in the overall medium-term Common Budgetary Framework;</p>
Communicating as One	<p>A joint communication strategy appropriate to the country context approved by the UNCT and monitored and reported against in the UN Country Results Report (Guide to Communicating as One);</p> <p>Country Communications Group (chaired by a Head of Agency) and supported by regional and HQ levels, as necessary.</p>

Figure Two: Standard Operating Procedures for Delivering as One: Core Elements.

Source: Standard Operating Procedures for Delivering as One

The independent evaluation also identified critical enabling factors that support change. These include the importance of national ownership – usually by central coordination or planning ministries; a strong tripartite alliance between the UN, donors and government; and critically, the importance of donor support in particular through funding mechanisms, such as the One Fund, that promote coherence. Further, while leadership and political commitment are vital, national and international mid-level staff played a critical role in the change process. As staff surveys in a number of the pilots showed, the engagement and commitment of mid-level staff increased over time and their sense of identity and allegiance

shifted, from agency-specific to UN-wide. A sense of achievement, greater understanding of other Agencies, and appreciation of UN-wide priorities helped to contribute to this shift. Further, as the evaluation shows, while “Delivering as One” was originally conceptualized as enabling greater organizational effectiveness, it also helped improve the strategic positioning and relevance of the UN at country level, including through the “One Voice” pillar.

In addition, the independent evaluation highlighted some of the key challenges to DaO. These included strong agency-specific accountability systems at all levels, mixed signals

sent by donors at country level and on HQ Executive Boards, declining funding from key donors for the pilots over time, and bottlenecks at HQ – in particular in relation to common services and common premises. As the independent evaluation noted, there was a “start-up” cost to change in the pilots which required considerable investment of time and resources in internal change management, coordination processes, and engagement with government and donors in oversight and reporting mechanisms at the national level.

Building on the DaO pilot experience, the second generation of DaO sets out five pillars and 15 core elements that, taken together, constitute an integrated and comprehensive package of support for countries wishing to adopt the DaO approach. These five pillars and 15 core elements are articulated in the SOPs for DaO (as shown in Figure Two).

The second generation of DaO is designed to be results focused, delivering both greater operational effectiveness, but also – and as importantly – greater relevance and impact. The SOPs set out a Monitoring and Evaluation framework for each of the pillars that includes both operational effectiveness and progress towards implementation. The framework posits that full implementation of all five pillars and the 15 core elements, together with overarching accountability for “Delivering as One system-wide”, will enable UNCTs to make “*effective, efficient, relevant and coherent contributions to the achievement of national needs and priorities.*”²⁶ The framework sets out key assumptions, including the importance of political commitment from UNCT members, programme country governments, Agency Headquarters, and the UNDG. It also highlights a key assumption, namely that the SOPs will remain a sufficient instrument for UNCTs to undertake the DaO approach, and identifies key risks, including the critical risk posed by lack of political commitment and leadership, insufficient and fragmented funding, and lack of individual agency alignment with the SOPs, as well as resource and capacity gaps for implementation. The framework not only provides an important accountability mechanism, but also a tool for evaluating and assessing progress.

A critical element of the underlying theory of change in the SOPs is that UNCTs must fully implement all the pillars and core elements of the approach to successfully “Deliver as One”. Picking and choosing, while possible, is not considered to be sufficient to achieve the overarching aim of DaO, namely to contribute to achievement of national needs and priorities. It will be very important to test this hypothesis when evaluating the impact of DaO in countries that have – or have not – adopted all elements of the DaO approach.

Individual DaO countries are also developing results frameworks for the second generation of “Delivering as One”. For example, Vietnam, one of the original pilot countries, has developed a monitoring and evaluation framework for the DaO initiative. Where Vietnam’s One Plan 2012-2016 sets out

the “what” – the substantive development results the UNCT will deliver – this framework sets out “how” the UNCT will provide this support. DaO and the mutually reinforcing six pillars are posited to contribute to three key outcomes: i) better alignment to national development priorities; ii) increased effectiveness in delivering and demonstrating development results; and iii) saving costs and reducing duplication and transaction costs to more effectively convert inputs into results. The pillars are understood to be integrally linked and the indicators selected enable tracking of the contribution of the pillars to the outcomes. The framework includes a theory of change, shown in Figure Three.²⁷

As highlighted in the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system”, Member States increasingly recognize DaO as the platform for country support, and the foundation of an integrated approach to supporting SDG implementation at the country level. Further, successive surveys of programme countries conducted for QCPR reporting have found that governments see UNCTs that are “Delivering as One” as more relevant and easier to work with.²⁸ DaO is a significant change exercise at all levels, and greater investment in change management and internal communication in support of it is likely to be needed going forward, as discussed below.

iii. The 2012-2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

A third, and important example, is the current 2012 QCPR.²⁹ In addition to the substantive mandates for the UNDS set out in the QCPR, the resolution sets out priorities for the improved functioning of the UNDS. These include:

- 1) The importance of national ownership of the UN-DAF and the tailoring of UN support to meet country need and demand;
- 2) Increased joint programming, alignment of individual agency programme instruments with the UNDAF, and better division of labour at the country level;
- 3) Strengthening of the UN RC system and the leadership of the UN RC;
- 4) Improvements in the selection of RCs and the training and support offered to them, including ensuring sufficient capacity of the RC’s Office;
- 5) Enhanced staff and leadership capacity;
- 6) Increased support for the UN RC system by the UNDS including provision of stable and predictable resources;
- 7) Full implementation of the firewall and mutual performance appraisal between the UN RC and UNCT members;
- 8) Voluntary adoption of the DaO approach as an important contribution for enhancing the coherence, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the UNDS;
- 9) The importance of identifying and addressing chal-



Delivering as One in Viet Nam (2012-2016): Expected Changes

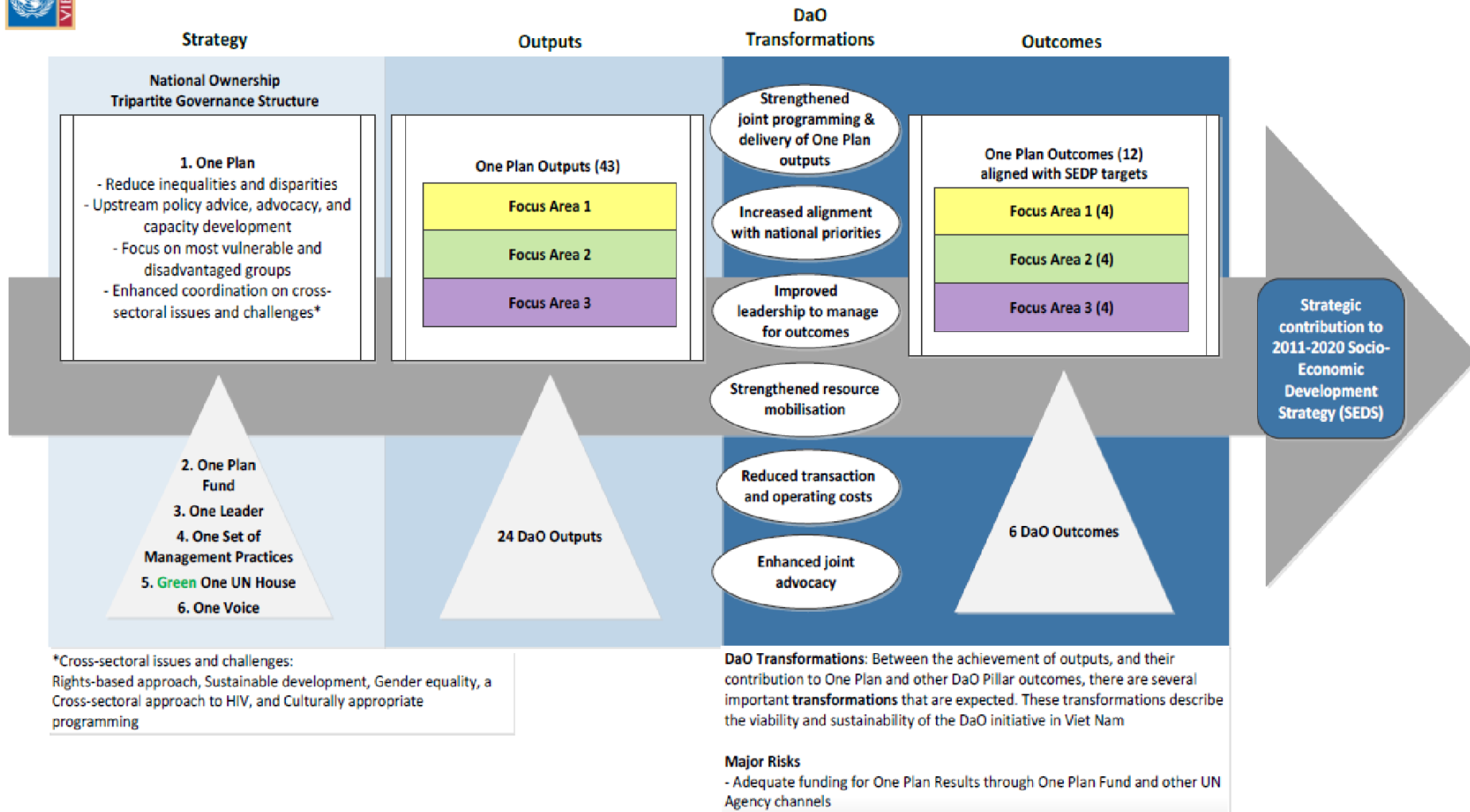


Figure Three: Theory of Change Viet Nam. Source: "Delivering as One" Results Monitoring Framework: Results-based second generation of "Delivering as One" in Viet Nam

- allenges and bottlenecks in particular at HQ which have impeded implementation of DaO;
- 10) Tasking the UNDS to provide an integrated package of support to programme countries wanting to adopt the DaO approach;
 - 11) Strengthened cooperation and coordination at the regional level;
 - 12) Accelerated action to consolidate support services at country level and use national systems;
 - 13) Accelerated efforts to implement results based management as an essential element of accountability at the individual agency level together with improved planning, monitoring, measurement and reporting on system-wide results; and
 - 14) Strengthened capacity for independent evaluation, as well as strengthened system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development.

Further, the QCPR highlights the critical importance of the sustainability, flexibility and predictability of funding for the UNDS, including a better balance between core and non-core resources. An extensive Monitoring and Evaluation framework comprising 116 indicators has been developed to support implementation of the QCPR, with reporting taking place on an annual basis, led by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), drawing on surveys of Programme Country Governments, UN RCs, Agency HQs, and Operations Management Teams. Of these indicators, 68 apply to the functioning of the UNDS and 25 to funding.

As stated in the QCPR Resolution, the intent of the QCPR is to strengthen the UNDS and to enhance its coherence, efficiency and capacity in order to “address the full range of development challenges of our time.”³⁰ Further, the Resolution highlights the need to make the UNDS more relevant, coherent, efficient and effective, and stresses that reform efforts must enhance organizational efficiency, achieve concrete development results, and strengthen the accountability and transparency of the UNDS to Member States. It posits that a combination of elements, including adequate and predictable funding, the right leadership and capacity of the UN RC system, use of the DaO modality (as relevant), nationally owned and aligned UNDAFs, strong and coordinated regional support, and robust results based management and independent evaluation will contribute to this outcome.

However, while very important elements and drivers of change are addressed in the QCPR, arguably there are too many priorities (and indicators), making it difficult to identify the key strategic issues that Member States want the UNDS to address. Linked to this, it is not easy to see how the many elements included in the QCPR add up to a coherent, focused theory of change, making it difficult to determine what Member States see as the most critical drivers for change, prioritize investments accordingly, and identify and report on what is working and what isn't. As has been identified by

some Member States in the ECOSOC dialogue, it will be critical that the next QCPR is more strategic and focused and gives clear direction to the UNDS, in order for the UNDS to be better able to define, measure, and report on progress.

iv. Business Operations Strategy

In the context of the current 2012-2016 QCPR and roll out of the SOPs for DaO, the Business Operations Strategy (BoS) represents an important reform effort in its own right. The underpinning hypothesis of the BoS is that business operations are an important enabler for delivery of the SDGs, and that changes are needed in different areas of business operations to meet the new demands of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Based on the 11 mandates included in the current QCPR, the BoS accelerates progress on “operating as one” led by the Operations Management Team (OMT) at country level, and under the auspices of the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) and UNDG, by harmonizing business operations policies and procedures at HQ level and translating these into country-level solutions. The premise of the BoS approach is that it adds value by reducing costs – including transaction costs – at the country level, enhancing quality and access to services that would not be possible if Agencies developed or contracted these services individually, and ensuring state of the art Common Services are in place to support UNCTs based on the latest HLCM and UNDG policies and guidance. In turn the country-level experience guides HQ initiatives to reduce bottlenecks, and identifies further areas for innovation and change in business operations at country level.

v. System-wide action plans – the SWAP on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment

In the context of the call by some Member States during the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue for a system-wide framework in support of the SDGs, it is worth briefly discussing existing system-wide plans and frameworks. Examples of such plans include the System-Wide Action Plan (SWAP) for Youth and the SWAP for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment; the latter, in particular, has a detailed accountability framework and explicit change focus.³¹ The SWAP for Gender Equality is an accountability framework for gender equality and gender mainstreaming in UN Agencies. The SWAP articulates a change strategy that underpins the framework, namely that progress in the dimensions of accountability, results based management for gender equality, oversight, human and financial resources, capacity development, coherence, coordination, and knowledge and information sharing will help drive effective implementation of the ECOSOC gender mainstreaming strategy and ultimately contribute to the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment. The framework includes these six dimensions and 15 performance indicators designed to bring about change within UN Agencies (see Figure Four). These are consistent with numerous evaluations and assessments of progress in gender mainstreaming at the organizational level.

UN-SWAP PERFORMANCE INDICATORS



Figure Four: UN-SWAP for Gender Equality. Source: UN System-Wide Action Plan for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

In 2014, more than 55 Agencies reported against the framework, with demonstrable progress made against 14 out of 15 performance indicators between 2013 and 2014. While the SWAP promotes vertical accountability within Agencies for gender mainstreaming, it is not an instrument for horizontal accountability, or for achieving substantive results on gender equality and women’s empowerment. A ‘next generation’ of the SWAP will need to build on efforts to improve individual agency performance, to more clearly demonstrate system-wide results and impact for gender equality. Such system-wide frameworks can be an important driver for policy coherence within the UN at a global level, and a key mechanism for ensuing integrated UN support to SDG implementation.

vi. System-wide evaluation

The QCPR calls for independent system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development. In response to this call, in 2013 the UN General Assembly and ECOSOC put in place the policy for independent system-wide evaluation,³² and established a mechanism for conducting these evaluations.³³ Such evaluations are designed to “*assess whether the United Nations system is efficiently and effectively responding to global, regional and country level needs and priorities, and achieving the internationally-agreed development*

Goals.... In particular, independent system-wide evaluations are expected to assess whether the United Nations system effectively exploits opportunities for programmatic and operational synergies and draws on the capacities of all relevant entities, with a view to enhancing system-wide coherence and impact, so that the total of the work of the UN system for development is larger than the sum of the individual parts.”³⁴

The rationale for conducting system-wide evaluations is to contribute to enhanced system-wide coherence, improved learning and improved accountability, as set out in the theory of change for independent system-wide evaluation. Two key priority evaluations are identified and are currently underway: a meta-evaluation of UNDAF evaluations, and a system-wide evaluation of the contribution of the UN development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection. Together with the independent evaluation of DaO these evaluations will be an important source of learning and reflection on how the UNDS can better function as a system to deliver results and impact.

vii. Changes in the functions and mandates of the UN system and its pillars

In addition to internal reform efforts, and as highlighted in the ECOSOC dialogue, changes in the mandates of the UNDS and individual Agencies, Funds and Programmes, as well as changes in the role, functions, and mandates of other pillars of the UN system, are key drivers of change in the UNDS. Examples include the evolution of individual agency mandates, including in response to evolving normative standards and commitments, and the establishment of new partnerships and entities such as UNAIDS and UN Women, as well as system-wide mandates such the UN Secretary-General’s “Human Rights Up Front” initiative which intends to strengthen the UN system’s commitment and accountability to uphold human rights, in particular whenever there is a threat of serious and large-scale violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Further, changes in the mandates and functions of the other pillars of the UN system – in particular peace and security, and humanitarian action – also impact on the role and functions of the UNDS. Examples include the evolution of integrated missions, integrated assessment and planning, and the “triple-hatted” role of the RC/Humanitarian Coordinator/Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General. As has been highlighted in the ECOSOC dialogue, and by the CEB in November 2015, much greater integration between the pillars of the UN system will be needed to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda and this will be a key driver of change for the UNDS going forward. The various reviews that have taken place in the peace and security, peacebuilding, and the humanitarian areas of the UN system have implications for the UNDS, including with regard to structural reforms and financing arrangements, to better drive integration going forward.

These include the need for more integrated planning mechanisms, a greater focus on prevention, building resilience, sustaining peace, better interconnected and sequenced financing in support of agreed priority functions, context-specific approaches to address drivers of crises, and new operational partnerships at the national and sub-national levels. At its November 2015 meeting the CEB tasked its constituent bodies to take forward integration including in the context of the SDGs and to promote more integrated planning at country level, supported by harmonized management practices and incentives for change. Developing an appropriate theory of change to underpin these efforts is clearly an area requiring further discussion going forward.

viii. Current reform efforts: the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system”

In the ECOSOC dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system”, Member States have focused on the issues of functions, funding, governance, organizational arrangements, and capacity, impact and partnership approaches. During the first phase, Member States identified critical elements for driving and leveraging change, including the importance of transformative purpose – embodied in the SDGs – of clearly defining functions and ensuring that functions in turn determine funding and organizational arrangements, and of moving beyond ensuring system-wide coherence to delivering system-wide results and impact. The dialogue has also highlighted the critical importance of system-wide governance, and much greater alignment of funding modalities with functions and purpose, if the UNDS is to function effectively as a system. The dialogue has recognized that DaO is the “floor” of UNDS support at country level – but at the same time, questioned whether it may be necessary to go beyond the DaO approach to deliver the change that is needed to support the SDGs. Member States have also stressed the need for more differentiated approaches to country support in the context of a universal sustainable development agenda. Further, the dialogue has highlighted the critical importance of putting in place the right leadership and staff capacity, and of significantly strengthened system-wide strategic planning at the global level. Finally, the dialogue has called for much greater integration of the pillars of the UN (peace and security, human rights and development), in addition to humanitarian assistance, in the SDG era.

The ECOSOC dialogue has also identified the importance of using the next QCPR as an instrument for change, while at the same time questioning whether it is the right instrument to drive change, in particular as it does not apply to all the Agencies, Funds and Programmes. And it has highlighted the need for an explicit theory of change both for the UNDS contribution to substantive results, and for how the UNDS can better function as a system. The op-

portunity to ensure the next QCPR is more strategic and focused is now on the table. The question remains whether the elements currently under discussion – functions, funding, governance, organizational arrangements, capacity, impact and partnership approaches – are sufficient to drive the change that is needed.

ix. Lessons learned from current reform initiatives

Key lessons from the examples discussed above can help inform and design reform efforts going forward. These include the following:

- Previous reform packages (such as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s reforms and the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on System-wide coherence) have not always been implemented in full, making it difficult to assess their impact and success. Looking forward, it will be important that future reform packages are implemented “as a package” to maximize impact and results.
- As has been highlighted by a number of UN watchers, previous reform efforts such as the DaO initiative have been largely focused at the country level. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, the question is whether change efforts targeting the country level are sufficient to enable the UNDS to deliver integrated and coherent support to the SDGs or whether (much) greater focus on systemic change is now needed.
- Further, change efforts need to be both strategic and focused – and well sequenced - to be effective and achieve results and impact. This includes clearly setting out strategic guidance for change (i.e. in the 2016 QCPR) and identifying the “boundaries” and parameters for system-wide change – whether within the UNDS or the wider UN system.
- The right instruments and the right targets and indicators for measuring progress need to be in place to drive change, while also allowing for flexibility and experimentation.
- At the HQ level, structural change has been very limited, with the exception of the establishment of UN Women, which merged four pre-existing entities (UNIFEM, INSTRAW, DAW and OSAGI), and the creation of UNAIDS, a co-sponsored Joint Programme which combines the efforts and expertise of 11 organizations, a largely field based Secretariat, and a collaborative, multi-sectoral response to a complex and multifaceted issue. While such changes remain very sensitive, in particular at HQ, in the SDG era consideration will need to be given to mandate review and structural reform. Certainly, UN colleagues at the country level are making a strong case for this kind of change.
- As highlighted in the focus group discussions held to discuss an earlier draft of this paper, with UN staff in HQ and the field, structural change alone, while im-

portant, will not succeed unless also underpinned and reinforced by attitude and behaviour change. Strong leadership, vision, and appetite for change are critical at all levels. A lowest common denominator approach that may well reflect a broad consensus is nevertheless unlikely to be sufficient to succeed.

6. External perspectives and perceptions of the UNDS and key drivers of change

Independent analysis conducted by external UN watchers – some of them former UN staff with direct experience of UN reform attempts – also highlights key drivers of change towards a more coherent and integrated UNDS.

For example, the Future UN Development System (FUNDS) project conducts regular surveys with UN system staff and external stakeholders, on perceptions and satisfaction with the UNDS.³⁵ Their most recent survey, conducted in 2014 with 3200 people in 150 countries, found that the UN is perceived to have the greatest impact in the humanitarian and peace and security sectors, followed by global development conventions and norms. Further, the UN is perceived to be most effective in the fields of health, education, gender and human rights. Key factors contributing to effectiveness include the quality of expertise, UN values and norms, knowledge of country situations, and work in both peaceful and conflict affected countries. Key challenges for the UN are identified as including internal structures, earmarking of funding, limited financial resources, ineffectiveness, and lack of adaptability. The top factor that would improve the UN’s effectiveness is seen to be greater responsiveness. Finally, when asked whether the UN is capable of significant reform, 73 percent of respondents said that the UNDS is capable – and 27 percent that it is not. The key changes that respondents see as important to be achieved over the next decade include greater use of technology to cut costs and improve efficiency, updated mandates and activities of the organization, a common system-wide technology platform for administration, a single gateway to all UN research and publications, and less funding that is increasingly earmarked.

Notably, as highlighted in several of the independent expert papers produced for the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue,³⁶ there is a shared sense among some external commentators that change in the UNDS is most often driven from the outside, including as a result of changing external circumstances, shifting funding patterns and modalities, evolving mandates (including the setting of international development goals such as the MDGs and SDGs), and governance arrangements.

For example, some commentators see major conflicts and crises as a key driver of reform of the UN system. Others note that development thinking has evolved significantly, with the latest evolution embodied in the transformative, universal, integrated agenda set out in the SDGs, and that

this has been both a driver, and consequence, of the UN system’s expanding normative role. Some see funding as a key driver, arguing for example that the “goal setting” era of the MDGs led to the current imbalance in core and non-core funding and predominance of earmarking, leading in turn to fragmentation and competition for resources. Others point to the sector-focused origins and diversity of the UN system as both a strength, especially in the context of the complex and multi-sectoral challenges the world faces today, but also a challenge to reform efforts that aim to bring about greater coherence and integration. This is echoed in the governance system whereby Member States are represented in different governance bodies by different ministries, making it difficult to ensure consistent positions across the UNDS. Indeed, some UN-watchers have suggested that there is no “intelligent design” in the UNDS, and that in a complex, devolved and decentralized system like the UN, change is haphazard, piecemeal and accidental as much as it is deliberate, coherent and designed.

Finally, and critically, external commentators have pointed out that reform is not simply a technocratic process – or solely the prerogative of management – but is in the end also political, and depends on political will and commitment at many levels, both within Member States, and in the UNDS. As former Deputy Secretary-General and UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch-Brown noted in a 2007 lecture, “*reform led by managers alone is a tall order*”: political leadership is essential, and governments need to be on board for reforms to succeed.³⁷

But this doesn’t mean that change isn’t possible or desirable – indeed it’s inevitable. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs call for transformative change. There is a consensus that this is a key moment in the change trajectory of the UNDS, and that the SDGs potentially represent a “fourth phase” in the history of the UNDS.³⁸ Further, the changing global balance of economic and political power, and the proliferation of non-UN actors working in development – and non-ODA resources funding it – will necessarily drive changes in the way the UNDS functions. It’s not a question of whether we will need to change – we will – but of how prepared we are to do so.

The question then becomes, what (more) does the UNDS need to do to be ready for the SDGs, and how much of this is “policy amenable” and can be achieved by deliberate design of the UNDS “as a system” – and how much is subject to external influences and/or requires the support of Member States? And what more can we do to anticipate and prepare for new and emerging external changes that will shape the trajectory of the UNDS in the future?

7. Designing (for) change in complex systems

In complex systems such as the UNDS, managing for and

designing change cannot rely on simple, linear interventions which assume linear cause and effect. Different approaches are required: moving from static to dynamic planning whereby plans are regarded as hypotheses that need to be continuously tested and adjusted using real time feedback; moving from prescriptive to flexible planning modes whereby options are identified – a “portfolio of experiments” rather than a single plan, that are scaled up or dropped altogether, based on what has potential and works on the ground; and moving from comprehensive to diversified approaches, with much lighter strategic planning at higher levels, and much more devolved and decentralized operational planning on the ground.³⁹ As Oxfam’s Duncan Green has highlighted, this kind of approach to managing change in complex contexts – using fast feedback and setting up multiple parallel experiments, to fail faster, learn and adapt – requires an entrepreneurial mindset and increased investment in the ratio of “change capital” to “delivery capital”; in other words, much greater investment in research, experimentation and innovation.⁴⁰

As discussed during the UNDG ASG Advisory Group’s 2015 retreats, creating space for, and fostering, innovation and experimentation will be critical for the UNDS in the SDG era. Already the UNDG is supporting UNCTs and UN RCs to innovate, including through the UNDAF Design Innovation Facility, which aims to promote innovation in areas such as data capture and analysis, public engagement and partnerships, and sustainable development planning. Looking forward, it will be important to facilitate strategic experimentation in support of the SDGs at all levels – for example in such areas as greater integration of humanitarian action and development at country level, differentiated country support and presence, global partnerships in support of the SDGs, and how to stimulate increased global and regional functioning as a system. A fundamental shift in the way the UNDS plans for and measures results, together with a much greater appetite for risk, will be needed to support these efforts going forward.

In this context, it is also worth looking at how change towards greater coherence and functioning as a system has occurred in sectors and organizations outside the UNDS. The Stanford Social Innovation Review, for instance, has documented examples of structured collaboration for collective impact in the social sectors. Based on the premise that multi-stakeholder approaches are necessary to solve large-scale social problems that can’t be effectively addressed by organizations working alone, studies of “collective impact” in sectors such as education in the US have identified the following five key conditions that enable true alignment and lead to results and impact:⁴¹

- **A common agenda:** All participants need to have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem, and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.

- **Shared measurement systems:** Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported, and consistent data collection and reporting on a short list of indicators, is key to alignment and accountability.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities:** A coordinated and mutually reinforcing plan of action are essential.
- **Continuous communication:** Regular in-person meetings of CEO-level leaders are critical, supported by regular communication within the network of partner organizations.
- **Backbone support organizations:** Creating and managing collective impact requires a distinct organization and staff with very specific skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative, as often organizations involved in implementation are not able to take on this additional role. *“In the best of circumstances, these backbone organizations embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.”*⁴²
- **Enabling environment:** Also critical is having in place the right enabling environment, including funding for the necessary facilitation, coordination, and measurement to enable participating organizations to work in concert.

Outside the UN, discussions are well underway on how best to ensure institutions are “fit for purpose” for the SDGs, promote integrated approaches to development, and develop a theory or theories of change for SDG implementation. The UNDS can benefit from these approaches, including efforts to better measure results of integrated initiatives and show whether and when integration and collaboration offers added value – and when it does not.

For example, individual governments are setting up national coordination mechanisms for sustainable development and considering how best to ensure “whole of government” responses to the SDGs.⁴³ Within the OECD-DAC, the “Fit for the Future” initiative seeks to identify the core capabilities that DAC members will need in order to deliver effective development cooperation over the next 5-10 years. DAC members are considering how they will need to adapt to reflect the SDGs, including in whole of government policy approaches both in the sphere of international development, and sustainable development in domestic policy. They are also looking at structural questions about how best to deliver development cooperation, as well as how to ensure differentiated support in different country settings, and how best to provide high quality policy advice. The World Bank has also set out its approach to the 2030 Agenda, in a September 2015 paper,

which highlights where the Bank intends to contribute, based on its comparative advantages.⁴⁴ Global partnerships such as Every Woman Every Child are also repositioning in light of the SDGs, with new partners, investments and financing mechanisms.⁴⁵ The UNDS can benefit from these approaches, including efforts to better measure results of integrated initiatives and show whether and when integration and collaboration offers added value – and when it does not.

Other development actors are looking specifically at more integrated and systemic approaches to delivering the SDGs. For example, Devex and FHI 360’s “integrated development” initiative highlights the importance of leveraging interdependencies, and addressing complex problems at a systems level, in *“an intentional approach that links the design, delivery and evaluation of programs across disciplines and sectors to produce an amplified, lasting impact on people’s lives.”*⁴⁶ Such an approach, while not new, makes sense in the context of the integrated and transformative 2030 Agenda.

However, evidence for when and how integrated approaches are effective – and when not – is limited. In a context of limited resources, with the requisite time constraints and complexity that working collectively involves, having such evidence is key. FHI 360 is therefore undertaking research to identify when combined efforts produce amplified impact, and as part of this effort, is developing an “integrated impact index” to allow practitioners to better measure results of integrated projects. Developing shared metrics to measure progress and prove whether and when integration offers added value is key, as is developing new ways of measuring impact of collaborative efforts, especially given that *“multi-sector interventions are complex and the pathways to causality even more so. Simply combining standardized indicators typically used for evaluation in each relevant sector may not be sufficient. These complex, multi-layered models for development may require more nuanced and sophisticated measurement tools than have been relied on in the past.”*⁴⁷

8. Elements of a proposed “theory of change”

Each of the approaches discussed in section 5 has elements and approaches in common, and together with the feedback received in the initial round of focus group discussions these have informed and influenced the theory of change presented below. However, while each approach identifies important and *necessary* elements that help to drive change, the question remains whether these elements are – individually or collectively – *sufficient* to ensure the UNDS functions as a system? And if not, based on the discussion and evidence to date, what might a consolidated and coherent set of elements of a theory of change for UNDS reform towards “system-wide” relevance, strategic positioning and impact look like?

Based on the discussion above, this section briefly elaborates

possible suggested elements of a theory of change for UNDS reform towards **improved functioning as a system for relevance, strategic positioning and results**, to enable the UNDS to perform its key priority functions in an integrated and coherent manner in support of SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting.

The narrative that follows briefly outlines these elements in relation to: i) the context for, and underpinning factors and drivers that determine, change in the UNDS; ii) key strategies and tactics, that, taken together, contribute towards system-wide functioning and which are “design-amenable” – within the purview of the UNDS; iii) specific measures and approaches that are generated from these investments; iv) intermediate outcomes, higher-level outcomes and overall objectives; and v) key risks – including risks of changing and not changing, as well as some possible unintended consequences of change – and key assumptions. These elements are also represented in visual form (see Figure Five).

The elements included in this proposed theory of change could potentially apply at global, regional and country levels, but this will need to be further refined to test and reflect the different drivers and dynamics of change at each level. Some elements are also likely to need further unpacking to identify the key drivers and change factors that support or impede their implementation and achievement. For example, a separate theory of change could be constructed for business operations, or for leadership and staff capacity. Finally, some aspects such as risk mitigation strategies, and development of targets and indicators to measure progress, require further discussion and development.

(i) Context and underpinning factors

The context for this theory of change includes factors that are beyond the control, and largely also beyond the direct influence, of the UNDS. Many of these factors have been well discussed in the papers prepared for the ECOSOC dialogue. They include, but are not limited to: the declining importance of ODA as a source of financing; the plethora of actors in the development space; the many new partnerships that have sprung up between the UN and other actors, and beyond, including in the context of the new 2030 Agenda; the change in the balance of power and influence between North and South and developed and less developed countries; the changing context at the country level, with many more Middle Income Countries and countries in transition to high-income status, while at the same time a number of countries are facing entrenched conflicts and chronic insecurity; the massive increase in humanitarian crises and displacement; accelerating impact of climate change and natural disasters; and rising inequalities. Against this backdrop, the UN is increasingly just one of many players.

Underpinning factors are often outside the direct control of the UNDS, but set the context, parameters and constraints for its work and ability to change. They create the enabling environment for the UNDS to change – or inhibit and con-

strain it. They are not directly amenable to UNDS control or design – but they can be influenced by the UNDS and its Agencies. They include the following:

- A critical driver is the way that the UNDS is funded, at all levels. As highlighted in the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, and in the focus group discussions for this paper, the increase in non-core, and the dominance of bilateral, project based funding, directly undermines efforts to be more coherent and integrated and promotes fragmentation and competition for resources. At the same time, funding can be an important driver for coherence including through the use of pooled funding mechanisms at global and country levels. Linked to this, is the way the UNDS is assessed by donors, which is based almost entirely on individual agency performance, and not on joint or integrated work and results.
- Governance – both “system-wide”, and of individual Agencies, is also a critical driver, as clearly identified in the ECOSOC dialogue, by the UNDG ASG Advisory Group, and in focus group discussions. Governance of the UNDS as a “system”, and the decisions of individual governance bodies of UNDS Agencies, Funds and Programmes, can at times be inconsistent, undermining coherence and integration efforts. The QCPR mandate for “system-wide” results reporting, and agency Executive Board requirements for individual agency reporting, are just two examples of many.
- The fundamental values and principles of the UN and the normative commitments made by Member States are a central driver of the system – and as these frameworks continue to evolve, they drive change in the focus, and operations, of the UNDS.
- The internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs, and now the SDGs, have driven change in the way the UNDS is funded and organized, as well as the UNDS’s priorities for delivery, and measures of success.
- Specific UNDS system wide and individual agency mandates given by Member States are also a key driver of change, including the QCPR itself, and the establishment of new entities such as UNAIDS and UN Women.
- Also critical are perceptions and expectations of Member States, including programme countries and donors, and their views about the role and function of the UNDS in the SDG-era.
- Also critical are changes in the mandates and functions of other areas of the UN system – peace and security, humanitarian action and human rights. These include changes in the leadership function at country level, structural reforms, financing, accountability and reporting, and so on, mandated by the UN Security Council and other governing bodies.
- Political will and leadership of Member States, and of

governments at the country level, are also key drivers, including in the context of the current ECOSOC dialogue and development of the 2016 QCPR.

(ii) *Intermediate drivers and strategies*

These include the intermediate drivers and the strategies – the inputs and investments that the UNDS currently makes – or will need to make – to bring about change. They are, at least in part, “design amenable” and within the direct influence of the UNDS, though they are of course also subject to and influenced by the factors outlined above. They include the following:

- Political will and leadership within the UNDS, at the global, regional and country level – including strong and effective leadership of UN Heads of Agencies, UNDG Regional Teams, and the UN RC and UNCT. Leadership – at all levels of the UNDS and within Agencies, Funds and Programmes – has consistently been identified as a key driver and strategic investment for change within the UNDS. Having the right incentives in place to ensure leaders are accountable for and invested in change towards better functioning as a system is key. Accountability of leaders at all levels for collective efforts, impact, and results must be strengthened, and embedded in performance systems. Also critical is trust, within and between Agencies, and at all levels.
- A strong and adequately resourced coordination system that can act as the independent and trusted “backbone” for coordination and integration is also critical. This includes the UNDG and the UN Development Operations Coordination Office (DOCO) at the global level, the UNDG Regional Teams, and the UN RC system and RC’s Office at country level.
- Linked to this are the organizational arrangements and architecture that support substantive coherence and integration, including effective and flexible coordination architecture and mechanisms – the UNDG and Regional UNDGs, and UNCTs, OMT, Communications Group, Results Groups, etc.
- While Agencies all have individual strategic capacity, there is also a need for dedicated strategic thinking, research and development, innovation, knowledge management and policy capacity available to the UNDS as a system. This includes the capacity to think about, develop policy, and plan for the “system”.
- Similarly, while individual Agencies have change management capacities – of varying degrees – in place, there is a need for greater investment in change management as and for the system, supported by system-wide internal communication and awareness raising. An internal communications capacity that can really drive communication around the role of the UNDS in supporting implementation of the SDGs is critical and would support and complement external

communications efforts that also reach and influence UN staff.

- Staff capacity and mobility is also key, as is investment in staff capacity for the new agenda. This includes the initiatives currently underway under the auspices of the HLCCM and UNDG. Systems leadership and capacities to work in a more coherent and integrated manner across the dimensions of sustainable development and the pillars of the UN system will be critical going forward, as will staff mobility within the system. As is the case for leaders, a much more systematic approach to incentivizing working together across Agencies will be key, including through performance management systems. Greater mobility of staff across Agencies is also critical to help create a common sense of UN identity among staff.
- A robust, coherent and flexible body of guidance, methods, tools and approaches, including the SOPs for DaO, guidance on SDG localization, guidance for RCs on Human Rights, etc.
- Also critical are strategic analysis, planning and programming instruments that promote and enable coherent and integrated approaches, such as the UNDAF/One Programme, Integrated Strategic Frameworks, and so on.
- A common monitoring and evaluation system that enables joint measurement and reporting on progress towards integration and coherence and functioning as a system.
- A strong and effective horizontal accountability system and associated incentives for leadership and staff to work collaboratively. As highlighted above this includes setting common performance indicators at the organizational level and for individual leaders and staff members for contribution to common initiatives and results across Agencies.
- Accelerated business operations and harmonization efforts at global, regional and country level, including mutual recognition of Agency business practices.

At present, a number of these elements are already in place, in particular at the country level, through the DaO approach adopted in some 50 plus countries, and increasingly recognized by Member States as the platform for the UN’s support at country level. However, some – such as investment in change management, internal communication, and strategic capacity for the system – clearly require greater investment and/or scaling up, while some – such as a common Monitoring and Evaluation system for system-wide substantive and coordination results, are not yet fully in place, at least at the global level. Investments will also need to be strengthened across the pillars and key areas of work of the UN system to ensure greater integration in leadership, programming, financing, and coordination at all levels.

(iii) *Specific measures and approaches*

If these strategies are in place, it is posited that they will lead to the following measures and approaches:

- A shared vision and objectives in place at country, regional and global levels for substantive work and coherence efforts.
- Clear understanding and definition of UNDS comparative advantages vis-à-vis other partners in contributing to SDG implementation and monitoring.
- Shared metrics and indicators for success in functioning as a system.
- A common UN staff with shared capacity that identifies as “One UN” staff, and a motivated and expert workforce with the right incentives in place to drive collaboration.
- Communicating as One both externally and internally in support of coherent and integrated support to SDG implementation.
- National ownership and oversight of the UNDS’s programming at the country level through the DaO approach.
- Joint policy, planning and programming initiatives in place.
- Development and use of joint financing instruments at global, regional and country levels.
- Joint measurement, monitoring and evaluation of results and impact, including common assessment and evaluation of the contribution of collective efforts.
- Joint accountability for and transparent reporting on results and impact at national, regional and global levels, in the framework.
- A single/common back office, common services, and co-location, where cost efficient and cost effective, even if incrementally in place starting at the country level.

As noted above, a number of existing examples of these measures and approaches are already in place, not only within the context of DaO at country level, but also at global level, such as the UNAIDS Joint Programme and Unified Budget, Results and Accountability Framework, and joint accountability frameworks like the UN-SWAP on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, among others. It will be important to build on these experiences and good practices going forward.

(iv) *Intermediate outcomes, higher-level outcomes and objective/impact*

If in place, these measures will contribute to the intermediate outcome of the UNDS functioning as a system for greater relevance, improved strategic positioning, results and impact. And this will in turn enable the UNDS to deliver its key priority functions in an integrated and coherent manner in the SDG era.

If achieved, it is posited that this will in turn lead to:

- Improved delivery and impact of UN support and services;
- Improved evidence base for system-wide results and impact;
- Improved UN-wide “branding” and image.

And this will also lead to and be demonstrated by:

- Increased government and stakeholder satisfaction and improved perceptions of the UNDS;
- Increased pride and satisfaction of leadership and staff and sense of common UN identity.

In turn, this will contribute to the UNDS effectively contributing to the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, and ultimately to progress towards achieving the SDGs at country level and globally.

(v) *Risks and assumptions*

There are some important caveats and risks to this draft theory of change and the elements outlined above. These include both risks of changing – and of *not* changing – as well as possible unintended consequences of change. For example:

- There is a considerable risk of change fatigue at all levels, together with resistance to change. However, *not* changing also presents risks both in terms of external stakeholders, and for staff and leadership experiencing high levels of frustration at the slow pace of change. This will in turn impact the reputation, positioning and funding of the UNDS. And for leaders and staff, it will mean that some simply give up – or get out – leading to loss of motivation, higher staff turnover, and loss of expertise within the system. Slow or token change towards coherence and integration may also lead to Member States micro-managing the UNDS through mechanisms such as the QCPR.
 - There is undoubtedly a perceived risk of loss of diversity, and a risk of constraining or undermining individual Agency mandates and branding, associated with efforts to achieve greater UNDS integration and coherence. At the same time, there is a risk that individual agency priorities and incentives will prevail over coherence efforts, and that fragmentation and competition for resources, and siloed approaches, will undermine the effectiveness, reputation and relevance of the UNDS as a key partner for SDG implementation. Diversity is one of the greatest strengths of the UNDS, and balancing coherence and integration with effectively leveraging and managing the diversity of the system is a key priority and a challenge for the UNDS going forward.
 - There are clearly increased investment costs associat-
- ed with change, in particular in the start-up phase, as was evident with the DaO pilots. However, there are also significant costs associated with maintaining the status quo, for example the transaction costs associated with slow progress on harmonization of business practices. Up-front investment in change management is required but at the same time, change efforts will need to demonstrably lead to lower transaction costs over time.
 - All too often, change in the UNDS is personality driven, and negatively impacted by turnover in leadership. Investment in change at all levels is needed for sustainability. Change management and engagement of mid-level and national staff is particularly critical, and requires targeted incentives, effective communication, and accountability mechanisms that promote coordination and coherence and much more effectively balance agency-specific incentives and accountability.
 - There is a significant risk of being too prescriptive and bureaucratic, focusing too much on codification and getting the right guidance and tools in place – and too little on shared values and principles that can support behavior change and motivate leadership and staff. As highlighted above, in complex environments, it is critical to allow and enable flexibility, fast feedback, and trial and error based experimentation, in particular at the country level.
 - At the same time, there is a risk that reform efforts will continue to focus largely on the country level. Country level reform and innovation, while necessary, is not sufficient, and systemic, global change is now needed, as participants have highlighted in many of the focus group discussions that helped to inform this paper.
 - There is a risk of taking on “too much” change at once – making success more difficult – versus aiming too low – for “too little” change. Raising the level of ambition – and stretching the appetite for change – are key, but so are realism, pragmatism, and getting the sequencing of change initiatives right.
 - There is also a risk that coherence and integration leads to “lowest common denominator” decision-making – stifling innovation, and undermining strategic vision and direction. Strong leadership and political will, and keeping the level of ambition high, are key.
 - Even if the UNDS is able to accelerate change efforts to function more effectively as a system, there is still the risk that integration across the pillars of the UN system remains limited.
 - Strong horizontal accountability may run counter to or even undermine vertical accountability, leading to difficulties with individual agency governing bodies and stakeholders.
 - Finally, there is a clear risk that the underlying factors and drivers discussed above will undermine efforts of the UNDS to more coherently function as a system. Funding and donor assessment practices, and gover-

nance arrangements, that support rather than impede coordination and integration are particularly critical. The role of Member States in setting the parameters for change, and approving and supporting reforms, is central in this regard.

In this context, some key assumptions that underpin this “theory of change” are as follows:

- The UNDS is able to overcome “change fatigue” and motivate leadership and staff
- Individual Agencies – and leaders and staff at all levels - are willing and have sufficient incentive to “take off their hats” to function more effectively as a system and see their careers and future in the system as depending in part on the extent to which they work towards integration and coherence.
- There is political will and commitment to address change at the global level, including willingness to open up greater space to discuss systemic change.
- There is space and support for innovation, increased “risk appetite”, and support for risk-takers.
- The UNDS is able to manage diversity without reinforcing fragmentation and competition, while at the same time clearly identifying where coherence and integration best add value and maximize impact.
- Vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms are put in place that are mutually supportive and reinforcing rather than competing.
- Existing mandates and modalities for change – such as the current QCPR and the SOPs for DAO – are fully implemented.
- Opportunities for integration across the pillars of the UN are recognized, prioritized, and effectively leveraged.
- Resources are available and invested in support of change.

(vi) *Implications*

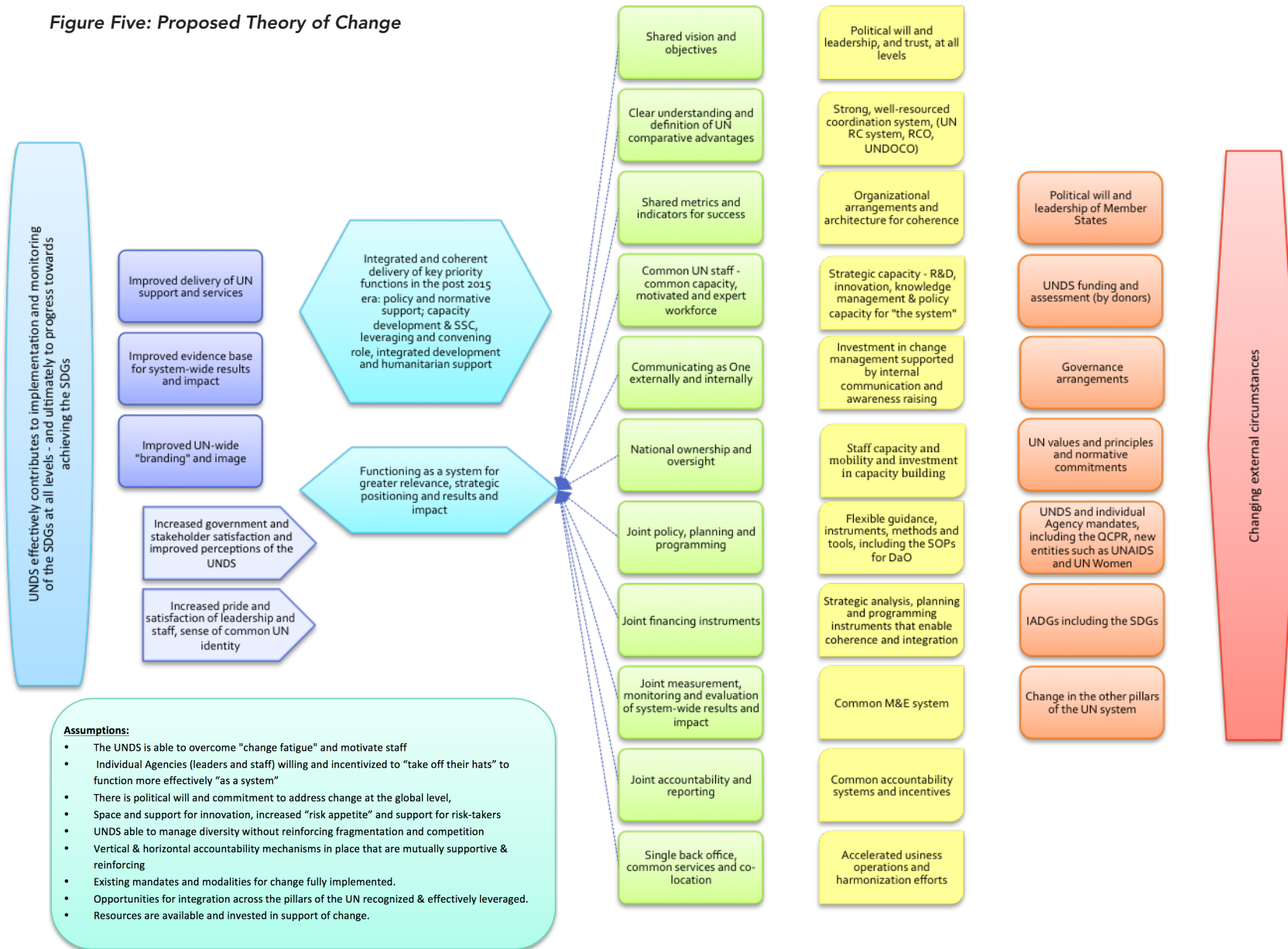
There are some key implications and reflections arising from this initial discussion of a draft theory of change for the UNDS to function in a more coherent, integrated manner – “as a system” – for greater relevance, strategic positioning and results and impact, as follows:

- There are some areas where the UNDS has clearly underinvested to date. For example, given the importance of staff perceptions, motivation and behavior change, greater investment in change management, internal communication, and in putting in place the right incentives for change is absolutely key.
- Piloting – “test and fail” experimentation – is absolutely critical in a complex environment. The DaO pilots and BoS pilots are important examples in this regard. Continued space and resources for innovation and ex-

perimentation will be essential going forward, building on initiatives such as the UNDAF Design Innovation Facility.

- The UNDS will need to resist the temptation to overly bureaucratize and codify guidance to UN RCs and UNCTs – giving up a “command and control” approach to change. Shared values and principles, higher level objectives, shared metrics and a strong coordination backbone - together with constant communication and a common action plan - are more important than detailed blueprints. The same observation also applies to integration across the pillars of the UN.
- At the same time it will be key to move beyond “either/or” approaches whether this is framed in terms of diversity versus coherence and integration; or global, system-wide change versus country level experimentation. “Both/and” measures and approaches are needed whereby we move towards systemic change while also creating more space for risk-taking; and ensure integration where it is most needed while also capitalizing on diversity. Managing these tensions is difficult but critical going forward.
- The SOPs for DaO are an essential platform for UNDS support at the country level – and all the elements are key to, and included in, this theory of change. The pillars are an integrated package and they need to be implemented that way. However some critical issues – such as behavior change and internal communication – are not included in the SOPs. It will therefore be important to continue to roll out the SOPs, but also to build on them.
- As the DaO experience shows, it’s vitally important not to get too caught up in the *process* of change. A continued strong focus on “what this is all for” – relevance, strategic positioning, results and impact – is essential.
- A fundamental question that needs to be asked is whether functioning as a system is the only way to effectively achieve relevance, strategic positioning, and results and impact – as this paper has proposed. What alternative hypotheses could be developed and tested? Would a clear-cut division of labour around the SDGs be sufficient to enable the UNDS to effectively support delivery of the 2030 Agenda? And how can we best test and verify these alternative hypotheses?
- Looking forward, it will be very important to continue to refine and test theories for change both for the UN’s substantive work – “the what” – as well as for how the UNDS works together, including at the country level, as well as to clearly articulate assumptions and risks – and guard against unintended consequences. It will also be important to develop a theory of change for how the UN system can better deliver across its pillars and key areas of work – human rights, development, peace and security, and humanitarian action.
- Finally, it will be critically important to be able to measure change going forward. This theory of change is

Figure Five: Proposed Theory of Change



designed to support and inform such measurement. Once the broad approach is adopted, targets and indicators can then be identified to track and assess progress. This could potentially be an important contribution not only to the work of the UNDG, but also to the formulation of a more strategic results framework for the next QCPR.

9. Investing in change

Based on this analysis, it is critical to maintain focus on the priorities already agreed upon, including implementation of DaO, and investment in the RC system. In addition, the following critical areas for greater investment in change were identified for the consideration of the UNDG:

- i. **Funding** – while this remains the preserve of donors and other funders, the UNDS should do all in its power to ensure financing mechanisms are in place, and are promoted and used, that can really help drive coherence, and advocate with Member States to use these to the full extent possible. This includes pooled funding mechanisms at the global, regional and country level.
- ii. **Leadership** – accelerating efforts to ensure the selection, capacity building, performance assessments and incentives, support system, etc. for UNDS leaders – not only UN RCs and UNCTs, but also other leaders in the system, really drive and support coherence efforts going forward.
- iii. **Capacities and mobility of staff** – there is a strong push needed to ensure that Agencies, Funds and Programmes, and country teams, truly have the right capacities in place for the SDG era, the right incentives are in place to support coherence, and that staff mobility is encouraged, incentivized, and rewarded to the fullest extent possible.
- iv. **Strategic capacity** – not only for the UNDS, but for the UN system as a whole to think, plan, strategize, assess, and evaluate “as a system”.
- v. **Change management** – investment in a change management capacity for the UNDS in support of the SDGs and integration, building on existing system-wide capacities in UN DOCO, the UN System Staff College, and drawing in/on agency change management capacity as needed. This could also include, for example, internal communications capacity to support behavior change communication to UN staff.
- vi. **Shared metrics** – develop common targets and indicators for both the “what” and the “how” at the global and country level including clear timeframes and sequencing of efforts going forward.
- vii. **Evidence** – much better, more robust and compelling evidence is needed of the contribution and value-added of functioning as a system to development impact and results. Joint evaluation, joint audit, and joint donor assessments will all be key in this regard.

The UNDG is currently taking forward a number of these issues as outlined in the UNDG endorsed summary (A “Theory of Change” for the UN Development System to Function “As a System” for Relevance, Strategic Positioning and Results – [Summary Paper Version 1.0, 26 January 2016](#)). In addition, it is recommended that going forward the UNDG also: i) prioritize much greater use of incentives and performance management measures to drive greater integration, together with better utilization of common change management capacities, “strategic capacity for the system”, and development of shared metrics for success; and ii) develop selected key indicators for the outcomes, measures, and strategies set out in the proposed theory of change for use by UNCTs and the UNDG.

Finally, it will be important to regularly review this proposed theory of change both to ensure its continued relevance as well as its usefulness and effectiveness in helping set key UNDG strategic priorities in support of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Annex I: Summary of Feedback from Focus Group Discussions

The following key points were highlighted in focus group discussions held with UN colleagues in the field and at headquarters (HQ) from July-October 2015 on an earlier draft of this paper:

- Participants highlighted that the draft “theory of change” is timely and will help inform their own work.
- They stressed the need to clarify the strategic intent and purpose of the draft paper, including what is meant by system-wide change towards functioning as a system, and how to measure this change.
- It was also suggested to clarify whether the draft paper is meant to be explanatory or a driver of change, or a Monitoring and Evaluation framework – some felt that the paper should help facilitate the change that is needed.
- The SDGs are the opening and the imperative for change: “If the UN cannot deliver the SDGs our relevance will be further questioned, we are fighting for multilateralism.”
- Participants in a number of discussions raised questions about the relationship between this draft paper and a theory of change for substantive results. They highlighted that a theory of change for how the UNDS will support the SDGs substantively is also needed. If the SDGs require a global plan of action – a global “One Plan” – this should be developed before this theory of change.
- Participants also highlighted that the SDGs are only part of the “what” – for many Agencies their normative mandates are also important.
- It was suggested to clarify the intended audience for this draft theory of change – as external audiences may need a different iteration. It was suggested to also consult on the paper with external stakeholders, to engage them in the discussion.
- It was also seen as important to clarify the focus and scope of the draft “theory of change” - some participants argued that the primary focus should be on the country level, or include different theories of change for country and global levels. Others highlighted the need for a theory of change for the whole UN system. Participants also highlighted existing theories of change, for example for pooled funding mechanisms, and asked how all these different theories of change would fit together, stressing the need to avoid parallel initiatives. Also important would be to clearly set out the time-frame, priorities and sequencing for change.
- Change efforts must be based on the value and role of the UN, not just efficiency. The UN needs to be values driven. As peace and security are part of the value proposition for the UN, some participants argued that we need a theory of change for the whole UN system.
- Participants in a number of focus group discussions stressed that it was very important to specify when functioning as a system adds value and when it does not, based on the principle of subsidiarity. Linked to this is the need to very clearly show substantive impact and contribution to results including collective impact.
- A clear analysis of what works and doesn’t work in current reform efforts is needed. Also needed is an analysis of the pathways, incentives and catalysts for change based on a ‘political economy’ of what the UN system really is and how it functions. There was a sense that we may now have reached the limits of technocratic change and political will is essential going forward.
- It was suggested to include examples of working together and country level examples to illustrate different elements of the theory of change. It would also be important to add more on lessons learned from previous reform efforts. For example, previous reforms were conceived as a package and some elements were implemented while others were not. The whole package has to be implemented in order to effectively assess impact.
- Many participants, in particular at the country level, emphasized that the time has come to consider serious structural and systemic change, including mandate review and reform. They highlighted the need for systems analysis, as the current configuration is no longer fit for purpose.
- Participants also stressed that in the end leadership and political will are fundamental. Participants at country level questioned the appetite for change, whether Agencies are really engaged, and asked who will drive such change forward. It was strongly emphasized that the UNDS cannot deliver the 2030 Agenda without commitment, intent, focus and drive.
- It was highlighted that the UN system is risk averse and that increased scrutiny of the UN is reducing appetite for risk.
- Many participants highlighted that the draft paper is too inwardly focused and greater external focus is needed. This includes the need to unpack external circumstances and look at the proliferation of non-UN actors and how this influences the UN’s business. It was also stressed

that partnerships are critical to the new agenda and the UN must pay attention to partnerships beyond government, including with civil society.

- It was suggested to look at how other big systems work, that are comparable to the UNDS; for example, how does the private sector bring about change in big systems and what can we learn from this? The theory of change must also address how to work in a broader coalition of partners.
- It was noted that the paper assumes current country programme configuration and presence and the principle of universality is not reflected – the role of the UNDS in supporting accountability and reporting in a universal context should be addressed. The draft paper is too focused on the past and not looking enough at where we are going, including in middle-income countries where we need very different capacities and profiles.
- Participants in country level discussions highlighted that contextualization and flexibility are key, and that the theory of change must be context and country specific to understand how change operates.
- A number of participants stressed the need to look at the regional level where reform is also needed including to ensure greater coherence in the UNDG-Regional Teams.
- Some participants preferred the alternative hypothesis of a clear division of labor in support of the SDGs. It was also highlighted that there is a need to ensure a balance between the drive for coherence, and diversity.
- There was a call to better reflect outside influences, and intangibles such as trust in the draft theory of change, and to clarify what elements of reform are already underway and areas where more investment is needed.
- In terms of key drivers, funding is seen as both a key driver and constraint. Governance is also viewed as a critical factor. Participants highlighted that change and progress are not possible without change in donor and Member State behavior especially as regards funding and governance.
- Leadership is also seen as key and the need to put coherence at the heart of drivers and incentives for leaders was stressed in several groups.
- A common international UN civil service is seen as critical, with the right incentives and accountability, and cultural change is also needed. Investing in staff capacity and ownership is key.
- The need to invest more in change management including change management for the system as a whole was also highlighted. Identifying change champions and allies will be key.
- Accelerated business practice reform is viewed as critical in particular at country level.
- Greater transparency and accountability, backed by investment in data, can also be an important driver for change.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations General Assembly (2015) ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, A/RES/70/1, para 46.
- 2 A/RES/70/1, op cit., para 88.
- 3 The authors wish to express their appreciation to all those who participated in the focus group discussions for their thoughtful, insightful and helpful comments on the earlier draft of this paper. Focus group discussions were held as follows: UN Development Operations Coordination Office (UNDOCO); UNDG ASG Advisory Group Focal Points (New York and Paris/Europe); UN Resident Coordinators in East and West Africa; UNCT members and UN staff in Tanzania and Bosnia; select individual UN agency change managers; and “Delivering as One” veterans based in New York.
- 4 See the discussion in United Nations Development Group (2015) ‘ECOSOC Dialogue on the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system”: “UNDG Perspectives” on Capacity, Impact and Partnership Approaches’, accessed at: <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/phase-1> Also see UNICEF (2013) ‘Strategic Plan 2014-2017: Supplementary Programme Note on the Theory of Change’, accessed at: http://www.unicef.org/strategicplan/files/First_official_draft_Supplementary_Programme_Note_on_UNICEF_Theory_of_Change.pdf
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- 6 Craig Valters (2015) ‘Theories of Change: Time for a radical approach to learning in development’, ODI, London.
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- 11 See United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) (2014) ‘HLCP Discussion Paper: First Regular Session for 2015’, accessed at: <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Item-1-CEB-2014-1-RETREAT-2-HLCP-DISCUSSION-PAPER.pdf>
- 12 See United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) (2013) ‘Impact Evaluations in UN Agency Evaluation Systems – Guidance on Selection, Planning and Management’, accessed at: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/1433>
- 13 A/RES/70/1, op cit.
- 14 See UN DESA Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination (2015) ‘ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system in the context of the post-2015 development agenda: Update/Report’, available at: http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/pdf/ecosoc_dialogue_report_phase_i.pdf
- 15 United Nations (2015) ‘Statement: Secretary-General’s remarks at Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda’, accessed at <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9015>
- 16 These five elements were set out in the UN Secretary-General’s letter to the CEB on 30 May 2014, available at: <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Item-1-Ltr-SG-Outcome-of-Retreat-on-Post-2015.pdf>
- 17 See Ban Ki-moon (2014) ‘Letter from the Secretary-General to CEB Members on the outcome of the retreat on the post-2015 agenda’, accessed at: <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Letter-Secretary-General-to-CEB-Members-outcome-retreat-post-2015.pdf>
- 18 This finding is echoed in programme country surveys conducted by UN DESA for the 2015 and 2016 QCPR reports. In 2015, two thirds of governments in DaO countries reported that the UN contribution to human rights and equity had been especially significant. The UN’s contribution on gender equality was considered to be significant in both DaO and non-DaO countries, second only to health, in both 2015 and 2016. See A/70/62- E/2015/4 and UN DESA Development Cooperation Policy Branch (2016) ‘Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR): 2016’, Report of the Secretary-General, Advance Unedited version 28 December 2015, accessed at: http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/pdf/SGR2016-Implementation_of_QCPR_advance_unedited.pdf
- 19 A/51/950 “Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform”: Report of the Secretary-General. 14 July 1997. See also Stephan Klingbiel (1999) *Effectiveness and Reform of the UNDP*, GDI, London, Box 4, page 93; also Gambhir Bhatta (2000) *Reforms at the United Nations: Contextualizing the Annan Agenda*, Singapore University Press, Singapore.
- 20 A/51/950, p6
- 21 Ibid para 148
- 22 UN General Assembly (2008) ‘System-Wide Coherence’, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 15 September 2008, A/RES/62/277.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 United Nations (2012) ‘Independent Evaluation of Delivering as One: Main Report’, United Nations, New York, accessed at: <http://www.un.org/en/ga/deliveringasone/pdf/mainreport.pdf>
- 25 However, this was retrospective, did not inform actual implementation of the pilots, and was not developed or owned by the UNDS, thus limiting its utility beyond the evaluation itself.

- 26 UNDG (2014) “Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Delivering as One: Draft”, accessed at: https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Item-2-Draft-Delivering-as-One-ME-Framework_7_July-2014.docx
- 27 See “Delivering as One” Results Monitoring Framework: Results-based second generation of “Delivering as One” in Viet Nam, Ha Noi, June 2015
- 28 See UN DESA (2016) ‘Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR): 2016’, Report of the Secretary-General, Advance Unedited version, op cit.
- 29 United Nations (2013) ‘Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system’, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 21 December 2012, A/RES/67/226.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 See UN Women (2012) ‘UN System-Wide Action Plan for Implementation of the CEB United Nations System-wide Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women’ and UN Women (2015) ‘UN system-wide Action Plan for the Implementation of the CEB Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: Performance Indicators, Technical Notes’, both available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/un-system-coordination/promoting-un-accountability>
- 32 UN General Assembly and UN ECOSOC (2014) ‘Policy for independent system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system’, A/68/658-E/2014/7, accessed at: http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/julyhls/pdf14/sg_note_e_2014_7.pdf. An independent system-wide evaluation is defined as follows: “a systematic and impartial assessment of the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of the combined contributions of United Nations entities towards the achievements of collective development objectives. This includes an assessment, inter alia, of the implementation of policies, strategies, programmes and activities, as well as implementation of system-wide mandates and institutional performance issues. The latter implies a focus on how effectively the different parts of the UN system are working together.” See United Nations (2013) ‘Policy for Independent System-wide Evaluation of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System’, accessed at http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/julyhls/pdf13/policy_for_independent_system-wide_evaluation_of_operational_activities_for_development_of_the_united_nations.pdf
- 33 See website of the UN Independent System-Wide Evaluation Mechanism: <http://www.uniswem.org>
- 34 United Nations (2013) ‘Policy for Independent System-wide Evaluation of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System’, op cit.
- 35 See FUNDS 2014 Global Perception Survey Results Available at: www.futureun.org. A number of other important surveys on the UNDS are carried out including surveys conducted by UN DESA and UN DOCO. It will be important to look across these surveys to assess to what extent benchmarks are available to measure the key elements proposed in this draft theory of change.
- 36 See <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/phase-1> for the background papers.
- 37 Mark Malloch-Brown (2007) ‘Holmes Lecture: Can the UN Be Reformed?’, available at: <http://acuns.org/2007-can-the-un-be-reformed/>
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- 39 See Richard Hummelbrunner and Harry Jones (2013) ‘A guide for planning and strategy development in the face of complexity’, Working and discussion paper, ODI, London.
- 40 Duncan Green (2015) ‘Fit for the Future? Development trends and the role of international NGOs’, Oxfam GB, Oxford, accessed at: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/fit-for-the-future-development-trends-and-the-role-of-international-ngos-556585>
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- 43 See examples cited in UNDG (2015) ‘Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Interim Reference Guide to UN Country Teams’, available at: <https://undg.org/home/undg-mechanisms/sustainable-development-working-group/country-support/>
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- 47 FHI 360 (2014) ‘Integration of global health and other development sectors: a review of the evidence’, accessed at: <http://www.fhi360.org/news/taking-closer-look-evidence-integrated-development>