Reform of UN development system

Is the UN Development System Becoming Irrelevant?

Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss

The challenges described in development dialogue paper no.3, 'UN Development at a Crossroads', are elaborated further here. One particular problem is the lack of a unifying paradigm consolidating the ideational and operational parts of the UN Development system. Human Development could have been such a paradigm but failed to achieve a universal status partly due to the compartmentalized structure of the UN. Furthermore, the UN Development system faces challenges from a lack of coherence, undefined capacity and increased competition. Referencing the 2006 UN report 'Delivering as One', Thomas G. Weiss and Stephen Browne suggest a way forward:

» Continue to press for the UN development system to deliver as one at the country level, thus forcing UN Organisations to work more closely.
» Consolidate whole UN entities, as examplified by the merger of four entities to form UN Women.
» Strengthen the collaboration of the UN with the World Bank.

We are pleased to comment on the October contribution of this paper series by Bruce Jenks, 'UN Development at a Crossroads.' The thorough and well-documented report on which it is based, written with Bruce Jones, is a solid contribution to the ongoing yet seemingly endless discussions about 'reform.'[1] Notwithstanding the preoccupation, the UN system remains more wasteful and weak than it should be – 'punching below its weight' is how Jenks and Jones summarize the situation. Indeed, much of what passes for 'reform' amounts to wishful thinking.

We thus part company with our colleagues who argue that 'the UN development system has proved itself capable of radical reform in the past.' To be fair, there has been adaptation by the United Nations over time. Indeed, founders might well not recognize today what they created in 1945. At the same time, our perspective is far more guarded and less sanguine. It is based on professional experience, analysis, and the evidence that the FUNDS Project has amassed from two independent global surveys in 2012 and 2010.[2]

Plus ça change?

The requisite transformations are not only urgent but also unprecedented. While adaptations and additions have taken place over the years, radical reform has been elusive and change incremental and piecemeal. As former UN deputy secretary-general Mark Malloch-Brown puts it: 'a long period of tinkering with the UN machinery may actually allow the growing gap between performance and need to increase … the call for reform is likely to grow steadily' and 'the question remains when not if.' Our own research and interpretation of the last seven decades of development efforts show growth by accretion, more and more moving parts with less and less synergy, and more and more transaction costs related to coordination for both host governments and for UN staff but with too few results.

There are two primary functions of the UN development system (UNDS), ideational and operational. A decade of research from the United Nations Intellectual History Project demonstrates the UN's exceptional role in the generation of ideas, norms, principles, data, and standards.[3] In many ways, these efforts have been a singular contribution, one that can thrive amidst institutional silos.

However, it is in translating ideas into practice where the UN falters. There are two parts to the problem. The first consists of attempting to define a unifying development paradigm by bringing together the many good ideas that have emerged from the system. In the 1990s, UNDP came up with 'human development,' which was a value-driven riposte to the Washington Consensus. Defined over the course of many global, regional, and country reports, human development is a paradigm that encompasses all the key dimensions and places individual well-being, not economic fortitude, at the center. Inherent in the concept are the rights, capacities and opportunities of the individual and the creation of an enabling environment. Unfortunately, human development never caught on across the entire UN development system (UNDS) – not because of any inconsistency with UN values, but rather because the organizationally-atomized system could never find common ground.

So, human development was identified as a UNDP idea. The rest of the system was still defining development in narrower dimensions by organizational sector: economic, social, and environmental.

These three dimensions are now known as 'sustainable development' and are intended to guide the post-2015 development agenda and goals to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Will sustainable development 'broaden the frame of reference and community in which development issues are understood, decisions are taken, and implementation is executed and evaluated,' as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon tells us?[4] Maybe. However, it is just as likely to permit an array of isolated efforts to be displayed side-by-side, with different UN organizations championing their own favored angles. To arrive at a coherent paradigm would require the kind of collaboration across agencies and perspectives that cannot easily come from the UN development 'system' as currently configured (see box to the right). It could, but is unlikely to, without a substantial change in incentives.

'Ideas matter'[6] but the UN's comparative advantage in idea-mongering is not what most friends or foes – and certainly not what Swedish parliamentarians and citizens – have in mind when considering the next budgetary allocation to the UN development system. The second part of the problem arises in 'operationalizing' development, however it is defined. The UN's operations, particularly in developing and transition countries, are its most visible feature, and most conversations about 'reform' concern the operational delivery capabilities of the UNDS.

What is the UN development 'system'?

Development is usually described as one of the three main pillars of the UN, the others being international peace and security; and human rights and humanitarian action. As distinct from the other two pillars, the various organizations that make up the UNDS share long-term development objectives and subscribe to the MDGs and to what will follow. Almost every part of the UNDS is also a member of the High-level Committee on Programmes and the UN Development Group (UNDG), which oversees operational activities at the field level. To that extent, therefore, there is a 'system' behind the UN's development pillar.

This system undertakes the 'operational activities' that account for about 60 percent of total annual UN spending (over US$ 13 billion), employing 50,000 people, a majority of the organization's full-time staff. It includes more than 30 organizations (variously called funds, programmes, offices, and agencies). There is also an equivalent number of supportive functional commissions and research and training organizations, which are not included among the UNDS organizations. The UN University on its own has 16 specialized centers.

Few would deny that the system is atomized. Apart from the number of different entities, there is their physical dispersion. The headquarters of the main organizations are in 14 different countries (and 15 cities). There are also more than 1,000 representative offices of the UNDS worldwide (and over 1,400 for the UN as a whole, including peacekeeping and the humanitarian organizations). The numbers, moreover, are growing not shrinking. [5]

The importance of having a system, moreover, is nowhere more in evidence than in the UN's attempts to face up to major longer-term development challenges. Whether at the global level (in confronting environmental management, climate change, food security, migration, and many other issues) or at the country level (in marshalling a range of expertise to address more local problems), 'coalitions of the willing' – of different organizations and agencies within the development pillar (technical, normative, and operational) – must come together if the UN is to have a real impact. While the longer-term development vocation of the UN can be easily identified, in fragile states and countries in reconstruction – increasingly the main focus of UN operations – these functions need to be combined with its other main roles of peace operations, humanitarian relief, and the promotion of human rights and social justice.

Will the operational efforts of the UNDS be transformed and become fit-for-purpose or alternatively an irrelevant relic of times past? The answer depends on whether the system is able to confront four challenges that begin with 'C' in our alliterative framework: competition, coherence, capacity, and complacency.

» **Competition** means that the UNDS is more and more marginal, disbursing only about 5 percent of total overseas development assistance (ODA). The UN's operations are essentially financed by ODA, which is less and less important in comparison with alternative sources of funds and expertise – ranging from foundations like Gates to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of rival size, to foreign direct investment (FDI) that is 5 times larger than ODA, and to remittances that are at least twice the size. And of course, trade is booming; and many of the poorest countries in Africa have access to substantial and growing royalties from oil and mineral production.

» **Coherence**, or actually lack thereof, is a long-standing lament; but decibel levels of criticism are growing as impatience grows with proliferation, decentralization, rivalry, turf battles, and redundancy.

» **Capacity** is another variable. What exactly can the system do? How robust is the expertise within it? What are its comparative advantages, and how can they be maximized? Merely replicating the activities from the past that have been ongoing recipes is not viable – limping along does not suffice.

» **Complacency** is how we characterize the attitude of too many members of the international civil service who do not seem to recognize that in fact there is a crisis, and that something drastic ('transformation' is not too strong a word) must be done to prevent the UNDS from being a marginalized anachronism.

Another 'C' is for 'consolidation' or 'centralization,' but these obvious solutions are anathema to officials who rationalize futile complexity and react to incentives from donors to go their own way.

The UN's structure would have puzzled the celebrated US cartoonist Rube Goldberg, whose elaborate contraptions were a 'symbol of man's capacity for exerting maximum effort to achieve minimal results.'[7] The UNDS's futile complexity along with donor incentives explain why individual UN organizations focus on substantive areas often located in a different city from other relevant partners and with separate budgets, separate governing boards, separate organizational cultures, and independent executive heads. An almost universal chorus sings the atonal tune praising decentralization and autonomy; and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provides one of the main concert halls for this cacophony.[8]

One of the giants of multilateralism, for the Allies in World War II and the UN afterwards, was Sir Robert Jackson. He began his 1969 *Capacity Study's* evaluation of the UN development system by writing: 'The machine as a whole has become unmanageable in the strictest sense of the word. As a result, it is becoming slower and more unwieldy like some prehistoric monster.'[9] That sentence infuriated heads of UN organizations then, but the lumbering dinosaur is now older but certainly not better adapted to the climate of the twenty-first century. Astonishingly, there has not been a serious debate on the capacity of the system for some 45 years – in fact, we could do far worse than revisit the Jackson report's recommendations which, if implemented, could have contributed to a more effective UN development system with more collective punch.

With the fateful terminal year 2015 approaching, the UN has initiated an intense and intensive process of determining the goals that might follow the MDGs. While the UN is driving the process – dubbed 'The World We Want' – the FUNDS Project is pushing to add another clause, 'The UN We Want.' Why? Because there has been very little introspection about the organizational capacity to help countries to meet what undoubtedly will be called the new sustainable development goals (SDGs). There is a no doubt that a strong, cohesive, and responsive UNDS would be able to play an essential role in ensuring progress. But it has become increasingly disjointed and inadequately adapted to contemporary needs, often being sidelined by other more effective development organizations and initiatives along with alternative sources of finance, expertise, and oversight.

Ways Forward?

The UN needs to be fitter-for-purpose if it is to be a useful partner in the post-2015 era. But unlike most public organizations, there are few incentives to pursue cost-effectiveness because its member states are either its interested patrons or its patronized partners. These cozy relationships are impediments, but they also are opportunities for reformers: impediments because any proposal that purports to reduce the UN's footprint will meet opposition (from donor countries that are hosts of UN organizations, or developing countries with a large UN presence); but opportunities as well because one or a few influential member states can work together to champion change. Sweden, as a major donor to and advocate for the UN development system and a trusted partner of the developing world, could play such a role. Fortunately, there are initiatives for champions to pursue.

The most recent meaningful reform blueprint consists of the Delivering as One report of the High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence.[10] It dates from 2006, the last major panel called for by Kofi Annan, and its recommendations are still very pertinent but are only very slowly being implemented. The report recommended that the UNDS deliver as one at the country level, and there has been some degree of convergence in over 40 countries. While not achieving one leader, one program, one fund, and one office in more than a handful of cases, UN development organizations are at least collaborating more closely. Another marker has been the merger of four entities to form UN Women, the result of a painstaking negotiating process of four years – the first time in UN history that entities were closed down in favor of consolidation. The panel also recommended a rapprochement of the UN with the World Bank, which appears to be taking place informally, through growing contacts between the Korean-born heads of the two institutions, hopefully leading to joint programs in some troubled states.

Other recommendations from 2006 have some traction, but remain incomplete. The proposal to vest the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) with 'real authority as the environmental policy pillar of the UN' was widely mooted at Rio+20, but it certainly has not moved far. The Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) is to be re-vamped, but it will fall short of the authoritative Sustainable Development Board envisaged to oversee the Delivering as One initiative. Two of the recommendations that would have done more than any of the others to bring greater coherence to the system have not materialized: the appointment of a strong and respected development coordinator as overseer, and the establishment of single consolidated funds for the UN development system in each country.

There have been fledgling efforts to promote coherence on the watch of the current secretary-general. Some business practices are being harmonized.

More system-wide evaluations are envisaged. A cautious plan has been proposed to align seven research and training entities. That such seemingly obvious steps are still under consideration and seen as stretches is a reflection of the magnitude of the task.

Some new initiatives could have a beneficial impact. In an attempt to bring the different parts of the UNDS together and more partners into the UN's work, the secretary-general has launched several new programs: Every Woman, Every Child; Sustainable Energy for All; the Global Education First Initiative; Zero Hunger Challenge; the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement; and the Call to Action on Sanitation. These initiatives demonstrate the same proclivity for accretion in the system. However, if they encourage existing UN organizations to take charge and extend partnerships, they will have helped to move the UN towards the center of the development debate.

Ironically 2016 will be the first year of a renewed development agenda, and the last of the current secretary-general's term. It would be a shame if his principal legacy will have been to preside over the further decline of the UNDS. Inertia is not a viable organizational strategy for the future UN development system.

Notes

1   Bruce Jenks and Bruce Jones, *United Nations Development at a Crossroads* (New York: Centre on International Cooperation, 2013). Mark Malloch-Brown, shortly after retiring from the UN as UN deputy-secretary-general and UNDP administrator, commented that the world organization is the only institution where, around water coolers or over coffee, reform is a more popular topic than sex. (Mark Malloch Brown, 'Can the UN Be Reformed?' *Global Governance* 14, no. 1 (2008): 1-12.)

2   FUNDS Project, Global Perception Surveys, 2010 and 2012, available at http://futureun.org/en/Publications-Surveys/Article?newsid=19&teaserId=2.

3   For further details, see the two summary volumes: Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Additional information can be found at http://www.unhistory.org/.

4   United Nations, *Mainstreaming of the Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development throughout the United Nations System, Report of the Secretary-General*, UN document A/68/79-E/2013/69, 9 May 2013, para. 7.

5   See Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, *Making Change Happen: Enhancing the UN's Contributions to Development* (New York: World Federation of United Nations Associations, 2012).

6   Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 214.

7   Quoted by Dana Jennings, 'Beyond a Man's Machines,' *New York Times*, 10 December 2013.

8   Thomas G. Weiss, 'ECOSOC and the MDGs: What Can Be Done?' in T*he Millennium Development Goals and Beyond: Global Development Goals after 2015*, ed. Rorden Wilkinson and David Hulme (London: Routledge, 2012), 117-28.

9   United Nations, *A Capacity Study of the United Nations Development System* (Geneva: UN, 1969), volume I, document DP/5, iii. See also Craig N. Murphy, *The UN Development Programme: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Stephen Browne, *The United Nations Development Programme and System* (London: Routledge, 2011).

10 United Nations, *Delivering as One* (New York: UN, 2006).

Stephen Browne is Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, The CUNY Graduate Center, and former Deputy Executive Director of the International Trade Centre. He is the author most recently of *United Nations Industrial Development Organization* (2012) and *The United Nations Development Programme and System* (2011).
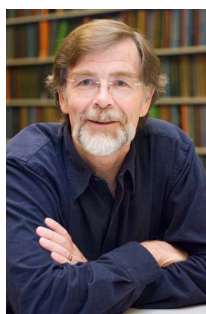
Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science and Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at The CUNY Graduate Center; his latest single-authored books include: *Governing the World: Addressing "Problems without Passports"* (2014); *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (2013); and *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (2012).

The authors are co-directors of the Future UN Development System (FUNDS) Project. For further details, go to http://www.futureun.org.

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