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VIEWPOINT
The future UN development agenda: contrasting visions, contrasting operations

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'Sustainable development' – as currently and politically correctly formulated – provides an inappropriate basis on which to frame a future-oriented UN agenda, and risks perpetuating patterns of assistance in which most UN organisations perform poorly and in the shadow of alternative and more able multilateral and bilateral sources. UN operations should take as their point of departure the comprehensive agenda outlined by the two world summits of 2000 and 2005. This agenda recognises the value-based UN as the only universal-membership organisation, which combines the concerns of satisfying human needs while ensuring security, human rights, justice and sound governance. The post-2015 agenda should not look only at development and environment but aspire to what a million global voices canvassed by the UN in 'the world we want' campaign are clamouring for.

In a draft 2012 report UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed 'a transparent and inclusive dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system (UNDS) in the rapidly changing development cooperation environment'. The purpose of such a dialogue would be 'to further define the value proposition of the operational activities of the UN'.[1] The secretary-general understands that the changing aid environment has far-reaching implications for the roles of the more than 30 organisations that comprise the UNDS. Virtually all are members of the UN Development Group (UNDG) but comprise a 'system' in name only because each operates autonomously.[2]

The United Nations has been both a source of ideas and a provider of technical services. However, these two roles have meshed poorly, and the UN has not always been effective in putting its best ideas into practice or in persuading states, civil society and the for-profit sector to sign on. The ongoing debate on the UN's post-2015 agenda revolves around 'sustainable development', a three-pronged sectoral approach that, if past is prelude, will provide the new framework for the operational activities of the world organisation.

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This sustainable development approach – at least as currently and politically correctly formulated – provides an inappropriate basis on which to frame a future-oriented agenda. It risks perpetuating patterns of assistance in which most UN organisations perform poorly and in the shadow of alternative and more able multilateral and bilateral sources. UN operations should, alternatively, take as their point of departure the comprehensive agenda outlined by the two world summits of 2000 and 2005, more specifically the Millennium Declaration. This agenda recognises the value-based UN as the only universal-membership organisation, which combines the concerns of satisfying human needs while ensuring security, human rights, justice and sound governance. This broader agenda is more than ever required. The post-2015 agenda should not repeat the mistake of looking only at development and environment but should aspire to what a million global voices canvassed by the UN in 'the world we want' campaign are clamouring for.

In forging the new post-2015 development agenda and future operations, which voices, at which decibel levels, should guide UN secretariats and influential member states? In order to answer that question, this essay briefly explores the dual contributions of ideas and operations before parsing the organisation's comparative advantage, combining its security and development roles. Next, it probes the ideational and operational contrasts between sustainable and human development and concludes with a plea for norm-driven rather than technical efforts.

Ideas and operations

The United Nations is an under-appreciated source of development wisdom. It is no exaggeration that many UN ideas have 'changed the world'.[3] A partial list includes human rights, gender equality, human development, environmental sustainability, human security, fairer economic relations and global development goals. These ideational milestones have been facilitated by different UN organisations, which – despite popular views to the contrary – have attracted some of the most creative minds labouring in development vineyards. To an extent not commonly realised, the world body has influenced not only normative discussions within UN circles but also policy debates in other bilateral and multilateral arenas. Even the Washington-based international financial institutions are often obliged to reflect UN concerns – in field coordination meetings and in global policy discussions around such issues as poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS).

The United Nations has been less successful, however, in translating ideas into practice and in persuading governments, civil society and businesses to implement them. Certainly some ideas have been more aspirational than practical – for instance, the call for fairer economic relations and the redistribution of wealth – but the main other reasons reflect basic functional and bureaucratic imperfections. Two in particular come to mind.

The first relates to coherence – or rather, the lack thereof – within the world organisation. What then is the 's' in the UNDS acronym? The word connotes far more centralisation than actually is the case, which is why many set aside 'system' in favour of 'family' because, like many such units, the UN one is

dysfunctional. In fact, the UN has more in common with feudalism than with a modern organisation.

If the UN system were a system, the never-ending discussions of reform would be about 'how' not 'whether'. Radical reform has been elusive, change at best incremental and piecemeal. Former UN deputy secretary-general Mark Malloch-Brown summarises: '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'.[4]

The past seven decades demonstrate growth by accretion; more and more moving parts with less and less synergy; and increasing transaction costs for governments and UN officials. This conclusion draws on the views of nearly 10,000 people from around the world – two thirds from the global South – who responded to three global surveys by the Future UN Development System Project (FUNDS) about the relevance of the policy and operational activities of the UN development system. Health, human rights and education came out on top but still with only 50% of respondents judging them as pertinent, whereas UN activities for the environment – at 35% – and economic management – at barely 20% – were rated far lower.[5]

Because each organisation guards its independence fiercely, even though most report to the General Assembly and many are under the authority of the secretary-general, UN ideas and the research behind them are rarely shared. They tend to be identified with the originating organisation that has more to gain from the trademark than from its wider implementation.

Paradigms are, in Thomas Kuhn's classic definition, 'ways of seeing the world'.[6] World-views are essential for framing policy responses and determining the nature and emphasis of operational activities. A prime example is human development, which emerged from the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in 1990 and remained there, even while other UN organisations continued to talk up fashionable but narrower concepts. 'Development with a human face' was UNICEF's riposte to structural adjustment; 'decent work' is an International Labour Organisation (ILO) brand; and so on. Human development, which encompasses people-centred concerns that coincide with the UN's values and comparative advantage, could have helped knit the system together more closely.

Funding patterns are the prime cause of atomisation. As core resources have stagnated, all UN organisations have pursued 'extra-budgetary' funding for operational activities from the same donors.[7] In chasing earmarked monies, UN technical assistance priorities have increasingly come to resemble the proclivities of major donors. Competition among UN organisations works against coming together under a single paradigm. With 80% of resources non-core, it is not unfair to characterise the members of the UNDS as sub-contractors.

The second reason for ineffectiveness is that many ideas have lacked traction because they were inadequately 'operationalised'. This ugly term basically means that UN organisations were unable, or unwilling, to build activities around the best development concepts. They had more to gain – in visibility, resources and reputation – from going it alone. The quintessential human development paradigm was never the basis for country-level programming even by UNDP, a decentralised and individualised network of offices. Not only were the

intellectual resources lacking, but UNDP has persisted in technical assistance brokerage, attempting to be all things to all governments.[8] It never designed activities to be strictly compliant with human development. In fact, while this term appears frequently in academic literature and donor profiles,[9] it now is absent from the UNDP's home page.

Development and security

The UN's operational role increasingly resembles the activities of its sponsors, including, more recently, private and philanthropic sources, but its real value in the development arena derives from its broad-based mandate, which includes concerns of security, justice and rights. These values encapsulate the UN's comparative advantage. No other institutions on the world stage possess such a range of activities or the legitimacy that emanates from universal membership.

When it comes to operations, however, the gulf between the UN's development and security capabilities is at least as serious as the divisions among competing development organisations. In spite of repeated declamations over the years about the inextricable links between security and development, the world organisation has continued to be bifurcated along two quite separate axes. Perhaps the clearest manifestation was the then secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali's, authoring of *An Agenda for Peace* and, separately, *An Agenda for Development*.[10] These have remained separate in practice and underscored by the UN's very organisational structure.

In the 1990s the UN embarked on a series of high-profile global development conferences, following upon earlier ones on many of the same topics in the 1970s, sponsored by one or other – rarely more than one – development organisation, whose outcomes provided a fresh mandate for their own operations. From 1990 to 1996 summits were held successively on children, the enviroment, human rights, population, women, social development, human settlements, and food, each one championed by a different UN organisation.

In 2000 and 2005 the two largest-ever development summits of heads of state and government were convened in New York and resulted in milestones, with the promise to set the UN on a more holistic development course. Almost 150 heads signed the Millennium Declaration (MD) in September 2000, a striking blueprint for progress over the following 15 years.[11] One year later international terrorism struck the USA, helping to tilt the balance towards security for the next summit on the UN's 60th anniversary in 2005. Over 150 heads of state and government reaffirmed the Millenium Declaration's principles and elaborated an even more detailed blueprint for UN action, including counter-terrorism measures, the responsibility to protect and peacebuilding.[12]

The 9/11 shock jolted the world organisation into a heightened awareness of the centrality of security, the *raison d'être* of the 1945 UN Charter. The 2005 summit was preceded by the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change,[13] requested by the then secretary-general, Kofi Annan, who wrote his own report.[14] In 2006 followed the report from the secretary-general's second high-level panel, this one devoted to system-wide coherence,[15] which proposed organisational changes to the UNDS intended partly to facilitate the implementation of the 2005 outcome document.

Prescient words are always in more abundant supply than actions to match. With a change of secretary-general in 2007, some momentum was inevitably lost. However, Ban Ki-moon arrived on the 38th floor to find an unprecedented array of proposals for strengthening the United Nations. It was rebooting its focus on security, specifically by moving ahead with the new Peacebuilding Commission, making peacebuilding operations a more explicit concern, albeit with insufficient new resources. On the development front the UN pursued two of the coherence panel's recommendations: experimenting with 'delivering as one' in several country pilots and amalgamating four entities – a first in UN history – to create a new organisation, UN Women.

Modest progress also highlighted the gap between security and development. This division had political underpinnings: security concerns are generally of greater interest to industrialised countries, while development has greater resonance in the global South. The UN agenda continues to reflect the outmoded North–South theatre that began with rapid decolonisation.[16] This division of perceived political interests was evident in 2008–09 when, following an increase in the UN's budget for peacekeeping, the G77 – predominantly comprised of aid-recipients – successfully pressured the General Assembly for additional funding of many development organisations as well.

Following the Millennium Declaration the UN applied a narrow lens to formulate the MDGs. It was the easiest option because they differed little from the 'international development targets' that had been derived, at donor urging, from earlier global conferences. Their subsequent success reflects a focus for the UNDS and measurable benchmarks. However, the MDGs were extracted from only part of the Millenium Declaration, leaving out those chapters with such essential priorities as human rights, human security and good governance. To that extent the UN's third development 'summit' in 2010, albeit with less high-level participation, was unhelpful in promoting a broader development agenda. It focused almost exclusively on taking stock of progress towards meeting the MDGs.

Approaching the 2015 terminal date for their achievement, the United Nations is now actively debating a 'new' development agenda that reflects the intergovernmental consensus at the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012. One might question the wisdom of asking government delegates in political forums to define 'development'. The role of institutional leadership by the '2nd UN' of senior officials and secretariats – aided and abetted by the '3rd UN' of civil society, business, experts and the media – should be proactive and not merely accept dictates from on high by the '1st UN' of member states.[17] A genuine UN definition, that is, one that would receive enthusiastic backing by 'we the peoples', would need to encompass the adjective 'human' in a different trio: namely *human* development, *human* rights and *human* security.

However, the dominant approach is once again narrower than it should be, impelled by the dubious wisdom of sectoral summitry. With the alarming onset of climate change sustainability is deservedly receiving more attention. Environmental concerns have become so predominant that the United Nations is now speaking almost exclusively about a 'sustainable development agenda' and replacement Sustainable Development Goals, which look and sound like a three-part framework that has rather mechanistically added environment to the economic and social dimensions enshrined in the 1945 UN Charter.

While sustainable development may be the most politically palatable paradigm, it ignores the comprehensive agendas approved in the 2000 Millenium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome – as well as those proposed since by other partners. In addition, these documents are more compatible with the broader UN mandate and more likely to result in accelerated development. As a recent draft report by the secretary-general states, 'development cooperation is more than a transfer of funds and technical assistance. The United Nations has legitimacy and mandate to focus on development, human rights and security'.[18]

Contrasting visions: sustainable development vs human development

In debating the shape of the post-2015 development agenda, the older meaning of sustainable development as better management of non-renewable resources has expanded. The task consists of 'integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their interlinkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions'. Operationally these three facets of development are to be 'mainstreamed' throughout the UNDS.[19]

Some claim that this approach amounts to a 'paradigm shift in global thinking about development',[20] hyperbole for three reasons. First, it implies that the environment and non-renewable resources are a discovery and have somehow to be retrofitted to earlier economic and social preoccupations. The UN convened its first global conference on the human environment in 1972 in Stockholm, and market failure associated with natural resource utilisation has long been flagged as a development challenge.[21] In fact, the environment is an older UN preoccupation than poverty reduction, which became widespread only in the 1980s.

Second, the purported paradigm bespeaks an obsolete, top-down approach that divides the complex development process into sectoral silos: fix the economy, boost the social sector, and manage the environment. Separate UN organisations were set up in the 1940s as sensible specialisations to better understand issue areas but have become impediments to integrating knowledge and operations that contemporary problem-solving requires. As such, the UNDS employs what French speakers would dub a *pis-aller*, or a second-best make-do in the form of so-called integrated approaches to such things as 'poverty and environment initiative' (UNDP et al) and 'environmental and social sustainability' (UNEP et al). Any effort at integration within a disparate and disputed system is to be welcomed, but the proliferation of integrated approaches often involves additional transaction costs, as organisations establish cumbersome coordination arrangements with little benefit, either to themselves or recipient countries.

Third, and most importantly, sustainable development treats people as passive recipients of public services rather than making them and their needs the central focus. Surprisingly the UNDP, which almost a quarter-century ago invented the UN's most original paradigm – 'human development', putting people and their choices first – still views its operational role in an old-fashioned manner.[22]

This threefold sectoral approach – economic, social and environmental – is depicted in Figure 1 and inevitably creates orphans; it is apparent that the current sustainable development vessel fails to contain some of the most vital
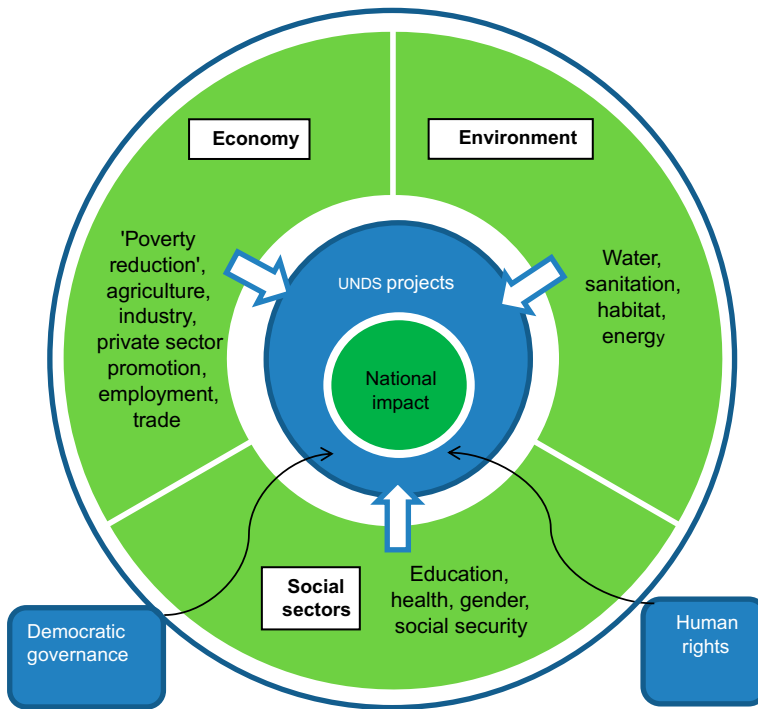
Figure 1.   Sustainable development, the UN's current sectoral approach.

ingredients for successful development. For example, UNDP has made democratic governance one of its top priorities; it provides technocratic forms of assistance to national electoral commissions, other public administration bodies, parliaments and justice systems. Yet this essential component is absent from the sectoral picture.

Another orphan is human rights, which former secretary-general Kofi Annan insisted in 1998 should be mainstreamed throughout the UNDS:

> It describes situations not simply in terms of human needs, or of developmental requirements, but in terms of society's obligation to respond to the inalienable rights of individuals. It empowers people to demand justice as a right, not as charity, and gives communities a moral basis from which to claim international assistance where needed.[23]

These two orphans are specified because, despite their critical importance to development, they risk being left out by focusing on sectors. Moreover, both are likely to receive minimal attention because their politically toxic character in parts of the global South is magnified in consensual UN gatherings. If we have learned anything about the sustainability of development processes – pre-dating the Arab Spring – it is the primordial importance of inclusiveness and the empowerment of individuals, which are only guaranteed with democratic governance and a respect for human rights.

These quintessential UN values and principles have been enshrined in a large number of agreed conventions and treaties.[24] The UN secretariat, while doggedly respecting the sectors of inter-agency reality, has nevertheless reiterated its commitment to more normative engagement. In another 2012 report Ban Ki-moon acknowledged 'the vital role and comparative advantage of the United Nations development system in accelerating progress on the MDGs and other internationally-agreed development goals'. At the same time he recognised 'the unique role and comparative advantage of the United Nations system in promoting the values, principles, norms and standards of the United Nations Charter with all Member States'.[25]

The adjectives 'vital' and 'unique' are noteworthy, implicitly assuming a less important UN normative role. Figure 2 represents such a value-driven approach, which specifically plays to the UN's acknowledged strengths in highlighting human needs and promoting human security and human rights. It is faithful to the word and spirit of the UN's summit agendas of 2000 and 2005 and explicitly reflects all their chapters, rather than only those dealing with poverty reduction and the environment.

This alternative approach has important practical implications for UNDS operations. Rather than persevering with myriad technical inputs and projects defined by sectors as depicted in Figure 1, the United Nations would focus on assisting countries to conform to the global norms and conventions that they as member states have agreed for the human development domains of security, rights and needs, but for which compliance remains elusive. The 'interface with the UN system' in Figure 2 would be clear between country action with norms and
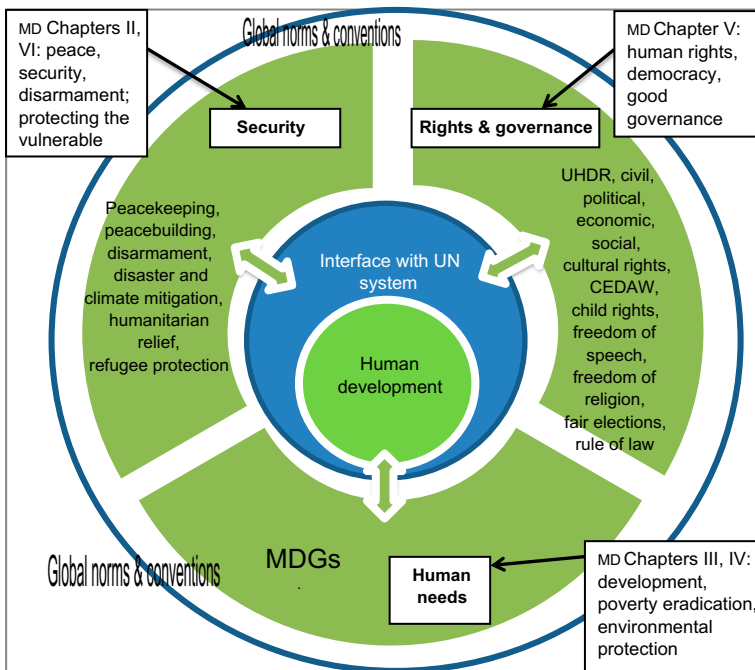

Figure 2.   Value-driven development, the UN's future approach.

conventions. The major concerns of development would be fully subsumed by this alternative approach. Climate change, for example, would be perceived as a concern of human security from the point of view of those who are most vulnerable. Food security would reflect such concerns and no longer be conceived as increasing smallholder production. Some of the key objectives of governance would be found in safeguarding human rights and freedoms.

Figure 2 is inspired by the Millennium Declaration, to date the most complete, consensual and value-driven UN manifesto. It contains eight chapters. The MDGS were substantially derived from Chapters III and IV, the UNDS's concentration represented here by 'human needs'). Human rights and security take their inspiration from Chapter I (basic values of freedom, equality and tolerance); Chapter II (peace and security); Chapter V (human rights, democracy and good governance); and Chapter VI (protecting the vulnerable). The guiding human development paradigm does not revolve exclusively around social, environmental and economic aspects but responds to a genuine UN definition – one that would receive enthusiastic backing from 'we the peoples' by embracing needs, rights and security.

Contrasting operations: building on the UN's comparative advantage

What are the implications for UN operational activities of relying upon either sustainable development or human development? A comprehensive perspective, or paradigm, that organises our overall understanding of a phenomenon (here development) that we are trying to fathom is influential for UN organisations because a particular way of seeing the world draws attention towards some things and away from others.

Current discussions on the sustainable development agenda centre around an Open Working Group (OWG) of government representatives in New York. In addition to the absence of such important governmental voices as finance ministers, another problem is that the UNDS's various moving parts are actively lobbying to ensure that their own interests are safeguarded in any eventual outcome. This natural bureaucratic instinct is especially effective in a body comprised mainly of non-specialist diplomats. In hallowed UN tradition the OWG will favour continuity over originality and innovation; and it will endorse a set of goals within which all existing UN organisations can find their place and defend acquired turf and mandates. The sectoral approach depicted in Figure 1 conveniently pigeonholes most UN operations. The programmes of WHO, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNESCO are mainly social; UNEP and UN Habitat are mainly environmental; and IFAD, UNCTAD and ITC are mainly economic. UNIDO and FAO claim to straddle economic and enviromental domains. UNDP claims to be in all three. All organisations will be able to fashion most of their future programmes within this framework, leading us to expect a replication of development assistance as delivered since the 1940s.

Is 'more of the same' what the world needs? For an answer, it is instructive to look at the changing realities of official development assistance (ODA), most especially because the UNDS is ODA-driven. Traditional UN assistance, epitomised by many thousands of sectoral or thematic projects of limited scope and duration, is ineffective. UNDS organisations fare unfavourably when ranked alongside

other bilateral and multilateral sources.[26] For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranks all multilateral development banks and the European Commission ahead of the UN;[27] the Brookings Institution places the United Nations last for most criteria of aid quality among multilateral organisations;[28] the World Bank compiled findings from major aid-quality studies and put the UN well behind 11 multilateral and 27 bilateral institutions;[29] and the UK's Department for International Development rated 21 UN organisations, with only UNICEF meriting 'very good' but nine deemed 'poor'.[30] Aggregation conceals the better performance of some individual organisations, but variations in performance themselves indicate incoherence.

More fundamentally evidence is growing that traditional forms of aid are not working. Many countries have received substantial ODA from the UN and other sources over many years, but remain mired in poverty, whereas many, with modest assistance, have performed better. In the words of Angus Deaton, 'when the conditions for development are present, aid is not required. When local conditions are hostile to development, aid is not useful, and it will do harm if it perpetuates these conditions.'[31]

While the UN's role in setting goals is an acknowledged contribution,[32] the precise role of the UNDS in accelerating actual progress on the MDGs, for instance, is doubtful. Meeting such objectives is the responsibility of member states, not of the UN or other outsiders. Progress is best served by governments, not just in pursuing positive measures but more especially in reducing the limitations which, inadvertently or otherwise, they have imposed on individual freedom, creativity and innovation. Moreover, to the extent that aid still has a role, the flows of ODA to developing countries are of diminishing significance. They are dwarfed by overseas remittances – three times as large[33] – and foreign direct investment – between five and six times as large[34] – not to mention by oil and mineral royalties and export revenues. The focus should be rather on the quality of domestic governance, institutions and policies, along with the capacity and willingness of governments to channel the growing resources at their disposal, including from domestic sources, into development.[35]

In any case the UNDS as a conduit for ODA is steadily and rapidly losing ground in the majority of developing countries; and it is hardly required – if it ever was – in the growing number of middle-income countries and certainly not in emerging powers. As such, the creaking system of decentralised UN organisations is an anachronism from the earliest days of decolonisation. Core contributions from major donors are falling. While the decline is more than compensated by earmarked funding from the same donors, we have already noted the extent to which the UN has come to resemble a consultancy firm, essentially an adjunct to bilateral and other multilateral assistance. The largest source of funding for UN operations is now the European Commission. Meanwhile large vertical funds in the domains of health and environment rival the those of the UNDS. These funds have harnessed growing private and philanthropic sources, enjoy mixed public–private governance arrangements, and disburse funds fast. They too utilise UN organisations as implementing agencies.

The more UN organisations serve as the agents of funding sources, the more rapidly will they be marginalised by the sources of funds and beneficiaries. The withdrawal of some major donors from individual UN development

organisations is a manifestation of diminished confidence. For instance, the UK, France and Portugal are withdrawing from UNIDO; and the UK is withdrawing its core funding from the ILO. If the UN is to have a meaningful role in development, it should recognise what has become obvious to observers worldwide. The world organisation should concentrate, not duplicate; it should focus on what it is empowered to do and not be distracted by following donor money down myriad technical assistance avenues with limited impact; it should pursue its comparative advantages and eschew its comparative disadvantages.

While losing the race for traditional ODA resource-transfers available under 'Aid 1.0',[36] the UN can still add value as a development partner in its contribution to Aid 2.0. Global development cooperation emphasises development problems with universal scope, suggesting global public goods as solutions.[37]

The renewed focus on global partnerships – especially for effective development cooperation growing from the 2011 OECD gathering in Busan[38] – to address development problems in the post-2015 era vests the UN with special significance as a convener to refine existing norms and conventions and forge consensus on new common challenges. In this essential global role the UN's development organisations should not primarily be dispensers of technical assistance but forgers of global agreements in areas of their specialisation, supported by selective research and advocacy.

At the country level, leaving aside shorter-term humanitarian action – for which the world organisation is also more than ever needed – the UN's future operational role should revolve around two types of activities. First, in low-income and conflict-prone states the UN as a whole should build and sustain peace and help to nurture countries on the path to enhanced security and development. Again the guideposts for such activities would be agreed global norms on humanitarian and development action. The more extreme the crisis, eg Syria sooner or later, the more the UN's inputs are obvious, even if the organisation cannot deliver because member states stand in the way. In such crises, however, the UN should call on the gamut of its capabilities – from peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance to building inclusive institutions of justice, rights and sound governance. These operations fall under the rubric of 'peace building', in which the UN has so had far a mixed record,[39] but in which the UN's primordial role in many conflict-prone states is beyond dispute. Interestingly enough UNDP's forthcoming *Human Development Report 2014* will focus on 'Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience', precisely the UN's operational comparative advantage.

To do this more effectively, the UN must bridge the organisational gap that stubbornly persists between the secretariat staff concerned with peace, security, human rights and humanitarian action, on the one hand, and the rest of the development system, on the other. In fragile and conflict-prone states the UN has virtually no competition as the purveyor of such comprehensive deliverables; the need to unify and integrate the system as a whole is even greater than the pursuit of delivering as one among its development organisations in less fragile states. It is surprising that the protracted but halting attempts to bring the UNDS together at the country level have higher priority than integrating those parts of the system under the direct authority of the secretary-general.

Table 1.   Examples of norm-driven UN operations.

Needs-related	
Generating information and ensuring quality standards in education	UNESCO
Establishing national health norms, drug standards	WHO
Implementing guidelines on water and sanitation	UNICEF
Security-related	
Developing national disaster mitigation strategies	UNEP, UNISDR
Implementing better work norms	ILO
Protecting migrants	UNHCR
Implementing the Montreal Protocol	UNIDO, UNEP
Rights-and governance-related	
Preparing for and following-up on Universal Periodic Reviews	UNOHCR
Drafting national legislation on the rights of the child	UNICEF
Drafting of constitutions, electoral laws	UNDP
Drafting national legislation to support the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women	UN Women

Table 2.   Actual and potential UNDS operations.

1. Traditional operations	2. Norm-driven operations
Development as aggregative process	Development as human-oriented
Existing organisations driving agenda	Human needs driving agenda
Based on sector specialisation	Based on facilitating norm compliance
Competition with multiple sources	UN-focused and value-driven
Insensitive to inequalities and marginalisation	Sensitive to inequalities and marginalisation
Themes outside sector require 'mainstreaming'	Integrated approach with all relevant themes
Focus on MDG achievement	Focus on values in 2000 and 2005 summit declarations

In all states the UN's operational role should not court whatever attracts donors but rather emphasise the secretary-general's previously-cited passage about the UN's uniqueness: 'promoting the values, principles, norms and standards of the United Nations Charter...and...supporting member states to integrate these international norms in national policies'. The UN is good at formulating and agreeing standards, norms and conventions but it is deficient in helping to ensure compliance.[40] In the realm of human rights, the UN has instigated universal periodic reviews, applicable to all member states and conducted every four years. Similar monitoring and reporting practices exist in areas from children's and women's rights to worker safety. Focusing the UN's development responsibilities on helping countries to comply with the norms and standards drawn up under its auspices would connect its ideational and operational roles. It would mean boosting the UN's efforts to gather data and disseminate information on the full range of human development concerns, gauging the progress of individual countries and reinforcing their efforts to raise compliance. Table 1 illustrates UN norm-compliance operations, based not on the economic, social and environmental trio of sustainable development but rather on the threefold human development paradigm.

Conclusion

The United Nations has a respected record in articulating sound development ideas but a less sterling one in operations. What direction will the world organisation take in its post-2015 developlment agenda? Given the inertia in

intergovernmental processes among non-experts, most likely will be the continuation of traditional technical assisatance. The UN's comparative advantages lie elsewhere, not in imitating others or pursuing donor priorities. The UN's prowess is needed more not less in a world in which genuine development cooperation is replacing discredited patterns of patronage.

The differences between the old and new operational approaches are summarised in Table 2. Traditional UN operations – as with most ODA-financed efforts – emanate from the top down and focus on service delivery, directly or via national institutions. This familiar supply-driven assistance – with perhaps only one-quarter of bilateral assistance actually disbursed in developing countries – is anchored in the agendas and interests of the UNDS and especially their funders.[41]

Table 2 also depicts the alternative, norm-based approach that places people's needs and capabilities at the heart of the development process. To repeat, the United Nations can offer qualities that make it an indispensable partner but only when its 'human' aspects are evident. This global value-based organisation was born to serve as the ultimate guardian of peace and security. Its universal membership brings all countries together to address global challenges from climate change to migration, from human trafficking to pandemics, from proliferation to terrorism, from economic instabilities to mass atrocities. It is the custodian of universal norms and standards, both rights-based and technical. Above all, it is people-centred and driven by its founders' vision to promote freedom from want and freedom from fear.

The MDGs were valuable in setting time-bound and measurable targets as proxies for development progress. They have been emphasised in operations by every UN development organisation, which cannot, however, individually take responsibility for their achievement. Making norm compliance the basis for the next set of objectives would mean that the United Nations could claim success if progress occurs. Such an operational agenda would be a genuine UN contribution. It would require agreement on a core set of norms applicable to every country, as well as some supplementary norms and standards for individual countries. Formally the final choice of these standards would be agreed by each member state. Relevant UN organisations would be responsible for helping governments to conform and for monitoring compliance, together with civil society organisations.

Despite the clarion call in the Charter's first sentence, the United Nations has customarily not asked 'we the peoples' what they actually wanted from the world organisation. But in 2012 it launched a global electronic platform called 'the world we want'. Based on over a million responses, the main message was the 'call for a new agenda built on human rights, and universal values of equality, justice and security. Better governance underpins many of their calls'. Intriguingly, 'there is a strong desire to capture the momentum generated by the MDGs, but also to bring in additional areas and principles from the Millennium Declaration'.[42]

It is by no means clear how the United Nations intends to fold the results of this poll into the ongoing intergovernmental process that will formulate the new agenda. But the call from the global public for a people-centred approach is unmistakeable. What, they are asking, is the UN we want for the world we want?

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