



## "If Dunkin' Donuts Can Do It, Why Can't the UN?"

by Jonas von Freiesleben\*

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*"If a donut shop and an ice cream place can share retail space, why can't the UN agencies cooperate better with each other?" That is the question Sally Fegan-Wyles, director of the UN Development Group, posed when the Center for UN Reform Education interviewed her in her New York office. Among other things, Fegan-Wyles talked about the Delivering as One- projects and the developing process towards increased coherence of the United Nations system.*

After more than 28 years with the United Nations, Sally Fegan-Wyles knows the system well. She has served around the world, and her positions include stints as UNICEF representative in Liberia, Uganda and Zimbabwe as well as UN Resident Coordinator in Tanzania. Since 2001, the Irish native has been the director of the UN Development Group (UNDG) in New York.

The UNDG was created in 1997 by Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a mechanism to promote closer integration of the Funds and Programs reporting directly to the Secretary-General. It was also established to bring greater coherence between the UN operational agencies working on development at the country level. Initially, only four agencies participated; UNDP (Development Programme), UNICEF (Children's Fund), UNFPA (Fund for Population Activities) and the World Food Programme (WFP), but today UNDG brings together 28 UN offices, specialized agencies, funds & programmes, and departments. The group is responsible for improving the coherence of all these diverse and field-based actors by supporting inter-agency negotiations on how to agree on common working methods, giving guidance to UN country teams on how to work together, and overseeing the Resident Coordinator (RC) system. One major activity in 2008 is to support the eight Delivering as One-pilot country projects – an innovative tool launched by the former Secretary-General in 2006 to test in a concentrated way directives on cooperation in the field provided by the General Assembly in the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review (TCPR) – a major monitoring and assessment of operational activities - in 2004 and again in 2007.

### **"Some seemed to be waiting for Kofi Annan's departure..."**

Having been a part of the UNDG since the days of the four original members, Fegan-Wyles recounts vividly how the idea of strengthening cooperation between agencies was initially somewhat controversial to many, mostly out of fear of losing autonomy, prestige and funds. "When I came from the field to New York I realized how different the Specialized Agencies are compared to the Funds and Programs - how independent they are and how little power ECOSOC or the Secretary-General holds over them." She says that she was very surprised to learn that the heads of the different Specialised Agencies did not consider that the 2001 Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review applied to them. "Some seemed to be waiting for Kofi Annan's departure and the end of his many reform attempts," she adds. "There was a whole different governance structure at headquarters than at country level that I was unaware of. I thought we were all in the same organization, but there are huge differences."

However, Annan's reform efforts persisted and the four-member UNDG flourished under the able leadership of UNDP's Administrator, Mark Malloch Brown (1999-2005). The greatest progress was made in increasing country level collaboration. This attracted the attention of other agencies, which eventually saw the potential benefits of cooperation. UNDG proved to many that cooperation did not have to encroach on autonomy. "And soon everybody wanted to join," Fegan-Wyles notes. In her view, it became an outward sign of political correctness and "maturity" to join the group, and it



did not take long before many agencies, departments, offices of special representatives and programmes rushed to be included in the group.

“The down-side of the surge of members was a lack of manageability,” she says, and adds that Kofi Annan probably believed that limiting the membership could negatively impact the agencies’ attitude towards the reform process. And there was a growing problem with the original four members retaining the management of the UNDG through the UNDG Executive Committee (ExCom), thus creating a feeling of the existence of two classes of members.

### **Annan Appoints High-level Panel**

In 2005, the appointment of the High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment and their subsequent report offered ample opportunities to remedy this down-side: it proposed a change to the basic structure of the Chief Executives Board (CEB). The CEB is composed by all of the executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system, and is an instrument for further overall coordination and cooperation of the UN system. The board, in addition to regular reviews, approves statements on political issues and major concerns facing the UN system, on the basis of recommendations from bodies reporting to it.

In its new configuration, the CEB would consist of three basic pillars, each in charge of a crucial area governing the UN. UNDG would have responsibility for country operations; the High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) for global policy issues, while the High-level Committee on Management (HLCM) would be in charge of business practices.

For Fegan-Wyles the most substantial change came after this reorganization, as it was decided that a small group would be formed - with 10-12 agencies as members - to advise the UNDG Chair, as a pillar of the CEB, on country operations and the governance structure for the Resident Coordinator system. “This group is bigger than the four-member Executive Committee, but way more manageable than one with all 28,” she says as she explains the design of this new advisory board. “It will finally have membership from Funds, Programs, and Specialised Agencies drawing from a non-rotating group consisting of UN entities with large presences at country level, and one group of rotating members made up of agencies with smaller (or no) field presence.”

Fegan-Wyles expects this development to have a positive impact on the Delivering as One-pilot projects and on UN reform in general. The projects were launched in eight pilot countries by Kofi Annan after the release of the High-level Panel’s report in 2006, and are designed to test the coherence of the UN system at country level. Many observers believe that this important initiative came just in time for the UN, as development money increasingly was channeled around the Organization. Fegan-Wyles agrees. “It was really a do or die moment for the UN,” she says. “The UN was becoming marginalized within the international aid community, and we had to improve the cooperation between the many agencies working in the field to be more relevant to donors.”

### **“Biggest Change is Mentally”**

According to Fegan-Wyles the biggest change for the many independent agencies participating in the process has so far been mostly mental. “They have had to alter their thinking of cooperation, and that can be difficult for agencies used to acting on their own.” However, she is also quick to point out that the Resident Coordinator system has been greatly improved. A new rigorous test weeds out many unsuitable candidates. “There’s been a 100% change in Resident Coordinators since the late 1980s and it’s been all for the better,” she says with satisfaction.

According to Fegan-Wyles, the high quality of the Resident Coordinators has to a large extent been the driving force behind recent successful development projects in the pilot countries. “But efforts in Malawi and Papua New Guinea have shown that non-pilots can thrive too, if they just apply three important lessons: 1. Local governments have to take the lead and clearly identify their priorities; 2. A quality Resident Coordinator must take more leadership and position the UN to achieve greater results in fewer areas; and finally; 3. Donors must respond accordingly.”

Nonetheless, she notes that positive developments on the ground in no way relieve Member States from solving their differences in the General Assembly. “The ‘bottom-up’ approach is great, especially from the UNDG’s perspective,” she says, referring to how the current Co-Chairs of the System-wide Coherence discussions have decided to let developments at country level determine the course in New York. “But it is important that Member States not just pass the buck to country level.” The political process involving the membership, including the North/South conflict, might be a tough nut to crack, she explains, but misunderstandings and tensions between major blocks of states must be solved in New York.

“For instance,” Fegan-Wyles says “it will be difficult to achieve a 100% “One UN” under the current funding structure,” noting that 90% of the current dysfunctions of the UN comes from the incoherent funding structure. “Only political will on the part of Member States can solve that problem, but unfortunately that often seem to be lacking.”

Frequent misunderstandings in the process have also been another problem. As an example, she recounts how the role of the Resident Coordinator confused a lot of developing countries. “Many governments feel, correctly, that they already co-ordinate the response of the international community, so they wonder what is the added value of the Resident Coordinator. The Resident Coordinator coordinates the activities of the UN, and if it is done well, it reduces the burden that a fragmented UN can create for a government. And the RC always coordinates according to the local government’s priorities.”

But that is also, in her view, because some developing countries are more in need of a coherent UN than others, especially in those countries where the role of the UN is very significant. “So why not have differentiated strategies to deal with different countries,” Fegan-Wyles asks. “More importantly perhaps,” she continues “Member States have to ask themselves what the role of the United Nations in middle income countries should be,” and she points to Cape Verde as a brilliant example of a trimmed-down UN presence in an emerging economy, where UN agencies had the choice of either reducing overhead costs, or leave.

“All in all, though, the tone is much better in the System-wide Coherence debate this year.” It seems that the larger developing countries are no longer threatening to block the entire process, “she remarks.

### **“If they can manage, so can we”**

From her perspective, the next important challenge is going to be the harmonization of business practices. “When all the different UN agencies get together, it is so abundantly clear,” she says and explains how even basic salary structures differ between agencies. “It needs to be tackled as soon as possible, and by a strong, committed and fulltime leadership.”

Her hopes for the end of this General Assembly session include strong expressions of support from Member States for the pilot projects, enabling the current process towards increased cooperation between UN agencies to continue. From her perspective it is a two-way street between the UN



system and Member States. “Member States need to show necessary political will to decrease fragmentation, but we in the UN also needs to be held accountable if we do not play our part.”

Fegan-Wyles cautions that many agencies are caught up in old thinking and are still afraid of losing their identity, and thus their funding, if they cooperate - even if it is just on office space. “However, if Dunkin’ Donuts - with their breakfast - and Baskin Robbins and their desserts can share one store, why can’t we cooperate at the United Nations?” she asks with a gleam in her eye, as she leans forward. “It’s not as if you go in after ice cream and accidentally get coffee instead. If they can manage, so can we.”

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*Unless attributed to a specific source, all expressions of opinion in this analysis are those of the author. The Center for UN Reform Education does not endorse any particular reform proposals.*