



System-wide Coherence – the 62nd GA Session and the Road Ahead

by Jonas von Freiesleben
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The following analysis provides an update to [chapter 3 on System-wide Coherence](#) in “Managing Change at the United Nations,” and covers events pertaining to this issue during the 62nd General Assembly session, as well as a look ahead at what might come.

Since 1945, there have been numerous attempts to reorganize the ever-growing myriad of UN departments, agencies, funds and programmes dealing with development aspects. In 1997 - and building on many of these previous efforts - former Secretary-General Kofi Annan decided to launch several new initiatives aimed at streamlining the operational activities of the UN. This all culminated in the signing of the World Summit Outcome Document ([A/RES/60/1](#)) by Member States in 2005. Paragraphs 168 and 169 of the document suggested four general areas which, if strengthened, could improve the overall coherence and output of UN’s development-related activities. The four areas were “policy,” “operational activities,” “humanitarian assistance” and “environmental activities.”¹

In response to the document and in order to move the process forward, Annan subsequently formed a “High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment.” In November 2006, the Panel submitted its report, “Delivering as One,” ([A/61/583](#)), outlining 48 recommendations, which were then grouped into eight thematic clusters, “Delivering as One at country level,” “governance and institutional reform,” “humanitarian issues and recovery,” “environment,” “gender,” “human rights,” “funding” and “business practices.” These clusters were discussed by Member States during the 61st session of the General Assembly. By August 2007, deliberations had ended without a definitive resolution and it was decided to move further talks to the following 62nd General Assembly session, which began in September 2007.²

62nd Session of the General Assembly

Before negotiations could start on the process to deal with the eight clusters, however, Member States had to first finalize discussions on the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review (TCPR). This review is an instrument created by the General Assembly in the late 1990s to monitor, evaluate and assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the UN’s efforts to support developing countries’ own priorities. By December 2007, resolution A/RES/62/208 was successfully adopted, and with the resolution, the General Assembly could resume its consideration of the issues highlighted by the High-Level Panel.

On 7 February 2008, Member States convened for the first meeting on System-wide Coherence during the 62nd General Assembly session. The President of the General Assembly, Sgrjan Kerim, and his two newly appointed co-chairs, Ambassadors Augustine Mahiga of Tanzania and Paul Kavanagh of Ireland, announced that the scope of the future process would be narrowed down from eight thematic clusters to four covering the following aspects: “Delivering as One at country level,” “funding,” “governance and institutional reform,” and “gender.” As co-Chair Mahiga noted during the meeting, “We believe that as a practical proposition, it would be extremely difficult to seek to move ahead on all aspects of the high level report at the same time.” This approach reportedly caused some concern among the Group of 77 and China (G77) and the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) as they had hoped for a single decision on all issues. Nonetheless, the groups acquiesced and the process was allowed to continue.

The February meeting was followed by a [high-level conference](#), organized by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), on 4-5 March in Vienna. The conference aimed at enhancing the dialogue between governments, aid agencies and UN organizations. As the conference ended, attention again turned to New York where discussions on the four different thematic clusters were slowly getting underway, with the first meeting scheduled to cover the “Delivering as One” initiative.

Delivering as One UN

Subsequent to the UNIDO conference, Member States met on 28 March 2008 to discuss the “Delivering as One” initiative, which was tested in eight pilot countries. Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro opened the meeting by stressing the importance of providing for national ownership of the process, thereby recognizing that one-size does not fit all, and that the pilots should serve to align UN goals with those of the governments involved.

Co-Chairs, Ambassadors Mahiga and Kavanagh noted that “...‘Delivering as One’ was reinforcing significantly national ownership and leadership in the programming and delivery of development assistance through the United Nations Country Teams on the ground.” But they also pointed out that “...it will be necessary for the various Headquarters to energise the process further and effectively to ‘catch up with the field’ by bringing greater synergy between the field and Headquarters levels.” Finally, Ambassador Mahiga indicated that together with the TCPR process, the current deliberations would contribute to the eventual, more official, evaluation of “Delivering as One,” which will take place at the end of the second year of the pilot projects in 2009.

Most Member States commented on the success they felt the “Delivering as One” initiative was enjoying. Amongst other, the European Union (EU) said that notable progress was achieved within several key areas, such as providing for national leadership and ownership, greater alignment of UN activities with national programs and priorities, and the creation of a system that will make a more empowered and impartial Resident Coordinator (RC) feasible. Many members of NAM and G77 noted gaps in funding, and called for savings to be “ploughed” back into the system; and stressed that any solution must be build on an individual country needs.³ Overall, a variety of Member States said that they would await the outcomes of the eight pilot projects in 2009 before making any definitive assessments. After the meeting, several diplomats from major donor and pilot countries expressed their satisfaction with the process. In their view, positive developments at the country level could eventually guide the political process in New York, in what some called a “bottom-up approach.” A second meeting was held in mid-June to hear additional briefings by representatives of the pilot countries, as well as from the two co-Chairs on their visits to seven pilot countries.

Funding

In his opening statement at a meeting on “funding” held on 7 April 2008, Ambassador Kavanagh, co-Chair, touched upon the significant progress made within this cluster, and he added that “Many States will be particularly interested to hear of additionality and predictability of funding in the context of greater coherence and effectiveness.”

The European Union subsequently said that the issue of funding remains one of the biggest challenges to an effective running of the UN’s operational activities. “Improving the balance between core and non-core resources is imperative to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN system at country level,” said the Slovenian Ambassador on behalf of the EU. She also emphasized that “Regarding financing at country level, the EU is willing to consider increasingly pooling funding instead of financing individual projects and programmes.” The Joint Coordinating Committee of the

G77 and NAM (JCC) said that “...it is essential to ensure that there is an expanding and adequate base of development assistance from the UN system and other sources,” and noted with concern the “...imbalance between ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ resources...” They also expressed support of the recommendation to align multi-year funding cycles to increase coordination. It was generally agreed that the latest TCPR document should provide the framework for the next steps to be taken.

Governance and Institutional Reform

The High-level Panel, in its consideration of the issue of Governance and Institutional reform, generally focused on how to consolidate some functions while strengthening others. Its recommendations largely fell into three categories: organizational level, regional level and intergovernmental level. Previous debates during the 61st GA had, however, uncovered a number of other concerns among Member States, including fears of erosion of national ownership of the UN intergovernmental processes, a lack of sufficient information on proposed new bodies, and the potential overlap of mandates. Member States had also seemed to agree that institutional reform could be undertaken within the existing framework of the TCPR.

On 17 April 2008, Member States met to discuss these issues further. After receiving briefings on the Resident Coordinator (RC) system by UN officials and an update on the issue of “Funding,” the co-Chair, Ambassador Kavanagh, noted that issues pertaining to the organizational level were included in the TCPR and could be treated as having been dealt with. He therefore proposed to focus on the intergovernmental level, and asked Member States to evaluate progress made by the Annual Ministerial Review and the Development Cooperation Forum, and whether these bodies together with the TCPR have played a meaningful role in support of coherence at country level. In addition, the Ambassador asked if the Sustainable Development Board had had an impact on operational matters; how governance at Headquarters level can help support plans at country level, and how to improve overall goals in cooperation with the Bretton Woods Institutions to help meet development goals. Responses from Member States revealed that a number of concerns remained. Among others, the EU highlighted that effective governance is at the core of coherence, and praised positive developments “on the ground.” However, the EU also noted that “...in order to deliver decisive results, UN headquarters must also step up their efforts. In this regard, greater accountability by the RC and the UN Country team, as well as a clearer definition of roles and responsibilities need to be ensured.” On the matter of establishing new bodies, the Union stated that “The creation of new structures for the sake of reforming old ones may only add to overall complexity.” The G77 noted that changes at the central level must be in agreement with individual government priorities at the country level. They also said that Resident Coordinator’s should avoid being an intermediary between governments and civil society.

Gender

The High-level Panel report identified “gender” as a key issue for improvement across the UN system, and recommended that Member States create both a new UN gender entity and an Under-Secretary-General (USG) position on gender and women’s rights. During the 61st General Assembly the issue had proved somewhat contentious.

On 16 May 2008, Member States considered the matter in the first of several meetings. During the deliberations, many different UN entities dealing with gender delivered statements alongside the co-Chairs and Member States. Because of the divisive nature of the issue - especially centering on the question of a new gender entity - the co-Chairs decided to ask the Secretary-General for a non-paper reviewing the status of the UN’s gender related activities as well as the gaps in the existing architecture. In general, the EU supported the creation of a new USG post and a new gender entity,

while the JCC, China and India called for a more analytical approach, focused on strengthening the current architecture.

The SG's response was released in early June, and identified several gaps in the existing gender architecture. The note prompted Member States to ask for a second paper detailing different reform options, which came out in late July. It outlined four main approaches to reform: Option A - maintain status quo. Option B - establish an autonomous fund that would consolidate different entities. Option C - establish a new department within the Secretariat. Option D - combine normative and operational work in a new "composite" entity.

Business Practices

This cluster was discussed at a meeting on 13 June 2008. Member States first heard a presentation by CEB representatives of their "Plan of Action for the Harmonization of Business Practices in the UN System." The plan addresses several key issues, covering major management functions of the UN system: human resources, information/communication & technology (ICT), finance & budget, and procurement. Furthermore, the plan consists of 21 projects and sub-projects, with their expected outcomes summarized in six points: 1. Adopt international standards and replicate best practices; 2. Facilitate knowledge & resource sharing; 3. Enhance transparency & accountability; 4. Enhance public trust and engage stakeholders; 5. Facilitate effective inter-agency coordination; 6. Achieve efficiency gains. As one representative noted: "...investing in one practice area makes investment in another practice area more productive, setting off a potential virtual cycle." Member States generally endorsed the work of the CEB, but some countries raised concerns that the plan could potentially overlap with the work of the Fifth Committee (budget).

Final Report and Adoption of Resolution

In late July, the two co-Chairs released their year-end status report to Member States. The report also included recommendations on the way ahead, and was generally well-received by the membership. Consequently, the conclusions and recommendations of the co-Chairs were to a large extent carried over into the final draft resolutions submitted to the General Assembly for adoption.

On 10 September 2008, the issue of System-wide Coherence was addressed in the GA under the agenda item, "Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit." It was unanimously decided to adopt the draft resolution previously circulated by the co-Chairs as resolution [A/RES/62/277](#). The resolution formally mandated the 63rd GA session to further narrow its focus from the above-mentioned five issues to four: 1. Delivering as One at country and regional level and the related area of Harmonisation of Business Practices; 2. Funding; 3. Governance; and 4. Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. It also requests the SG to provide the membership with a substantive paper on the issue of "funding and governance" as well as on "gender," with the latter "...focusing in particular on the "Composite Entity" option with a view to facilitating substantive action by the Assembly within the 63rd session."

Further recommendations and conclusions of the two co-facilitators were included as annexes to the resolution and largely built on the meetings held throughout the 62nd GA session. As for "Delivering as One," the co-Chairs noted that although the present picture is only provisional in nature until a final, independent evaluation is issued in late 2009, developments at country level have been mostly positive: "Assistance is being delivered with greater effectiveness, savings are being realized and greater reductions in transaction costs are clearly in prospect." According to the co-Chairs, this development should give further political impetus to the initiative, as well as encourage participating developing countries and other states wishing to join the initiative. They also recognized

the positive developments and atmosphere within the CEB. On a critical note, the co-Chairs indicated that Headquarter levels throughout the system must continue to empower the different country level representatives by providing them with greater flexibility, latitude, and encouragement to advance a more coherent and effective delivery of assistance at country level.

On the issue of “funding,” the co-Chairs write that “...there clearly needs to be greater flows of and greater predictability in funding [...] Overall, there needs to be a significantly improved balance between core and non-core funding.” Finally, they note that savings realized at country level must be channeled back into the same countries.

As for “governance,” the co-Chairs say that “...we have detected no palpable appetite in the General Assembly for establishing new intergovernmental bodies, including the putative Sustainable Development Board.” However, they note that new realities appearing as a result of the “Delivering as One” initiative will need to be addressed more effectively by existing bodies, possibly with continuing and deepened discussions during the 63rd GA session. They also highlight that the UN system and the Bretton Woods institutions must be encouraged to develop a far greater degree of cooperation and collaboration.

Conclusion

Member States took an important step towards greater system-wide coherence of the UN’s development related activities by adopting resolution 62/277 in September 2008. As noted above, the resolution significantly concentrates the scope of the future debate by focusing on four clusters, thereby - as some sources noted - moving the issues further away from the burden of the North/South confrontations and towards more constructive and concrete reform discussions. The positive development, has to a large extent been ascribed to the able leadership of the two co-Chairs, Ambassadors Mahiga and Kavanagh. With their confidence-building and consensus-seeking style, they succeeded in identifying areas of potential agreement, while leaving more contentious issues to other, more specialized venues, such as Geneva.

The successful adoption of the TCPR resolution in December 2007 has also been mentioned as a contributing factor to the success of the process. According to one European delegate, the process leading to the TCPR resolution greatly helped in clearing up a number of misunderstandings between the North and the South, and eventually led Member States to more easily focus on concrete aspects of the System-wide Coherence process.

On the specific issues, the discussions surrounding a new UN gender architecture are progressing, and it seems highly likely that Option D of the SG’s summer proposal will be further explored in detail during the 63rd GA session, with especially the Scandinavians pushing hard, and with some success, for this model. The option involves the establishment of a composite gender entity with the possible addition of a new Under-Secretary-General position specifically for gender. Member States are currently looking into different structural models to base such a model on, and some are reportedly drawing inspiration from the way UN HABITAT was originally set up. The issue of “funding” could be tied into the gender discussion, as some larger G77/NAM countries have signaled their eagerness to see additional funding coupled with any establishment of a new gender entity. However, some European countries have noted that they would like to see “funding” instead being discussed in the context of the “financing for development” talks in Doha.

On “governance:” As noted in resolution 62/277, it appears unlikely that the membership will further experiment with the establishment of new intergovernmental bodies. Instead, discussions within this cluster seem to center on the role of the Resident Coordinator system. Talks about the

“Delivering as One UN” initiative are likely to progress along with the related issue of harmonization of business practices, with the upcoming final evaluations of the pilot projects expected during 2009. A bottom-up approach will probably guide the deliberations on the issue in New York, in which information from the country level on what works will feed into discussions at headquarters level.

Lastly, it should be noted that Member States are still waiting for the appointment of new facilitators. Ambassadors Kavanagh and Mahiga have signaled that they will not continue. Nevertheless, whoever it will be the process of System-wide Coherence looks to move ahead steadily.

Notes:

1. Although most countries agree that the question is basically about improving the overall efficiency of the system, opinions often differ on how, where, and on what to spend the limited resources available. Traditionally, these issues have split the membership into two opposing blocs; developing countries of the South (most often represented by the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 and China (G77) in the Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC)) and the developed countries of the North, mainly the European Union (EU). The US, according to one observer, did not take a vested interest in the issue since they usually tend to focus on earmarked or bilateral aid. Since the 2005 summit, however, the debate has proven decidedly more nuanced, with several competing sub-factions developing within the two blocs; some holding more pragmatic views of reform, while others are in favor of general positions.
2. For further information on the process of System-wide Coherence, please see the website of UNDG via following [link](http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Print&P=32) (<http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Print&P=32>).
3. Following a joint meeting of the G77 and NAM on 22 February 2008, www.ReformtheUN.org reported that some developing states felt pressured into endorsing the “Delivering as One” initiative prematurely, before reports of the pilot countries’ experiences had come back. Statements by Deputy-Secretary General Asha-Rose Migiro had apparently helped fuel these sentiments.

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.