One UN Pilots:
Aligning UN Capabilities in Support of National Development

One UN was created to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of UN agencies in delivering services to developing countries. It is a new program with eight countries—Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Vietnam—serving as volunteer One UN pilots. How well is it working so far? Is there better coordination among UN agencies? Have field operations improved? Most important, are the citizens of the pilot countries benefiting?

The creation of the Delivering as One pilot program was recommended by the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence, a group of policymakers tasked to examine ways to strengthen the United Nations' ability to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. The eight pilot countries are at different points in implementation with 2008 being the first full year of implementation for all of the pilots and a formal evaluation will be conducted in 2009. In the meantime, various UN entities—the Development Group (UNDG), the General Assembly, the Secretariat, the agencies—and national governments are conducting initial stocktaking exercises.

To support this stocktaking effort, the Stanley Foundation focused its 39th United Nations Issues Conference on the subject. "One UN Pilots: Aligning UN Capabilities in Support of National Development," was held March 14-16, 2008, in Tarrytown, New York. This policy dialogue brief outlines the conference's findings and recommendations

Findings

1. Participants agreed that progress in development and the eradication of poverty is critically important. One UN is meant to improve effectiveness, and participants said effectiveness needs to be measured in many ways.

2. So far, the One UN effort seems to be working for the pilot countries. Participants from these countries report that the program is delivering results. Their views are augmented by reports from the field, reports of visits by the General Assembly cochairs, and other assessment information. Among the positive results:

   • The host countries have significantly increased their "ownership" of the development program. They feel more in control of their own development.

- Progress is being made toward a more focused budget framework.

- The resident coordinator (RC) position is providing leadership and better coordination of development work.

The United Nations is supporting and aligning its resources with national government priorities. The principle of "no one size fits all" is clearly being followed—individual pilots are adapting to specific country needs. Together these reforms facilitate more flexible and effective delivery on the ground, generating positive momentum in the field.

3. There is agreement that savings from coherence and efficiency should be plowed back into development. More important, most participants agreed that more effective development work will attract more resources. Success requires coherence that involves the host country governments, the United Nations, and donor partners.

4. UN agencies need reasonable amounts of core funding. Without sufficient core funding, some agencies are left wholly dependent upon voluntary funding, which in turn can produce unhealthy competition for resources.

5. Progress in the pilot countries has not been adequately recognized within the political and, to a lesser extent, administrative organs at the UN headquarters in New York and elsewhere. The effect is that headquarters is not yet aligning itself sufficiently with these positive in-country developments, thereby stymieing even better progress. UN agencies and headquarters need to provide better support to these more flexible, country-driven approaches if they are to take hold and be applied effectively in other countries.

Recommendations

- The pilot country program should be continued and the approach it uses should be extended. At a minimum, the programs in the current eight pilot countries should be continued.

- Consideration should be given to adding more countries in a program that employs similar methods. For example, those might include the 15 United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) countries that have been identified.

- Recognize that programming drives the process and programs must show effectiveness and impact the bottom line if the Delivering as One pilot effort is to be considered successful.

- All involved should continue to learn from pilot program work, adapting and developing it for even better results.

- Concepts and methodology learned from pilot countries is being and should continue to be applied to other countries that are not pilots.

- Raise the profile of the resident coordinator (RC) so he/she has more authority in-country. A key element of this effort must be building greater awareness that the RC credentials come from the secretary-general. Perhaps they should carry a title like "representative of the secretary-general."

- Agencies and headquarters units should be encouraged to be as flexible and supportive as possible of pilot countries and similar development work within the limitations of their present charters and governance. They should work to reduce regulatory and procedural blockages.

- The United Nations has a number of system-wide issues that will take time to address. These need study and assignment of responsibility. Examples are procurement systems and ERP systems. While everyone understands that addressing them will take time, the efforts should be accelerated.

- Headquarters and agency governance issues should be approached carefully and slowly. Defining the functions that need to be performed should be a first step, followed by adjustment in governance arrangments and function.

- Establish a "Code of Conduct" to more clearly define the RC relationship and responsibilities relative to the agencies, country teams, and headquarters' functions.

- Fast-track harmonization of business practices, information technology systems, and support services to provide field operations with the tools they need to be more efficient and effective. This will enable faster and better measurement of empirical results and sharing of best practices across all countries—pilots and nonpilots.

- Manage internal and external expectations regarding short-term results. The effectiveness of development programs is difficult to measure in the short-term. Rather, cost savings (efficiency measures) from streamlined business and technology practices are more likely to be seen in a one- to three-year measurement period.

- Promote and strengthen the United Nations' important coordination role in-country, including its work with the Bretton Woods Institutions. Other development organizations often look to the UN presence and the success of its efforts to determine if and when they should begin work in a region or state.

Progress Report on Coherence

On the whole, most participants said the pilot country effort is going well. It is still early, but the pilot countries appear to be satisfied with the results, and observers confirm the encouraging signs. The program definitely merits continuation and should be considered for expansion. Participants at the conference expanded on lessons learned and challenges still to be met.

Programming Drives the Process

Efficiency and effectiveness are both important to the success of the pilot efforts. The growing number of UN stakeholders involved at varying levels (from local to international) in delivering UN development assistance has increased complexity across the system. Given the size of the UN development funds, system "incoherence" translates into costs that, if decreased, would free up a significant amount of money that could be plowed back into actual development programming. At the same time it is important that these "efficiencies" be real and not just the result of cutting corners.

Program effectiveness is hard to measure in the short term as development efforts take years to yield results. Yet over the longer term, demonstrable increases in effectiveness—the quality of the programming—should generate greater funding for UN efforts and lend greater credibility to UN efforts beyond just those in the development field.

Evolution of Agency and Headquarters Practices Is Still Needed

Agencies and headquarters units have their own set of regulations and procedures, most of which were developed before the advent of the pilot country program. As the pilot country program is moving forward, it is encountering constraints and limitations from those regulations and procedures.

That is not to say that no progress has been made. Some headquarters units and agencies are working to be flexible, adapting their regulations and procedures to the extent possible. However, the efforts need to be stepped up.

It is recognized that there are sensitivities when new practices brush up against the prerogatives and mandates of long-established agencies or UN organs.

Reform Depends Upon Increased Commitment to Core Funding

There are concerns regarding the predictability and extent of funding. There is a need for more core funding to improve the quality of strategic UN planning and allow agencies to concentrate their efforts on delivering results rather than competing for funding. There are also concerns that without additional funding, the positive momentum and trends from the pilots may not continue, especially in countries beyond the pilots that did not receive additional pilot monies.

There are competing apprehensions on the part of member states. Some developing countries feel that there may be a hidden agenda by the donors to take more control over development. Some developed countries want to donate more now but their taxpayers want visible, measurable results so they know that this funding is being used efficiently and effectively. These concerns need to be discussed by the General Assembly in an effort to find common interests that enable the gains from the pilots to be supported in additional member states. If this doesn't happen, the United Nations' ability to compete in today's development environment will be impaired.

Resident Coordinator Needs a Higher Profile

There is a need to strengthen system-wide knowledge that the RC is a representative of the secretary-general, which lends credence to the RC's authority. The accreditation letter introducing the RC is signed by the secretary-general who also makes the final decision on RC selection. The RC also prepares an annual report that is distributed to the secretary-general, the country, and other stakeholders.

Giving the RC a significant title that conveys his/her credentials, such as "representative of the S-G," is one means for giving more stature to the position.

This perceived increase in stature may also help the UNDG meet RC recruiting guidelines, particularly those relating to gender, geographic balance, and garnering applications from outside of UNDP.

"Code of Conduct" Can Help Clarify RC Role

The complexity of the UN development system is visible across four levels: (1) from the field back to headquarters; (2) between donors, agencies, the UN development system, and recipient states; (3) across agencies and organizations in-country; and (4) and across the four "Ones"—program, budgetary framework, leader, and office.

This complexity requires clear role and responsibility definition for the RC relative to headquarters, agencies, and country teams. Currently, this lack of clarity can cause friction and often leaves the RC without the support necessary to achieve his/her assigned objectives.

Harmonization of Practices, Systems, and Services Must Become a Higher Priority

Streamlining the plethora of business practices, processes, systems, and services is critical if the pilots are to operate cost effectively and realize the lower transaction costs that are expected.

A major issue is the number of procurement systems and practices that are both time-consuming and often result in purchases that do not meet the needs of the field. Poor knowledge management systems is another area that is preventing effective capture and sharing of best practices within and across countries as well as with headquarters and donors. The ability to quickly share such information and implement such practices should be important measures for overall success of the Delivering as One initiative.

Finally, the use of different enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems makes it difficult to streamline overall business practices and processes as these are built into these systems. Data warehousing can overcome different systems at headquarters level, but this is not effective when working in the same office at the country level. Most UN agencies now use one of two systems. A move to one system becomes even more critical in countries that have peacekeeping and other operations, as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) will soon choose one of these two systems. The choice of one of these systems will impact the effectiveness of future integrated missions.

Better Governance Is Necessary to Support Coherence Gains in the Field

Headquarters at the United Nations and in agencies are not aligned optimally to support the newly aligned efforts in the field. Rather than first choosing which intergovernmental body—ECOSOC or agency boards—should oversee the process, a better approach would be to first identify the gaps in headquarters oversight and then determine the role each body should play. It was noted that often new structures are simply created in lieu of reforming the existing structures, which merely adds to overall system complexity.

Manage Expectations Regarding Results

There is tremendous interest in the pilots within the entire coherence effort. This is the first full year of implementation. Therefore, current stocktaking efforts are by necessity more qualitative than quantitative in nature. Yet even with the formal measurement in 2009, stakeholders must realize that it is still difficult to measure development effectiveness after a year or two. Development efforts are long term in nature. Results in the short to midterm are most likely to be seen in the area of efficiencies—cost and other resource savings due to better alignment of business processes, practices, and systems.

At the same time, this effort also entails significant change management components that impact the people involved. Therefore, qualitative measures along with employee satisfaction measures are also important to determine what is facilitating or impairing people's willingness and ability to change.

UN Coordination Role in Overall ODA Must be Strengthened

Even with the trends showing that the United Nations is losing ground as a channel for multilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) compared to other organizations—such as the European Commission, World Bank, and regional development banks—the United Nations does provide a vital normative, advocacy, and convening role upon which the other institutions depend.

By better aligning its capabilities with country needs, which begins with state-level development plans, the United Nations can strengthen its role in assisting a country's overall use of ODA. It is also important for the United Nations to capitalize on this strategic role by strengthening its ties with these other ODA providers, particularly the Bretton Woods Institutions.

Conclusion

Improved delivery of services to developing countries is a winning proposition for all involved—the United Nations, its family of programs and agencies, the countries themselves, and most of all the people in those countries. Over the years, the United Nations has accumulated sets of practices and prerogatives that, notwithstanding the best intentions, have made suboptimal progress on development. Those results, in turn, have weakened political support for development programs. The coherence effort offers the opportunity to turn around this dynamic. All involved at the United Nations and in the pilot countries should make every effort to seize the opportunity.

Participant List

Chair
Richard H. Stanley, Chair, The Stanley Foundation

Conference Organizer
Kathy Gockel, Program Officer, The Stanley Foundation

Rapporteur
Raj Chitikila, Analyst, US Government Accountability Office

Participants
Maged A. Abdelaziz, Permanent Representative of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations

Bui The Giang, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam to the United Nations

Mustapha Darboe, Regional Director for West Africa, Regional Bureau for West Africa, World Food Programme

Patricia W. de Mowbray, Former Resident Coordinator, One UN, Cape Verde

Stefan Delfs, Counsellor, Climate Change, System-wide Coherence, Office of the President of the General Assembly, United Nations

Hugh Dugan, Foreign Affairs Officer, Economic and Social Section, United States Mission to the United Nations

Igor Dzundev, Chef de Cabinet, Office of the President of the General Assembly, United Nations

Sally Fegan-Wyles, Director, UN Development Group Office, United Nations

Thomas Gass, Counselor, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations

Bruce Jenks, Assistant Administrator and Director, Partnerships Bureau, United Nations Development Programme

John Paul Kavanagh, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations

Srgjan Kerim, President of the 62nd General Assembly, United Nations

Jiro Kodera, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations

Dumisani S. Kumalo, Permanent Representative of the Republic of South Africa to the United Nations

Liu Zhenmin, Deputy Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations

Johan Ludvik Løvald, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations

Augustine Philip Mahiga, Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania to the United Nations

Peter Maurer, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations

Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations

Adrian Neritani, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Albania to the United Nations

Joseph Nsengimana, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Rwanda to the United Nations

Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, Director, Office of the Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations

Conrado Ramos, Director, Planning and Budget, Office of the Presidency of the Republic, Uruguay

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