An Invitation to Collaborate:
Supporting the United Nations Development System’s Regional Reform Roll-Out

June, 2021

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COVID-19 had a unifying force at the regional level. It renewed faith in the United Nations Development System’s (UNDS) ability to work together to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 Agenda going forward. With the political will and momentum in place, the time is ripe to leverage the new regional structure to embed collaboration in the UNDS’s organizational DNA.

The purpose of the reform is to deploy UNDS’s financial and human resources more efficiently and effectively in the face of an increasingly unpredictable future. If the UNDS embeds in its Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs) and Issue-Based Coalitions (IBCs) a collaborative operating model centered on the SDGs and 2030 Agenda, the best of the Regional Economic Commissions (RECs) and Agencies Fund and Programs (AFPs) will be manifested on the ground to deliver not only newer, bolder solutions, but those with lasting, large-scale impact. In addition, the RCPs and IBCs could become a platform for Member States and other stakeholders to renew and refresh their relationships within the UN.

Evolving toward a forward-looking collaborative framework will take time; there will be growing pains as the different UNDS entities learn to work together in new ways. That is why, throughout this exciting period of organizational evolution, robust leadership will be essential. Leaders will need to articulate a clear narrative, including the value proposition for collaboration, to compel evolution at the regional level; they will need to adapt the enabling environment, accountability structures, and incentives and rewards to create a compelling invitation to collaborate.

By addressing the current challenges and disincentives illuminated in this report through the lens of a communal vision, this narrative will unleash individuals across the UN system to pursue more exciting, bolder work—together. Ultimately, as the fruits of this labor begin to mature, this careful evaluation and collective reorientation will catapult the UN system into the future of organizations.
The Regional Collaborative Platforms: Embrace Partnerships

On March 2, 2021, Deputy Secretary-General, Amina J. Mohammed, addressed the first annual African RCP meeting, stating that the RCPs mark “the start of the next-generation collaboration approach for the regional UN entities.” She reminded us that the UN reform seeks to “strengthen its support to countries, leveraging its capacities at all levels. The new Regional Collaborative Platform has responded to the growing need for enhanced UN coordination and regional collaboration in the face of the pandemic and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It brings together UN regional expertise, capacity, and data to provide analytical, policy, and operational support to countries.”

The UN system should apply the learnings from COVID-19 to inform the regional reform implementation going forward. COVID-19 forced all regional activities toward one goal. Now, the RCPs should embed this directionality and focus using the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as the anchoring purpose. By integrating the spheres of development and environment, the SDGs disrupted established agendas and pushed the international system, including the UNDS, to adopt an integrative mindset toward implementation. Therefore, the RCPs should put the SDGs at the center of planning and execution of programs, projects, strategies, and initiatives at the regional level.

COVID-19 also demonstrated that the regional level has strong convening power both within the UN system and externally. The RCPs should promote horizontal collaboration among Agencies Funds and Programs (AFPs) and Regional Commissions (RECs) by encouraging initiatives and strategies to adopt an integrated SDG-focus. They should formalize region-to-region collaboration by engaging in systematic knowledge-sharing with their counterparts.

The RCPs should also build bridges across global, regional, and country domains to enable vertical collaboration. One interviewee suggested that the Development Coordination Office’s (DCO) knowledge of the expertise and capacities of the different RECs and AFPs at the regional and national levels made it the perfect “match-maker” across the UNDS at all levels. The DCO could serve as the critical missing link to help the UN system facilitate horizontal collaboration at the regional level, as well as vertical collaboration and information flow to the country level, through the RC system. Interviewees highlighted that the reform of the RC system created an important new channel through which to better coordinate with the country level.

The role of the RCP should not stop at internal coordination. The RCPs should broker partnerships with powerful regional, trans-regional, and sub-regional bodies. They should also forge stronger connections with Member States, civil society organizations, marginalized communities, and authorities who possess the trust in the field to further facilitate demand-driven implementation on the ground. Additionally, as one interviewee noted, with Environment, Social, and (Corporate) Governance (ESG) becoming an
integral part of business strategy globally, partnerships with the private sector should also be a priority at the regional level. The RCPs should engage the private sector not just as a source of capital, but a source of ideas, implementation skills, and innovation.

While a close examination of the typology of partnerships is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a great deal of information available on how different partnerships could work to better implement the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in this Decade of Action. The peer support group structures, for example, were cited by interviewees as promising institutional entry points for the UNCTs/RCs to connect into the regional level, where the DCO could help facilitate.

As the RCPs formalize their structures and processes, they could become the ideal platform to convene a wide range of ideas, financial resources, human capital, and expertise. The IBCs then have a unique capacity to operationalize those partnerships and mobilize collective resources into joint products. To enable them to do so, the RCPs should serve as advisory boards for their regional IBCs. They should help the IBCs define concrete purposes and deliverables based on regional and national SDG priorities, and hold them accountable for delivering tangible impact on the ground.

1. A number of existing UN collaboration frameworks can be leveraged to institutionalize coordination: Peer Review Voluntary National Review Mechanisms, Peer Support Group structures, existing cooperation frameworks (CCA), leveraging the new RC system.

The Issue-Based Coalitions: Operationalize Joint Projects, Programs and Strategies

In 2019, Member States requested that the Secretary-General present potential solutions to improve implementation capacity at the regional level of the UNDS. Recognizing the “historic deficit of collaboration, accountability and strategic guidance at the regional level,” the Secretary-General proposed Issue Based Coalitions: “In all regions, issue-based coalitions will be demand-driven and will respond to the specific needs and priorities of countries or to the demand of the respective

United Nations country teams. Issue-based coalitions will vary according to the policy priorities in each region.”³

An integrated vision for the IBCs has been established: the UNDS should channel its diverse expertise, experts, capacities, and resources into shared products aligned with the SDGs and 2030 Agenda. The regions have started to design proactive, constructive, action-oriented IBCs. Now, the challenge is to build on those original initiatives and elevate performance.

In order to translate theories of collaboration into practice and results, the IBCs, with the support of the RCPs, should build functional, operative partnerships across a broad array of UN and non-UN stakeholders within and across regions. The African RCP decided that the IBCs needed to open up to a broader landscape of partners, especially those with financial capacity like regional banks, in order to deliver impact on the ground. The possibilities for leveraging external partnerships on the IBCs are endless. How to best engage external partners will depend on the scope and purpose of the particular IBC; a one-model-fits-all approach will not suffice.

The IBCs should lead and operationalize joint projects, programs, and strategies across these diverse stakeholders. In addition to collaboration, executing programs with a high degree of impact requires focus, investment, and acute knowledge of local needs. To this end, the IBCs, like the RCPs, should put the SDGs at the center of planning and execution of programs, projects, strategies, and initiatives at the regional level.

A Proposal: Transform the Issue Based Coalitions into SDG Incubators

The IBCs could become cross-functional portfolio managers at the regional level as “SDG incubators.” As an SDG incubator, the IBC’s role could be to crowdsource ideas for programs, projects, and strategies from diverse UN and non-UN stakeholders, and then turn the ideas into actionable projects focused specifically on the IBC’s dedicated area of the SDGs. In essence, the IBC could oversee the entire end-to-end workflow: sourcing ideas, identifying the appropriate UN and non-UN stakeholders to contribute, planning, coordinating the work, and measuring the efficacy and efficiency of the joint action on the ground.

Led by the chairs and co-chairs, the IBC could adopt a consultative and transparent annual planning process in which they seek feedback from UN and non-UN stakeholders about the needs in the region. Based on the feedback, the IBCs could define strategic, actionable priorities for the year ahead relative to their particular SDG focus.

The IBC could then create a portfolio of projects to incubate to fulfill their annual priorities, leveraging the Knowledge Management Hub to crowdsource ideas from Member States, AFPs, RECs, RCs, UNCTs, and non-UN stakeholders. The REC and AFP representatives on each IBC could collectively assess the portfolio and vet and prioritize proposals based on the defined strategic priorities. They could then jointly invest capital and headcount into the projects and form project teams.

The hope would be for each project team to draw financial resources and personnel from a range of different UN entities, so that there is collective ownership/buy-in for the idea and the parties are equally invested in the team’s success. This may be more effective than a pooled fund because each UN entity will maintain its autonomy to choose where to invest its budget and resources.

Of course, in the context of earmarked funding, all investment-related matters need the support of Member States and major donors. This model of investment would enable the various UN stakeholders to take more risks and invest in bold, systemic initiatives that they would not otherwise be able to fund on their own, but which would positively impact their mandates and donors’ and Member States’ objectives. The same would be true for other external stakeholders.
Once the internal UN resources are allocated, the IBC could **proactively source additional investments / donations, personnel, expertise, or other resources from external stakeholders** to join the project team. Those that could eventually help to implement the program on the ground, such as RCs and UNCTs, could be included as partners early on. For example, if the program is to develop a new policy or regulation, then it ultimately needs to be implemented by the government, in which case, government representatives should be involved from the beginning. The nature of the partnerships could be flexible and problem-based; particular entities could participate in certain projects but would not need to have a standing role on the IBC-SDG incubator.

While the project teams should be empowered to execute their joint products on their own, the IBCs could help to **manage team dynamics and operationalize collaboration**. The IBCs should anticipate that differing organizational structures, mandates, and administrative processes could make it difficult to coordinate cross-sectoral activities, develop plans, create interagency guidance notes and common position papers, and organize events across the RECs, AFPs, and external partners. The IBC should help the project teams establish appropriate rules of engagement.

A centralized IBC digital platform or repository could be incorporated into the Knowledge Management Hub and used to aggregate and visualize the progress and outcomes of activities globally. The IBC could be rigorous in **scanning, sensing, and funneling key learnings across the project teams in their portfolio**.

Finally, the IBCs should hold themselves and the project teams they sponsor **accountable for creating impact** on the ground. At this time, the primary outputs from the regional level are knowledge products. COVID-19 demonstrated that the regional level has critical capacity to be able to aggregate data, rapidly assess emerging situations, and develop these products quickly. Despite this, the regional level still faces the challenge of ensuring the products it produces are coherent and supportive of results-oriented action on the ground. How are these knowledge products being used? Are there metrics to measure how much impact they have? How do they know they are creating an impact? Similarly, while the regional level is helping to facilitate agreement on norms and policies, these conversations seem to fall short of the call to action. COVID-19 and the transition to remote work enabled broad participation in virtual conversations from diverse non-UN stakeholders. Are these webinars and online gatherings resulting in joint action?

**Accountability must go beyond measuring the number of reports published, webinars hosted, and attendance at meetings.** Webinars and meetings need to be for a purpose, and the regional level must be disciplined in measuring whether they fulfill that purpose. The IBC could implement metrics to measure the impact of the products produced and be expected to demonstrate results to the stakeholders that invested in the project teams. If the results do not live up to expectations, then the IBC should expect that the investors will likely not invest in one region could be adapted and deployed by another part of the UN system. Therefore, the RCPs could **help to scale the learnings to other regions** and, where appropriate, to stakeholders at the global and country levels to help the system avoid duplicating efforts.
in similar projects in the future. The IBC should conduct post-mortems and ensure that every effort produces learning so that mistakes are not repeated.

**Organizational behavior at the regional level should also be monitored.** The IBC could implement a “regional collaboration scorecard,” with clear markers of progress, to enable it to self-assess its collaboration efforts. The IBC could also invite non-UN stakeholders to give feedback on their collaboration efforts. The Secretary-General should set the expectation that the IBC should continuously adjust their processes based on the lessons and experience. When inspiring stories of collaboration surface, the RCPs and IBCs should be proactive in sharing these with the broader system, to give them hope of what collaboration can achieve.

All in all, a more collaborative model of IBC, with an integrated vision centered on the SDGs framework, could enable the IBCs to make a difference on the ground provided certain conditions guide the process:

» The UNDS entities commit to deliver on one common purpose on the IBCs, join resources and expertise, and work together.

» The UNDS entities strategize to avoid duplication and collaborate according to mandates.

» The IBCs align their products with global, regional, sub-regional, national and local initiatives related to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda to avoid spreading themselves too thin.

» The IBCs proactively build partnerships with Member States and other stakeholders to increase the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of implementation on the ground.

» The IBCs create a financing mechanism by which every entity, state, or other stakeholder is able to contribute resources to the IBCs.

» The IBCs conduct an assessment of other available funding that could complement the IBCs. However, the UNDS should not assume that this additional funding will be the only source of revenue.

If the UNDS chooses to adopt this collaborative model of IBCs, it should anticipate challenges. First, it could take a significant amount of time for the UNDS to consolidate an IBC proposal. Despite this, the regions should go forward with consolidating regional activities on the IBCs and implementing a demand-driven, collaborative approach.

Second, it is possible that the RECs and AFPs might label their conglomeration of separate programs and activities as an IBC, but not actually pursue joint products. While each entity’s separate work, such as seminars, publications, reports, or webinars would surely strengthen the delivery of joint products through the IBC, they do not constitute an IBC on their own. The IBC is a consolidated delivery framework, calling for operational coalitions to work together in a coherent manner to deliver on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

The UNDS’s leadership has shown its commitment to the process. Beyond any doubt, the UN system, as a whole needs, to transform and not just reform. And for this to happen all entities need to take a hard look at themselves, and be willing to change.
Contact
Javier Surasky
Program officer governance and financing for sustainable development
j.surasky@cepei.org