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Introduction

In 2020, mutually reinforcing global health, economic, and social crises warned us that, “We no longer have the luxury, if we ever really did, of solving problems as isolated, quasi-independent points in separate social and ecological spheres.”¹ The needs of Member States and vulnerable populations across the globe have become more dire and complex than ever before, and demand concerted action.

Organizations across sectors—public, private, and civil society alike—are transforming to become more flexible, agile, and proactive in order to adapt to the current disruptions to society. All are having to innovate, invest in new ways of working and creating value, and take new risks to prepare themselves for uncertain futures. Above all, they are recognizing that resilience cannot be achieved by a single organizational entity, but only among a broad ecosystem of collaborators.

The United Nations Development System’s (UNDS) regional reform was initiated to help the UNDS collaborate more efficiently and effectively, and enhance its capacity to support Member States in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. In 2021, with the regional reform roll-out underway and making progress, Cepei, with support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, undertook to assess the UNDS’ progress on the regional reform roll-out. In addition to analyzing the available UN documents on the regional reform, Cepei conducted three (virtual) experts meetings, consulted the regional Agencies Funds and Programs (AFPs) offices, the Regional Commissions (RCs), and interviewed (virtual) UN Staff, states, civil society, academia, and think-tanks in the five regions. Every interview and meeting was conducted under Chatham House Rule.

In the 2021 Annual Overview Report of the UN System Chief Executives Board, ECOSOC called for a renewed type of leadership “[…] across mandates, pillars, functions, and geography […].”² The UN system has an important role to play in brokering relationships across stakeholders and supporting Member States to realize the SDGs and 2030 Agenda. It is now time for the regional level to adopt a new, integrated way of work to catalyze the broader evolution of the United Nations Development System (UNDS). To this end, forging partnerships and harnessing all UNDS assets across regions and levels—global, regional, sub-regional, and national—is critical.

State of Play:
Findings and Recommendations

All five regions have created their Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs), Issue-Based Coalitions (IBCs), and Knowledge Management Hub websites, and have hosted meetings and made statements advocating for collaboration. Although the UNDS has achieved an initial readiness phase in its regional reform efforts, it has done so unevenly across the five regions.

The UNDS has the tools, resources, and expertise to deliver more efficiently and effectively. However, a shortfall of collaboration in practice is preventing verbal commitments to the reform from translating into actions and deliverables on the ground. Therefore, despite the progress that has been made thus far, the UN is still leaving value on the table.

This report presents 8 recommendations to empower the UNDS at the regional level to harness the full value of its reform efforts. The recommendations aim to strengthen the RCPs, IBCs, and Knowledge Management Hubs, and, ultimately, create a UNDS that can deliver concrete, transformative outcomes efficiently and effectively.

1. The Knowledge Management Hub should become the UNDS’ institutional nervous system—a centralized learning organ that provides a real-time view of what is happening and where. It must create institutional memory, reveal where efforts are duplicated, and facilitate learning and collaboration both internally and with the external community.

2. The RCPs should maintain an up-to-date, evolving map of assets at the regional level to have a clear picture of the capacities, expertise, and financial resources available at all times.

3. Member States should be empowered to hold the RCPs accountable for delivering tangible results on the ground. Internally, the RCPs should implement a regional collaboration scorecard to keep a pulse of the efficacy of collaboration efforts. The results should be used to identify the challenges concerning collaboration and possible solutions, potentially through coaching or upskilling.

4. Participation in the RCPs and IBCs should be framed as a talent development opportunity for high-potentials hoping to advance to leadership roles. Performance and evaluation systems should be tailored accordingly, holding participants accountable for their contributions.

5. Collaboration within the UNDS and building partnerships with non-UN stakeholders (including private and civil institutions) is now imperative. Each UNDS entity leading an IBC should proactively forge partnerships across the development spectrum of actors. The RCP should facilitate the realization of these partnerships and the results should be reported at their regular meetings.

6. Inter-regional collaboration is critical to deliver on the 2030 Agenda more
efficiently and effectively. Although the regions are diverse, they share many implementation challenges; the lessons learned in one can create value in another. The 5 RCPs should develop shared criteria to assess implementation and regularly exchange information, best practices, and troubleshoot common problems.

7. The role of the regional directors of the Development Cooperation Office (DCO) should be revised and adapted to the new regional ecosystems the reform has produced. As a member of the RCP secretariat, DCO should be a broker between regional and national layers of capacities, knowledge, expertise, and experts, in order to enhance the IBCs’ and Knowledge Management Hub’s implementation.

8. The regional reform roll-out needs leadership. AFPs headquarters should direct all regional and national layers of operation to embrace the RCPs, IBCs, and Knowledge Management Hubs. Their directives should clearly articulate the value of the regional level, and the RCPs and IBCs specifically, in terms of catalyzing transformational change of social, economic, and environmental conditions around the world.

Bottlenecks and Aspirations Emerging from the Regional Reform Roll-Out

All of the reports on the regional reform roll-out have been produced in the midst of COVID-19. Because the RCP and IBC structures are not yet consolidated, their focus thus far has been process, not substance. As the regions have begun to implement the Secretary-General’s 5 recommendations, a number of challenges and opportunities have surfaced. The starkest challenges are with respect to collaboration.

Organizational Culture

The first impediment to the reform is the notion of the “three UNs”: the UN of Member States, the UN Secretariat and system, and the UN of partnerships—the nongovernmental and civil society community and experts that are essential to implementing the SDGs. Despite the unifying intention of Agenda 2030 and the UN Charter, a lack of a clear division of labor in practice produces fragmented thinking and action at the regional level, and in the broader UN system. While the SDGs were originally intended to serve as the unifying vision for the UN system, some UN entities have not yet embraced the SDGs as a totality.

Each REC and AFP engages with a wide range of communities, nations, and regions to support development and accomplish invaluable work on its own. However, because project management of programs, policy, and strategy-setting is distributed across UN entities, the system continues to divide its resources among smaller projects and initiatives that
are more incremental by definition, rather than systemic and integrated solutions. **Overlapping mandates, silos, and lack of transparency and communication** continue to cause inefficiencies, including duplicated efforts at the regional level. For example, a significant part of regional resources is spent on staff, yet it is common for agencies to contract external specialists as consultants even though the expertise could be found in other UN agencies.

Interviewees noted that the **lack of incentives for collaboration** continues to be a serious impediment to the reform at the regional level and across the UN system. The true drivers of behavior in the UN system are the mandate and funding, and **funding is allocated according to precedent and political motives** rather than impact on the ground. In this context, the culture is such that one should “do whatever is necessary to protect their mandate [by fulfilling donors’ specific goals and expectations] and secure and expand their resources.” Thus, the cost of transaction, especially in the largest UN entities, renders collaboration and joint action uneconomical.

Additionally, a **scarcity mindset** continues to drive **internal competition** for resources where there are clear “winners” and “losers.” Within UNDS, the “winners” are the entities that receive Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding; those with other funding sources and no operational activities are “left aside” within the system, but still have valuable expertise to contribute.

The competition for resources detracts from an integrated view of program delivery at the regional level; it creates a **competition of agendas**, including competition between different sector-specific regional initiatives and between regional and subregional initiatives. **Fear of losing power** is immense.

In some regions, momentum around the reform is stunted because people feel **dismayed** at the regional level; they believe that all the real decisions are made at headquarters or the country level, so it is not worth the added effort to collaborate and be proactive lower down in the organization. Interviewees noted that there is a **diffusion of responsibility** in the culture across much of the UN system because of the **lack of one unique accountability framework to the UN system**. For example, performance appraisals are made by direct supervisors. The leaders who are promoted are those who do all that they can to protect their resources and staff, not those who necessarily collaborate; the fact that recruitment and appointments are based on rigid **nationality-based quotas** exacerbates this problem. At bottom, people fear they will not be rewarded for collaboration.

Finally, interviewees noted that the **lack of trust in democracy, multilateralism, and institutions** in the broader macro context also poses an obstacle to collaboration at the UN regional level. One may think that with aid no longer being the biggest player in town, the UN could be motivated to cooperate better and more widely. However, if the UNDS continues to defer to its competitive, turf-guarding instincts, other more powerful stakeholders operating at the regional level will likely overshadow it.

**Implementing the Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs)**

The RCP replaced two UN coordination mechanisms —the UN Sustainable Development Groups and the Regional Coordination Mechanisms. The RCPs in all five regions are chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General. In each region, top representatives from the Regional
Commissions and UNDP act as Vice-Chairs. They share the secretariat coordination with the UN Development Coordination Office (DCO).

While the pockets of progress on the RCPs across the regions are encouraging, based on the limited information presently available, it seems the regions have not fully internalized nor acted upon the recommendations put forth by the Secretary-General. Inevitably, the RCPs/IBCs have yet to engender the intended level of collaboration and, in turn, tangible increases in efficiency and efficacy of program delivery on the ground.3

As one interviewee put it, creating better synergies at the regional level is “almost an impossible task” to grasp. Some interviewees expressed concern that the reform exercise is being implemented through the lens of the Regional Economic Commissions. They claimed that the RECs are a difficult place to start developing a vision for empowering regionalism, both because they are underfunded and because the AFPs do not operationalize their work through the RECs.

Another challenge is that the leaders of the RCPs are not modeling the collaborative behavior that the reforms were intended to produce. Dis-alignment of mandates and lack of communication among the three entities has complicated the division of responsibilities in some regions. As a result, actions are being taken in silos, which is forging a sense of distrust at the leadership level of the RCP, and no doubt influencing the AFPs’ and RECs’ faith in the reform.

Several interviewees expressed that the reform and the new calls for collaboration felt like an “additional job,” but which came with no additional funding to execute. In contrast, some interviewees described that their regions were enthusiastic toward the reform and the promise of collaboration, and that the new structures had begun to enable new forms of collaboration. Most regions, however, lack clear metrics or markers to assess whether they are making progress on this front.

In addition to the challenges with horizontal collaboration at the regional level, the RCPs have not yet formalized their relationships with the global and country levels and are not yet producing substantive vertical collaboration. There is a lack of clarity around how the Resident Coordinators and UNCTs can access the RCPs and IBCs, and how much support, and in what form, the regional level should provide to the country level. Disparate data sets between the global, regional, and country levels make it difficult to collaborate and measure the impact that the regional level has in the field. One interviewee noted it was like comparing apples and oranges.

Part of the challenge is a perceived leadership gap. Interviewees at the regional level noted that HQ leaders are not articulating a clear, coordinated narrative about the vision for the reform at the regional level. In fact, there are competing narratives from leadership at the different global, regional, and country levels, which contributes to a lack of clarity and, frankly, disagreement about the role the UN system should play at the regional level. Some doubt whether the future of multilateralism is truly at the regional level; others question whether the regional level should purely play a normative role or also mobilize resources for implementation. For example, should the RCP serve as purely an inter-agency coordination mechanism or engage with partners? Should

3. The appendix contains relevant UN information regarding RCPs and IBCs.
the RCP focus specifically on regional thematic issues or broader issues? In practice, there are even different meanings and definitions ascribed to the term “region.”

**Implementing the Issue Based Collations (IBCs)**

Varying points of views about the purpose of the RCPs and IBCs, and the regional level more broadly, has led the new structures to take very different forms across the regions. For example, while some IBCs have adopted a thematic focus related to the SDGs, others have implemented more macroeconomic or structural foci, making it difficult to facilitate region-to-region information-sharing and collaboration. It is also proving more difficult for the IBCs with a more structural focus to deliver effectively on the ground because the UNDS does not have the resources and expertise to address the dimension and complexity of macroeconomic development challenges—these are ultimately the responsibility of Member States and development financial institutions. That said, the African RCP and IBCs have demonstrated how the regional level can strike the balance between the macro and the SDGs; they worked across horizontal and vertical levels to implement initiatives related to climate change, financing, and debt relief with ecological assets in the Congo Basin.

In terms of collaboration on the IBCs themselves, interviewees noted instances of co-chairs being too heavy handed in choosing the direction of the work, rather than facilitating horizontal, system-wide collaboration and ownership. Despite the IBCs being envisioned as a broader platform for collaboration with non-UN entities, most IBCs are not engaging in external partnerships.

As of now, the African region is the exception: the RCP and IBCs actively engage with non-UN partners, including the African Union, in part because of the trans-boundary nature of the problems in the region and their longstanding history of collaboration with external partners.

In contrast, other regions made the conscious decision to limit the IBCs to the UN-system only. Some RECs in particular actively opposed opening up the IBCs to external stakeholders because they believed it would negatively impact the dynamics of the meetings without producing added benefits. One interviewee described that their region had reached out to external institutions to join their RCP and IBCs, but that there was not much interest. Another attributed the lack of external collaboration to the fact that the IBCs were still finding their footing internally.

More broadly, it seems that Member States are unclear about the role of the newly created regional UN structures (RCP/IBCs). Some perceive the RCP and IBCs as purely serving an internal UN-coordination purpose. Therefore, they are disinclined to participate or invest in them. One region described having experienced a power dynamic between Member States and the RCP, in that Member States were concerned that the IBCs might be exercising too much influence and “killing off topics.”

**Creating the Knowledge Management Hubs**

In addition to the implementation of the RCPs and IBCs, the regions have taken steps to consolidate their disparate statistical data and knowledge products on single regional Knowledge Management Hubs, with Europe...
as the exception. While Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Arab States/Western Asia, and the Asia Pacific regions have each launched Knowledge Management Hub websites, the platforms differ in their level of progress and detailed procedures.

The Knowledge Management Hubs were originally intended for two use cases: (1) to provide information to the public about UN work, publications, and data at the regional level, (2) to serve as an internal collaboration tool. While some regions claim to have made significant progress, upon closer look, it seems that what the regions are calling “knowledge hubs” are enormous libraries of tens of thousands of documents from the different UN entities. The SDG gateways/SDG knowledge repositories that existed previously have been integrated into what the regions are calling their knowledge hubs, and are also overtaking them.

While it is certainly progress to have these materials and SDG statistical data consolidated on a single website, the knowledge hubs are not yet fulfilling their promise to create value for internal and external users. Some interviewees noted that these efforts were delayed because of the focus on the COVID-19 response. An added challenge is that Member States are still not inclined to collaborate in co-creating the knowledge hubs; the external perception is that the knowledge hubs are an “internal UN problem” requiring an internal solution.

While some regions have communicated their plans for more sophisticated knowledge diffusion, including conducting a complete mapping of assets, expertise, and best practices and making that information available at the touch of a button, the actual execution of these visions is subject to challenges.

The main challenge thus far is that the knowledge hub is regarded as “additional work” rather than mission-critical to the effective functioning of the UN system at the regional level. One interviewee explained that they felt the pressure of expectations from the country level, Deputy Secretary General, and the Development Cooperation Office to advance the Knowledge Hub, but that they did not have a sufficient budget and headcount for delivery. (The Arab/Western Asia Region’s Manara platform required significant investment to develop; it deploys artificial intelligence and search capacity to enable users to interrogate the databases.) In the context of budget cuts, some RECs have resisted the expense of creating functional knowledge management hubs because they have not been regarded as an immediate priority. As a result, one region reported receiving a surge in requests for statistics during COVID-19 but did not have the capacity to fulfill them.

Aside from the Manara platform, the regions’ existing knowledge libraries are difficult for users to navigate. While some describe that the documents, overall content, and search engines are “good,” in practice the user experience for the Resident Coordinators at the

4. One interviewee noted that the European region has not yet implemented the Secretary General’s recommendation for a knowledge hub in large part because of a lack of budget and resources. For details on the status of the regional knowledge management hub as of September 25, 2020, See pg. 7 of Regional Review Summary of Current Status per Workstream (as of 25 September 2020).’ See: http://www.regionalcommissions.org/inventory_Regional%20Review%20Roll-out.pdf
5. Manara (Arab States/Western Asia), Agenda2030LAC (LAC), Knowledge.eca (Africa), and Knowledge.unasiapacific (Asia Pacific)
country level or external stakeholders is one of information overload. Moreover, the five regional platforms are not standardized, which makes it difficult for the regions to share information within the UN system and for external users to compare data across regions.

Because the Knowledge Management Hubs have been implemented separately in each region, with no pre-programmed region-to-region information sharing or alignment of data, intra-regional communities of practice around the hubs have yet to take form. Interviewees emphasized that the regions should find a way to make knowledge produced in one region useful in another, either by consolidating the regional knowledge hubs on one platform with one access point, or by establishing cross-regional communities of practice.

During COVID-19, the Knowledge Management Hub proved essential in some regions for projecting information to the country level and supporting the Regional Commissions to implement policy trackers and cross-fertilize national best practices. However, interviewees were concerned that some policy expertise that could be of critical use to UN and non-UN stakeholders resides in UN entities, like the ITC or at the country level, that do not have a regional structure and, in turn, no formal channel to publish to the knowledge hub. Other interviewees agreed that critical information is currently missing from the current knowledge management frameworks: a comprehensive map of all regional assets, rosters of expertise, a hub of best practices and lessons learned, and country level activities. Interviewees noted that these elements should be incorporated in order to be demand-driven and that there is an opportunity to integrate policy and analytical advising, or even skills-building or capacity-building support, into the Knowledge Management Hubs in order to better support Resident Coordinators, UNCTs, and external stakeholders engaging with the regional level.

Looking Ahead

Neither a single government nor the UN system can deliver on the SDGs and 2030 Agenda independently. Now more than ever, the UN needs to leverage partnerships and build new, agile capabilities to align its regional capacities to the national level.

Nearly two years into the regional reform roll-out process, it is clear that there is still a lot of work ahead. Nonetheless, the reform presents a critical opportunity for the regional level to embed the fundamental infrastructure to facilitate joint action across UN and non-UN stakeholders. Toward this end, there is great potential in the RCPs, IBCs, and Knowledge Management Hubs. The relevant structures are in place; it is now a matter of adding an operating model to align and coordinate actors across the UN system (within and across regions), Member States, civil society organizations, the private sector, and other external organizations, to deliver sustainable development as one integrated whole.
Appendix

Context of the United Nations Development System’s (UNDS) Regional Reform Process

**Review process**

As outlined in the Secretary General’s December 2017 report, *Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity, and peace on a healthy planet*, the overarching objective of the UNDS reform is to support Member States in achieving the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

In his 2017 report, the Secretary-General reaffirmed the importance of regional entities and capturing the regional dimension in the repositioning of the UNDS. The report also recognized the critical role of regional actors in offering a convening platform for joint intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder action on key development priorities; delivering integrated policy advice; providing normative support and technical capacity on regional priorities; enhancing the policy and analytical capacities of Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UNCTs; and contextualizing country analysis in regional specificities.

The May 2018 General Assembly resolution A/RES/72/279 on Repositioning the UNDS endorsed the Secretary-General’s vision and called for a two-phased approach to the UNDS regional reform: the first focused on enhancing collaboration between different entities at the regional and sub-regional levels, and the second was more comprehensive, focusing on how to realign these assets.

**ECOSOC Mandate**

In December 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 71/243. In the *Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system*, the Secretary-General requested for the regional level “in consultation with the entities of the United Nations development system, to carry out by June 2017 a system-wide outline of present functions, as defined in their strategic plans and similar planning documents, and existing capacities of all United Nations entities carrying out operational activities for development in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a view to identifying gaps and overlaps in coverage and providing recommendations for addressing them, identifying comparative advantages and improving the inter-agency approach, in accordance with their respective mandates” (paragraph 19).

Resolution 71/234 set the stage for the Secretary-General’s proposal of a comprehensive UNDS reform. In April 2017, the Secretary-General
took the first step to institutionalize the process, establishing an Internal Review Team (IRT) on management reform. The team was mandated:

» To identify internal measures that the Secretariat could take to streamline procedures, reduce delays, and improve the implementation of mandates, including any processes underway.

» To identify proposals supporting and advancing a broader reform agenda.

The IRT immediately launched a series of consultations with the Member States and UN AFPs, and later presented early ideas on reform management.

The Secretary-General subsequently published two reports. The first was issued in June 2017, entitled Repositioning the UN development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda – Ensuring a Better Future for All. The second, published in December 2017, was named Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity, and peace on a healthy planet.

In 2019, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG) partnered with Cepei, a southern-based think tank with extensive experience in global development agendas, to develop evidence-based knowledge to support the reform process and scale it from the national to the regional level. Cepei conducted consultations and interviews with +800 UN and non-UN experts, and conducted fieldwork in regional and sub-regional UN hubs in all five regions to identify concrete ways to strengthen the UN’s regional architecture.

As a result, Cepei published a report that was presented to the IRT and the EOSG. Among its main conclusions, it pointed out that the regional level had to overcome its siloes, eliminate duplication of work, and embrace collaboration, including with respect to knowledge-sharing, project management, and reporting. In this context, as sensed by the Secretary-General, change was urgent.
Shortly after the report was shared with the UN, it was decided that the 2019 ECOSOC Operational Activities for Development Segment should center on the reform.

During this meeting, the Secretary-General delivered a message foreshadowing his subsequent appeal to a Decade of Action and Delivery. He stated, “We need a more cohesive, integrated, and accountable UN development system to help countries accelerate action and achieve the transformative change our world requires.”

Member States expressed support for the reform process in the 2019 ECOSOC Operational Activities for Development Segment:

» Member States noted the smooth and efficient transition of the new Resident Coordinator system and underscored the need for profound change in the organizational culture of individual entities and the system as a whole.

» The longer-term reprofiling and restructuring of regional assets was recognized as an extraordinarily complex exercise. Member States made clear that they expected the process to keep moving forward.

» Member States welcomed the new Funding Compact.

At the same time, Member States drew their red lines:

» All the processes should advance in the framework of countries’ consultations.

» Actions on the UNDS repositioning must be rolled out with existing resources.

The Secretary-General incorporated Member States’ feedback in the April 2019 report on Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, 2019. The document presented five concrete recommendations to guide the longer-term reprofiling and restructuring of UNDS assets at the regional level:

1. **Create a unified mechanism for coordination in each region**, the UN Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs).

2. **Establish knowledge management hubs** in each region by pooling together policy expertise, by or across sectors.

3. **Enhance transparency and results-based management** at the regional level strengthening intergovernmental forums,
annual reporting on system-wide results at the regional level, and clarifying the regional value proposition in each region.

4. **Initiate a region-by-region management process change consolidating capacities on data and statistics.**

5. **Identify administrative services that could be provided more efficiently to regional offices through joint back offices.** Where feasible, co-location in common premises will also be sought.

In July 2019, the ECOSOC adopted its resolution E/RES/2019/15, endorsed the Secretary-General’s proposal, and called on him “[...] to provide options, on a region-by-region basis, for longer-term reprofiling and restructuring of the regional assets of the United Nations [and] stresses that further efforts are needed to identify and address gaps and overlaps at the regional level” (paragraph 8).

A new Secretary-General report on *Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system* published in April 2020 followed the same path. The ECOSOC resolution E/2020/18 of July welcomed its contents.
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