20 Cepei

Unpacking the Regional United Nations Development System Reform

Voices From Experts

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Introduction

This report is based on a series of expert meetings hosted by Cepei in partnership with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and supported by the Action for Sustainable Development and Together 2030 initiatives.

The series of events aimed at discussing with field experts and practitioners in the five United Nations regions the first steps taken on the United Nations Development System (UNDS) reform at the regional layer. Thus, we did not only take stock of the process advancements and identified obstacles but also explored opportunities to move the reform forward and make it strong.

More than a hundred experts and practitioners from the regions joined seven meetings. Three of them discussed common issues in the five regions: regional governance, stakeholder engagement, and financing sustainable development. The other four gathered stakeholders from each region to focalize the discussion on issues specific to each of them.

All meetings met virtually under Chatham House Rule, and that is why we do not attribute quotes to any participant.

The main outcomes from the debates are presented in this report organized in three chapters: The first gives an introduction to UNDS reform and is mainly intended for readers that are not entirely familiar with his process. The second chapter recapitulates key issues, proposals, and opinions raised by experts and practitioners in the meetings. The final chapter focuses on conclusions.

We hope that this report facilitates the ongoing implementation of the UNDS regional reform in a more informed, transparent, accountable and inclusive fashion.

Chapter 1. The United Nations Development System Reform

1.1. A long process

Reforming the UNDS to make it more effective and efficient is a long-awaited goal. So far, many initiatives have been undertaken to achieve it with varying levels of success. Early in his tenure as UN Secretary-General (SG), António Guterres made UNDS reform one of his top priorities. This meant to structurally adapt the system to the UN's present challenges, such as accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a world that is characterized by the COVID-19 recovery, the climate crisis, geopolitical tensions, lack of sufficient and timely data, and other 'wicked' problems.

The unfolding UNDS reform touches upon three working levels: national, regional, and global. It seeks to strengthen each of them but also to improve the mechanics between these layers. That is why this report will include references to the national and global levels, even when it mainly focuses on the regional level.

The active part of the UNDS reform process formally started in 2017 with the adoption of UN General Assembly resolution 71/243 "Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system," in which member states requested the SG to carry out a system-wide outline of present functions and existing capacities of all UN operational activities for development in support bodies.

Consequently, the SG submitted his report "Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: ensuring a better future for all" (A/72/124) in July 2017. The document reviewed the system's functions and capacities, identified systemic capacity gaps and overlaps despite assumed data insufficiency in the report building. It also offered options for improving the accountability and overall coordination of the UNDS and was presented as the first in a series of reports addressing perceived shortcomings of the United Nations Development System.

The second report of the Secretary-General on "Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet" was delivered in December 2017, proposing seven key areas of transformation to allow the emergence of a new generation of UN Country Teams led by an impartial, independent and empowered Resident Coordinator and supported by a reprofiled regional approach to better support the work carried out on the ground.

The third 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," was presented

by the SG in January 2018. It included the results of a survey conducted by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2017 targeting governments in program countries and Resident Coordinators.

It became evident that the UNDS had significant room for improvement in terms of flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and its ability to collaborate with UN Resident Coordinators and government representatives.

Table 1. Perceptions of the United Nations development system's flexibility, cost-effectiveness and ability to collaborate

	Is flexible		Is cost-effective		Operates collaboratively	
	Governments	Resident coordinators	Governments	Resident coordinators	Governments	Resident coordinators
Strongly agree	19	12	8	9	15	17
Agree	67	59	58	47	71	72
Disagree	12	26	18	38	12	10
Strongly disagree	1	3	2	3	1	1
Don't know	2	0	14	3	1	0

Source: A/73/63

According to the survey results, satisfaction with the work of the main regional coordination mechanisms in place at that time[1] has been mostly low.

Table 2. Perceptions of the United Nations development system's flexibility, cost-effectiveness and ability to collaborate

	Regional Coordination Mechanism		Regional United Nations Development Group	
	2015	2017	2015	2017
Strongly agree	19	8	16	8
Agree	54	41	63	68
Disagree	18	26	17	16
Strongly disagree	4	6	2	4
Don't know	5	19	2	4

Source: A/73/63

1. The Regional Coordination Mechanism led by the UN regional economic commissions and the regional United Nations Development Group.

In the following May, resolution 72/279 of the UN General Assembly requested the SG to implement a new generation of UN Country Teams (UNCTs); determine appropriate criteria regarding their presence and composition; and conduct a review of the configuration, capacity, resource needs, role and development services of multi-country offices. Moreover, member states decided to "create a dedicated, independent, impartial, empowered and sustainable development-focused coordination function for the United Nations development system by separating the functions of the resident coordinator from those of the resident representative of the United Nations Development Program" (paragraph 8), thus introducing a major change on the UNDS work at the country level. The renewed Resident Coordinator system started on the first day of 2019.

The resolution also advanced on the regional and global levels. On the former, asking the SG to implement measures to optimize functions, enhance collaboration at the regional and subregional levels, and provide region-by-region options for reprofiling and restructuring the UN regional assets. On the latter, taking note of the SG proposal to gradually merge the New York-based Executive Boards of UN Funds and Programs and considering UNDS as-a-whole funding issues.

A new SG 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" was published in 2019. A UNDS regional assets mapping results was included in the report together with "five key areas of transformation to guide the longer-term reprofiling and restructuring of the regional assets of the United Nations", namely:

1. To create a unified mechanism for coordination in each region −a United Nations regional collaborative platform− to foster collaboration on sustainable development across entities operating at the regional level, including the establishment of flexible, time-bound "issues-based coalitions" gathering the UNDS, civil society, businesses, and academia, to respond to specific cross-border or sub-regional issues.

2. To establish strong knowledge management hubs in each region.

3. To implement a series of initiatives to enhance transparency and results-based management at the regional level, including an annual report on system-wide results of the United Nations at the regional level in support of the 2030 Agenda.

4. To launch a region-by-region change management process that will seek to consolidate existing capacities about data and statistics, as well as other relevant analytical functions that may be currently duplicative.

5. To work with entities of the United Nations development system to identify administrative services that could be provided more efficiently to regional offices through common back offices.

Cepei's support of the UNDS reform at the regional level

In its 2019 report on the implementation of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for the United Nations development system, the Secretary-General recognized the support provided by Cepei. Paragraph 105 states: "To complement existing analytical work and the mapping of regional functions and capacities that was carried out in 2017, we engaged in an innovative partnership with a group of experts from different regions specialized in sustainable development and familiar with the different regional contexts, under the overall coordination of Cepei, a think tank based in Colombia and with strong track record on the 2030 Agenda. Following visits to all regions and interviews with some 400 stakeholders, Cepei delivered rigorous analysis and recommendations that helped to inform the work of the internal review team".

The 2020 report on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system recalls the 2019 Secretary-General five proposals and analyses the progress made towards them in a twofold approach: on the one side, referencing the five UN regions' common elements and, on the other side, drawing next steps on a region-by-region basis.

In 2020, the General Assembly adopted a new quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system by resolution 75/233, which takes note of the provisions of resolutions 72/279 and 74/297 on the revamping of the regional assets of the UNDS, recognizes the contribution of the regional economic commissions and the UN regional teams, and requests the SG to continue regular follow-up, monitoring and reporting on the work of regional assets of the UNDS

"with a view to enhancing transparency, accountability, efficiency, coordination and results-based management at the regional level in order to ensure that the longer-term reprofiling and restructuring of the regional assets on a region-by-region basis." (Paragraph 78).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has reframed the UNDS priorities at every level and poses a litmus test to the system. It is too early to provide a conclusive answer. Still, as a result of the UNDS reform process, the revamped system seems better equipped to face the pandemic recovery than before: the Regional Coordination Platforms, Issue-Based Coalitions, and knowledge hubs are moving forward as concrete tools for comprehensive and collaborative action. That is good news, even though much work is still to be done to build a strong, effective, efficient, and integrated regional UNDS.

1.2. The regional UNDS key changes in a nutshell[2]

In this section, we present the major changes introduced by the reform in the UNDS governance structure and working methods at the regional level.

1.2.a. Avoiding institutional duplications and overlaps

Before the reform, two bodies led the UNDS in each of the five regions: the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG). Both had similar mandates and compositions. While the RCM's main role was to promote policy dialogue and coherence between UN system entities and to coordinate system-wide program implementation, the UNSDG focused on providing coherent technical support to resident coordinators. Both were attended by principals and senior officials of the agencies, funds, and programs (also referred to as "AFPs"), and regional economic commissions (RECs).

The RCMs were chaired by the executive secretaries of the RECs, which also served as their secretariat; on the other side, the UNSDGs were chaired by UNDP regional representatives and were supported by the Development Coordination Office (DCO). Both the RCM and the UNSDG, met twice a year. In addition, the UNSDG met twice a year at the global level seeking coherence between AFP efforts in different UN regions, chaired by the UN Deputy Secretary-General. RCMs and UNSDG largely operated independently from each other without a common agenda.

As a result of the reform, each region established its Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) to replace RCMs and UNSDGs. Its establishment prevented duplication of coordination mechanisms and facilitated collaboration and coherence across the system. The RCPs are chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General and co-chaired by the REC Executive Director and the UNDP Regional Director. RCPs meet in different configurations throughout the year, which includes at least one annual plenary session held back-to-back with the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development. DCO's regional offices serve as RCPs secretariats.

1.2.b. Establishing Issue-Based Coalitions

Working alongside the RCP, Issue-Based Coalitions (IBC) were created in all regions bringing together UN entities to foster policy and operational collaboration on regional, cross-border and transboundary issues.

Each IBC is led by different AFPs, as decided by the RCP, with particular experience and specific mandates in the theme selected for work. RCPs produce annual reports presented to the member states at each Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

Each region has defined its IBCs according to its priorities and specificities. The African region decided to slightly modify its denomination to Opportunities/Issue-based coalitions (OIBCs) to highlight that they refer to areas with plenty of opportunities, not only challenges. Two "issues" rose in every region as critical: climate change and women empowerment. Migration, people mobility, and resilience could be considered the third, even less cohesive, common issue.

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2. This sub-chapter is based on chapter 1 of the report "Why Member States should support the UN regional reform?" published by Cepei and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in May 2020.

Table 3. Issue-Based Coalitions established in each UN region (2022)

Common issues across regions				
Africa	**Arab countries**	**Asia-Pacific**	**Europe**	**Latin America & the Caribbean**
Fostering Climate Action and Resilience	Food Security, Climate Action and the Environment	Climate Change Mitigation and Air Pollution	Environment and Climate Change	Climate Change and Resilience
Harnessing Demographic Dividends through investments in Youth and Women's Empowerment (Health, Education, and Employment) for Sustainable Development	Gender Justice and Equality	Human Rights and Gender Equality	Gender Equality	Gender
	Adolescents and Young People		Youth and Adolescents	Youth
Forced Displacement and Migration	Migration	People, Mobility and Urbanization	Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience	Human Mobility
	Urbanization	Building Resilience		
Ensuring effective and efficient macroeconomic management and accelerated inclusive, economic transformation and diversification	Macro-economic Management and Social Protection			Equitable Growth
Peace, Security, and the Respect for Human Rights	Humanitarian-Development (and Peace) Nexus			Crime and Violence
	Quality Social Services		Social Protection	
Specific issues by region				
Leveraging new technologies and enabling digital transitions for inclusive growth and development		Inclusion and Empowerment	Sustainable Food Systems	Governance and Institutions
Strengthened Integrated data and statistical systems for sustainable development			Health	

Source: Cepei

1.2.c. Building Knowledge Hubs and sharing data

The regional knowledge and expertise of the UN is an asset well recognized by stakeholders; however, no uniform entry point to find knowledge products published by the UN regional entities existed before the reform.

Moreover, experts in different UN entities worked in silos. The reform addressed this issue by creating Knowledge Management Hubs (KMHs), a process that is still ongoing, and by reuniting the regional knowledge products into a single openly-accessible website. In the future, portals will serve as standard data-sharing tools of the UNDS, in which regional data compiled by AFPs and RECs are being harmonized.

1.2.d. Promoting results-based management and transparency

Programming and implementation efforts were substantial at the regional level but fragmented, resulting in insufficient collaboration between UN entities and some transparency and coordination problems regarding reporting on regional activities.

With the establishment of IBCs, the reform attempted to strengthen the coherence of UN regional planning processes and increase transparency. In the same line, the reform mandates RCPs to draw up system-unified regional annual reports that recently started to be presented to the Member States at each Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

Chapter 2. The United Nations Development System Reform at the Regional Level. Voices from Experts

Based on the outcomes of three global experts and practitioners' meetings on regional UNDS reform to discuss changes in the governance of regions, the impacts on stakeholder engagement and financing as well as four meetings focusing on the specific situations in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean, this chapter reports on the perception from the field on the current regional reform rollout.

2.1. Experts and practitioners' perceptions: obstacles in the UN regional reform rollout

2.1.a. Governance issues

The UN "institutional inertia" and the weak definition of "success"

Experts noticed that many structural challenges are deeply rooted in the long history of the UN and how it evolved over more than 75 years, pointing out structural long-term UN

organizational problems negatively impact the reform rollout.

The question of how viable and legitimate some of these UN regions are was raised. Using the example of the Europe region, it was noted that in regions encompassing highly diverse states, finding a sense of regional purpose and common interest may be challenging and a source of deteachment.

The UN system's complexity was also repeatedly suggested to be a barrier to coordination and transparency improvement, particularly due to the lack of a clearer division between operational and coordination tasks. It was suggested that while the strategies may be good, what is less clear is how to make them effective for everyday UN staff work.

"A behavioral and cultural change in the UN practices and methods of doing is needed", a participant said, as part of the structural changes required for smoothing the reform process.

As part of the discussion on the sluggishness of the UN body to implement reforms, the lack of a clear marker for success was highlighted as an obstacle to accelerating the change. As suggested by an expert, what will ultimately help member states is to have a simple structure for what success looks like.

On a similar page, the point that there needs to be a clear definition of reform priorities was also underlined. Stronger guidance is needed in this sense, and defining indicators of success may be useful. There was a broad consensus among experts on this topic.

Regional Collaborative Platforms and Issue-Based Coalitions: "the newcomers"

Uncertainty is the keyword surrounding experts' understanding of RCPs and IBCs. A participant pointed out that the mandates for the IBCs are not entirely clear. While some understood them as advisory bodies without any authority or policy role to play, others considered them mainly as new regional operative tools.

According to participants, global analysis of RCPs often focuses only on the national component, whereas IBCs likely focus primarily on regions specificities. It was also brought up that IBCs often possess information that the RCP may lack.

Finally, one participant suggested that we should not stop at considering the internal dynamics of the UN but should consider the perspective of member states, such as the UN agency, funds, programs, and resident coordinators.

Funding/Financing impacts on regional governance & collaboration

The concerns raised in this regard can most easily be categorized into two buckets, one having to do with unhealthy competition at the national and regional level, and the other having to do with how donors hurt or help the situation.

Beginning with the former: one raised problem was that UN bodies wish to collaborate with one another, but that they are so financially strained and must focus their energy on fundraising, which became a source of competition among them.

Besides, a UN staff participant asserted that 90% of their colleagues identified a lack of dedicated resources, time, and capacity as obstacles to the progress of IBC's. Essentially, they are seen by the individuals who should be leading them as too much additional work with little additional pay-off.

On a related note, donors' role was also discussed at length. UN staff members build projects and programs linked to requirements made by donors, so if they do not emphasize collaboration as a condition or incentive for receiving funding, this will be hard to change the described landscape. As a participant puts it, "Unless donors incentivize cooperation to receive funding, the competition for resources will continue".

2.1.b. Stakeholder engagement

Struggle in defining terms and its impacts on stakeholder engagement

One concern raised in the plenary is the lack of a clear aim for the reform regarding stakeholder engagement, an issue affecting the reform's efficiency. Moreover, the previously mentioned lack of clarity among UN Staff on priorities and the absence of a shared understanding of what "success" means for the reform represent an obstacle to promoting a more muscular stakeholder engagement because it raised the question of engaging stakeholders for what.

UN cryptic knowledge and stakeholders

Experts and practitioners noted that the knowledge produced by UN entities, even if it is vast and valuable, still faces a gap regarding its productive use by non-UN actors.

Several participants referred to the way in which the information is presented in "UN-ese", a language that is only clear to individuals who are already deeply embedded within the UN language and have extensive experience dealing with UN acronyms.

As a result, governments and non-government actors outside the UN are not taking full benefit from the information created by the UNDS, resulting in "knowledge waste". Thus, large quantities of high-quality knowledge can prove inefficient due to accessibility/affordability reasons.

It was unclear to experts and practitioners the degree to which this obstacle is being considered in the renewed UN Knowledge Hubs design.

Different perceptions on promoting stakeholders' engagement in Regional Collaborative Platforms and Issue-Based Coalitions

IBCs are not seen as a relevant vehicles for stakeholder engagement. It became clear relatively early in the discussion that participants in the group had varying levels of comfortability with the notion of further including external stakeholders within their already established bodies.

The meeting members expressed concerns about how the inclusion of stakeholders in the RCPs would impact internal dynamics and discussions. Instead, it was suggested that such insight is exactly what these IBCs are best able to produce, as they bring in specific experts based on the given topic at hand. Participants largely supported including UN stakeholders in IBCs structures and shared success stories of such instances that have already occurred in some regions.

2.1.c. Financing

Fragmented financing for development system

The current funding system was considered hardly accessible and broadly fragmented. Building a more cohesive and coherent financing system would be integrated into the UN reform scope. Building regional collaborative frameworks for planning and action would be a way to face financing fragmentation. There is a window of opportunity provided by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and Our Common Agenda report to approaching resources as means to solve concrete problems and identify the political problems leading to resource availability fragmentation.

Another point raised during the discussion was the difficulty for stakeholders to follow up on financing for development-related debates at different fora. Increasing positive outcomes requires discussions to promote coherence between financial debates at different institutions to answer common questions such as who is (and will be) financing what, how the financial flows are changing, how are we measuring financing for development, and who is making (leading) decisions about different financial-related topics.

Leveraging public and private funding to reach nationally determined outcomes

While public funding or public investment cannot be replaced, there is a need to leverage funding from international financial

institutions based on national ownership, which will drive resources to SDGs. At the same time leveraging private sector resources by identifying different funding and investment options by matching how their interests in environmental, social, and governance matters could be a catalyst for pushing forward on the SDGs, promoting co-responsibility among stakeholders.

Earmarked funding is not effective

The issue regarding multiple dependencies outlined by participants also hinders connections among different stakeholders. More than 90% of resources are already earmarked to fulfill specific projects/topics decided by donors.

Promoting a shift from earmarked to core funding would relocate resources to the real needs and countries' priorities. As a participant puts it: "A donor can earmark funds for ending child marriage through global projects. However, some regions may have a different challenge; one case could be a region where the major issue is teenage pregnancy which doesn't usually end or start with child marriage. Nonetheless, the disruption in a girl's life is huge and cascades to the child, which will continue to cascade when that child becomes youth".

Achieving the current fund allocation paradigm will require a broad commitment from many actors, including RCPs and IBCs, to promote new relationship models between financial resources availability and sustainable development requirements.

2.2. Experts and practitioners region-by-region approach

2.2.a. Africa

African regional experts and practitioners expressed general frustration with how the UN goes about sharing information with non-UN actors. It was pointed out that stakeholders can only effectively engage in those processes which they know are occurring. This lack of information also applies to the UNDS reform rollout in Africa.

Although participants recognized efforts to address how the UN shares its information with non-state actors, the point was made that CSOs would be important sources of information sharing in and of themselves due to their work on the ground, engaging with and learning from those in the community.

Experts and practitioners indicated that despite having attended the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development just a few weeks before the expert's meeting, they heard no mention of these regional reform efforts and that, despite being six years into the SDG's, questions about aligning 2030 SDGs with 2063 SDGs of the African Union were still being asked.

Similarly, civil society organizations raised the concern that they are merely becoming "rubber stamps for inclusion and the latest on being consulted." This demonstrates a serious flaw in how the UNDS operates at the regional level. Valuable knowledge is potentially not being acted on as a result of this dynamic.

To give an idea of what this looks like in practice, it was mentioned that African IBCs were launched without requesting non-UN actors' inputs. Such unilateral decision-making by the UNDS raises serious concerns about how efficient such "coalitions" can be.

This lack of inclusion, coupled with the feeling that CSOs "are not yet an equal partner" in the way that the private sector and government appear to be, resulted in one expert asserting that "the space for civil society is not only shrinking, but it has already shrunk".

It was pointed out that there are three groups routinely neglected in the "Leave no one Behind" framework, and these are (i) civil society organizations, (ii) women, and (iii) the elderly. If the UNDS hopes for efficient and thorough data and information sharing, it should focus on building partnerships that include these otherwise forgotten groups.

On data-related issues, participants highlighted that country capacity must be considered when discussing knowledge-sharing platforms, as reliable access to technology varies and may restrict countries' ability to engage.

2.2.b. Asia-Pacific

Experts and practitioners from this region brought up, again and again, the problematic silo approach that the UNDS bodies' mandates reflect. This should be among the top of the priority list for the UN regional reform to address.

Another concern consistently raised was that of "experts" engagement in IBCs. Many practitioners from civil society organizations emphasized that by restricting the coalition to "experts," there is a possibility that groups are being marginalized, which does not contribute to developing a sense of trust in the UN reform. Moreover, participants suggested

that civil society organizations offer the UN legitimacy and a reality check on the ground and that they should be welcomed by the UN instead of treated as actors that are grateful for a seat at the table.

Nevertheless, it was recognized that many of the CSOs working in the region are primarily funded by Western actors, and cross coordination with them may become a hindrance if perceived as influenced.

The issue of the "UN language" was also flagged as an obstacle for multistakeholder meaningful engagement: "the number of acronyms and initiatives make the language inaccessible to those who do not already operate within the UN system, making it appear intimidating and unapproachable to engage with", a participant said.

The topic of regional knowledge platforms was also touched on, with participants highlighting the importance of improving interoperability between national, regional, and global platforms. There was a proposal for the platforms to act as a guide to best practices and provide access to the data.

Participants suggested that the UN should find a way to incorporate the work and knowledge of regional intergovernmental organizations, as they often have more power, financing, and influence in the region. ADB and ASEAN were two such organizations mentioned by name.

Accountability was another subtheme that received much attention. One participant made the point that so few consequences exist for what takes place at the regional level that it is somewhat of a "sandbox" and that it is important to get out of this.

Engaging youth was underlined as critical. A speaker pointed to a discrepancy around

what the youth in the region care about during their last years of high school and first years of university and where they end up occupationally. The participants attributed this disengagement to three things: (1) the amount of jargon and information that comes with engaging with any UN entities; (2) the financial component since many UN internships are unpaid; and (3) restricting youth participation in youth initiatives. Instead of letting youth engage in wider initiatives themselves, playing not only a consultative role.

2.2.c. ECE region

Experts and practitioners from the ECE region main concern about the UNDS regional reform was the lack of information. Asked if the organizations in the meeting felt that they had the information they needed about the reform, the response from nearly all who chose to answer this question was a resounding no.

The only exception came from a CSO representative based in Belgium, who pointed out that this reform is a primary concern of their organization, making clear that the information exists but is hard to find and to be aware of the reform rollout requires stakeholders to consider that issue as a priority in their own agendas.

Partnering with the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism to ensure proper communication and information sharing was suggested as a potential solution, at least by civil society.

Regarding IBCs establishment and themes selection, a practitioner suggested that the Issue-Based Coalitions possess an "inner circle dynamic", which helps explain why so many CSOs appear to be in the dark on the reform, while another participant noted the need for increased discussion and engagement with

the UN Secretariat, as well as a need to make working with the Secretariat mutually beneficial for stakeholders.

A new element was introduced in the debate by an expert indicating the need to make the information about the IBCs, and on the reform as-a-whole, relevant to those populations which they are meant to be influenced: "people use information if they care about it", so the job of the UN regional reform is to make the people on the ground care.

A participant noted that it makes no sense to apply a one size fits all approach to a region as diverse as this one. This sentiment was echoed by a participant who suggested looking at each country in the region and asking whether an IBC is needed on a case-by-case basis. Another suggestion was that the reform should be viewed through a different lens in the case of Europe, where the regional level could "foster policy conversations among member states, provide information and play the role of a critical friend." It was also pointed out that linking the UNDS regional reform process with entities such as the HLPF and the SDGs implementation is an important way of opening doors to a more coherent dialogue among stakeholders.

On a similar line, participants noted that IBCs were still an abstract entity for most of them and didn't mean anything to the individuals on the ground. On a worrisome intervention, a participant suggested that the SDGs themselves didn't matter to populations in the region, as they did not feel a connection to them. As a result, the region shows sub-optimal levels of coherence between community members and UN initiatives, including the UNDS regional reform.

In response to a question on funding availability, it was interesting to see

individuals point to a larger problem of lack of function. When there are no clear outputs, the energy in the system itself is lacking. As one participant concisely summed up: "The problem is not funding, it's the function".

2.2.d. Latin America and the Caribbean

One concern raised in the meeting was the lack of information on how the reform process is evolving in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), including the insufficient availability of current regional assets.

A practitioner pointed out that having a platform for an informed multistakeholder dialogue on the reform is necessary so that the process can be discussed and understood by the different sectors in real-time. At this moment, every interested actor appears to partially understand the reform goals and implementation process, making it difficult to find a common basis for discussion and creating different expectations regarding the reform outputs.

A representative from academia suggested that academic outputs and research could fuel debates and decision-making on the UNDS reform in LAC, but there is no information on how to channel it into the UN system.

Participants' low awareness levels of the unfolding reform among stakeholders is the third issue. Implementing multistakeholder' awareness-raising actions/strategies seem to be a priority to make the reform process more open and accountable. There was a broad consensus among participants on the need to include an official session on "UNDS reform in LAC progress" in the LAC Regional Sustainable Development Forum program.

On a different page, it was noted that the LAC countries were among the hardest hit by the pandemic. It is unclear from different participants how the UN reform process would help link Build Back Better and the Decade of Action while leaving no one behind. Some participants wondered about the absence of an IBC focusing on COVID-19 recovery in the region. While they understand that it is a cross-cutting issue, they nonetheless expressed concern about the lack of visibility of any COVID-19-recovery process in the region.

Very close to this, participants highlighted that IBCs' themes were defined without participation from non-UN stakeholders, resulting in a UNDS regional reform that has become "a UN private issue, hardly accountable and transparent," in the words of an expert. This absence of stakeholder's participation in defining IBCs issues was linked with the shrunk of civil society space in some LAC countries "and now at the UN as well. If the reform does not work to address this issue, it will lose support from civil society," a participant said.

A call was made to adapt the cryptic language in use at the UN, including the overuse of acronyms, when the UN system meets external actors.

2.3. Experts and practitioners' suggestions for a strong reform rollout

Participants in the consultation meetings were asked to identify not only challenges but also to suggest actions helping to make the UNDS regional reform stronger. Among many proposals, the following were the most repeatedly mentioned in the seven dialogues.

2.3.a. Make the regional reform more meaningful at the national level

Include a common chapter supplied by the regional level in the Common Country Assessments, focused on transboundary issues with high impact at the national level and providing regional data and good practices taking place in the region regarding nationally prioritized issues.

The need for coherence between national and regional engagement was highlighted. To achieve this, a multi-sectoral approach was recommended, including the UN, governments, and stakeholders. Critically, however, it was emphasized that the UN should intentionally seek such an approach and that the process would be institutionalized, avoiding ad hoc solutions. An example was given of UN Women operating in the region and the success they've had engaging all actors in their efforts.

The importance of clearly defining the terms "stakeholder" and "partnership" at the regional level was emphasized. That definition, was said, should be the result of participative work and cannot be produced only by the UN staff, and without it will be difficult to promote "stakeholder's partnerships" for obvious reasons.

The idea of peer pressure as a motivating factor was brought into the debate. It is based on the assumption that if countries within a region compete with one another, looking over their shoulder to see the status of their neighbors in reaching the SDGs, it will create a natural motivator for success. A greater sense of regional identity, followed by a greater sense of regional competition was, therefore, one of the solutions proposed.

Promotions for UN staff members could be based on a declared commitment to the SDGs and collaboration. By making the sustainable development goals the only game in town and demonstrating a clear relationship between career advancement and collaboration/ cooperation, promotions would only go to those who are sincerely motivated by collective purpose.

2.3.b. Improving regional reform transparency and accountability

UN reform awareness-raising actions/ strategies on the UNDS regional reform, its goals, and institutional changes would be implemented. National CSOs networks and platforms could contribute to that end.

Existing channels of dialogue between the UN system and the regional stakeholders, such as the regional sustainable development forums, could be more effectively employed to share information and progress on the UN Reform.

Moreover, increasing investment in social mobilization would be worthwhile, as funds and efforts are likely to go much further at minimal costs when the community and CSOs are involved. Connected to this was the insistence that there is a "need to trust the community's ability to identify change, assess gaps, and mobilize resources". In this same way, it was recommended that the UN would localize the reform by showing people how it impacts them and why it matters. The work done by the UN working with CSOs in Kenya was suggested as a model to be followed.

It was pointed out that the UN should find a more holistic way of bringing young people to the table, as they also have a big stake in sustainability.

A repeated and strong call to open IBCs for stakeholder participation was made in every meeting, together with a request to publish

the information and results of each IBC meeting (in a dedicated space in the regional knowledge platforms?). Besides, it was requested that the cryptic language in use at the UN be adapted when the UNDS regional system meets external actors.

Regarding policy impact measurement, it was suggested that the reform would include time-bound targets so that the desired change occurs according to practical deadlines. Emphasis was placed on an "ecosystem approach", one which would identify synergies and ultimately enhance actors' capacities.

2.3.c. Reducing data shortages

Regarding the regional knowledge platforms, participants suggested increasing harmony between regional hubs and national and global platforms. The importance of better interoperability was also brought up so that the information may be more easily accessible. There was a proposal for the knowledge platforms to act as a guide to best practices and provide access to the data.

It was suggested that the UN would find a way to incorporate into the regional knowledge platforms information and data generated by regional intergovernmental organizations, civil society, and the private sector while working to engage the entire data users and providers ecosystem in a shared effort to make data available.

2.3.d. Closing funding gaps

Participants noted that pooled funding could contribute to overcoming the internal struggle for funds both at the national and the regional levels. To include UN interinstitutional collaboration as an element supporting funding requests would act as an incentive for UN bodies to work together. Another

participant echoed the potential feasibility of such a plan, agreeing that a regional SDG fund may be the best way of aligning funding with incentivization for cooperation.

A novel idea requiring further consideration is to establish a regional carbon management scorecard as a tool for accountability and, when successful, incentivization as well. Extra funding availability would depend on a region obtaining a particular score on its carbon management.

2.3.e. Proposals based on regional specificities

It was noted that shifting from regional to subregional focus would be helpful in when countries in the same UN region have very little in common with one another. It was also noted that the subregions in a region tend to converge with one another anyway, that they are naturally drawn to each other, "and that this is where the magic happens in regard to efficiency and cooperation". In this sense, it was suggested that building governmental action-oriented collaborative transboundary platforms may help to make the reform process more accountable.

It was mentioned that establishing IBCs on COVID-19 recovery or creating a participatory mechanism to ensure that COVID-19 recovery will be at the heart of every IBC work would open a door for regional recovery collaborative efforts linked to each region's specific situation and needs.

Conclusions

The work conducted by Cepei in partnership with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and with the support of Action for Sustainable Development and Together 2030 provides a stocktaking of experts and practitioners working at the five UN regions' perspectives on the UNDS regional level reform obstacles, but also provides informed ideas on future possible steps to be taken to reinforce the process and its current path.

The seven dialogues have shown that the UNDS regional reform is still not very well known even by actors engaged in the UN work. Moreover, even UN Staff members recognized a lack of information, clarity, and incentives inside the UN to engage in the unfolding change process deeply.

As was seen, some major concerns were shared among experts and practitioners working in the five regions regarding the new institutions (IBCs and RCPs) responsibilities and expected outcomes. There is a widespread sense among stakeholders of being excluded from the new bodies and the UNDS reform process. This perception affects non-UN actors' engagement in the process, causing low-awareness levels and excluding from the UNDS regional reforms useful information and experiences.

It is also clear how the absence of a shared narrative on the reform affects the entire process. Moreover, when the UN tries to communicate the efforts the system is carrying out to be better prepared to support countries' efforts toward sustainable development, the language is obscure to the public. Thou, the risk of ending with a process only understandable by elites is high.

A clear demand to make the process much more inclusive, accountable, and transparent rose from every sector. That is good news: despite the difficulties, non-UN actors are interested in understanding and contributing to the reform rollout.

Having conducted the above-presented dialogues, it is clear to us that one key issue is jeopardizing the entire reform process: lack of clarity on its goals is creating expectations above the UNDS regional reform reach. It seems that even experts and practitioners expect the ongoing process will solve long-lasting UN structural problems such as AFPs overlapping mandates, internal competition, difficulties in working with external partners, and the system financing gaps. The UNDS reform could be seen as a step in that direction, but it will not be a solution for every problem the UN faces. Excessively high expectations may result in early disappointments with the ongoing regional reform.

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