Governing The Ungovernable

The First 1000 Days: A Strategic Agenda for the (Next) UN Secretary-General

In partnership with: IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability

To: The Incoming United Nations Secretary-General
From: Cepei
Re: Where Power Actually Resides and How to Shift It
Date: March, 2026

Executive Summary

The Opportunity: You inherit the most powerful position in multilateralism at one of its weakest moments – and yet also its greatest opportunities. The convergence of UN80, the Pact for the Future, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4) and the approaching post-2030 transition creates a genuine opening for fundamental reform. But the UN is no longer the only game in town. Regional development banks mobilize billions without Security Council vetoes. BRICS builds a parallel architecture. G20 and G7 decide on policies. When the UN deliberates, others make the decisions.

The Core Problem: The UN development system faces a legitimacy crisis rooted in a triple disconnect. Those who formally govern (Executive Boards, ECOSOC, and the General Assembly) control only 13% of funding – core funding. Those who provide resources (ten donors, who account for three-quarters of all contributions), operate outside formal channels through earmarking. Those most affected by decisions (programme countries, which host 86% of operations) have the least voice at the global level.

Your Unique Leverage: You have four forms of power: a) symbolic (voice of the international community), b) managerial (through appointments and internal control), c) network (convening and brokering), and, maybe most importantly, the power of the Charter (constitutional authority under Articles 99-100 to set agendas independently). Previous Secretaries-General either underestimated this power or overreached beyond it. Your effectiveness depends on using each strategically.

Five Strategic Priorities to Change the Governance of the UN Development System: (1) Make power visible through transparency. (2) Realign money and governance. (3) Democratize decision-making. (4) Strengthen coordination. (5) Embed inclusion.

The Bottom Line: The UN is ungovernable by design. Your job is to make it governable by choice. That requires making invisible power visible, realigning incentives so coordination beats fragmentation, and building coalitions that sustain beyond your tenure. Reform will succeed only if those with power, including you, pursue substantive change backed by concrete accountability mechanisms. This brief explains how.

The Window Is Now

You inherit the most powerful position in multilateralism at one of its weakest moments, yet also at one of its greatest opportunities. The convergence of UN80, the Pact for the Future, and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4) and the approaching post-2030 transition creates a genuine opening for fundamental reform. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, questions about the UN's purpose, legitimacy, and governance structure are on the negotiating table. Major donors question value for money. Emerging economies demand a voice proportional to their economic weight. Programme countries assert ownership over development agendas. Civil society pushes back against shrinking participation space. But here's what makes this moment different: the UN is no longer the only game in town. Regional development banks mobilize billions without Security Council vetoes. The BRICS coalition builds a parallel financial architecture. The G7 and G20 set development priorities that UN forums then ratify. When the UN deliberates, others make the decisions.

Previous Secretaries-General have faced similar moments and let them slip. Your choices in the first 1000 days will determine whether the UN development system remains ungovernable by design or becomes governable by choice.

This brief explains where power actually resides versus where organizational charts say it should, and what you can do about it. Not what you should be able to do in an ideal world, but what you can do given constitutional constraints, political realities, and the asymmetric leverage available to a Secretary-General who understands the difference between managerial authority and network power.

Our argument is based on evidence, including over 150 stakeholder surveys, 80 interviews with UN officials, member state representatives, and civil society leaders, as well as an analysis of funding flows, voting patterns, and institutional dynamics. The diagnosis is precise. The pathways are feasible. What remains is political will – starting with yours.

I. The Core Challenge: A Triple Disconnect

The UN development system faces a legitimacy crisis rooted not in bureaucratic inefficiency or outdated mandates, but in a fundamental structural flaw: a triple disconnect between formal authority, financial resources, and the populations affected.

Those Who Govern Lack Authority Over Resources

The Executive Boards of the UN funds and programmes are responsible for providing strategic oversight. In practice, they control 10-20% of total funding. The remaining 80-90% flows through earmarked channels negotiated bilaterally between donors and agency management, sitting entirely outside board oversight. Survey respondents named financial leverage as the single strongest driver of influence, while Executive Boards rated far lower in actual impact. As one diplomat characterized executive board proceedings: they have "devolved into monologues focused on compliance, not dialogues" about strategy.

ECOSOC has evolved into what one interviewee called "ECHOSOC" – deliberations echo endlessly without producing actionable outcomes. It lacks budget authority and is unable to enforce compliance. When boards of UN funds and programmes approve strategic plans that diverge from ECOSOC guidance, and when donors earmark 85% or more of funding for their own priorities, ECOSOC's coordinating role becomes aspirational theatre.

The General Assembly's Second Committee produces 40-50 resolutions annually. Most pass by consensus. The Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review provides policy direction to a system whose funding and governance operate largely independently of that direction.

Those Who Fund Govern Informally

Ten donors provide approximately three-quarters of all voluntary contributions. This concentration translates into disproportionate influence through mechanisms invisible to most stakeholders: donor coordination meetings that align positions before formal votes, penholder privileges that allow drafters to frame issues, and the Fifth Committee's control over Secretariat budgets, which often micromanage details instead of providing strategic overall guidance.

Most consequentially, earmarking has become the primary governance mechanism. Rather than providing core funding subject to board oversight, donors specify exactly where money goes, bypassing formal multilateral decision-making entirely. The Funding Compact committed donors to increase core/pooled funding to 30%. Five years later, the figure stands at 13%. Voluntary pledges without enforcement mechanisms change nothing.

Those Most Affected Have the Least Voice

Survey respondents rated the Global North as having high influence at 91% versus 27% for the Global South. Yet programme countries host 86% of UN development system operations. This creates systematic disadvantages: smaller missions are spread thin across overlapping processes, countries dependent on development financing face pressure not to challenge donor preferences, and the G77 and China struggles with collective action, given its limited institutional infrastructure.

The civil society space is shrinking, despite over 6,500 organizations holding ECOSOC consultative status. The 2024 Summit of the Future negotiations excluded civil society organizations even from informal sessions – an explicit rollback.

Why This Matters: The Legitimacy Crisis

This triple disconnect creates a legitimacy crisis that threatens the UN's long-term viability. A 2025 Rockefeller Foundation survey found that while 55% of people globally support international cooperation, this support is conditional on the delivery of improved lives and benefits, without coming at their expense. When the UN appears to serve donor visibility imperatives rather than programme country priorities, when decisions are made in closed rooms accessible only to well-resourced actors, legitimacy erodes even when programmes deliver technical results.

Efficiency reforms alone cannot solve legitimacy problems rooted in power asymmetries. You can streamline mandates, cut costs, digitize processes – and still preside over a system that programme countries view as donor-controlled, that civil society sees as increasingly closed, and that publics worldwide perceive as unable to address challenges that matter most to their lives.

II. Your Unique Leverage: Four Forms of Power

Previous Secretaries-General have either underestimated or misunderstood their power. Some tried to use managerial authority they didn't possess and faced political backlash. Others defaulted to symbolic leadership without leveraging the institutional, network and Charter power actually available to them.

You have four distinct forms of power. Your effectiveness and impact? Depends on using each strategically:

1. Symbolic Power: You Are the Voice

You are the only person who speaks for "the UN" as a whole – not for the Secretariat or one agency, but for the multilateral ideal itself. This symbolic authority becomes strategic when you use it to name what others won't acknowledge: that ten donors control three-quarters of the funding, that earmarking has made boards largely irrelevant, that the civil society space is shrinking, and that those most affected have the least voice.

When you publish your first annual report explicitly naming which countries meet Funding Compact commitments and which don't, you transform voluntary pledges into reputational stakes. When you commission a public power audit that documents funding flows, voting patterns, and attendance at informal consultations, you shift incentives by making the invisible visible. Transparency is your most potent weapon – it costs nothing, requires no approval from member states, and changes everything.

2. Managerial Power: What You Actually Control

Your managerial authority is narrower than organizational charts suggest, but within that scope, it is decisive. You directly control appointments (Resident Coordinators, Deputy Secretary-General, Under-Secretaries-General), internal coordination through UNSDG and CEB, transparency measures through Secretariat directives, and mandate review within EOSG structures.

When U Thant became Secretary-General in 1961 – the first from a non-European country – he deliberately constructed a non-Western advisory circle from the Non-Aligned Movement. This wasn't representation for its own sake; it was a strategic assertion of neutrality and global legitimacy. Your appointment choices will either reinforce existing power concentrations or demonstrate commitment to genuine diversity. And you're backed by a General Assembly resolution 46/232, which states that *"as a general rule, no national of a Member State should succeed a national of that State in a senior post and there should be no monopoly on senior posts by nationals of any State or group of States."*

The key is to focus managerial power where you actually have authority, rather than wasting political capital on battles you'll lose. You cannot compel specialized agencies, force core funding increases, or override the dynamics of the Security Council. But within Secretariat operations, appointments, transparency, and coordination mechanisms, your authority is real – use it.

3. Network Power: The Underutilized Lever

This is where previous Secretaries-General have most consistently underperformed. Network power is the ability to convene, broker, legitimize, and catalyse. You alone can convene across the entire system. You can broker North-South coalitions by identifying bridge-building states that consistently vote across traditional blocs. You can legitimize emerging power centres by recognizing the infrastructure needs of the G77 and China and establishing standards for civil society engagement.

When the UN Tax Convention negotiations shifted from the OECD to the UN – a significant Southern victory – it occurred because persistent advocacy intersected with secretariat support at a politically opportune moment. Your role isn't to impose solutions; it's to create conditions where actors with less formal power can build coalitions, frame alternatives, and win political fights.

4. Charter Power: Your Constitutional Authority

This fourth dimension is often overlooked but potentially transformative. Charter power derives from your constitutional status as one of the UN's principal organs, on par with the General Assembly and Security Council. Article 99 grants you authority to bring matters to the Security Council's attention[1]– an independent right to set the agenda that no other international civil servant possesses. Article 100 establishes your independence from member state instruction.

[1] *While such action lies formally beyond the development mandate, its practical consequences for development outcomes — conflict prevention, humanitarian access, and institutional credibility — are effectively the same.*

Only 4 Secretaries-General have exploited the option of article 99 – Trygve Lie[2] during the Korean War (1950), U Thant's invocation of Article 99 during the Congo crisis, Hammarskjöld's assertion of an independent political role and Guterres during the Gaza war – while others have downplayed it, treating the office as subordinate rather than coordinate with member state bodies. Your willingness to invoke Charter authority signals whether you see the role as an administrative manager or an independent political actor.

The strategic insight: Previous SGs underused network and Charter power while overestimating managerial reach. Your effectiveness depends on inverting that ratio – focus heavily on convening, brokering, legitimizing, and asserting constitutional independence, while using managerial authority only where you clearly possess it.

III. Five Strategic Priorities For Your First 1000 Days

Reform succeeds when it changes the system's operating logic, not just its efficiency. These five priorities work as a strategic sequence: transparency enables accountability, accountability enables equity, equity enables coordination, and coordination enables inclusion.

Priority 1: Make Power Visible

The Problem

Power flows through invisible channels. Donor coordination meetings are convened regularly, but outsiders are unaware of who attends or what is discussed. Earmarked funding accounts for most of the resources; however, the data remains scattered and unorganized. Informal consultations determine a large percentage of negotiated language, but only well-resourced missions track multiple venues. Appointments follow informal understandings, but the criteria and shortlists remain private.

[2] *Trygve Lie's actions during the Korean War (1950) are sometimes described as an early use of Article 99. However, Lie did not explicitly invoke the provision, nor did he frame his intervention as an exercise of independent Charter authority. His actions are therefore best understood as a de facto or proto–Article 99 use, undertaken before the constitutional role of the Secretary-General had been clearly articulated. By contrast, subsequent invocations by Hammarskjöld, U Thant, and Guterres were explicit, deliberate, and legally self-conscious assertions of the Secretary-General's Charter-based political authority.*

What You Can Do

Your Actions | Immediate (First 100 Days):	Your Actions | Near-Term (Year 1):
Launch the Power Audit: a dynamic, publicly accessible dashboard documenting a) Funding flows (who gives how much, core vs. earmarked, by agency and by donor); b) appointment patterns (nationality, gender, and career background of D1+ staff across the system); c) voting patterns (General Assembly and board-level alignments and divergences). This requires no member state approval – it's simply publishing data the Secretariat already collects. The dashboard should be updated quarterly and include interactive filters that allow any stakeholder to explore patterns. When a journalist can generate a graphic showing that ten donors provide 70% of the funding, when a Southern diplomat can document that WEOG countries hold 80% of the pen-holder positions, and when civil society can track which countries consistently block participation reforms, the entire political dynamic shifts. Publish your **first annual report on Funding Compact compliance**, explicitly naming which countries increased core funding, which maintained earmarking levels, and which reduced flexibility. The Funding Compact didn't work because it relied on voluntary pledges without transparency and enforcement mechanisms. Make compliance public, and donor governments face domestic political pressure – from their own parliaments, civil society, and media – to either deliver on commitments or explain why not. Issue a **directive on informal consultations:** all meetings where draft text is negotiated must offer virtual participation to any interested member state. This doesn't require physical expansion of negotiating rooms; it requires Zoom links and advance notice. Smaller missions that cannot staff every informal suddenly gain access, and the capacity gap between well-resourced and under-resourced delegations narrows.	Establish **quarterly transparency reports on earmarked funding:** within 30 days of accepting any contribution exceeding $5 million, the receiving entity must publicly disclose the donor, amount, purpose, duration, and any conditionalities. Currently, this information is often presented piecemeal in annual reports, long after decisions have been made. Real-time disclosure enables boards, civil society, and other stakeholders to observe patterns as they emerge. Create an "**Inclusion Scorecard**" to track civil society participation across major UN processes, including advance notice provided, allocated speaking time, access to informal meetings, and feedback mechanisms. Score each forum (executive boards, ECOSOC segments, General Assembly committees) and publish rankings. When spaces that claim to value inclusion score poorly, reputational pressure creates incentives to improve their performance. Institutionalize "**State of UNDS Governance**" as an annual address to ECOSOC – not about programmatic results or SDG progress, but specifically about power dynamics. This becomes the venue where you publicly assess whether the triple disconnect is narrowing or widening, which reforms are working, which actors are leading or lagging, and what the evidence shows about coordination effectiveness.

Why This Works

Transparency costs nothing, requires no approval from member states, and shifts incentives by making behaviour more visible. When the public in donor countries sees how their governments actually use multilateral channels, domestic political pressure becomes a catalyst for reform. When under-resourced delegations access the same information as major donors, negotiating dynamics shift.

Priority 2: Realign Money and Governance

The Problem

Executive Boards govern what they don't fund; donors fund what they don't govern. This misalignment emerged from deliberate political choices that shifted governance from "differentiated responsibility" (where funding and voice aligned) to "equitable geographical representation" (where formal seats are distributed regionally regardless of contribution).

What You Can Do

Your Actions | Immediate:	**Your Actions | Near-Term:**
Issue a Secretary-General–led system-wide policy instruction to all agency heads: No entity should accept earmarked contributions exceeding 65% of its total funding without explicit consultation with the executive board. This doesn't ban earmarking – politically impossible – but it makes high earmarking levels a board-level discussion rather than a management discretion. When boards formally deliberate on whether to accept funding that fragments programming, governance becomes substantive. Establish a **Funding Compact enforcement mechanism:** Link quality of funding to governance access. Countries that consistently meet Funding Compact commitments (by increasing core/pooled funding toward the 30% target) gain advantages in other venues – including preferential access to penholder positions, priority speaking slots in ECOSOC, and recognition in SG reports. Countries that maintain or increase earmarking levels should face proportional consequences – not exclusion, but reduced influence in drafting and coordination roles. Make funding quality a reputational issue with tangible governance implications. Commission an independent review on "**The Real Cost of Earmarking**" to document transaction costs (multiple proposals, duplicated reporting, fragmented programming), coordination failures (entities pursuing donor priorities rather than country-led strategies), and accountability gaps (resources flowing outside board oversight). Quantify what the current funding architecture actually costs in efficiency, coherence, and effectiveness. When you present evidence that earmarking wastes 20-30% of total resources on transaction costs alone, the business case for funding reform becomes unanswerable.	Negotiate a **pilot program with ECOSOC:** Grant the Council budget authority over 10-15% of pooled funds (funds that multiple donors contribute to without strict earmarking). Start small but establish the principle that the UN's formal coordinating body should have direct resource leverage, not just advisory authority. If the pilot demonstrates better coordination and reduced transaction costs, it becomes the template for broader reform. Establish personal **diplomatic engagement with the top 5 donors:** Conduct private negotiations to seek a voluntary commitment from each donor to shift 5% of their earmarked funding to core funding annually over five years. This doesn't require public announcement or formal pledges – just operational changes that compound over time. Present this as serving donor interests: core funding increases their influence in boards (where they have a formal voice) rather than fragmenting it across hundreds of bilateral agreements (where they compete with each other). Create a "**Funding Diversity Index**" publicly ranking entities by donor concentration. An entity that receives 80% of its funding from three donors is structurally vulnerable to political pressure; one that receives funding from 20 or more sources has genuine multilateral governance. Publish rankings and set targets: by 2030, no central entity should have more than XX% of financing from any single donor or more than XX% from the top three. When entities compete for reputational standing based on funding diversity, incentives shift. Commission a genuinely **independent cost-benefit analysis of UNDS interventions** compared to alternative delivery mechanisms (bilateral aid, foundations, private sector, South-South cooperation), examining both financial efficiency and distinctive value-added (normative influence, convening power, technical expertise, legitimacy). Use findings to define strategic focus areas where the UN's comparative advantage justifies operational presence.

Why This Works

Everything else – democratizing decision-making, strengthening coordination, embedding inclusion – depends on money aligning with governance. You're not trying to achieve assessed funding (politically impossible) or ban earmarking (practically unworkable). You're trying to shift the ratio from 13% to 25-30% over five years – enough that boards govern meaningful resources and coordination has real financial leverage.

Priority 3: Democratize Decision-Making

The Problem

Real decisions happen in closed rooms where only well-resourced actors have consistent access. Informal consultations account for 80% of the negotiating text, but under-resourced missions often struggle to staff multiple venues. Pen-holder positions concentrate among Western countries. Donor coordination meetings happen weekly, while the G77 and China lacks equivalent infrastructure. The capacity gap is not about competence; it is about resources.

What You Can Do

Your Actions | Immediate:	**Your Actions | Near-Term:**
Issue a **circular to all UN negotiating venues:** 50% of penholder positions on development resolutions must rotate to countries from the Global South. This isn't about geographical balance for its own sake – it's about ensuring that those drafting text include actors from countries where 86% of UN operations occur. When programme countries hold the pen, different issues get prioritized, different language gets proposed, and different stakeholders get consulted. Establish **a Technical Drafting Support Unit** within DESA or EOSG, providing resources to countries new to pen-holding. Drafting requires legal expertise, institutional knowledge, and time – resources smaller missions often lack. Rather than penalizing countries for limited capacity, provide the support that enables them to participate effectively. When a Pacific Island delegation holds a pen-holder position on climate finance, pair them with technical experts who can translate political vision into negotiating text.	Institutionalize **co-pen-holder arrangements** as standard practice: pair Northern and Southern countries on all major development resolutions. This builds capacity (Southern diplomats learn drafting), ensures diverse perspectives shape text from the beginning rather than through amendments, and creates political incentives for cross-bloc negotiation. The Pact for the Future used co-facilitation effectively – scale that model. Provide **G77 and China infrastructure support:** Standing secretariat, coordination platform, technical staff – following the G24 model at the IMF. The G77 and China represents 134 member states, but volunteer efforts from rotating coordinators largely drive its operations. When major negotiations span 12-18 months, volunteer coordination is inadequate against the resourced, permanent delegations of major donors. **Launch a "Bridge-Builder States Initiative"** to identify and empower middle powers that consistently vote across traditional blocs and play mediating roles. Your network power means convening these actors, providing platforms for quiet diplomacy, and legitimizing their efforts publicly. When bridge-builders succeed in forging compromise, credit them explicitly in SG reports and statements, creating incentives for others to play similar roles.

Why This Works

Procedural equity is more achievable than resource equity; however, procedural changes can shift power dynamics over time. The empirical evidence is clear: G77 and China voting cohesion on development issues is high despite the group's diversity, and when given resources and space, Southern coalitions achieve significant victories (UN Tax Convention, Loss and Damage fund). Your job is to make procedural participation systematically easier.

Priority 4: Strengthen Coordination with Teeth

The Problem

The UN Sustainable Development Group coordinates but cannot compel. The Deputy Secretary-General chairs UNSDG but lacks budget leverage. Resident Coordinators convene but cannot resolve inter-agency disputes with authority. Survey data is devastating: only 3% of respondents identified UNSDG as influential. This isn't about UNSDG's efforts – it's about structural constraints. Voluntary coordination is effective when interests align and ineffective when they don't.

What You Can Do

Your Actions | Immediate:	**Your Actions | Near-Term:**
Empower the Deputy Secretary-General with budget control over pooled coordination funds (start with $50-100 million annually) and explicit authority to mediate inter-agency disputes. When entities disagree about programming at the country level, the DSG should have the power to convene, adjudicate, and allocate resources accordingly – coordination shifts from consensual cooperation to accountable governance when backed by financial leverage. **Clarify RC authority** through explicit delegation: Resident Coordinators can resolve programming conflicts, approve joint initiatives, and determine when entity-level programming conflicts with system-wide priorities. Currently, RCs convene; however, when UNDP, UNICEF, and WHO pursue different approaches, the influence of Resident Coordinators depends on personal relationships rather than institutional authority. Give RCs power proportional to their responsibility. **Launch mandate review pilot** within EOSG structures – special envoys, personal representatives, thematic advocates – document which mandates duplicate existing agency work, which remain relevant, which should sunset. Starting here (where you have direct authority) builds methodology and credibility before attempting a broader system-wide review. When you can demonstrate successful mandate rationalization within Secretariat operations, political credibility grows for larger reforms.	Propose a **"UN Development Charter"**: a voluntary compact where entities commit to system-wide priorities in exchange for increased core funding. Entities signing the Charter agree to: joint programming at the country level, shared back-office functions, accepting RC coordination authority, and reporting on coordination metrics. In return, donors commit to providing a minimum of 25% core funding to Charter signatories. This creates positive incentives – entities that coordinate effectively receive better funding quality, rather than trying to force coordination through hierarchical control. **Establish sunset clauses** as standard practice: All mandates (including Secretariat functions, special envoys, and thematic priorities) expire after 10 years unless explicitly renewed through a formal governance process. This shifts the burden of proof – rather than defending why something should be eliminated, proponents must justify why it should continue. Build this into UN80 recommendations as an operational principle.

Why This Works

You cannot merge specialized agencies – they are constitutionally independent. You cannot force coherence through hierarchical command – member states would revolt. However, you can create incentives that favour coordination over fragmentation. When the DSG controls coordination funds, when RCs have authority, and when entities that coordinate receive better funding, rational institutional actors respond.

Priority 5: Embed Inclusion as Governance Standard

The Problem

Civil society space is shrinking. The 2024 Summit of the Future excluded CSOs even from informal sessions – an explicit rollback. When civil society gains access, participation is often tokenistic. Southern women's organizations face compounded barriers. Meanwhile, foundations are increasingly shaping development agendas but operate without transparency requirements proportionate to their influence. When those most affected cannot shape decisions, legitimacy erodes regardless of technical quality.

What You Can Do

Your Actions | Immediate:	**Your Actions | Near-Term:**
Establish **CSO engagement standards** through ECOSOC resolution: minimum advance notice (14 days for session documents), guaranteed speaking time (proportional to session length), feedback mechanisms (requiring response to CSO input), and access to informals (at least observer status in drafting sessions). Make these standards binding across all ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and recommend them to executive boards and General Assembly committees. Countries that violate standards are named in the annual Inclusion Scorecard. Establish a **Global Participation Fund**, ensuring the participation of Southern CSOs. When a key negotiation takes place in Geneva or New York over a period of 12 months, Global South organizations often struggle to sustain a presence due to high travel costs, visa challenges, and opportunity costs. The fund should cover travel, accommodation, and salary replacement, with prioritization for organizations from LDCs, SIDS, and those representing marginalized populations. This isn't charity – it's ensuring those affected by decisions can participate in making them.	**Formalize foundation engagement standards** following WHO's FENSA model: conflict-of-interest disclosure requirements, funding caps (no entity should receive more than 15% of the budget from a single foundation), governance limitations (foundations can advise but not vote), and peer review of influence. The principle is clear: accountability must be proportional to influence. When philanthropic actors shape development priorities, they should face transparency requirements similar to those imposed on member states. Issue **transparency requirements for foundations:** All philanthropic entities contributing more than $10 million annually to UN entities must publicly disclose their donations, programmatic focus, governance influence activities (including seats on boards, advisory groups, and technical assistance), and potential conflicts of interest. Currently, foundation influence operates through informal channels with minimal transparency. Make philanthropic power visible before it becomes a systemic problem.

Why This Works

The legitimacy crisis cannot be solved without addressing who participates. You cannot force inclusion through mandates, but you can establish standards, provide resources, and use symbolic power to legitimize participation. When you explicitly state that those most affected must have a voice, when you create concrete mechanisms that enable that voice, and when you name the actors blocking inclusion, the political dynamic shifts.

IV. Navigating Constraints: What You Cannot Do

Sequencing Strategy | Your First 1000 Days

Strategic sequencing matters. Start with actions that demonstrate commitment, require no member state approval, and build political capital for harder fights ahead.

First 100 Days | Establish Credibility Through Transparency

- Launch Power Audit dashboard (funding flows, appointments, informal access)
- Publish first Funding Compact compliance report naming leaders and laggards
- Issue directive: all informals offer virtual participation
- Make your first senior appointments explicitly diverse (geography and gender)
- Give inaugural address framing challenge: "The UN is ungovernable by design; our task is to make it governable by "choice"

Months 4 – 12 | Build Coalitions

- Convene "Friends of UN Reform" dialogue bringing together bridge-builder states across traditional blocs
- Deep engagement with G77 and China leadership: listening sessions in regional capitals, not just New York
- Foundation transparency consultations: negotiate FENSA-style standards before imposing them
- CSO engagement standards adopted through ECOSOC resolution
- Publish first "Real Cost of Earmarking" evidence documenting transaction costs

Months 13 – 24 | Institutionalize Changes

- Mandate review pilot completed within EOSG (demonstrate you can eliminate duplication where you have authority)
- First "UN Development Charter" signatories announced (entities committing to coordination)
- RC authority clarified and tested in pilot countries
- Co-pen-holder arrangements normalized across development resolutions
- ECOSOC pilot on pooled fund budget authority launched
- G77 and China secretariat infrastructure operational

Months 25 – 36 | Demonstrate Results

- First "State of UNDS Governance" report showing measurable narrowing of triple disconnect
- Core funding increases documented across major entities
- Inclusion metrics trending positive on Scorecard
- Case studies of coordination successes (joint programming, reduced transaction costs)
- Member states begin proposing next wave of reforms based on your framework

"The Secretary General will make power visible"

This phase costs nothing, requires no member state vote, and demonstrates immediately that transparency will be different under your tenure. When you name which donors keep promises and which don't, when you make informal consultations accessible, when your first appointments demonstrate geographic diversity, skeptics start paying attention.

"Inclusive reform is not optional"

This phase builds political coalition for harder structural changes. When you convene bridge-builders, when you provide G77 and China infrastructure support, when you legitimize CSO participation and require foundation transparency, you demonstrate that inclusion is substantive, not rhetorical. The earmarking cost evidence creates business case for funding reform.

"This is the new normal"

This phase moves from demonstrations to institution-building. When mandate review succeeds, when entities voluntarily join the Development Charter, when RCs resolve disputes with authority, when co-pen-holders become standard, these changes embed into operational practice rather than remaining pilot projects.

"Reform is working – let's go further"

This phase shifts burden of proof. When you can demonstrate that transparency increased funding quality, that inclusion improved legitimacy, that coordination reduced costs, opposition to further reform loses credibility. Political momentum builds for changes that would have been impossible in Year 1.

Being explicit about limits maintains credibility. You will face enormous pressure to attempt reforms beyond your actual authority. Resist. Constitutional constraints you cannot overcome:

- **You cannot compel specialized agencies.** They are constitutionally independent and accountable to their own governing bodies. Proposals to merge or subordinate them will fail.
- **You cannot force funding shifts**. Sovereign states control budgets. No Secretary-General can compel increased core funding or ban earmarking. You can create incentives and transparency, but decisions remain with member states.
- **You cannot override the dynamics of the Security Council.** The P5 veto exists. Charter amendment proposals lie outside your purview. Focus on where you have leverage.
- **You cannot dictate to executive boards.** They are subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC, not of the Secretary-General. You can influence and propose, but boards govern.

Rather than fighting against these constraints, design reforms that work with political reality: focus on what you can control directly, utilize network power to build coalitions, leverage data to create political pressure, establish positive incentives, and initiate reforms where feasible.

You do inherit advantages that previous SGs lacked: digital tools enabling transparency on an unprecedented scale, growing Southern coalition capacity, as demonstrated by recent victories; heightened public scrutiny creating reputational pressure; and the unique political alignment of UN80, FFD4, the post-2030 transition and the Pact for the Future.

Use these advantages strategically. When you demonstrate that transparency enhances funding quality, that coordination reduces costs, and that inclusion improves legitimacy, you build political momentum that compounds over the course of your tenure.

Success Metrics | How We'll Know It's Working

Clear, measurable indicators across three dimensions. Hold yourself accountable to these publicly.

Transparency Metrics (Year 1)

- Power Audit dashboard launched, with quarterly updates, showing funding flows, appointments, informal access, and voting patterns
- 100% of informal consultations offering virtual participation to any interested member state
- All earmarked contributions exceeding $5 million publicly disclosed within 30 days
- Appointment criteria and shortlists published for all D1+ positions
- First Inclusion Scorecard published ranking UN forums on civil society access

Target: Transform opacity to transparency as default setting

Equity Metrics (Year 2)

- Core/pooled funding increased from 13% to 15%+ of total across major funds and programmes
- 50% of pen-holder positions on development resolutions held by Global South countries
- Donor concentration index declining (top 10 donors providing <65% of total voluntary contributions)
- Global South representation at D1+ level increased by 10 percentage points
- G77 and China standing secretariat operational with adequate resources

Target: Measurably narrow the triple disconnect between authority, resources, and affected populations

Effectiveness Metrics (Year 3)

- Transaction costs from fragmentation reduced by 20% (measured through joint assessments, shared procurement, integrated reporting)
- Stakeholder survey showing improved perception of UNDS coordination effectiveness
- Number of overlapping mandates reduced by 15% through review process
- Civil society participation in governance increased by 25% (measured by number of organizations actively engaging)
- At least 10 major entities sign UN Development Charter committing to coordination standards

Target: Demonstrate that reform improves operational performance, not just governance process

The Ultimate Test

- By the end of your first term, can you demonstrate that the triple disconnect is narrowing?
- Do those who formally govern control a larger share of resources?
- Do those who provide resources operate more through formal channels with board oversight?
- Do those most affected have greater voice in shaping decisions?

If the answer is yes — even if progress is incremental — you've succeeded where previous Secretaries-General have not.

If the answer is no, honesty requires acknowledging that efficiency reforms without power reforms simply perpetuate the legitimacy crisis under new management.

V. Conclusion: The UN Secretary-General As Catalyst

The UN development system doesn't need another manager. It requires a catalyst – someone who changes the system's operating logic, not just its efficiency. Your role is not to run 40+ entities (you can't – they're independent), nor to force coherence through hierarchical command (you shouldn't – member states would revolt), nor even to implement reforms yourself (you can't – most reforms require political choices only member states can make).

Your role is to make the system governable by choice rather than leaving it ungovernable by design.

That means making invisible power visible through transparency. It means creating spaces where Southern voices can organize effectively. It means changing incentives so coordination beats fragmentation. It means building coalitions that sustain beyond your tenure. It means using your symbolic and Charter authority to shift narratives about what legitimate multilateralism requires.

Reform will succeed only if actors with power choose to share it. You cannot force this. But you can create conditions where:

- Donors face reputational costs for excessive earmarking and domestic political pressure to deliver on commitments.
- Southern coalitions have infrastructure to organize effectively, rather than depending on volunteer efforts.
- Transparency makes closed-door deals politically costly and incentivizes behaviour change.
- Success stories demonstrate the value of coordination in concrete terms—faster delivery, lower transaction costs, and better outcomes.

Three Scenarios

Technocratic tinkering: Mandate reviews that eliminate marginal duplication. Efficiency improvements reduce costs by 5-10%. The triple disconnect persists. Legitimacy continues to erode. Reform becomes synonymous with austerity rather than transformation.

Strategic incrementalism: Transparency measures that shift incentives. Procedural changes that democratize access. Funding reforms that modestly realign governance and resources. Coalition infrastructure that strengthens the Southern voice. Each change is modest individually, but the cumulative impact over 5-10 years transforms operating logic.

Coalition-driven breakthrough: Major donors commit to Funding Compact. G77 and China achieves institutional transformation similar to their victories on the UN Tax Convention and Loss and Damage. Civil society embeds as governance partners. Specialized agencies voluntarily coordinate. The triple disconnect becomes the central focus of the reform.

The most likely outcome combines elements of all three. But what emerges depends on political choices you make – and political coalitions you build – in the coming years.

This Is the Window

The system we build – or fail to build – in the next 3-5 years will shape global cooperation for decades. Climate change, pandemic preparedness, technological governance, conflict prevention, and sustainable development all depend on effective international institutions.

The UN development system is currently ungovernable by design. Those who formally govern lack authority over resources. Those who fund operate outside formal channels. Those most affected have the least voice. Efficiency reforms alone cannot solve legitimacy crises rooted in power asymmetries.
Reform is necessary. Reform is possible. What remains is the most challenging part: actually doing it.

About This Research

This policy brief synthesizes findings from comprehensive research combining: desk review of academic literature and policy documents; stakeholder survey of ~150 respondents (diplomats, UN staff, civil society, experts); 80+ semi-structured interviews complemented by focus groups to test findings; and data analysis of voting records, funding flows, staff compositions, and High-Level Panel compositions. The participatory methodology has inherent limitations – interview respondents reflect elite perspectives, with country-level actors and programme beneficiaries underrepresented. We present our findings as evidence-based assessments of power dynamics, not definitive verdicts – opening a conversation rather than closing a debate. The full report provides a much more detailed analysis, evidence, and recommendations. This Policy Brief Summary provides concrete recommendations the incoming Secretary-General may wish to consider.

Acknowledgments

The insights, critiques, and encouragement of many colleagues have enriched this study. We are grateful to the diplomats, UN staff, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners who shared their perspectives on power dynamics within the United Nations development system through interviews, focus groups, and a survey. Their contributions informed both the analytical framework and the policy-relevant proposals presented in this report.

We also acknowledge the support of our research collaborators and peer reviewers, whose careful and constructive feedback strengthened the structure, clarity, and rigor of the analysis. Any remaining errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Most importantly, we extend our thanks to colleagues and partners around the world who continue to work toward reforming multilateralism at this critical juncture. Their efforts are central to shaping the future direction of the United Nations and broader multilateral reform processes, and they provide important context and inspiration for the agenda explored in this paper.

This publication is based on research funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.

In partnership with: IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability