

UN FIT, OR UNFIT, FOR POST-2015 PURPOSE? VIEWS OF THE GLOBAL PUBLIC

Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss

How is the UN's development machinery perceived? Does anyone care?

One year ago, the report of a high-level panel of world leaders and renowned development specialists proposed 12 goals and 50 indicators for the UN's post-2015 agenda. These were already unwieldy numbers, but after a year-and-a-half of juggling and negotiations, member-states in New York on the Open Working Group (OWG) decided by acclamation after a non-stop, 29-hour marathon session late in July a supposedly "concise" list of 17 development goals and some 169 indicators. They will forward the text as recommendations to the General Assembly for decision in September 2015.

The final shape of the agenda is likely to include most of the original Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—"only" 8 goals and 60 indicators—in some form.¹ It also is likely to embrace several new areas, the expression of "the world we want." In addition, it will constitute a major challenge to the UN development system on which successful implementation will partially depend. While the OWG is congratulating itself on completing their job—a sadly typical criterion of UN success, staying in the same room and agreeing upon a laundry-list—there has been precious little thought given to the really critical indicators of development progress, which could have formed a core agenda.

Perhaps as importantly, no thought has been given to the shape of the UN system itself and whether it is fit for whatever purpose is decided. Thus, this *FUNDS Briefing* provides pointers to "the UN we want" for the new era of development goals. As a guide to a desirable future configuration of the UN development system, it draws on an earlier 2014 global survey that indicates how the world organization is perceived, and how it needs to change. Combined with the results of similar surveys in 2010 and 2012, a total of some

10,000 informed, independently-gathered responses are now available. The complete results of the survey are available at: <http://www.futureun.org/Surveys>.

Four views emerge across the survey:

- The UN's development functions are less crucial than such other functions as security, humanitarian action, and setting global norms with teeth.
- The UN's development organizations are still mostly relevant, but some are not particularly effective.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF consistently receive the highest rankings among operational agencies; regional commissions receive the lowest rankings.
- The UN faces two major institutional challenges: poor internal organization and the predominance of earmarked funding.

MAIN PERCEPTIONS

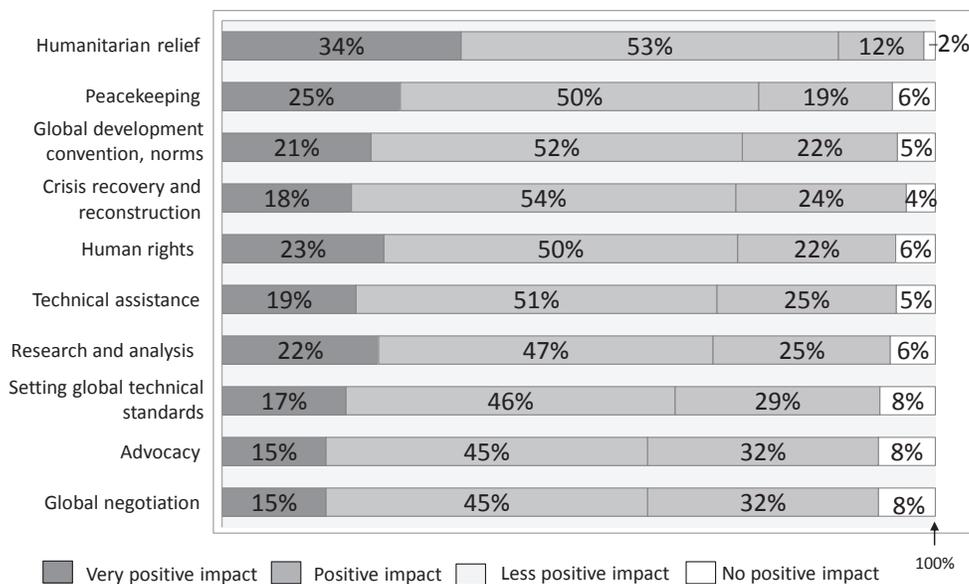
One of the survey's central findings is that the UN is seen to have its greatest impact in functions other than development. Respondents ranked the world organization highest in its humanitarian and peacekeeping roles, followed by its efforts to formulate global development conventions, human rights and crisis recovery, and ahead of most of the functions associated with the development system, including technical assistance, research and analysis, global standards, advocacy, and global negotiations (see Figure 1). The most marked differences were for technical assistance and research and information, which were markedly lower for those in high-income countries. So donor countries continue to generously fund UN technical assistance, but their publics have doubts about its value.

Box 1: FUNDS Global 2014 Survey, the Demographics

In March 2014 the FUNDS Project sent out more than 25,000 email invitations to respond to a comprehensive questionnaire in six languages. The list contains people who have worked for the UN, or subscribed to its public information services, or were familiar with the development field. The questionnaire was also posted on several development-oriented websites. There were some 3,300 respondents, approximately the same number as in 2010 and 2012. They were drawn from more than 150 countries of origin, and a similar number by location: 38 percent in developing countries, 37 percent in emerging economy countries, and 25 percent in high-income countries.

As in the previous global surveys, the largest cohort of respondents identified themselves as being in the private sector (25 percent); the next largest was the staff of UN organizations (21 percent), national governments and public sector (19 percent), academia (18 percent), NGOs (13 percent), and non-UN intergovernmental organizations (4 percent). The proportion of those from the “third UN” was 60 percent, against 19 percent from the “first UN” of governments and 21 percent from the “second UN” of international civil servants.²

Figure 1: What Impact Does the UN Have?



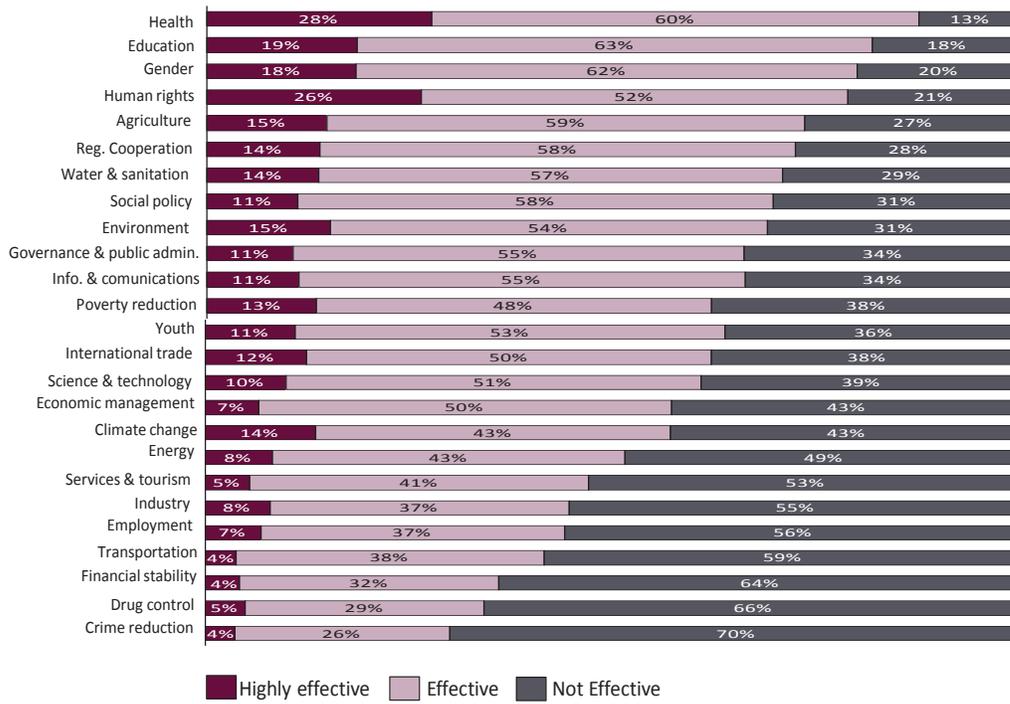
Source: FUNDS survey 2014

Within the development domain, four areas of UN operational efforts stand out in terms of their perceived effectiveness: health, education, gender, and human rights (see Figure 2). These reflect quite well some of the priorities of the MDGs. Across country groups, those in high-income countries generally rate the UN lower for effectiveness across all domains, and the difference is most marked for economic management, financial stability, international trade, and tourism. Also ranked comparatively lower by respondents in high-income countries is the effectiveness of efforts regarding climate change, information and communications, and science and technology.

Individual UN organizations score very differently on perceptions of their effectiveness and relevance (see figures 3 and 4). The ratings of relevance are consistently higher than those of effectiveness, meaning that most organizations are considered important to the

overall development cause even though respondents perceive them to be less effective than they should be. The differences are particularly marked for organizations like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is leading the climate change debate (90 percent relevant or highly relevant, but only 70 percent effective or highly effective). Other entities with similar disparities include the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP, with 93 to 71 percent), the International Labour Organization (ILO, with 92 to 71 percent), UN Habitat (86 to 60 percent), UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 86 to 65 percent), UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO, 84 to 59 percent), and the International Trade Centre (ITC, 80 to 63 percent). Figure 5 depicts the combined results (highly effective versus highly relevant) for a selection of these organizations.

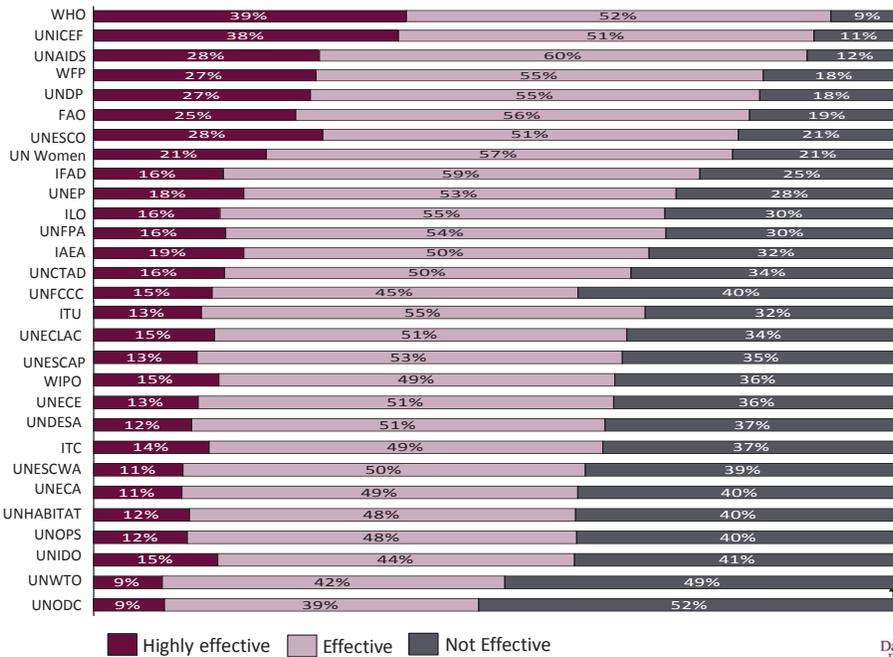
Figure 2: How Effective Are UN Development Organizations in Sectors?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2014

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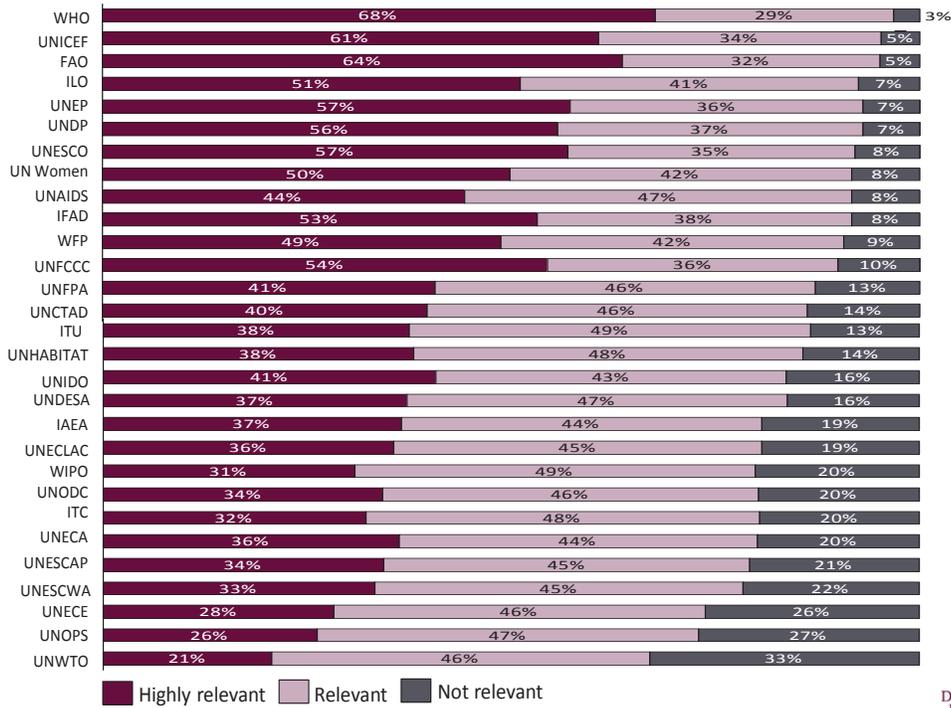
Figure 3: How Effective Are the following UN Organizations?



Source: FUNDS survey 2014

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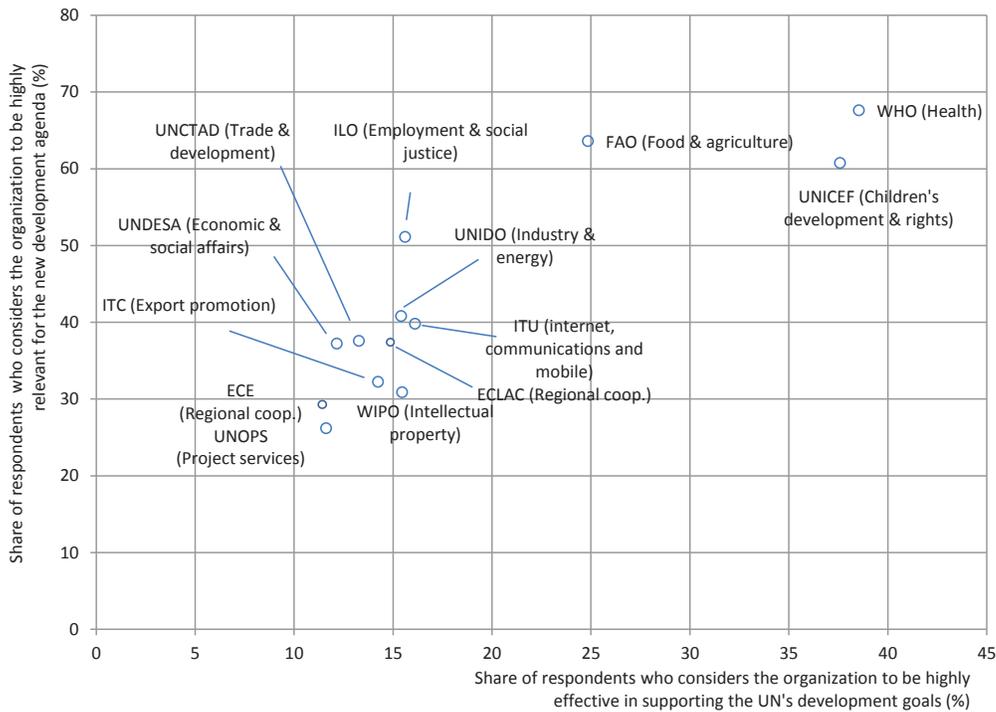
Figure 4: How Relevant Are the Following UN Organizations?



Source: FUNDS survey 2014

Dalberg Research 8

Figure 5: Perceptions of Relevance and Effectiveness



As indicated earlier, the WHO and UNICEF get the highest grades for being the most effective and the most relevant, reflecting the positive perceptions of UN operational efforts to improve health and education. Four of the five regional commissions (the exception being UN Economic Commission for Latin American and Caribbean, ECLAC) are among the six organizations viewed as least relevant in the 2014 survey, a finding that is consistent with previous surveys.³ Between 34 and 40 percent of the respondents familiar with them judge the regional commissions as ineffective. These poor perceptions are shared across high- and low-income countries. However, emerging economies give somewhat higher scores, perhaps reflecting the interests by these countries in closer South-South cooperation.

Asked about the shape of the UN’s future agenda, respondents gave highest priority to promoting human rights (62 percent strongly in favor), emphasizing human development (60 percent), formulating and implementing post-2015 goals (59 percent), and becoming more responsive to global crises (58 percent).

THE SHAPE OF REFORM

The 2014 survey also confirmed the earlier and sharply expressed convictions that the UN development system is in drastic need of reform—“transformation” would perhaps be more accurate. The top two immediate challenges were perceived to be internal organizational structures (79 percent) and the growth in earmarked or non-core funding (78 percent) that has become a prominent feature of donor support from both developed and emerging powers.

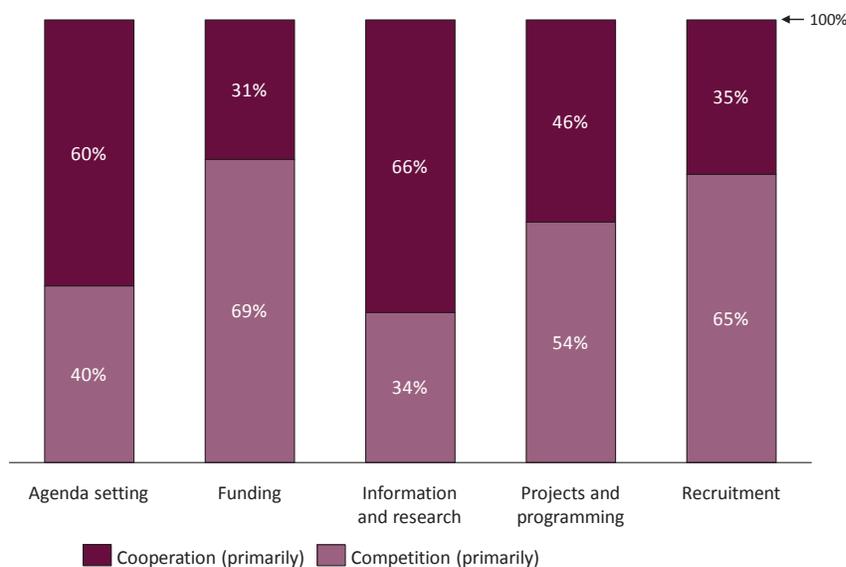
The two problems are hardly disconnected. Donor patronage of individual UN organizations, increasingly with funds directed at fostering their own priorities, makes it harder for the UN to come together as system. Figure 6 depicts the extent to which competition for funds is already perceived as a characteristic feature of the system, which can be expected to become even sharper as official development assistance (ODA) declines. Another area of competition is staff recruitment, which could be construed as a positive factor. The highest perceived area of cooperation within the system is in information and research, which comes in well above programming. Clearly, both donors and the system could try harder to achieve convergence.

Few would dispute that the nature of today’s development problems demands more joined-up rather than “silo” approaches. Other challenges seen as important for the UN included insufficient resources, ineffectiveness, lack of adaptability and competition from alternative sources of assistance.

Asked to choose three (out of ten) factors most likely to improve the UN’s effectiveness in development, respondents listed responsiveness to local needs, knowledge of country situations, and quality of expertise. These factors were far ahead of others—including some of the more typical recommendations for greater collaboration with governments, civil society, and the private sector.

Other organizational challenges for the UN development system include a lack of adaptability and growing competition from outside the UN.

Figure 6: To What Extent Is the Relationship Among UN Development Organizations Cooperative or Competitive?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2014

Dalberg Research 10

Answers to an open-ended question on challenges for the UN confirmed perceptions of turf-consciousness (competition and disjointedness) within the system and revealed several other concerns, including the UN's perceived lack of independence from the major powers, and excessive bureaucracy. It is dramatic to register the decibel levels of some actual voices from respondents; some interesting responses are shown in the Annex.

The survey also sought guidance about possible links between the private sector and the UN. A large majority of respondents were positive about the prospects of funding from the private sector (77 percent) and collaboration in project implementation (76 percent). A majority, however, (55 percent) were unenthusiastic about the influence of the private sector on shaping the UN development agenda.

Feedback was more positive about the influence of emerging powers.⁴ Large majorities considered that they would become more influential in UN agenda-setting (87 percent) and increased South-South cooperation (85 percent), which several currently are pursuing through UN organizations. More than 70 percent of respondents also foresaw increases in the influence of emerging powers through more funding, more senior UN positions, as well as more co-sponsorship with the UN of centers of excellence.

The survey asked for opinions on desirable future changes in the UN development system. More than 90 percent of respondents

avored greater use of technology for at least three purposes: to cut costs and improve efficiency; to ensure a common technology platform for administration across the system; and to provide a single gateway for all UN research and publications. A similar majority called for updated mandates and activities of UN development organizations, and two-thirds wanted greater consolidation, particularly at country level through single system country representatives, single programs, and fewer organizations. Answers to open-ended questions on future change confirmed these results and provided additional insights on the future orientation of the UN agenda and the ways in which the system still needs to adapt. Again, the words of individual responders are found in the Annex.

CONCLUSION

Is the system capable of change? A large majority (77 percent were thus "optimists") maintained that the system could change, but almost a quarter remained pessimistic (23 percent). The proportion of pessimists was smaller among emerging powers (15 percent) and larger among developed countries (31 percent).

Whether the UN's development glass is half-full or half-empty, clearly there is much room for improvement to get the UN we want for the world we want.

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NOTES

1. Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, "New Development Goals, plus ça change?" *FUNDS Briefing* no. 7, June 2013, available at <http://www.futureun.org/media/archive1/briefings/FUNDS-Briefing-7.pdf>.
2. See Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis and Richard Jolly, "The 'Third' United Nations." *Global Governance* 15, no. 1 (2009): 123-42.
3. Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, "How Relevant Are the UN's Regional Commissions?" *FUNDS Briefing* no. 1, February 2013, available at http://www.futureun.org/media/archive1/briefings/FUNDS_Brief1.pdf.
4. For more details, see a forthcoming publication from the FUNDS project edited by Thomas G. Weiss and Adriana Erthal Abdenur, *Emerging Powers and the UN: What Kind of Development Partnership?*—a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (January 2015).

ANNEX: WHAT RESPONDENTS ACTUALLY SAID ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS

“What are the key challenges for the UN in development?”

Structural

- Intra-UN turf battles, inability to merge or close down UN organizations.
- Lack of collaboration and/or coordination of activities among UN organisations.
- Re-align development agencies behind the new SDG's - major structural reform!
- Need more rapid progress to delivering as one.
- Fragmentation, duplication, lack of coordination and coherence.
- Too many UN agencies, lack of coordination and of well-established complementarities.
- No real effective coordination within the system—still work as isolated islands.

Donor influence

- Engaging key powers publicly on policy issues even though these countries are UN members and hence could ‘threaten’ do show displeasure if public discourse makes them look negative.
- Some countries think that the UN isn’t neutral.
- Influence of USA on UN system and policies.

- UN Representatives are biased towards developed country intentions, disregarding the needs of small countries.
- World power influences.

Funding

- Competition among agencies for limited donor funding leading to lack of cooperative behavior.
- Lack of softly earmarked funds globally and at country level and little support to multi-donor trust funds.

Procedural

- Level of bureaucracy is increasing and paralyzing parts of the system.
- Too much supply-orientation, scarcity of really competent persons, administrative costs too high.
- Heavy bureaucracy.
- Unwieldy bureaucracy and inefficiency, inability to act.
- Credibility: the UN is perceived as a huge ineffective bureaucracy by many people.
- Inefficiency, bureaucracy, corruption, excessive benefits and entitlements.

“How do you consider the private for-profit sector as a partner for the UN in development?”

- Moving away from traditional models of development/aid programs and designing more market/business oriented strategies for inclusive growth.
- It should never be a partner but a supporter and advocate for UN principles and tasks.
- Needs to be seen as an effective partner, not as a cash-cow to replace diminished government contributions.
- The profit motive of private sector involvement is often at odds with the UN values and goals.
- Dangerous to allow private for-profit sector to have much influence.

- The influence of transnational companies on the UN agenda is a high risk to the value of global justice. There should be absolutely NO reason at all why the for-profit sector should influence the UN agenda—not even for funding!
- So called private-public partnerships lead to private capture of public endeavors and massive amounts of rent-seeking as well as skewing of agendas to meet for-profit funders’ goals rather than the needs and aspirations of the peoples being served.
- The possibility of the ‘privatization’ of the development agenda poses serious risks for the United Nations and its core values/roles. It must be very carefully managed.

“What one or two important changes could make the UN development system more effective in the future?”

Changing priorities

- Concentrating more on conflict-prone states and reconstruction.
- Renewed global commitment to new vision and new SDG's for next 15 years (which will include some new goals—e.g., global tax cooperation).
- UN organizations should concentrate on what individual countries cannot do alone or in a small group. Example: human rights, epidemics, world rules and standards, refugee status, conflict prevention.

- Focus on social justice issues and push to reduce conspicuous consumption/perceived obsolescence marketing strategies in developed nations.
- Promoting human rights and global values & Giving more attention to national capacity building

Reforming institutions

- Commitment to migrate and transform the existing UN System to have one agency per SDG from 2030 onwards—which is already beyond the term in office of incumbent

agency heads—so no personal risk. Recruit new agency heads based on this committed vision.

- Consolidation of UN development organizations into far fewer organizations that are better resourced.
- Unite World Bank and UNDP programming under reformed and strengthened ECOSOC.
- To give all senior personnel, from the Secretary General down, KPIs against which their performance should be evaluated by an independent panel. Make the organization leaner (by 50% at least).
- Consistently speaking with one voice—whilst agency mandates are important, the outside world needs to see us as “one UN.” More attention to simplification of operational and business processes, that can cut costs and improve our efficiency,
- UNDP would need to limit itself to governance and human rights issues. Too often UNDP takes up activities for which other organizations have a mandate and experience. The UN Resident Coordinator should not be of UNDP, but independent.

Improving personnel

- There is a disconnect between those employed at UN institutions and what is actually taking place on the ground. Employees see it as a privilege to be employed at a UN entity rather than really being change agents.

- Internal politics within UN, lack of focus, lack of qualified staff, no clear vision to push the projects effectively.
- Local staff are incapable and politically motivated. They don't have empathy on issues like poverty as they usually come from higher class/caste.
- Bureaucratization, nepotism, partiality in recruitment systems dominated by few bosses who only recruit people who are either their relatives, friends, past colleagues to hold power and influence all decision making processes.
- I have no doubt that the United Nations has the necessary skills required in development, but one challenge that I can mention is political influence. Let's allow the UN employees to be independent and apply their skills on what needs to be achieved.
- Expert, not national appointments.
- Delivering as One is only on paper, nothing in reality and Resident Coordinators are always biased to one UN agency “usually the one they come from” mostly UNDP.
- Zero tolerance fraud and corruption policy in practice is a dream, but getting below some 25% tolerance would make a great difference.

