WHY THE UN CANNOT DELIVER AS ONE (AND HOW IT COULD)

Stephen Browne

Attempts by the UN development system (UNDS) to "deliver as one" at the country level confront many obstacles and have not prevented a further proliferation of field offices. DaO will not be achieved unless accompanied by other reforms of the UNDS, many of which have been proposed before, but not implemented.

In 2006, at the end of Kofi Annan's term as UN Secretary-General, his High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence published its report, *Delivering as One* (DaO).[1] Although already ten years old, the report of the panel—chaired by at the time three serving heads of government—was the most recent set of comprehensive UN reform proposals. The central theme, as expressed by the co-chairs, was summed up as follows:

> A more united system would be a stronger, more responsive and effective United Nations. A system reconfigured to optimally use its assets and expertise in support of country needs and demands would strengthen the voice and action of the United Nations in development, humanitarian assistance and the environment. A repositioned United Nations—delivering as one—would be much more than the sum of its parts.[2]

The report went on to define DaO at the country level as one leader, one program, one budgetary framework, and one office. To this was added one fund, to encourage the pooling of donor resources. By 2010, there were to be One UN offices in 40 countries, and thereafter a single consolidated presence everywhere.

The campaign to drive DaO forward was taken up by the UN Development Group (UNDG), starting in 2007. As described by the head of the UNDG secretariat (DOCO) at that time, the premises of DaO were to increase national ownership, enhance the impact of UN support in the development domain, and reduce transaction costs.[3] In 2010, the Future UN Development System (FUNDS) project undertook an analysis of the number of country and regional representatives in the UN system, as a measure of the scale of the challenge of UN convergence among the field-based organizations. In that year, there were over 1,000 separate representations among the UN development organizations (see Table 1), and over 1,300 if all UN organizations were considered, including peace-keeping missions, humanitarian organizations (such as UN High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR) or the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

WHAT IS THE RECORD OF DAO?

After ten years, progress towards DaO has been modest, at best. There is only one country (Cape Verde) where a genuine organizational convergence has been achieved, as a result of the UN resident coordinator being jointly accredited to UNDP, UNICEF, and UN Population Fund (UNFPA). This is a partial return to the situation in the 1980s when the UN Development Programme (UNDP) resident representative in many countries was also the local head of UNFPA and WFP. From the original eight countries, there are now 56 that requested the DaO approach and adopted certain aspects of convergence. An independent 2012 evaluation found that in DaO countries national ownership increased, but little progress was made in reducing transaction costs and program convergence were uneven.[4] But the governments of almost two-thirds of UN program countries have yet to request the adoption of DaO.

Why has the progress been slow, in spite of repeated exhortations by the UNDG and substantial funding from traditional donors in support of DaO? There are five reasons:

Continuing organizational proliferation
In 2016, the FUNDS project again looked at the number of UNDS organizations represented in developing and transition economy countries and discovered that, overall, there has been almost a one-third increase: an additional 300 country and regional offices since 2010. For the system as a whole, the increase was 18 percent. The pattern is widely differentiated by region, however. While there was a decline in Europe and Central Asia (reflecting the withdrawal from several countries) and stability among the middle- and upper-income countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, there were substantial increases in the number of UN representatives in the other three major regions.

The increases can be partly explained by the creation of new in-country representations by UN Women, which set up 51 new country and regional offices since its inception in 2010, and the UN Office of Project Services (UNOPS), which now has 35 country offices. The 2016 figures may also

be inflated by the designation of some local staff representatives as UN country team members. But even allowing for such considerations, there has been substantial growth in the number of offices established by UN development organizations such as the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and some of the specialized agencies. The largest offices include Ethiopia (with 21 UN development organizations) and Kenya (19) —both regional UN hubs—as well as Afghanistan (19), Côte d'Ivoire (19), and Niger (19). A large majority of African countries have between 10 and 20 UN development organizations represented.

Table 1: Numbers of UN Representatives in Developing Countries, 2010 and 2016

Region	UNDS Representatives		Change	UN Representatives		Change
	2010	2016		2010	2016	
Africa	345	546	+58%	479	638	+33%
Asia/Pacific	222	304	+37%	297	362	+22%
Arab States	121	188	+55%	173	263	+52%
Latin America/ Caribbean	214	222	+4%	265	266	0%
Europe/Central Asia	120	89	-16%	190	125	-34%
TOTALS	1,022	1,349	-32%	1,404	1,654	+18%

The large increase in the number of different country representations need not be an impediment to the goals of DaO. The drive by individual UNDS organizations to open new offices in the most active program countries can enrich the UN country presence. The problem, however, is that each representative, while a member of the UN country team, has a primary reporting relationship (and is personally contracted) to a distant and distinct headquarters, which expects its field staff to wave the agency flag. For joint programming purposes, these multiple vertical axes of responsibility inhibit horizontal convergence at the local level because the headquarters of UN organizations are reluctant to mesh their programming interests and devolve responsibility to their field staff.

Lack of government interest
A potential incentive for greater UNDS and UN system consolidation would be cost-effectiveness. If member states were to establish financial economy as a prime objective of the UNDS, it is more likely that greater consolidation would follow. The ultimate goal of One UN with a single office, shared administration, single program, and consolidated budget was designed to lead to substantial cost savings and allow the UN to do more with less. But UN cost-effectiveness is not a member-state priority because of prevailing patronage patterns. On the donor side, individual governments like to maintain their influence with the individual UNDS organizations which they favor with their funding. There is limited incentive for donors to support merging these organizations' interests and activities into a broader system-wide approach.

At the receiving end, the governments of most program countries also favor the multiple presence of the various entities of the UNDS. Like the donors, they prefer to maintain links with individual ministries and departments with the corresponding UN organizations: health ministries with the World Health Organization (WHO), agriculture with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), education with the UN Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), labor with the International Labour Organization (ILO), environment with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and so on. The UN will not be joined-up as long as governments are not.

Differing organizational procedures and practices
To its credit, DOCO on behalf of the UNDG helped to promote the need for a greater degree of program, administrative, and financial harmonization among the UNDS organizations under the rubric "operating as one." In 2014, 18 organizations (out of more than 30) signed up to "standard operating procedures" (SOP) negotiated by DOCO, which was intended to facilitate joint UN operations in the DaO countries. As of 2015, 37 percent of all countries had "fully implemented" and 38 percent "partially implemented" One Programmes. The corresponding figures for integrated budget frameworks, however, are much more modest: only 22 percent of offices have fully complied, and a further 14 percent partially. When it comes to business operations, only 24 percent are compliant, and further 21 percent partially.[5]

Thus, there has been some progress towards harmonizing the disparate business practices of the different parts of the UN. A major impediment has been the absence of a common Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) platform among the organizations which, despite being part of a common family, made their own individual choices. For example, after UNICEF had chosen to use SAP, the other main field-based organization and putative coordinating agency, UNDP, ignored wider family interests and chose PeopleSoft (now Oracle). Only now are the UN funds and programmes moving towards a common system, known as UMOJA, having incurred huge costs of adaptation which could have been partially avoided.

The SOP and UMOJA initiatives represent progress towards more harmonized business practices. However, there is continuing resistance to a merger of business and communications operations at country level, and little prospect that the UNDS can achieve the "integrated support services" called for in the original DaO report.

Competition for funds
Donor patronage of the UNDS organizations greatly increased with the rise in earmarked funding practices: the designation by donors of the geographical and thematic purposes of their contributions. Today, more than half (55 percent) of the revenues of the UNDS organizations are earmarked, and in the case of some individual organizations, the proportion is over 80 percent.[6] The current funding pattern, substantially based on discretionary contributions by major donors, encourages competition among organizations, which is inimical to fostering a spirit of cooperation. To counter the trend, the UN encouraged the pooling of resources by creating One Funds. An ultimate objective should be for all UN operational activities to be funded collaboratively in each country. As proof of the value of pooling, it helped to promote closer cooperation among participating UNDS organizations (although not always reducing inter-agency transactions costs).[7] However, only a few donors are ready to commit to pooling their funds and none is ready to use pooling as an exclusive practice; and so the benefits will only be partial.

No head of UN development
One of the single greatest weaknesses of the UNDS is the absence of a strategic center that could help promote greater coherence and "leverage

the diverse assets that exist within the system for joint solutions."[8] The head of UN development should be a renowned and widely respected individual able to identify how best the substantial intellectual and financial resources of the system could be strategically applied to global, regional, and country challenges. The head would not be there to knock agency heads together, or second-guess their decisions, but to propose and justify coherent solutions and draw on the best UNDS resources available and avoid duplication.

The proposal for a UNDS head is nothing new. The *Capacity Study* of 1969 called for a single head of development.[9] Following a new set of reform proposals in 1975,[10] there was a UN director-general for development and international economic cooperation from 1978 until 1992. However, the three incumbents of the post had neither a sufficient reputation nor authority to steer the UNDS strategically. The 2006 reform called for the designation of a "development coordinator" with responsibility for the performance and accountability of all UN development activities. The individual was supposed to be supported by a coordination group comprising the heads of all the UNDS organizations. With the creation of the UNDG under Kofi Annan, the UNDP administrator was also designated as a global "resident coordinator." However, the UNDP is perceived by the rest of the UNDS as not only a coordinator but also a competitor. It therefore is not in a position to exercise strategic guidance objectively—which was why the 2006 reform called for UNDP to "withdraw from sector-focussed policy and capacity work for which other UN entities have competence."[11] In 2016, the Independent Team of Advisors to the ECOSOC dialogue process called for a deputy secretary-general for sustainable development to be appointed.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

DaO still represents a worthy goal. Before deciding what needs to be done to achieve it, however, it is necessary to define—more clearly and realistically in the light of experience—what it should mean in practice. DaO should lead to a convergence of UN ideas, policies, and programs, but not of structures. Organizations should be able to retain their individual identity, but there should be much closer harmonization—and where possible integration—of in-country administrative services. It is also clear that donors will not give up their proclivities for earmarking, but there are still ways of achieving greater coherence even with distributed patronage.

Many of the additional recommended reforms are those already suggested by the principal impediments to DaO. Starting with the fifth challenge, António Guterres should appoint a development coordinator as deputy secretary-general. The incumbent should have the status and authority to take strategic decisions on behalf of the UNDS, and become the overseer of the network of resident coordinators, which is currently—and ambiguously—administered by UNDP. At the country level, UNDP should (as the 2006 DaO report puts it) "be limited to interventions that strengthen the coherence and overall positioning of the UN country team," withdrawing from other specialized operational activities.[12]

Next, there should be a brake on the creation of new representative offices, particularly by the funds and programmes that fall under the authority of the UN secretary-general and the new development coordinator, who should require the financial justification for any expansion of UN offices. If the UNDS organizations are to be fully accountable—notwithstanding the low priority that member-states appear to place on their cost-effectiveness—they should publish detailed accounts showing how they are striving to achieve more with less. As part of this process, UN organizations should be able to show, year-by-year, how they are achieving greater efficiency through system-wide procedures, platforms, and other common facilities.

Earmarking has made it difficult for individual organizations to turn down offers of new funds, even at the cost of straying beyond their mandates. As a counterweight to competition and mission-creep, the UN should more aggressively pursue pooled funding by establishing thresholds for minimum donations to joint funding mechanisms aimed at supporting strategic UN-wide initiatives. The ambition should be for the majority of UN operations in each country supported by pooled funding. Parallel funding by individual donors should be discouraged.

DaO also requires cultural changes within the UNDS, which will need to be stimulated and rewarded. Because resource mobilization is a prime criterion for career success, program staff are motivated to establish themselves as their own project managers, raising and spending money raised from donors. The result is a UNDS characterized by hundreds of thousands of individual projects, many of which operate independently, even within each organization. Incentive systems should be redirected at rewarding staff for strengthening partnerships with, and building on the programs of, other UNDS organizations.

If any of this appears utopian, given the past record of UN change, it is important to stress that these reforms would be within the power of a UN secretary-general committed to fulfilling the objectives of a program that member-states agreed over a decade ago.

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NOTES

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