

What is UN Development Reform and Why Should We Care?

By Stefano Gennarini, J.D.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, members of the United Nations organization have been debating and adopting measures to reform the UN development system. The process, like many other UN reform efforts before it, is ostensibly meant to increase the efficiency and responsiveness of UN agencies and programs, but that is not the full picture.

Some aspects of UN development reform go beyond just increasing efficiency and responsiveness. They profoundly transform the UN development system itself. Changes thus far proposed and implemented shift power away from countries and into the hands of UN officials, moving away from a cooperation-based model for development to a more colonial-style top-down model for development. This power shift should concern socially conservative countries because the UN bureaucracy has been at the forefront of promoting abortion, comprehensive sexuality education, social acceptance of homosexuality, and other policies that are not internationally agreed.

This issue of Definitions will provide a brief analytical introduction to the ongoing process of UN reform, with special attention to the formal shifts in power it is causing within the multilateral system.



UN DEVELOPMENT REFORM

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The UN development system is a conglomerate composed of several dozen UN agencies, funds, and other entities directly overseen by the 193 UN member states.¹ These UN entities often have overlapping mandates and functions that have evolved in an *ad hoc* way over several decades to meet specific development needs. Altogether, the UN development system oversees expenditures of roughly \$26 billion U.S. dollars annually.²

The way the UN system is guided is primarily through the overall normative directions found in UN resolutions negotiated and adopted by UN member states, as well as through direct mandates or programs approved formally by the executive boards of UN agencies. UN member states serve on the executive boards of UN agencies, and are selected to four- or five-year terms by the UN General Assembly.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres proposed a set of reforms for the system in 2017.³ In 2018, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (UN Document No. 72/279), and acted on some of the Secretary-General's recommendations. Progress on the reforms is documented in the Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (UN Document No. A/74/73).

For many years, UN member states have debated UN development reform as a way to achieve greater coherence and less waste in UN programming. But the reform that began with Guterres' proposals in 2017 is qualitatively different than prior efforts and is rightly being called “transformational.”

The main direction of the new round of UN development reforms currently being carried out is to merge the *ad hoc* functions and mandates created over many years and through multiple entities into a single bureaucratic structure directly under the control and supervision of the Secretary-General.

The overall effect of the changes is to magnify the power of the Secretary-General far beyond that of any individual UN entity. The reforms give the Secretary-General the ability to

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concurrently and jointly control and supervise the many and varied mandates that UN agencies and funds heretofore only possessed individually, to a degree never foreseen by states when they created the separate mandates that make up the UN development system. And it gives the Secretary-General the ability to do this not only at UN headquarters, but within countries around the world.

The effect of this is to switch the model for the UN development system from being one of mutual cooperation and support between states to a corporate model where the UN Secretary-General is effectively a corporate chief executive officer managing a company on behalf of stakeholders with differing interests and abilities to influence the company.

Rather than enhancing the cooperation of states between each other, the ongoing development reforms will increase dependency on the UN Secretary-General for countries that rely on UN assistance, and it will decrease the opportunities of UN member states to supervise and control the operations of the UN development system.

REGIONAL COORDINATORS

The capstone of the changes proposed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres is the reform of the UN resident coordinator system. This part of the ongoing round of UN reform efforts has already been approved by UN member states and is now being implemented.

Resident coordinators are the principal UN development focal point in every country. Until recently, they acted as mere go-between between UN agencies and government officials in aid recipient countries. Now, with the reforms in effect, they have new policy and decision-making powers to guide the engagement of the UN system in every country.

Under Guterres' plan, the resident coordinators have power to assess and propose what policies to emphasize in the aid recipient country in which they work, as well as coordinate cooperation with UN agencies and departments, and find ways to fund UN work in the country through domestic resources and foreign aid.

Under the new powers conferred on them, the resident coordinators will be the brokers of overarching development agreements between the UN secretariat and each individual

aid recipient country for the entire work of the UN system in that specific country over a defined period. Considering all the conditionality that may be brought into the negotiations between resident coordinators and individual countries, this reform will likely give the UN Secretary General an outsized say, not just on what the UN does in a specific country, but also on the INTERNAL policies of the country itself.

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This is a very sharp departure from the previous way of doing business, where each UN agency working in any given country negotiated separate deals with that country to carry out development activities. Resident coordinators work under the direction of the Secretary-General, not under the supervision of UN member states. And the resident coordinators can now leverage the powers of the entire UN system behind them when making policy proposals to countries as to how best to implement sustainable development.

EXECUTIVE BOARDS

UN Secretary-General António Guterres proposed to merge the executive boards of all the UN agencies in order to simplify the supervision of the work of the UN development system. Guterres also proposed that reporting to the executive boards of agencies should be radically simplified, therefore further limiting the opportunities of UN Member States to supervise UN agencies and programs. So far, these proposals have not been taken up.

It is understandable why such a proposal would appear attractive. The need for constant approval and supervision by UN member states for everything a UN agency or fund does in any given country is a recipe for waste and duplication. Moreover, the process required to gain the necessary consensus and agreements is tedious and time consuming. And it may not sometimes reach a successful conclusion.

A constant in UN development efforts has been the insistence that all actions of UN entities conform to the direct and indirect guidance of UN member states through the executive boards. The mandate for what any given UN agency or program does in each country is therefore created and approved by the executive boards of UN agencies and funds.

The model thus far used for UN programming has placed a premium on approval from UN member states at a fairly granular level. While this can lead to waste and duplication,

it also ensures that UN member states work together on a consistent basis to operationalize UN policy. As a result, UN programming enjoys a higher degree of legitimacy than it would otherwise have.

Even though UN Secretary-General António Guterres' proposals for a single unified UN development oversight mechanism have not been entirely successful, UN agencies and the secretariat are looking for ways to achieve an integration of certain functions of the executive boards of different UN agencies and programmes.

CONCLUSION

Calls for efficiency and responsiveness are understandable. But these should not come at the cost of integrity.

The UN development system has organically developed over time under a model of mutual cooperation and support where power is shared equally among sovereign states. Ongoing UN development reforms are transforming the UN system from a tool for mutual cooperation and support between states to one where powerful and wealthy countries are able to direct the UN Secretary-General's efforts and promote their own agenda by concentrating power in the secretariat of the organization.

Aside from undermining the very notion of multilateral cooperation, this new modus operandi for multilateral development sets up the UN system as a tool for a new kind of colonialism based on norms favored by the powerful and wealthy. In the long run, these changes will probably not help the UN system continue to function as a forum for mutual cooperation and support between sovereign states. In the measure in which the system becomes less responsive to sovereign and democratic prerogatives they may have the opposite effect or further eroding the trust and good will associated with the United Nations.

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Endnotes

- 1 UN Organizational Chart, available at: https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/18-00159e_un_system_chart_17x11_4c_en_web.pdf
- 2 Report of the Secretary-General Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive

policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR): 2018, U.N. Doc. A/73/63, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1473566?ln=en>

- 3 Report of the Secretary General on the repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet, UN Document No. A/72/684, available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/684%E2%80%932018/7>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefano Gennarini, J.D. is the Vice President for Legal Studies at the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam). He represents C-Fam at UN headquarters in New York and researches and writes on international law and policy.

Susan Yoshihara Ph.D.
Editor

Rebecca Oas Ph.D.
Managing Editor

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805 3rd Avenue, Suite 1440
New York, New York 10022

info@c-fam.org
www.c-fam.org