A visible shift – the independent resident coordinator

United Nations evaluation evidence brief

The Secretary-General's repositioning of the United Nations development system sought to reinvigorate the role of the resident coordinator system in supporting government efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This brief, one in a series of five, draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by 33 independent evaluations conducted across the United Nations development system between 2021 and 2024 and presents evidence on elements of the United Nations development system reforms focused on the resident coordinator system. A core set of four evaluations[1] provided the majority of the evidence, complemented by a further 29 evaluations which referred to the topic.

Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), which is the primary policy instrument of the UN General Assembly.

The QCPR defines the way the UN development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts.

The complete version, including a bibliography, is available at: https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/oas-qcpr/2020-qcpr-status-reporting.

Insights from UN evaluations

1   Improvements in programming coherence have not yet resulted in the fully coordinated delivery of operational activities.

Evaluations highlighted that: indicators of programming coherence, including UNCT engagement in planning and the reduction of duplication, were improving; the convening role of the resident coordinator was providing independent leadership and a focus on strategic issues as well as contributing to programming coherence; joint programming enhanced coherence across agencies.

Photo (above): Secretary-General Meets Global Resident Coordinators © UN Photo/Mark Garten

The coherence of programme delivery has been inconsistent. Hindering factors included incentives around funding leading to competition, and delegated authorities and reporting lines that favoured the priorities of entities over those agreed in cooperation frameworks. However, COVID-19 was a major test of the reformed resident coordinator system and often showcased the potential of the independent 'reinvigorated' resident coordinator as a facilitator of a more cohesive socioeconomic response.

2   Information-sharing has improved and duplication of work is reducing, however, reporting processes are augmenting, which is impacting coherence.

Evaluations highlighted that: information-sharing mechanisms, particularly with resident coordinators, are in place but not all entities consistently use them; duplication of work at the country level was diminishing but examples persist; there was uneven information-sharing from UN entities to the resident coordinator.

The plurality of reporting requirements has been perceived to be a significant burden and numerous examples of heavy reporting requirements were given. There was a perceived lack of feedback on how reporting to the resident coordinator was being used.

3   Resident coordinators have played key roles in enabling integrated UN policy advice and have supported UNCTs to increase government capacity.

Resident coordinators provided support on cross-sectoral policymaking and strategic approaches to aligning national policies and financing strategies with the SDGs as well as providing assistance with engaging other development partners. Challenges remained in terms of capacity to pursue cross-cutting issues,. however, there were examples of the deployment of human rights advisers to resident coordinators' offices, facilitating the mainstreaming of human rights principles throughout the processes of the UNCTs.

4   Resident coordinators have helped entities without a physical presence and smaller UNCT entities engage more fully in analysis and planning processes, although difficulties persist.

Evaluations highlighted that: resident coordinators allowed for a more systematic inclusion of entities without physical presence, particularly at the analysis and planning stage of country programming; DCO

connected resident coordinators and UNCTs with technical expertise.

However, difficulties in accessing expertise from entities without physical presence persisted. Participation was limited by logistical constraints created by physical distance, a multi-country focus and weaker connections to country stakeholders.

5   Capacity and resource gaps in resident coordinators' offices affect the coherence and responsiveness of the United Nations development system.

Evaluations highlighted that: resident coordinators with appropriately staffed offices fostered coherence, enabled policy advice and supported the mainstreaming of normative issues; resident coordinators and their offices have not always been fully capacitated; the capacity of resident country offices was a determining factor for achievements in the provision of integrated policy advice, yet policy expertise was often lacking.

There could be a significant strain on resident coordinators' offices to support the delivery of policy advice while also delivering on their coordination mandate. There was a perceived lack of capacity within UNCTs to mainstream human rights throughout their work.

6   Joint programmes have leveraged the new generation of resident coordinators and their coordination and convenor role, yet procedures and funding remain major obstacles.

Evaluations highlighted that: a shift in programmatic approach could provide time and capacities for

Secretary-General Visits New UN Country Team Building
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resident coordinators and UNCTs to identify strategic opportunities that bring out the unique value of UN collective action; joint programmes are not suitable in all circumstances.

Joint programmes are vehicles to achieving collective results. They leveraged the new generation of resident coordinators and UNCTs,. Pooled funds help UN agencies work together and establish a rapport with stakeholders. Significant transaction costs remained, and the plurality of agency rules and regulations posed barriers. Challenges included: differing agency programming, funding processes, cycles and implementing partners; the lack of internal guidance for joint programme operationalization; and the high transaction costs and reporting burden involved.

7   The Management and Accountability Framework provided a framework with roles and responsibilities for the resident coordinators, but varied in its clarity.

Evaluations highlighted that: there were weaknesses in areas where the MAF language lacked clarity, resulting in conflicting interpretations; there was uneven commitment to, and application of, the MAF.

The MAF articulates accountabilities. Country teams are accountable to resident coordinators for their support to implement the 2030 Agenda. Challenges regarding the clarity and complementarity of roles and responsibilities undermined the implementation of programmes. The absence of a mechanism to ensure compliance by UN entities exacerbated the uneven entity delivery on commitments. There is no clear articulation, including in the MAF, of UNDP's integrator role.

Endnotes

[1] i) OIOS, 2021. RC Programme Coherence. ii) OIOS, 2023. RC Policy Advice. iii) OIOS, 2023. DCO Regional. iv) UNFPA, 2023. Engagement UNDS Reform.

UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

The United Nations Sustainable Development Group System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWEO) has been established by the Secretary-General to provide independent evaluation evidence to support the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

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