



UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

United Nations development system reform at the regional level – slow progress

Summary of United Nations evaluation evidence

The repositioning of the United Nations development system sought to revamp the regional level, to ensure that it is tailored to the individual needs of each region and supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including at the country level. This summary compiles evidence of the progress of the United Nations development system reforms at the regional level. It focuses on analysis, findings and recommendations related to the new regional architecture (including the regional collaborative platforms), the role of the regional economic commissions, and changes in the deployment of United Nations regional experts or assets to provide policy advice and technical assistance at the country level.

This summary draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by independent evaluations conducted across the United Nations development system between 2021 and 2024. It presents key issues and learning from evaluations for consideration in the context of United Nations system-wide and intergovernmental policy discussions. Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), in line with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 78/166 (2023).

This summary is part of a series produced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWEO) which includes summaries of United Nations evaluation evidence on:

- I the resident coordinator system;
- II funding quality;
- III whole of system responses in complex settings;
- IV sustainable food systems; and
- V an interactive evidence map featuring United Nations evaluations, published between 2021 and 2024, mapped against priority areas of the 2020 QCPR¹.

The complete series is available at:

<https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/oas-qcpr/2020-qcpr-status-reporting>.

Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

The QCPR is the primary policy instrument of the United Nations General Assembly to define the way the United Nations development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts. It assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of United Nations operational activities for development. A QCPR resolution is adopted by the General Assembly every four years with annual follow-up and guidance from Member States provided by the Economic and Social Council at its Operational Activities Segment and the General Assembly in its Second Committee. The 2020 QCPR resolution builds on the United Nations development system reform². The next QCPR resolution will be negotiated in late 2024 to guide efforts from 2025 to 2028.

The 2020 QCPR resolution took note of the provisions on revamping the regional assets of the United Nations development system. It specified the work of regional assets of the United Nations development system in support of the 2030 Agenda with a view to enhancing transparency, accountability, efficiency, coordination and results-based management at the regional level in accordance with each region's specific needs and priorities. It also highlighted the role and contribution of the regional economic commissions and the regional teams of the United Nations development system in addressing development challenges and supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. General Assembly resolution 78/166 on the QCPR recalled and reiterated resolutions

referring to a fit for purpose regional architecture and stressed the importance of leveraging regional assets to scale up country-level impact by ensuring that expertise, including of non-resident entities, is accessible across the United Nations system.

The Secretary-General provides annual reports on the implementation of the QCPR to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Since 2019, the UNSDG Chair has also reported annually to ECOSOC on the work of the Development Coordination Office (DCO)³. The main reported achievements are as follows:

- Regional collaborative platforms established
- Steady increase of United Nations country teams (UNCTs) supported by the platforms
- Linkages between resident coordinators and UNCTs with regional entities in a way that had not happened before
- Regional results reports provided a comprehensive picture of the work of the United Nations development system in each region
- Exchanges between the regional and country levels, as well as collaboration among platform members, around collective priorities became more systematic and increasingly focused on ensuring regional assets were deployed in support of country teams
- Regional issue-based coalitions became one of the main vehicles of the substantive work that regional collaborative platforms can offer to country teams

Challenges are also reported by the Secretary-General and UNSDG Chair. Only a small majority of resident coordinators reported that their country teams had benefited from the technical, normative and policy expertise of the platforms. Governments and resident coordinators continue to face difficulties gaining access to expertise from United Nations entities without a physical presence. UNCT perceptions of support from the platforms has deteriorated. The picture on benefits of interactions of platform support in policy discussions is mixed. Lastly, further efforts are required to strengthen dialogue between the regional and country levels and ensure that issue-based coalitions fulfil their role in providing agile and responsive integrated support to priorities in the region.

Insights from United Nations evaluations

The following summary of evidence on progress made in reforming the United Nations development system at the regional level draws on 26 United Nations evaluations conducted at regional and global levels⁴. Four evaluations, given their focus on development system reform, provide the majority of the evidence for most, but not all, the issues for consideration presented below (Box 1). Evidence from the other evaluations sampled often complemented or corroborated their findings.

BOX 1: EVALUATIONS INCLUDING A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM REFORM AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

- [Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\), Evaluation of the Development Coordination Office regional support \(2023\)](#)
- [Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\), Synthesis Review of Evaluation Results for Regional Economic Commissions – Contributions to Economic Development \(2024\)](#)
- [United Nations Commission for Europe \(UNECE\), The role of the UNECE to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in the context of the United Nations development system reform \(2023\)](#)
- [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\), Formative evaluation of the UNFPA engagement in the reform of the United Nations development system \(2023\)](#)

1 Regional reforms have been slower in their implementation, suffer from unclear directives and remain a work in progress.

The evaluations showed there was a general lag between the pace of United Nations development system reforms at country and regional level. United Nations development system entity regional offices and United Nations regional economic commissions have not fully communicated the potential support they could provide to UNCTs, nor consolidated the mechanisms by which it is supplied. There was also evidence of recurring difficulties across entities at the regional level to respond in a timely and coherent way to the expressed needs and demands from the country level. Challenges identified include ensuring: (i) that the regional presence of the United Nations effectively supports both a regional response and the ongoing work of UNCTs at the country level; (ii) that the regional presences of United Nations entities fully take part in the regional mechanisms in each region and; (iii) that there is no dissonance between messaging by regional directors and United Nations entity principals at headquarters.

Regional reform elements for which the evaluation evidence is scarce include the regional results reports and the pooling of expertise at the regional level. Evidence on knowledge management hubs is also limited. Within the evaluations sampled, only the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) evaluation on United Nations development system reform included analysis of knowledge management hubs. It confirmed that all five regions have established knowledge management hubs and, although all regions were successfully sharing United Nations knowledge products with the public, there was less progress with sharing knowledge internally and inter-regionally with colleagues.

2 Regional collaborative platforms, although established, are not yet fully meeting expectations.

The regional collaborative platforms present an opportunity to further foster collaboration and information-sharing among United Nations development system entities at the regional and country levels. Evaluations signalled that they have served to bring United Nations entities and the respective regional economic commissions closer. However, full utilization of the regional collaborative platform mechanism to foster collaboration within the United Nations development system has not been achieved.

Issue-based coalitions are not well covered in evaluations. Where they are, although their opportunity for technical support is recognized, they are more likely to be described as formal structures, unevenly responsive to country needs.

Evaluations on United Nations development system reforms by UNFPA and UNECE pointed to regional collaborative platforms as potential opportunities to better position mandates. In Europe, where the issue-based coalitions emerged from previously established groups, UNECE has shown leadership in those issue-based coalitions it co-chairs and leveraged them to provide demand-driven support to the country level. The UNFPA United Nations development system reform evaluation found that some issue-based coalitions and other, less formal, coordination mechanisms appear to have been more effective at the technical level than regional collaborative platforms at the policy level.

3 Peer support groups are providing appreciated support to country level planning and programming.

While the bulk of the work undertaken to prepare a cooperation framework is undertaken by the United Nations country team under the stewardship of the resident coordinator, the peer support group⁵ provides well-defined technical support to UNCTs

for key design steps of the cooperation framework cycle. Respondents to evaluations by OIOS, UNFPA and UNECE have indicated that the peer support group was effective in providing support and quality assurance to UNCTs in the development of common country analyses and cooperation frameworks.

4 The DCO at the regional level plays an important role in supporting resident coordinators and UNCTs, including connecting them with regional assets.

Evaluations, particularly the 2022 OIOS Evaluation on the Development Coordination Office's Regional Support, confirmed that DCO regional teams enhanced the capacity of resident coordinators to coordinate United Nations programming at the country level. Support for the resident coordinator programme coordination role was provided through the peer support group mechanism and through direct support, guidance and troubleshooting for programming.

The DCO regional teams have helped to connect resident coordinators to regional United Nations expertise to some extent, although this connector role was still evolving. DCO at the regional level connected and convened resident coordinators, UNCTs and regional directors of agencies, funds and programmes to address discrete thematic issues pertinent to the



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region. The DCO regional teams also connected resident coordinators to the United Nations Secretariat and wider United Nations system entities and networks at the regional and global levels, including the United Nations network of economists, global task forces and various subregional platforms.

Although all DCO regional presences supported countries in transboundary issues, the main challenges identified that could hamper increased support were the complexity of transboundary issues and office capacity constraints. Some of the complexity was due to a lack of clarity on how to connect regional strategies to the country-level programmes of country team entities. There were also difficulties working across country teams and with the number of actors involved.

5 The role of DCO is not well understood with regard to regional collaborative platforms and issue-based coalitions.

The 2022 OIOS Evaluation on Development Coordination Office Regional Support found that the role of DCO with regard to the regional collaborative platforms was not consistently clear to resident coordinators and regional staff. The DCO's role regarding the regional collaborative platforms was more broadly defined in the Management and

Accountability Framework. As a result, some DCO regional teams fulfilled a more active connector role, meanwhile, for others, the role was mainly administrative. An observation corroborated by other evaluations was that they faced broader organizational and structural challenges in connecting resident coordinators to regional United Nations expertise and strategies. These challenges include: uneven responsiveness of issue-based coalitions; lack of United Nations entity incentives and accountability; and still-evolving reforms at the regional level.

The evaluation indicated that coordinating the regional collaborative platforms and peer support group meetings was a high logistical demand. Platform members across regions suggested that the DCO did not have the resources to adequately perform its platform secretariat role, including to be able to articulate resident coordinators' needs, connect resident coordinators with platform discussions and adequately promote issue-based coalition work to resident coordinators.

The 2022 OIOS Evaluation on the Development Coordination Office's Regional Support recommended DCO should continue to work under the leadership of the platform Chair to further clarify the platform connector role of regional office teams and



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communicate that clearly to both resident coordinators and platform members.

6 Regional economic commissions are increasingly integrated into the United Nations development system at regional and country levels.

Evaluations of regional economic commission programmes found that they were relevant, well-aligned with their respective mandates and responsive to requests from Member States. The strategic planning and prioritization of these requests was inhibited because most did not have a formal tracking mechanism in place to manage such requests. Within the commissions, this affected knowledge-sharing and retention, and hindered opportunities for building upon services with additional or complementary interventions. Further, this impeded the ability of other United Nations entities to identify synergies, complementarities or risks of overlap and duplication with their own country level work.

The evaluations found evidence of strong collaboration between the regional economic commissions and a diverse set of United Nations and

non-United Nations entities, especially at the regional level. However, coherence vis-à-vis the resident coordinator system was more limited. It was noted that, across regions, the commissions were members of more UNCTs than previously. However, a recurring theme in the evaluations was that participation of the commissions at the planning stage of the cooperation frameworks was followed by limited involvement in their implementation.

The OIOS evaluations made recommendations including the following measures to address current shortcomings:

- Create a formal tracking mechanism for Member State requests to enhance visibility over the range of activities carried out; assist with strategic planning and prioritization of work in the context of limited resources; and better communicate activities to external partners and other entities to avoid duplication
- Increase engagement and cooperation with the resident coordinator system to better contribute to system-wide coherence through participation in strategic planning processes such as the cooperation

frameworks and their implementation; and continue engagement and communication with United Nations country teams in a manner that removes duplication and facilitates opportunities for collaboration.

7 Entity efforts to realign regional assets and change how they are deployed to better support countries are underway, but progress is patchy.

Across entity-specific evaluations, it was evident that regional entities and offices were providing support to the country level. Entity-specific evaluations showed that entity regional offices played a potential convening role, adding value in generating and disseminating information on good practices, and had an important and valued role in the delivery of joint programmes. A number of evaluations evidenced the efforts to restructure and reorganize the deployment of regional assets to support the country level. These internal measures seemed to have contributed to improved positioning and visibility of the added that could be provided by regional level assets, yet there is more work to be done. Further effort is needed to communicate the potential added value to the country level, particularly to resident coordinators and UNCTs.

The evaluations found that currently the comparative advantage of regional and subregional offices in understanding the region and subregional contexts and their ability to prioritize demands of Member States, was not being leveraged. In addition, efforts must be focused on delivering support to where it will add the most strategic value, in collaboration with other United Nations entities working at the country level, including through the Resident Coordinator system, and leveraging the partnerships needed to ensure regional United Nations development system coherence.

Approach and methodology

This summary, produced between July and September 2024, brings together evidence from 26 evaluations completed across the United Nations between 2021 and 2024. The sample was purposively selected to include the most relevant evaluation evidence, as well as balance across geographic regions and United Nations entities. An initial longlist of 46 evaluations was screened for

potential relevance, providing a sample of 30 evaluations. Subsequent in-depth review using an analytical framework resulted in the extraction and summary of relevant evidence from the 26 evaluations listed in the bibliography.

The sampling strategy, methodological approach, and draft report were reviewed by an inter-agency reference group from DCO, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the independent evaluation offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNFPA.

Limitations: With the exception of the four reports that explicitly addressed the subject of this summary, the other 22 sampled evaluations provided more scattered evidence on the regional architecture of the United Nations development system, often with limited depth of analysis. Greater attention on United Nations entity roles and collaboration at the regional level and connections between regional assets and emerging needs at the country level may be warranted in future evaluations.

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 strengthen learning, transparency and accountability in order to incentivize joint work and collective learning and conduct and advance system-wide evaluation evidence on the United Nations development system's contribution towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to work with United Nations evaluation offices to draw on and augment their contributions and capacities, to fill critical gaps, to promote collaboration on joint and system-wide evaluations and to improve the quality and usability of United Nations evaluation evidence in relation to the SDGs, 2030 Agenda, and United Nations reform priorities.

UTILIZING UNITED NATIONS EVALUATION EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE 2024 QCPR

This initiative is a collaboration between SWEO and evaluation offices across the United Nations. It provides user-friendly mapping and summary products of United Nations evaluation evidence to support engagement in the 2024 QCPR. The initiative is coordinated by SWEO, with substantive contributions from the following entities:

FUNDING



MANAGEMENT GROUP



Endnotes

¹ A/RES/75/233

² A/RES/72/279

³ Formal reporting specifically on the work of the regional economic commissions in implementing reforms and supporting Member States to advance the 2030 Agenda is primarily through their “Summaries of Work” and the Secretary-General’s reports on “Regional Cooperation”, both presented annually to ECOSOC, while their contributions to system-wide results of the UN development system are included in QCPR reporting mechanisms.

⁴ There were 3 agencies, fund and programme (AFP) global strategic evaluations, 4 AFP regional strategic evaluations, 6 evaluations of global/regional programmes or pooled funds, 9 evaluations of regional economic commissions, 3 OIOS global evaluations, and 1 global system-wide evaluation. Full list in Bibliography.

⁵ Peer support groups are chaired by the DCO Regional Director (with a dotted reporting line to the Regional Collaborative Platform Chair) and are composed of voluntary UNSDG entity staff members nominated by their Regional Director or Executive Director as applicable

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