

Beyond Aid: A New Vision for the UN Development Function

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Abbreviations

ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
G77	Group of 77
IDOS	German Institute of Development and Sustainability
ILO	International Labour Organization
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
MOPAN	Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN80	UN80 Initiative
UN Women	United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

This discussion paper advances a new vision for the United Nations (UN)'s development function at a moment when the organisation is facing profound pressures and persistent scepticism about its relevance. Although a consensus exists that reform is overdue, past initiatives have been too incremental, focusing on coordination and efficiency without addressing deeper institutional and political pathologies. The result is a UN development system that has grown financially large but is losing political significance. It is increasingly shaped by donor earmarking, entrenched patronage and a project delivery model that bears little resemblance to how national development actually occurs.

Our vision marks a significant departure from the UN's historical role as an aid channel predicated on the North-South divide. Instead, the UN's future relevance lies in leveraging its universal legitimacy, normative authority and convening power.

We argue for a UN development system that:

1. **Acts as a trusted knowledge facilitator:** providing high-level and technical advice, supporting peer exchange and helping governments navigate complex policy trade-offs in ways that are independent, politically informed and normatively grounded.
2. **Engages in public advocacy that matters:** elevating norms, correcting misinformation and shaping national debates in line with globally agreed standards, with sensitivity to national contexts.
3. **Applies universality in practice:** moving beyond the outdated distinction between donor and recipient to engage with all member states – including middle- and high-income countries – through global monitoring and peer accountability.
4. **Serves as an actor of last resort in fragile settings:** providing operational support only where national governments cannot or will not act, with strict sunset clauses and safeguards against unintentional harm.

This reconceptualisation is not primarily about money. It implies a financially smaller but politically stronger UN development system that is less dependent on donors and more relevant to today's multipolar world. The real benchmark for success is not the volume of aid provided but the quality of advice, advocacy and resulting cooperation.

Reaching this vision will be difficult. The UN's development apparatus is shaped by vested interests, path dependency and political inertia. Yet, opportunities for change exist. The collapse of traditional aid financing, the insistence of middle-income countries on equitable partnerships and fatigue with the current project-heavy model all point towards the need for a new approach. The Secretary-General's UN80 Initiative offers a platform for bold ideas, but only if the debate moves beyond technical fixes and acknowledges the political trade-offs inherent in transformation.

The Purposes of the United Nations are: [...] To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.

Charter of the United Nations, §1

1 Introduction

The establishment of the United Nations (UN) counts as one of the most significant institutional achievements of the 20th century. Throughout its eight decades of existence, the UN has facilitated multilateral cooperation, promoted agreements on international norms and standards and helped with implementation. Its development function, which soon emerged after the UN's inception, was instrumental in post-independence nation-building, assisting with economic growth, public service delivery and institutional formation. Landmark accomplishments in addressing global challenges – such as disease eradication, saving the ozone layer, promoting human rights and introducing the concept of human development – are at least partially attributed to the UN. Throughout its history, the UN has advanced “ideas that changed the world” (Jolly, Emmerij, & Weiss, 2009), most recently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UN80 Initiative, launched by the UN Secretary-General in early 2025, is only the most recent proposal for reform in a long line that dates almost to the inception of the UN (see Bertrand, 1985; Jackson, 1969). Past efforts to reform the UN's development system, which comprises 44 UN entities¹ and had collective revenue of approximately USD 45 billion in 2023,² have often run aground on short-term political interests, without providing adequate answers to questions about the ability of the UN to support member states in the area of sustainable development.³ The debate in UN circles about the UN80 Initiative is driven by the urgency of managing the UN's funding collapse. However, unresolved institutional challenges and new requirements necessitate a fundamental rethink of the UN's development function, if the purpose is to fully exploit the potential of the UN as a multilateral organisation for helping member states manage sustainable development.

The discussion paper aims to contribute two things to the reform debate: first, to provide a diagnosis of the “patient's sickness” (Jackson, 1969), showing how the UN is failing to live up to its potential. To do so, the paper reviews both the UN's institutional deficits that have grown through decades of neglect, patronage, and path dependency as well as the changing demands for development cooperation. The main thrust of the paper is then to provide elements of a new vision for how the UN's development function can become more effective and relevant in addressing today's challenges. This vision centres on a departure from development assistance as it is currently being practised, the paradigmatic case of which is the free-standing development project, financed with resources from the Global North and benefiting a so-called developing country. According to our new vision, the UN development system leaves old global divides behind, centres on engagement in national decision-making processes and is embedded in the UN's global governance functions, which also need to be strengthened through the increased inclusivity of all member states. Although the paper does not emulate the comprehensiveness of earlier reform reports, such as those by

1 According to UNDESA's financial reporting; see the latest statistical annex to the annual Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) reports.

2 UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

3 See the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN, 2021), Weinlich et al. (2022) and United Nations (UN, 2025a) regarding assessments of the latest reform from 2018.

Jackson (1969) and Bertrand (1985), we remain inspired by the same spirit of an independent, critical and constructive survey of the UN's current condition.

The authors' analysis and views have been formed through long-term involvement in the UN's development function – as practitioners serving in duty stations around the world and in the UN's headquarters, as independent researchers and as providers of policy advice to governments as well as the UN. As this is predominantly an opinion piece, we draw mainly on our own insights. But we triangulate them to the extent practicable with reference to a wide body of UN documents (reports, evaluations, funding data) and academic literature, which the interested reader may find useful for further reading. The paper also benefited from consultations with other experts.⁴ Normatively, the paper is guided by the IDOS vision to work towards better international cooperation for sustainable futures. Its target audience are member states, UN officials and experts who, very much like ourselves, are grappling with the ongoing global changes and what they should mean for the UN. The paper seeks to inspire a more fundamental debate about the future of the UN in the area of development.

2 The need for reform

The global political environment, marked by a bumpy evolution towards multipolarity, is currently not favourable for reforms that aim at “renewed multilateralism” (Ishmael, Klingebiel, & Sumer, 2025; Schulz, 2025). However, adverse conditions do not change the need for sustainable development. It remains a challenge of our times to reduce the pressure on planetary boundaries and secure prosperity, global public goods and a life in dignity for all. The mandate of the UN Charter to “achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character” is still incontestable. But there are, in our analysis, four reasons why the UN's development function needs reform, if we remain guided by the aspirations of the UN.

2.1 Slow to adapt: the UN development system does not sufficiently consider the interdependence of countries in addressing global challenges

The world today is different from the world 80 years ago. Although some problems are the same, new challenges have emerged over the last decades to which the UN still has not adapted adequately. Most of these are systemic and transboundary: climate change, pandemics, digital transformation, financial volatility, urbanisation, access to technology, demographic change and migration demand regional or global responses. The Human Development Report from 2023/2024 makes it clear that “mismanaged” interdependence has negative effects on human development (UNDP [UN Development Programme], 2024, p. 13). The report joins the calls for a new global public goods approach, which can spark a new mindset for how to tackle sustainable development and manage its inherent complexity (Horner, 2020; Horner & Hulme, 2017; Kloeke-Lesch, 2021). Against this backdrop, the UN's traditional programmatic approach to development, which reflects the overall official development assistance (ODA) regime with its focus on North-South transfers,

4 A workshop was held at IDOS in July 2025, bringing together a dozen UN experts from different backgrounds. The document was further shared for peer review with a number of experts on development cooperation.

appears outdated. Based on mandates by the General Assembly,⁵ which in 2024 emphasised again demand-based assistance to “programme countries”, the UN operates mainly on a country-by-country basis, with corresponding plans for assistance (through UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and agency country programme documents) being designed within countries. Despite the formal roles of headquarters and regional offices in approving country plans, they tend to overlook any collective challenges, including any actions, inactions or policies of other countries that hinder or promote development prospects in the assisted country. Global monitoring and normative frameworks exist (e.g. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, thematic reports), but are underutilised in the UN’s country-level engagement. An overly narrow focus on delivering services results in a UN development function that has very limited scope to address global public goods or complex interdependencies, both within countries (Passarelli, Denton, & Day, 2021) and at the global level. This produces the paradoxical outcome that national demands for fair treatment in the management of global challenges cannot be adequately met.

2.2 Beyond North-South: adjusting cooperation to a multipolar world

The traditional model of development cooperation is built around ODA and increasingly artificial North-South binaries. Donor priorities have always loomed large, despite efforts under the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness to strengthen the ownership of “developing” countries. The UN development system has essentially operated as an organisational shadow of the ODA regime, implementing aid provided by Global North countries. The UN’s allocation patterns across the SDGs reflect Western thematic priorities (Baumann & Haug, 2024, p. 19). As the world becomes more multipolar (Ikenberry, 2024), “developing countries” have in recent years become more articulate about demanding equal partnerships, and a UN that is less aligned with traditional donor interests (Baumann, Novoselova, Surasky, & Schönrock, 2024). Their needs have also changed. Seventy years ago, lacking capacities were a critical issue for what was then adequately referred to as “developing countries”. Today, all countries have access to capacities.⁶ The questions instead are how existing capacities can be utilised under decent work conditions, and how to prevent brain drain and employ national talent in the service of development to move countries forward. Building home-grown capacity at scale will be much more effective than selective training initiatives. Also, in line with the growing criticism of neo-colonialism, Global South governments – or at least academic pockets within those countries – are currently trying to redefine their development trajectories away from donor dependency, which traditionally comes with a focus on social issues, and towards economic development. Although ODA transfers continue to be made, other cooperation models are gaining importance. The Conference on Financing for Development has evolved into a noteworthy global governance platform, in the context of which a range of coalitions across the North-South divide are moving forward on specific issues (Pham, 2025). Forms of South-South cooperation are becoming more important, and its proponents are emphasising principles such as mutual benefit, sovereignty and non-conditionality. For the UN, continued close alignment with Global North donors – which account for a problematically high share of the UN development system’s income⁷ – and traditional North-South hierarchies comes with risks for its

5 The mandates for the UN development system are formulated in the QCPR, which is done every four years (see UN (2020, 2024b) for the last two iterations; executive boards can issue more specific mandates, but are subordinate to the General Assembly, which sets the overall guidance.

6 The existence of such elites – and their influence, both positive and negative, on the development trajectory of a country – has been described by Dercon (2022). It might also be worthwhile to view externally funded capacity-building in the context of brain drain through migration.

7 In 2022, the 10 largest member state contributors were all Western states. Three of them (United States, Germany and Sweden) accounted for approximately 38 per cent of income – in a system made up of 193 member states (Baumann & Haug, 2024, p. 12).

legitimacy, especially as traditional donors pivot away from altruistic forms of development cooperation towards more selective forms of engagement driven by their national interests (Browne, 2022).

2.3 Lack of effectiveness: how institutional deficits undermine UN performance

Soon after the UN's development system took shape, it was already described as the “most complex organisation” in the world (Jackson, 1969, p. iii). Complexity may ensure resilience, and that is partly the result of efforts to accommodate multiple interests, which speaks to the integrative role of the UN. But complexity is a problem when it means that centrifugal forces prevail over integration and strategy. A recent UN evaluation found that key parts of the 2018 UN development system repositioning, which aimed to bring about more effective coordination, are just not being implemented (UN, 2025a), suggesting that fragmentation and vested interests have reached a point whereby it has made parts of the UN difficult to govern, at least collectively. One reason suggested by the evaluation is that member states have only paid lip service to coordination – and effectiveness, we would add – but have not created appropriate incentives and used their oversight responsibilities in the General Assembly, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or the executive boards of UN entities. These institutional and oversight deficits translate into performance challenges. There is of course a broader, long-standing debate about the effectiveness of externally provided development support in general. But UN shortcomings have been identified relatively clearly in UN evaluations and independent research. Both have linked the reliance on freestanding operational projects with systemic deficits in how the UN operates: short-termism, a lack of sustainable impact planning (through sound theories of change), lack of exit strategies, low ownership from governments, overstretched offices with little attention to quality, an overreliance on (ineffective) capacity-building, just to name some of the most problematic dysfunctions.⁸ The UN can still be useful despite these shortcomings, in particular where individual governments, donors and UN entities align on top priorities. Nevertheless, these shortcomings are systemic, and they should not be accepted as unchangeable features of development support.

2.4 Losing its edge: the marginalisation of the UN's normative power

Some of the core functions of UN development that distinguish the UN from other multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental aid providers are the binding attachments to globally endorsed norms, standards, treaties and conventions. Governments and societies alike should benefit from the UN's ability to inform about global norms and standards and help with implementation, be it as a factor for increasing the legitimacy of national policies or to safeguard the rights of various groups. Increasingly, however, UN entities – from the largest to the smallest – have become managers of funds on behalf of their donors in support of large numbers of operational projects, distracting them from the normative functions that are the hallmark of global cooperation. This has led to a situation in which the UN only grows financially (until recently), but not politically. UN operational projects can still be justified in poor and fragile countries, but they should carry the UN's normative functions – which is difficult when they are implemented under the incentives of donor funding (Baumann & Reinsberg, in press). Free-standing assistance projects are increasingly irrelevant for middle-income countries, in which 75 per cent of the world's population live (World Bank, s.a.). They often constitute more of a distraction from the kind of development cooperation needed to get a countries'

8 Baumann and Reinsberg (in press). These deficits are also frequently noted in MOPAN assessments of UN entities and in meta or synthesis evaluations of UN development entities, for example UNDP (2018) and UNICEF (2020).

policies right, and from the UN's mandate and mission on "leaving no one behind" (UN, 2024b, para. 21). Instead of being reduced to a residual instrument of traditional aid, UN entities could return to normative functions and become known to stand for more than excellence in project implementation.

These four points demonstrate that any reforms of the UN development function will require more than the kinds of incremental changes that have characterised past reforms. Technocratic adjustments can come later, but for now there is a need to reimagine the UN development function for the 21st century. This reimagining – from which we derive our vision for UN development – needs to be grounded in an understanding of how national sustainable development processes work.

3 Calibrating the perspective: What drives development?

UN documents, and much of the expert discourse, typically analyse and debate the UN's development function in rather myopic, technical terms. Discussions are usually grounded in UN terminology such as "coordination", "ownership", "funding" and "efficiency". These are certainly factors, or conditions, that must exist for the UN to fulfil its potential, and below we present some ideas for how to organise them. Yet, they also represent a debate that is somewhat detached from sustainable development processes "out there" that the UN is supposed to shape. From such a limited starting point, it is difficult to capture in realistic terms the needs and limitations facing UN development cooperation. This section therefore revisits some basic insights on what drives national development (and what does not). It does so without making reference to the UN in order to obtain a more objective view of the appropriate contributions that the UN can make to sustainable development.

3.1 Drivers for national development

National development is a complex process influenced by both internal and external conditions. Internally, important factors include the effectiveness of domestic resource utilisation; the strength of the rule of law; inclusive institutions; the degree of social consensus; historical path dependencies, including colonial legacies; political culture; the commitment to non-violent conflict resolution; natural endowments, and many more. Some of these conditions are given, but most are shaped by political action. Countries that have made rapid development progress have done so through strong political commitment and smart strategies that have served the development interests of those countries.

In practice, however, sound policies often require difficult trade-offs that have to be resolved through a process of prioritisation. Development-friendly policies incur differing costs to national budgets and have differing impacts on jobs and the wellbeing of various constituencies. Invariably, however, development decisions are the outcome of political processes that reflect competing preferences and interests. In most societies – even in authoritarian ones – important decisions emerge from a national debate, whether conducted in open discourse or among elites and political factions. Civic institutions, the private sector, academia, interest groups and professional organisations populate the policy space and contribute to shaping the decisions of governments – and the implementation processes. Development has therefore rightly been described as the "messy politics of change" (Yanguas, 2018) with many – and often independently – moving parts. This reality contrasts strongly with the notion of development being driven by technical inputs – the "technocratic illusion" described by Easterly (2016).

External conditions that facilitate or hinder a country's development trajectory include the conditions of trade; world market prices; credit rating agencies; foreign investment; degrees of indebtedness; the actions of neighbouring states; illicit financial flows; climate exposure, among several others. Many of these conditions – and the various global regimes that govern them – have been subject to negotiations between the “Global South” and the “Global North”, often conditioned by the policies and interests of the heavyweights on both sides. Access to international finance and to their markets are among the critical factors affecting the development prospects of poorer countries. In addition, global development discourse – and the various frameworks resulting from them⁹ – played, and continue to play, a role in informing national discourses and how administrations respond to development challenges.

Box 1: African voices on foreign aid

“Aid flows into specific sectors of the African economy (the health sector is a prominent example) have resulted in the near-total disappearance of the state from such sectors. [...] While it may be true that none of this was intended, it does nothing to change the fact that reliance on aid often ends up poisoning the state-society compact in recipient countries.” (Obadare, 2025)

“I think governments respond to what donors do. So if a donor is fully supporting food relief in the north of Kenya, that's one less thing for the government to worry about. So we shouldn't look at it and say what will happen if the donor doesn't support food relief? What will happen is that the government will be forced to also think about food relief.” (Opalo, 2025)

“In truth, the aid industry was already adrift. Its interventions had become spread too thin and often failed to address the key obstacles that poorer countries faced as they tried to upskill their workers, build energy and transport infrastructure, and access new markets.”¹⁰ (Usman, 2025)

On the closure of USAID: *“It is long overdue, it is actually long overdue because it underscores the importance of us on the continent growing our economies, focusing on growth, growth and more growth.” (Hichilema: in Musika and Kapandula, 2025)*

“Foreign aid has been a double-edged sword for African nations. While it provides critical support, it perpetuates dependency, stifles innovation, and exposes countries to external shocks. Uganda's reliance on foreign aid makes its economy and social programs vulnerable to decisions made abroad. This dependency is unsustainable and undermines the country's economic sovereignty.” (Ujjiga, 2025)

“Take the case of economic diversification. For years, experts have warned that Nigeria's over-reliance on oil revenue is unsustainable. Yet, successive governments have failed to drive industrialization, develop the agricultural sector, or invest adequately in technology and manufacturing. Why? Because aid and grants have provided an easy escape, cushioning the country from the real pain of its economic mismanagement.” (Marcus, 2025)

3.2 The place of external support

Given these realities, it is not surprising that external aid has – at least on the aggregate level – been found to play a marginal role in influencing complex and highly variegated development processes (Doucouliagos & Paldam, 2009; Easterly, 2016, p. xvii; Signor & Vandernoot, 2021). Development happens – for better or worse – with or without external support. In addition, an increasing awareness of the unintended and detrimental effects of aid has emerged over the years.

9 With regard to the UN, we would highlight the “Development Decades”, the frameworks on social rights, the Millennium Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda with its SDGs.

10 Edited for readability.

Recent cuts to foreign aid have revitalised the discourse about aid dependency – a discourse led in no small part by voices of the Global South (Box 1). This discourse highlights the potentially harmful effects of external support. The main argument of the aid-dependency critiques is that aid can inadvertently undermine governments' accountability to their citizens and replace the political process through which a country charts its own path to growth and prosperity. The massive ODA cuts, and the recent revival of a critical discourse, constitute a profound crisis for the organisations of the development sector. But as with other crises, it provides an opportunity to rethink the role of aid and devise better engagement strategies to support countries in the medium to longer term.

Such a rethinking, which is currently taking place in the expert discourse, requires an element of differentiation. The observation that development cooperation played important roles in the post-independence area suggests that, in similar situations of weak and fragile statehood today, greater engagement is still warranted. Another aspect is that good intentions may have led development cooperation astray. Donors have in recent decades focused on reaching beneficiaries directly, bypassing governments as the most important factors for national development; although the intention was to empower individuals and create tangible results,¹¹ the nature of such aid made the evolution of patronising relationships more likely. As Devermont and others remind us, development cooperation should normally be “work to be done largely with governments in support of their goals, not with non-government entities in pursuit of an imposed [foreign] agenda” (Devermont, 2025). Moreover, the different types of development need to be distinguished. Financial transfers from multilateral development banks and bilateral donors had – and continue to have – a role, whereas the problematic and unintended aspects discussed above are linked more often to traditional development cooperation, which is based on donor-funded programmes and projects.

In sum, traditional development assistance as a form of philanthropy – dividing the world into rich donors and poor recipients – is becoming intellectually and practically problematic. At the same time, not all aid is the same.¹² To some extent, the challenges are more in the modalities, where prudent forms of engagement may go a long way in mitigating unintended harmful consequences (Koch, 2023). New forms of international cooperation, such as South-South cooperation, may contain positive elements that can provide lessons. But it is also not easy to escape the dilemma described by the Nobelist Angus Deaton, who explains that “when the conditions for development are present, aid is not required. When local conditions are hostile to development, aid is not useful, and it will do harm if it perpetuates those conditions” (Deaton, 2013, p. 273). One may disagree with the logical implication of the futility of external aid, but Deaton requires the advocates of development cooperation to be much more precise in articulating how external support – and even the supposedly better versions of it – can still be worthwhile. The way forward may be found in shifting from one-sided assistance in the context of patronising relationships, to development cooperation that is built on equitable relationships.

3.3 The multilateral dimension

Multilateral cooperation can help mitigate and ameliorate external conditions important to development; it is therefore a central, though often overlooked, aspect of development cooperation. In fact, although the UN Charter says nothing about “aid” or “assistance”, it focuses on international problem-solving. It is therefore important to bring into view the potential contribution of multilateral cooperation for sustainable development.

11 At the instigation of donors, the number of beneficiaries reached became a synonym for performance for several UN development agencies (see UNICEF, 2025, p. 7, on “Top 10 Achievements in 2024”).

12 This section refers to development assistance rather than short-term humanitarian aid.

The multilateral dimension of development cooperation can comprise quite different issues. It includes the provision of global public goods, on which national development depends, but which in a circular relationship also depend on national action (Messner & Scholz, 2018). Then there are cross-border externalities from economic policies (subsidies), tax systems (illicit transfers), supply lines (labour rights), foreign direct investment (risk management), etc., that need to be managed – on some of these issues, Global South countries are increasingly requesting better global regulation (Baumann et al., 2024; Kaboub, 2025). Yet another function of multilateral cooperation is forging and implementing common norms and standards in areas such as transport, communications, international trade, health and employment. Then there are the human rights issues that member states have agreed are matters of collective concern, both moral and practical, since rights abuses are associated with (international) crime, pandemics, migration and terrorism. Last but not least, multilateral organisations are manifestations of global solidarity and vehicles through which all member states are given a voice while providing support to each other, including through the transfer of globally significant technologies – a point regularly made by the Group of 77 (G77).

Multilateral organisations are called to play a role in these issues. They all have imperfections and often reflect the interests of powerful members, which can make them factors in reinforcing global power differentials (Graham, 2023). Despite these imperfections, member states – in particular the smaller ones – can gain advantages from multilateralism. Key functions of international organisations include the provision of platforms for member states to agree on norms and standards (Abbott & Snidal, 1998); to collect data and monitor, or in some cases enforce, compliance; to bundle and provide expertise; to “launder” in the sense of keeping a check on politicisation and facilitating a focus on the common good and longer-term perspectives; and to manage substantive operations with comparative efficiency. To be effective in these functions, multilateral organisations require a certain degree of independence from member states¹³ – this equalising effect of multilateralism remains an important aspiration as well as a factor for trust and legitimacy.

4 Reviewing the status quo: how the UN does development

The UN’s development function has evolved in response to expediencies. No founding conference has ever provided a design for the “system” in the way, for example, the UN Charter was the result of intensive deliberations among member states. Instead, it has grown by a process of accretion right up to the present day, characterised by increased fragmentation, mission creep and unintended consequences of well-meant reforms. In this process, the UN’s development function struggled to develop a distinctive profile. Rather than thriving on the Charter’s concept of international cooperation, it came to reflect the Global North-driven ODA system – a kind of “mammal” (Murphy, 2012) fed by donors that needed a mechanism to dispense aid and cater to “developing countries” expanding needs.

4.1 Origins and early contours

The idea of UN development cooperation can be traced back to US President Harry Truman, who authorised the first major contribution to the UN through the Extended Programme of Technical Assistance, initiating supply-driven assistance through a growing number of UN entities. The

13 For academic literature on this, see Abbott and Snidal (1998), Collins and White (2011), Hawkins, Lake, Nielson and Tierney (2006) and Cortell and Peterson (2022).

transfer of resources and skills – dubbed “technical assistance” or “capacity-building” – from North to South has remained at the heart of the UN’s development function. It proved so attractive – or lucrative, in a more cynical reading – that even the UN’s specialised agencies that are concerned with international norms and standards expanded their operational support to developing countries. Today, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organization and other specialised agencies are part of the UN development system and many UN country teams. An ODA coefficient defines how much of their expenditure can be counted as ODA, constituting an incentive to expand the delivery of operational support (Borchmeyer & Mir, 2019).

Donors initially had concerns about handing over resources. Various schemes were devised within the UN to encourage co-financing by recipient governments as proof of demand for technical assistance and to ensure ownership. According to ECOSOC, recipient countries were expected “normally to assume responsibility for a substantial part of the costs of technical services with which they are provided” (UN, 1949, para. 4). These counterpart resources soon withered away, however, because UN organisations – concerned about maintaining disbursements – stopped insisting on them. As a result, grant assistance became a one-way flow of resources, accentuating the nature of UN development work as grant technical assistance, rather than as a form of cooperation that would involve elements of mutual responsibility based on global agreements.

This affected how UN development work was approached at the global level. One-way technical assistance – unhinged from the management of common global affairs – contributed towards deepening the political North and South dichotomy within the UN. Although “developing countries” did not seek such support initially – focusing rather on the creation of a new global economic order¹⁴ – as soon as development aid started flowing, it became a defining issue in the area of UN development cooperation. Being an ODA recipient became a common distinguishing feature of the increasingly variegated G77 countries. Subsequently, every major UN development conference – from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to Monterrey in 2002 and the SDG Summit in 2019 – has been animated and imperilled by arguments about funding, maintaining the assumption that development problems can only be solved with more money from the North, a position that belies the concept of sovereignty. When economic growth and other development targets were not met, aid, which constantly fell short of the overall 0.7 per cent target, was to blame. This facile and highly inaccurate causal relationship has always been the rationale of development assistance, in particular within the UN.

It was in the nature of one-way technical assistance – done through programmes and projects (no agreed UN terminology exists on how to distinguish between the two) – that the growth of such interventions led to fragmentation. Early reform reports described the immense administrative burden of developing countries that had to deal with dozens of UN entities, each offering services on their own terms (Bertrand, 1985), not to speak of the many bilateral support programmes. Between 2004 and 2023, the number of donors grew from 63 to 118, and the number of donor agencies increased dramatically, rising from 227 to 622 (World Bank, 2025). The same trend is visible in the UN. New UN entities were created, typically by taking programmes out of existing organisations and turning them into more self-contained ones, as donors sought to strengthen various thematic areas. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), for example, had originally been part of UNDP until it became a separate organisation in 1972 (UN, 1972). UNAIDS, by contrast, was set up in 1994 as a joint programme of multiple UN agencies with its own Secretariat, rather than as a new specialised organisation. It illustrates how new structures were added to the system

14 The Bandung Conference, a precursor to the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77, did not mention aid once in its outcome document from 1955 (Bandung Conference, 1955). And the G77, the alliance of developing countries at the UN, was formed during the first conference on trade in 1964, which took place in Geneva (Sauvant, 1981). It was only during the 1980s that it was moved to New York.

in response to donor priorities and thematic urgency. To remedy this situation, the focus soon shifted to coordination in order to provide better UN development support.

4.2 Recent reforms and their focus on coordination

The history of UN development system reform has centred on efforts to improve coordination, which has been seen as the most obvious and deepest challenge (Browne, 2019). Yet, success has remained elusive. What has changed most significantly has been the tone, becoming ever more euphemistic: The Jackson report from 1969 describes the system as “unmanageable in the strictest use of the word” and marked by “sickness” (Jackson, 1969, pp. i, iii), and Bertrand later notes the “impossibility of coordination” (Bertrand, 1985). Not discouraged, those who have attempted more recent reform efforts have set the bar higher, aiming at significant improvements in coordination while focusing almost exclusively on the country level. The 2006 reform aspired to “deliver as one”, with the ambition to have the various UN entities represented in each country speaking with one voice, operating with one programme and sharing one office (UN, 2006).¹⁵ It achieved notable successes in a few pilot countries but was not fully scaled up, nor were the necessary structural changes implemented at the global level, as individual organisations resisted cooperation. Donors were not consistent with their support, did not provide adequate funding to incentivise the process and many preferred to continue their relationships with UN entities individually.

In 2018, another significant attempt at UN development system reform tried to build on the ambition of delivering as one, though the term itself was no longer used. This time, the reform aimed to introduce a “new generation of UN country teams” and a “reinvigorated resident coordinator system” (UN, 2017a). The reform was designed to establish a more structured and harmonised approach to programming, aligning UN efforts more closely with national priorities and the 2030 Agenda. But the resident coordinator system has always been an additional structure, and this reform, like the previous ones, also increased in complexity,¹⁶ but lacked the accountability and incentives needed to make it work. A recent evaluation found that coordination at the country level is still “more administrative than substantive” (UN, 2025a).¹⁷ Bertrand’s contention 40 years ago about the “impossibility of coordination” largely rings true, and coordination mechanisms might even have aggravated issues of fragmentation and overlap.¹⁸

In the background of these attempts at reform, two other major changes have made the process even harder. The first change has been in the pattern of funding contributions to UN development

15 Not entirely a new idea. In the 1990s, the Commission on Global Governance proposed single UN offices in each developing country “headed by a UN coordinator appointed by the Secretary-General, without personal responsibility for the management of any one programme” (Commission on Global Governance, 1995, p. 289).

16 A recent handbook on the UN’s country level work is around 140 pages long (Government of Switzerland, 2025).

17 Problems start with the cooperation frameworks, which, seven years after their reform, “are not delivering a more focused, prioritised, and coherent United Nations development offer at the country level, as intended”. The language of frameworks is often broad and vague. Annual joint work plans – meant to provide more detail on how cooperation frameworks are implemented – “are often a mere collation (often ex-post) of entity activities rather than coherent and strategic and they rarely drive strategic coordination”.

18 Coordination structure may even have contributed to problems. It may also have created an incentive for agencies to be visible in the country programmes, such as the UN Development Assistance Frameworks or later the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework as proof of their relevancy. Similarly, the call for “joint programmes” of two or more UN entities may have contributed to the opposite of what was intended. Rather than bringing UN entities together for coordinated responses, it encouraged mission creep, as UN entities ventured into programme areas that previously were clearly identified as the domain of a single entity.

entities. Starting in the 1990s, the amount of resources earmarked by donors for specific purposes rose as they sought to align the UN with their own agendas (even for activities outside of their mandates), and exert greater control over the use of their funding (Graham, 2023). In 2023 (the latest year for which data are available), 81 per cent of the UN development system's income was earmarked (UN, 2025b). For UNDP, the number was 90 per cent, for the World Food Programme 93 per cent.¹⁹ Individual earmarked contributions may often be justifiable, enabling the UN to do things it might otherwise not be able to do. But earmarking comes with systemic side-effects of increased fragmentation, the competition for resources, the fracturing of accountability and the corrosion of the UN's egalitarian multilateralism (Graham, 2023). It contributes to making the UN "responsive, but not responsible" (Prom-Jackson, 2017): responsive to donors (which can also include host governments), but not responsible in the sense of its mandates and mission (Baumann & Reinsberg, in press; Graham, 2023; Weinlich et al., 2022).

The other consequential change has been the decentralisation of organisational capacities to the field. The addition of increasingly more country offices by individual UN development entities had been going on for many years. In 2006, there were already more than 1,000 field offices of UN development system organisations (UN, 2017b). In 2016, a reform document gave a number of 1,432. In development circles, decentralisation to the country level (and sometimes to the subnational level) is seen as supporting national or communal ownership, ensuring that development projects fit local needs and that money reaches recipients rather than staying at headquarters – principles considered important in General Assembly resolutions. Member states have therefore pressed UN entities for decades to move human resources and responsibilities to the country level, resulting in a system where, in the words of Jackson from 1969, the "administrative tentacles thrust downwards", where they become part of national ecosystems and take on lives of their own. Decentralisation may seem like a worthy goal in the context of traditional aid patronage, but for the UN it has had the effect of diminishing the exercise of its multilateral functions and contributing to performance deficits, which are described in the next section.

4.3 Three pathologies of the current UN development system

All the factors described above – an unguided, ad hoc institutional evolution, organisational self-interest, the UN development system's funding patterns and a high degree of decentralisation – have contributed to a UN development function that is off track. Three basic deficits – or "pathologies", to use a health analogy – may serve to describe what is wrong with the current system. They have been in the making and known for a long time. But they bear repeating.

4.3.1 Entrenched patronage: donor and recipient interests over development impact

The UN, like any multilateral organisation, depends on a certain degree of autonomy from member states to be able to perform its functions.²⁰ This autonomy, however, has been undermined by vested interests that have become a strong feature of UN development cooperation. The UN development system has been analysed as having become the child of donors, acting as their agent of implementation and helping them extend their influence while taking advantage of the massive UN field network (Graham, 2023; Weinlich et al., 2022). The result of widespread earmarking is a supply-driven way of operating²¹ that undermines performance for impact, which

19 Own calculation, based on UN (2025e).

20 For academic literature on this, see Abbott and Snidal (1998), Collins and White (2011), Hawkins et al. (2006) and Cortell and Peterson (2022).

21 Even country-level offices run their own intelligence on donor policies to anticipate funding interests and adjust their offers accordingly (Weinlich et al., 2022).

would require responding to genuine development demands and aligning with domestic policy issues. UN staff are consequently not attuned to the need for cooperation, learning or innovation. Donors are aware of the negative impact of earmarking, but prefer to finance projects that reflect the interests of their taxpayers, and which are easy to report on. Systems that were designed to correct this, such as “resource-based management” (Prom-Jackson, 2017) and the UN’s monitoring and evaluation systems, have become tools of patronage. The focus of monitoring and evaluation has been on donor interests and short-term outputs, rather than assessing the UN against its mandates and mission.²²

The relationship of UN development entities with programme countries also invites patronage. Most projects target the public sectors of host countries, as discussed above, and UN counterparts enjoy a range of benefits in terms of incomes, vehicles, personal computers, training programmes and overseas travel. These benefits help ensure partner commitment to UN activities, but they absorb significant proportions of resources that might otherwise be directly spent on national programmes in support of beneficiaries. These vested interests, whether on the donor or recipient side, are a major reason for the reluctance of member states to change the status quo.

4.3.2 Misconstruing development: technical fixes without political process

The UN’s institutions are under tight scrutiny by donors for their levels of efficiency, anti-fraud policies, gender policies and other aspects. Major organisational reviews, such as those conducted by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) and the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), regularly scrutinise all organisational aspects. But they do not critically examine the conceptual dispositions that underlie UN development work or guide operational approaches. Widespread fallacies (not unique to the UN) have affected the relevance and effectiveness of its development support.

One such fallacy is the conception of development as a technical problem rather than a political process. Providing technical blueprints, piloting solutions, building systems, gathering data and issuing reports are all part of the UN’s toolbox. Underlying this is a culture in many UN entities – and in particular field offices – to stay clear from political processes and safeguard the speedy and orderly implementation of donor projects based on pre-agreed plans. One aspect of technical approaches is capacity-building, which is understood in the sense of strengthening skills. It accounts for the bulk of the development expenditure of the UN development system (Dalberg, 2017, p. 13).²³ Capacity-building rests on the assumption that countries lack the able number of civil servants or that people will take better decisions after they have been trained. However, the reality of UN capacity-building is probably closer to what the most recent evaluation we found on this topic states: “initiatives are currently short-term, small scale, disconnected and ad hoc, limiting their ability to contribute to transformative and sustainable impact” (UN Women, 2023, p. 51).²⁴ There is a broader problem. Like other donors, the UN has the dual objective of wanting to increase national capacity to provide services and to actually provide those services to end-users as an indicator of success. As Fukuyama has affirmed, the latter objective often wins out, and “the direct provision of services almost always undermines the local government’s capacity to provide them once the aid programme terminates” (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 40).

22 Baumann and Reinsberg (in press). These deficits are also frequently noted in MOPAN assessments of UN entities and in meta or synthesis evaluations of UN development entities, for example UNDP (2018) and UNICEF (2020).

23 There is no agreed UN definition of “capacity-building”. In a broad understanding, capacity-building can be a synonym for development support, and it may also be taken to include building institutions. The Dalberg survey of the UN’s functions brought the definition of capacity-building down to “include training, learning-focused workshops, expert content advice, etc.”

24 At the same time, capacity-building can be criticised as a good business proposition, because demand for capacity-building never ends, irrespective of national developments.

The notion of “delivering” development rather than contributing to the nationally owned development process has become a UN catchword, adopted to demonstrate value-for-money to its donors. A report by the Secretary-General speaks of “ensuring the effective delivery of development results on the ground” as a “key principle” of the UN development system (UN, 2017a, para. 4); a subsequent report advances the notion of a UN system “equipped to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals” (UN, 2025d, para. 140). This suggests an ability to engineer outcomes from the outside when achieving sustainable development results is the responsibility of national actors. For the UN to support development effectively, it must be clear-eyed about its limited role and where it can still be effective.

4.3.3 Project overload: a system lacking meaningful purpose

The third pathological syndrome of the UN’s development function is, in our analysis, an exaggerated focus on small-scale project work coupled with the absence of a mission or compelling idea of what the UN can offer. Often, both individual UN entities and entire UN country teams are inward-looking and struggle to define the core of their (collective) contribution to national development (MOPAN, 2021, p. 54; Weinlich et al., 2022). At all organisational levels, programmatic documents are often mere collations (often ex-post) of entity activities and do not provide strategic focus or clarity of mission.²⁵ Development planning might follow protocol in terms of analysis, but the analysis is shaped by what an agency can offer, not necessarily by what a country needs or whether the agency has a comparative advantage for this type of assistance within the development community: the supply-rather-than-demand syndrome again.

This lack of mission, or strategic leadership, contrasts with a large number of projects. Each will purport to do something beneficial, but the high number alone points to the factors that created these projects: opportunism, the availability of funding, patronage and misaligned incentive structures. Today, every programme manager must be a resource mobiliser.²⁶ All this comes with an overreliance on programme staff who administer and micromanage funds, and on consultants who do much of the work.²⁷ In contrast, the UN is not known for having seasoned subject-matter experts in areas that matter to governments. The UN operates in its own cosmos of donor-driven projects, with little connection to broader national processes.

5 Elements of a new vision for the UN’s development function

The previous section established that the UN’s approach of predominantly small-scale project work is not effective. More importantly, it is also poorly aligned with the reality of how national development processes work and the role foreign engagement can play in it, as analysed in Section 3. That the problem has not been corrected with past reforms conjures the image of the boiling frog

25 An extreme example is UN Women’s practice of allocating resources to countries. A MOPAN assessment found that the country allocation of the strategic plan is based on the success of resource mobilisation in the previous phase (MOPAN, 2019).

26 There may be targets, but they are not relevant. “I don’t even know my target”, one UN resident representative said in an interview, pointing out that resource mobilisation anyway would not stop at the target (Weinlich et al., 2022).

27 The focus on resource- and staff-intensive project work can also have a negative effect on national capacity, which it is often supposed to strengthen, by poaching talent from government. It may divert committed government staff into a parallel world of aid providers. This is a problem “clear to anyone who has spent time in the developing world” (Shaikh, 2010), and it occurs particularly in poor-country settings (Lemay-Hébert, 2019).

that has passed the moment when it can still jump to safety. For decades, member states, UN institutions and large parts of the epistemic aid community have grown so accustomed to the UN's development approach that it may be difficult for many to see alternatives.²⁸ In the following, we provide elements of a new vision for the UN development function. Each element is built around a specific idea, but all four are based on the UN Charter and thus provide a notion of what a UN development function based on the concept of cooperation could look like – in principle and in practice. All four elements are consistent with the idea that the UN development function should evolve from the delivery of projects and services which the UN owns (despite the formal commitment to national ownership), towards engaging with national sustainable development processes driven by governments and societies. Moreover, all elements might result in a UN that is financially smaller (because real demand for UN engagement might be less than what current financial throughput suggests), but more politically relevant nationally and globally.

5.1 Meeting the demand for advice: positioning the UN development system as a knowledge facilitator

Countries can benefit from technical and strategic advice, if it comes from a source they trust. Each country's leadership must grapple with strategic questions, which in Section 3 we described as being the most important factors in determining the course and the fortunes of national development under given circumstances. These are questions of how to navigate complex policy challenges; prioritise development concerns; allocate the national budget; reconcile competing demands of a diverse population; improve the effectiveness of their administrations, basic health services, data collection systems, tax systems and so on. The role of the UN would be to assist countries, help safeguard their interests, seek out best practices and ensure the alignment of solutions with global norms and standards. Importantly, governments must feel that the UN is adding value and seek the support of the respective UN entity.

If the UN currently does not live up to this expectation, that may have more to do with the inability to provide such advice than with a lack of demand (Baumann, 2022). Consultancy services for governments are a multi-billion-dollar market, and there is a specific niche for the UN. The General Assembly seems to recognise this, as it has in recent decades consistently mandated UN development entities to engage in policy advice.²⁹ What sets the UN development organisations apart from other providers is the trust linked to a universal organisation that is not attached to any specific ideology and not dominated by any specific member state or group of member states. In practice, this neutrality would be supported by the General Assembly's oversight of operational activities. Institutionally, it would rest on career staff with strong allegiance to the UN. To ensure that the UN is representative of its member states, it requires that there be more effort to ensure a better mix between staff originating from the Global North and the Global South. This would also increase credibility with developing countries that the UN is not representing views driven by a certain number of "rich" countries.

UN policy advice could take different forms. The UN could facilitate high-level advice from universally acknowledged experts. They could include recognised former politicians, eminent personalities, influential economists and acknowledged thought leaders in the field of development who have demonstrated a commitment to the spirit of the UN Charter, have a proven track record and whose advice a government can rely on with a degree of confidence. The UN has employed many Nobel prize winners in the past (Jolly et al., 2009), but it does not need to systematically draw such individuals into its ranks. The UN can assist in identifying appropriate individuals and expert

28 For a notable exception, see Jenks and Jones (2013).

29 See past QCPR resolutions, the resolutions through which the UN General Assembly monitors and mandates the UN development system.

networks. Visible engagement with external figures providing advice might be exactly what is needed to break a stalemate in the public discourse.

The UN could also have a direct role in more technical policy issues. In the past, advice has mostly been provided in the context of projects, such as how to increase coverage of a service, how to boost agricultural output or how to engage with marginalised groups. Specific consultants are often included in donor aid packages – in this form, the UN already engages policy advice but without using or building its own capacity. Consultants come and go and do not contribute towards building the kind of institutional expertise and trusted relationships needed for generating policy advice (Baumann, 2022). As a result, the governments might seek support elsewhere.³⁰ A specific form of policy advice could come through facilitating peer reviews, exchanges and learning. Whereas some world regions are well-integrated and feature established peer-exchange mechanisms (e.g. in the context of the OECD), others are not. In such cases – or in those where countries could benefit from an exchange with distant peers – the UN could have a role in making it happen.

The UN could also be a trusted partner for consultation on (large-scale) bilateral projects instead of conducting projects itself. It could support developing countries with expertise to help them negotiate on equal terms with donor countries, multinational enterprises and banks on matters that reflect their long-term interests and align with global norms. This role could extend to large-scale global initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Global Gateway Initiative, both of which are associated with financial and environmental risks for recipients. The UN's role in these cases would typically not be in the shape of formal involvement. Rather, the UN should be available as a trusted friend to offer informal advice behind the scenes. Horizontal assistance is also increasingly valid, as countries are seeking examples to emulate along South-South, North-South and South-North directions.

At the global level, we can imagine the UN playing an advisory role for global governance on sustainable development and performing a meaningful function by monitoring progress – as the UN already does with the SDGs – but with a greater qualitative component while focusing on specific countries that have achieved notable success. It should gather and analyse best practices so that they can be fed into policy debates. It should undertake analyses on issues related to global public goods, interdependencies and policy coherence, reconciling trade, climate, migration, taxation, and security policies and determine how they support or undermine sustainable development, both at the country and global levels. Such a function could be seen as encroaching upon sensitive areas of responsibility, but it is key to the concept of international cooperation, whereby member states trade certain prerogatives for the benefit of collective problem-solving.

Repositioning the UN as a key facilitator of knowledge and expert advice is nothing new. UN organisations already provide and facilitate advisory services, albeit to a limited extent. Specialised agencies would continue to share their expertise while pertaining to the norms and standards to which they are custodians. Other UN entities would need to build their expertise, which would require increased capacities that can be deployed at the global, regional and country levels. In addition, UN entities would need to tap into larger policy networks that include think tanks, universities, civil society, groups of elders and movements around the world, especially in the Global South. Less bureaucratic arrangements need to be made to make knowledge and experts accessible to countries. Rather than glossy celebrations of UN activities, reports would be based on analytical material with immediate practical relevance.

30 An example from a Balkan country: The Ministry of Labour wished to reform its vocational education programme in order to ensure private-sector participation and increase the chances for graduates to find employment. The combined UN country team (including ILO, UNICEF, UNESCO) were unable to respond. The ministry then contacted the labour office in Nuremberg (Germany) to help set up the system of apprenticeship in Albania.

5.2 Providing public advocacy that matters: elevating norms and shaping national debates

Sound advice to government officials is only one aspect of national decision-making processes. Behind policy decisions are the competing preferences, beliefs and often conflicting demands of a country's society. National decisions tend to emerge through a political process culminating in parliamentary and/or elite debate, but public discourse does not follow a preset and orderly agenda. It is influenced by myriad factors and susceptible to information and – increasingly so – disinformation,³¹ assertions, emotions, deep-rooted convictions, patronage and party politics. As laid out in Section 3, multilateral organisations have a role in providing objective information; in the context of development cooperation, this should also extend to national processes. In cases where issues related to the mandate of UN entities are at stake, representatives of these organisations should be involved as discussants or advocates to correct facts, rationalise discussions, represent the global consensus and share good practices from comparable countries in order to favour sound decisions and policies.³² The advocacy of WHO during the COVID pandemic and the role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in climate debates are just two of many examples. UNICEF's advocacy for children's rights may also be cited, although that may play a much smaller role in its day-to-day work than official communication suggests (Hagn, 2018).

Even more so than policy advice, public advocacy as a form of sometimes unsolicited engagement can come into tension with sovereignty and – in the context of development politics – might be seen as problematic. UN General Assembly resolutions have, in that spirit, stipulated that UN support must be “voluntary” and “at the request of countries” (UN, 2024b) – QCPR resolutions do not mention advocacy as mandated UN functions. These traditional provisions reflect more a paradigm of aid, or assistance, than multilateral cooperation. Under the latter, member states sign on to certain international frameworks and by doing so, they step into the arena of international cooperation, which includes elements of mutual accountability. In the UN's human rights pillar, governments have accepted global monitoring and accountability. Sustainable development is far less sensitive. In practice, advocacy will – if delivered prudently – be understood to serve the interests of governments and society, helping them to implement international frameworks and national goals. Further mitigating the intrusive nature of advocacy, the role of the UN is not to speak loudly or to shame and blame, but to contribute factual assessments.³³

In general, UN entities should be active advocates for their own missions, be it for the rights of women and children, public health, the environment, cultural heritage, migration or the many other domains consistent with the UN Charter and subsequent conventions, treaties and other frameworks. However, given the trade-offs in development – with the interests of some parties affecting the interests of others – advocacy should not be limited to the mandates of individual UN entities. It should also weigh in on policies that have a bearing on their constituency or mandated issue. Logically then, not all UN agencies have to speak with one voice. The importance is that the best arguments are known to help the country to decide.

31 In the UN's “Pact for the Future”, agreed in 2024, member states recognise the growing threat from disinformation and “decide to [...] Address the risks to sustaining peace posed by disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and content inciting harm” (UN, 2024a, pp. 14, 15).

32 For example, the majority of people in a country (and its government) may think that young offenders should be incarcerated to “learn a lesson”. The people and their government should know that the rest of the world thinks differently. Government alone is not going to change legislation on juvenile justice against the belief of the majority – hence the importance for the relevant UN expert to engage in the public discourse.

33 The UN has experience with adapting the demands of international frameworks into locally acceptable concepts. For example, birth control can be advocated through “spacing”, which works better in some cultures.

The UN's advocacy is important for all countries, although it must be adapted to each unique political context. In democracies with a vibrant civil society landscape and organised interests on almost every issue, the UN might focus on filling blind spots in national debates – issues such as those identified above that may relate to policy coherence and the detrimental effects of national policies in other countries. Such countries are generally accustomed to robust public debate and tolerant of external voices from formal organisations. In more authoritarian settings, the UN might provide some sort of safe space for national voices to contribute their views and expertise, as it has often done in the past. This will work better on issues related to economic or social development than on rights issues, where the UN's role and its freedom of expression will be subject to narrow limits, even in the best scenario.

Public advocacy should displace much of the UN's project implementation activities that are not related to its norms. Contributing advocacy to a law on property rights will be cheaper than implementing many kinds of projects, and perhaps even more effective. This greater emphasis on advocacy will require a comprehensive understanding by UN staff of normative frameworks and their application to complex policy debates. To follow the dynamics of public debate, UN staff would need to be more politically attuned, comprising more lawyers, political scientists, sociologists, etc., and fewer project managers. The nature of UN entities' accountability to their governing bodies would also need to change, being based on performance metrics related, *inter alia*, to public visibility, expert feedback and the impact of advocacy activities.

5.3 Engaging universally: a development function for all member states

Although the UN's security and human rights pillars are universal – applying to all member states in exactly the same way – the UN's development system is organised according to an ever more artificial and anachronistic donor–recipient distinction. This anomaly is increasingly at odds with the reality of global economic developments, a growing sense of emancipation and political agency of the Global South, and more recent normative developments, including the 2030 Agenda, which explicitly emphasises the universality principle (with some countries of the Global South having been more successful in meeting the goals than northern countries). Major global challenges cannot be separated into global hemispheres. The UN's development function therefore needs to fully embrace universality and engage with all member states (Baumann & Haug, 2024) in order to utilise the potential of the UN's global governance function and give practical meaning to the commitment in the UN Charter to “achieve international co-operation in solving international problems”.

Two functions are key. First, for addressing global challenges, the UN requires an egalitarian and inclusive governance function. Unequal relations make for unhealthy multilateralism, whereby marginalisation leads to resentment and heated rhetoric (Baumann et al., 2024). Going far beyond the High-Level Political Forum, where national efforts to advance sustainable development are discussed, the UN needs to provide a platform where all member states can engage on an equal footing in “shaping conditions within (other) countries by using cooperative and promotional means” (Kloke-Lesch, 2021). If donor countries can shape UN priorities for “developing countries” – through Executive Board scrutiny of agency country programme documents³⁴ – then “developing countries” should equally have the opportunity to review sustainable development progress in high-income countries and indicate where UN engagement might be needed. This would reflect the universality of the SDGs and ensure a genuinely inclusive approach. ECOSOC and the General Assembly could be reformed to allow for meaningful engagement with issues around global public goods, cross-border linkages and spill-over effects, and the externalities created by trade, climate and

34 A review of recent comments on draft UNICEF country programme documents demonstrates that virtually all substantive comments are made by donor countries.

security policies for development chances elsewhere on the globe. The purpose would not just be to create greater reciprocity between member states, but also to identify opportunities for more productive economic cooperation. In policy discourse, the debates around “policy coherence” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023) and “beyond aid” (Browne, 1999; Janus, Klingebiel, & Paulo, 2014) focus on these issues.

Second, the UN would have to increase its global monitoring, which is a key multilateral function.³⁵ The UN should further develop its analysis of cross-border linkages – from statistics at the aggregate level to country-specific and qualitative accounts. The UN human rights pillar, which represents less than 1 per cent of UN spending (UN, 2025c), provides inspiration for how that should be done in the field of development. Similar to the Universal Periodic Review, the UN should develop country-specific reports on sustainable development that go beyond today's voluntary national reviews. Among other tasks, these reports should critically analyse what actions or policies (high-income) countries ought to consider in order to avoid creating disadvantages or damages in other (developing) countries. Unlike voluntary national reviews, which remain voluntary, self-reported and uneven in quality, such assessments would need to be systematic, independent and comparable across countries. Their findings should inform both ECOSOC and the UN's engagement at the country level to identify where UN action in the form of advice and advocacy (see above) is needed.³⁶

Universal engagement with all member states does not mean the UN will have the same presence and function in all countries. In countries with higher incomes, the UN could be present with very few staff, performing advisory and advocacy functions as described above. The engagement patterns in high-income countries could provide a compelling model for how the UN could be more effective even in middle- and low-income countries. Regarding the UN's headquarters level, a greater global governance function, whether in ECOSOC or in the executive boards, would require bringing experts from national ministries into UN platforms (Rosenthal, 2005, p. 30). The specialised agencies provide an example. At WHO, for example, the World Health Assembly is attended by the Ministers of Health. It might be worthwhile to think about turning more UN entities into membership organisations such as the specialised agencies. This would finally shift the discussion from “donor–recipient” to a more substantive, technical level.

5.4 Taking care in fragile settings: the UN as an actor of last resort

The last element in our vision of a reformed UN development system concerns its role in fragile, conflict-prone or politically unstable settings, where the UN may be the actor of last resort following the departure of other external organisations. This is already familiar territory for the UN. However, our vision foresees a different way in which the UN engages. The last-resort function does not separate the world into donors and recipients but is more like a collectively owned emergency function available where needed. People enmeshed in fragile settings should thus be able to look to the UN as the one body that unfailingly works towards their interest, in a context where national politics falls short. As this function impinges on national sovereignty,³⁷ it needs to be strictly limited to doing what host governments cannot – or are not willing to – do by themselves, and new forms of accountability need to accompany the exercise of functions akin to statecraft. And it needs to be

35 For example, UNICEF's report card on European countries (UNICEF, s.a.).

36 This would go against the current principles of UN assistance being demand-driven (demand as articulated by governments). However, governments might be given the option to opt out from the UN's facilitation of global problem-solving.

37 The UN's very limited experience with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) acts as a harbinger of the difficulties of the approach.

informed by carefully devised exit strategies. In fact, the programmes guiding engagement in these settings should be formulated with sunset clauses.

The actor-of-last-resort function encompasses both development support and humanitarian assistance, and it should also involve the security and rights functions of the UN. As far as development is concerned, the UN should have an operational role, but it must resist falling into a project-execution logic. Any UN interventions need to be informed by a sound analysis of systemic solutions that have been subject to a deliberation involving a broad range of stakeholders and experts, including from the countries affected. Interventions must be executed with an astute awareness of the political difficulties of achieving anything useful. Wherever a UN political or peacekeeping mission is present, the UN's development apparatus should work closely with it. The UN should be clear-eyed about where it is best placed to operate, and where other actors (national, regional, private) may be better suited. And in contexts where other development organisations are still present, the UN might often find it more appropriate to monitor and advise objectively on bilateral projects – complementing the often output-driven monitoring³⁸ with a more holistic view.

In its humanitarian work – arguably the most effective of the UN's current functions – the UN should first and foremost focus on peace-making through conflict mediation and the involvement of the Security Council. Mitigation in the form of humanitarian work should always be the plan B. But where necessary, the UN should focus on monitoring the implementation of bilateral resources – again with a pragmatic sense of how to achieve best results in complex situations that defy easy categorisations of good and bad actors – and standard humanitarian principles of neutrality (Krishnan, 2025). In cases where there is neither a functioning government to oversee the humanitarian response nor strong bilateral engagement, the UN should focus on negotiating access, organising and managing logistics, warehousing and stockpiling, verifying situations, and so on – functions that are usually beyond the capacity of non-governmental organisations and for situations where an international body is needed. For cases when last-mile delivery is done by other humanitarian actors, in particular non-governmental organisations, the UN should focus on facilitating their work. Finally, the UN should examine situations in which a more streamlined approach to humanitarian assistance is appropriate and needs to involve just one – and maximum two – of its humanitarian organisations.

6 Next steps

For some aspects of the vision provided above, examples can be found in the current UN development system. UN entities do provide policy advice and sometimes raise their voices when political developments violate the rights of citizens. Several specialised agencies operate universally and the bulk of the UN's development and humanitarian resources is spent in fragile settings. Yet, taken together, our vision for a reformed UN development function goes well beyond current practices and marks a new direction.

This begs the question about the possibility of change. The UN system, shaped by 193 member states and entrenched institutional interests, has often struggled with even the most incremental reforms. Our response to such scepticism is that the vision outlined above is not a template for immediate action, but an invitation to debate the direction of travel. Having said this, we suggest to conceive of institutional reform as a path where the end point can be seen (the vision), but where it is also worthwhile to identify first steps. In that spirit, we sketch six areas in which established structures, processes and thinking need to change to orientate the UN towards the new vision described above. These reforms will go a long way towards refashioning the UN's aid bureaucracy and mitigating the dysfunction associated with it.

38 A main criticism of extant monitoring approaches is that they focus on immediate outputs and accountability to donors, rather than on outcomes and impact (Prom-Jackson, 2017).

1. Embracing a new understanding of the UN development function. A cultural and conceptual shift is needed across the system: from the provision of services to global cooperation; from resource-driven work to knowledge functions; from technical to politically informed engagement. In other words, from saving the world to humbly facilitating development.³⁹ A simple starting point could be to avoid – in the context of the UN – traditional aid terminology such as “developing country”, “ownership”, “effectiveness”, “coordination” and “delivering”, etc. The UN itself and member states should create opportunities to discuss a new concept of the UN development function.
2. Funding that supports cooperation. The first three elements of our vision (Section 5) operate in non-monetary ways. UN entities should not handle money earmarked by donors. Since all four elements of our vision for the UN rely on multilateral cooperation rather than the UN being a channel for aid transfers, they would require the benefits of assessed or voluntary core funding. It would be up to member states to provide a different kind of funding and to ensure that it supports multilateral functions, rather than nourishing a project-based way of working. The result might well be a financially smaller UN. The benchmark in future should be how the UN can grow in political rather than financial terms.
3. A different staff profile. With the phasing out of fund administration, subject-matter experts should move to the centre of UN operations. Current career patterns that reward rotation and general management should give way to incentives for building deep knowledge and long-term engagement. The UN needs more specialists in areas that governments value – elections, constitutions, fiscal systems, climate policy – rather than more project administrators.⁴⁰
4. Global networks of expertise. Expertise should be concentrated in strategically resourced hubs, (e.g. in centrally or regionally based UN clusters) capable of supporting multiple countries simultaneously in the respective fields. Such networks would strengthen the quality and consistency of technical support, reduce dependency on local patronage systems and align operations more closely with the UN’s core mandates. Re-centralising certain functions – in particular the mobilisation of financial resources – does not mean abandoning country-level engagement; it means ensuring that field staff are nimble, strategically placed and equipped to connect national processes with world-class technical capacity.
5. Resident coordinators should be recognised for what they already are: ambassadors of the UN Secretary-General, accredited to governments, but with a responsibility to represent the UN system in its entirety. Their core function should be to help governments navigate the UN’s complex machinery, ensuring coherence across the development, humanitarian and human rights pillars. To be effective, resident coordinators need to have a deep knowledge of the UN’s institutions, mandates and procedures and be able to mobilise the full range of UN expertise when governments demand it.
6. New performance metrics and incentives: Moving beyond a project-delivery model means assessing the UN not on development outcomes, but on the quality, relevance and integrity of its contributions. Performance should reflect whether UN advice, advocacy and convening are credible, evidence-based, aligned with international norms, and valued by governments and civil society. Key metrics include the quality and usability of knowledge products, the reception of UN ideas in national debates, the effectiveness of advocacy and convening, support to normative processes such as treaty bodies, and the system’s ability to learn and adapt. This shifts accountability away from “delivering development” towards doing the right thing in the right way and has important implications for the measurement of staff performance.

39 See Hagn’s case study on “organized hypocrisy” at UNICEF; “organized hypocrisy” refers to the separation of rhetoric and action, undermining the performance of organizations (Hagn, 2018).

40 As an example, one could point to the towering intellectuals UNDP has attracted in the past, leading to such important innovations as the concept of Human Development (Murphy, 2012).

7 Conclusion

We are today very much in the situation described by Maurice Bertrand when, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the UN, he reflected on the possibility of reform. Then and ever since, there has been a near universal agreement on the need for drastic reform. But Bertrand also noted “that there is a great deal of misunderstanding concerning the possible role of a World Organization and that the confusion in people’s minds on this subject is itself a political phenomenon” (Bertrand, 1985, p. 69). It is a fundamental paradox that, despite the broadly acknowledged need for reform, there has been an equally noteworthy dearth of ideas for the way forward and lack of appetite for taking first steps.

As our contribution to breaking the stalemate, we have made the case for a fundamental overhaul of the UN system that goes beyond traditional considerations of efficiency or technical adjustments. The focus should be on the principles that underlie the UN’s development function and the approaches to engaging with member states. An understanding of the current institutional deficits is key to identifying how the UN can extricate itself from patronage and incentive structures that undermine its effectiveness. Most importantly, the UN development function should be driven by the realities of how developing countries choose to pursue their own development and concentrate on the more focused role multilateral organisations can play in this. Based on that, we have argued that knowledge, experience, advice and advocacy (rather than resources and their delivery) should be at the core of the UN’s work. It should adopt a universal approach to all member states, fostering fairer international relations whereby wealthier nations allow space and opportunity for less fortunate countries to develop. While our proposal is not driven by current efficiency debates, it reflects a shift from resource-heavy aid to different and less resource-intensive multilateral modes of functioning.

The reforms implied by our vision will have winners and losers. Some UN entities will have to do with fewer resources; the traditional “programme countries” may see a smaller UN footprint and smaller financial transfer amounts from the UN; donor countries will not only lose a comfortable vehicle for aid, but also a global authority helping to promote their interests. But the gains outweigh the costs: a UN that reclaims political weight, provides governments with trusted expertise, holds powerful states accountable for spillover effects, and offers protection and support in fragile situations. The alternative is drift. If the UN clings to a delivery model rooted in outdated North–South divides and donor earmarks, it risks sliding into irrelevance at precisely the moment when multilateral cooperation is most urgently needed.

The choice is stark but simple. The UN can remain stuck in path dependency, or it can re-emerge as the indispensable forum for international cooperation that its Charter envisioned. The way forward is not through technical fixes alone, but through political courage by member states, the Secretary-General and UN leadership to realign the development function with the realities of today’s world and the aspirations of tomorrow. The UN80 Initiative, launched in 2025, offers such an inflection point. It is an opportunity to confront the failures of incrementalism and to open a debate not only about structures but about purpose. If used boldly, UN80 can help reposition the UN development function as more than a vehicle for aid – it can serve as the global reference point for sustainable development governance in a multipolar world. Whether this moment is seized will determine if the UN fades into irrelevance or re-emerges as a central actor in shaping a fairer, more sustainable future.

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