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**Making the UN development system more “Fit for Purpose” for the 2030
Agenda on Sustainable Development and the SDGs – what does it mean for
gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment?**

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Making the UN development system more “Fit for Purpose” for the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the SDGs – what does it mean for gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment?

Ingrid FitzGerald¹

1. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: An Agenda for Change

In the final outcome document of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States highlighted the role of the UN system in supporting implementation of the SDGs. Specifically, they underlined: *the important role and comparative advantage of an adequately resourced, relevant, coherent, efficient and effective UN system in supporting the achievement of the SDGs and sustainable development*². Member States also stressed *“the importance of system-wide strategic planning, implementation and reporting in order to ensure coherent and integrated support to the implementation of the new Agenda by the United Nations development system”*³. In addition they welcomed the ongoing ECOSOC dialogue on the *“longer-term positioning of the UN development system”*, in the lead up to the next QCPR, to help set the direction, and identify the actions needed, for the UNDS to effectively support implementation of the new development agenda.

The 2030 Agenda is an agenda for change. As many observers have highlighted, it represents a significant departure from the MDGs. Where the MDGs were vertical and siloed, and represented a so-called “North-South” development agenda, the SDGs are much more interlinked and horizontal. The SDGs are transformative – with an absolute goal of eliminating extreme poverty, “leaving no one behind”, tackling poverty and inequality within and between countries in one agenda, and the aim of bringing about change in the structural factors that impede development progress; universal – applying to all countries regardless of their stage of development; rights-based – explicitly referring to the human rights norms and commitments made by Member States – and integrated – bringing together not only the three dimensions of sustainable development, but also the pillars of the work of the UN – human rights, development, humanitarian and peace and security – including in Goal 16. There is no doubt that where the MDGs did not demand coherence the SDGs do.

Such a change-oriented, transformative, and integrated agenda requires a much more transformative and integrated international community and UN system. There are many more players engaged - not least because of the very broad and inclusive consultation process that led up to the formulation of the SDGs, including the consultations supported by the UN Development Group (UNDG) – and expectations are high. At the same time, there are huge investment demands – but no new resources on the table, at least in terms of ODA – meaning there will be much greater emphasis on domestic resource mobilization.

Against this backdrop, many actors are thinking about their own approach and readiness for this new agenda. Individual governments are setting up national coordination mechanisms for sustainable

¹ This issues brief draws extensively on presentations and papers by John Hendra and Ingrid Fitzgerald, including ‘UNDG perspectives’ papers developed for the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, as well as an independent draft paper on “theory of change” for how reform happens in the UN development system. UNDG perspectives papers are available at <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/>

² A/69/L.85, para 44

³ A/69/L.85, para 88

development and considering how best to ensure “whole of government” responses to the SDGs⁴. The OECD-DAC “Fit for the Future” initiative is looking at the core capabilities that DAC members will need in order to deliver effective development cooperation, as well as how best to adapt to the SDGs⁵. The World Bank has set out its approach to the 2030 Agenda, in a September paper, which highlights where the Bank intends to contribute, based on its comparative advantages⁶. Global partnerships such as Every Woman Every Child are also repositioning in light of the SDGs, with new partners, investments and financing mechanisms⁷. Devex and FHI’s “integrated development” initiative highlights the importance of leveraging interdependencies and addressing complex problems at a systems level in the context of the 2030 Agenda⁸. These conversations are ongoing as different entities and sectors position themselves for change.

2. *A UN system that is more “Fit for purpose”*

In this context, discussion has been underway within the UN system since early 2014 on how the UN can better be more “fit for purpose” to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2014, the CEB outlined five critical elements the UN would need to deliver in order to effectively support implementation of the agenda, namely: universality, inequality, human rights, integration and the data revolution⁹. At the request of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, the pillars of the CEB – the HLCP, HLCM and UNDG – have also been discussing how best to ensure the UN system is “ready” for the SDGs and is able to deliver a coherent and integrated response.

The HLCP has been considering how best to ensure integrated policy responses – including on inequality and human rights, Goal 16, and the humanitarian-development nexus. The HLCM and UNDG are accelerating action on how to ensure common business services and – critically – staff capacity and mobility of a common civil service. The UNDG, which focuses on the country level and support to UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams, is developing new guidance – including on how to support mainstreaming of the SDGs; accelerate SDG implementation; and ensure policy coherence. The UNDG is also rolling out dedicated guidance to UN Resident Coordinators on human rights; and developing new country programming guidance. Individual UN agencies are also considering their own readiness to support the new agenda. And many UN Country Teams are already moving ahead to support countries as they gear up for SDG implementation. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said in his speech to the Sustainable Development Summit, “*we can no longer afford to think and work in silos.*”¹⁰

At the same time, since late last year, Member States have been discussing the “longer-term positioning of the UN development system” in the context of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. In a very

⁴ See examples cited in <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Mainstreaming-the-2030-Agenda-UNDG-Interim-Reference-Guide-to-uncts-7-October-2015.pdf>

⁵ See <http://devpolicy.org/how-should-aid-agencies-evolve-views-from-developing-countries-20150323/>

⁶ See “The World Bank Group Support For The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development” available at: [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DEVCOMMINT/Documentation/23693927/DC2015-0009\(E\)agendaforsd.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DEVCOMMINT/Documentation/23693927/DC2015-0009(E)agendaforsd.pdf)

⁷ <http://www.everywomaneverychild.org/news-events/news/1141-un-secretary-general-announces-25-billion-in-initial-commitments-to-end-preventable-deaths-of-women-children-and-adolescents-by-2030>

⁸ <https://www.devex.com/news/pivoting-to-post-2015-proving-the-promise-of-integrated-development-86920>

⁹ See <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Item-1-CEB-2014-1-RETREAT-2-HLCP-DISCUSSION-PAPER.pdf>

¹⁰ Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, General Assembly, 25 September 2015, Remarks at Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=2749#.Vi6e6G79I2E

comprehensive ECOSOC dialogue, Member States have been discussing the functions, funding, governance, organizational arrangements, and capacity, impact and partnership approaches of the UNDS. The dialogue will inform development of the next Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), the four yearly Member State resolution that gives guidance to the UNDS on operational activities for development. The first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue wrapped up in June 2015, and the second phase is set to start soon, under the leadership of the ECOSOC Bureau. The discussion is still evolving but some important themes were evident in the first phase, as follows¹¹.

First, Member States see the functions of the UN development system as fundamental, and there is a general consensus that form must follow function. Among the key functions the UN will need to perform in the SDG era are the UN’s universal normative role, high-level policy support, convening and leveraging function, support to issues-based, multi-sectoral partnerships, and South-South and triangular cooperation. In the context of an integrated 2030 Agenda, much greater integration of the pillars of the UN, and of the UN’s normative and operational work, is also needed.

Second, funding must support the critical functions that the UNDS will need to perform, including funding of the platform of the UN’s normative role, and work at country level. Although critically important, core funding for many UN agencies is stagnant or in decline. The sustainability, predictability and flexibility of non-core funding will be critical, including non-earmarked and lightly earmarked funding and greater use of pooled financing mechanisms that can help drive coherent responses. The UN will also need to proactively leverage other sources of public and private finance, and it will be vital to leverage these resources for shared goals – even if they are not directly channeled through the UN system.

Third, Member States are highlighting the need for much greater agility and flexibility of support provided by the UNDS. This includes a strong call for much greater differentiation of the UN’s country support in different country contexts, so that the UN’s presence and capacity is much more tailored to country need and demand. Member States now clearly accept Delivering as One as the “minimum package” for the UN’s support at country level – and they are asking what else is now needed for the UN to effectively support implementation of the SDGs.

Fourth, it’s clear that partnerships are going to be central to delivering the 2030 Agenda, and in this context, Member States are strongly calling for increased investment by the UN in support to South-South and triangular cooperation, which many see as a critical function the UNDS needs to perform in the SDG era.

Fifth, Member States have highlighted a clear need to improve not only the representativeness, but also the effectiveness of system-wide governance of the UN development system for the SDGs.

And finally, Member States highlighted some critical issues that need further discussion in the second phase, including whether the UN development system is really “a system” – and where it is most critical that it functions much more effectively “as a system” – and where it is not. They also stressed the need for a much more strategic QCPR that is as much about “purpose” – giving high level guidance – as “fitness” – detailed mandates aimed at ensuring greater efficiency. Also floated by at least one Member States was the idea that a strategic framework be developed for the UN’s contribution to the SDGs at the

¹¹ See the report on Phase 1 of the ECOSOC dialogue available at <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/qcpr/>

global level. All of these ideas will need to be further discussed and refined in the second phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, set to commence in late 2015, in the lead up to the 2016 QCPR.

3. *Theory of Change*

The SDGs, and the 2030 Agenda, are in, and of themselves, a change project – and a massive change management effort is needed not only by the UN system but by governments, the private sector, civil society and the international community as a whole. A key issue that emerged in the first phase of the ECOSOC dialogue, that has also been discussed in the UNDG ASG Advisory Group, is the need for a robust and shared “theory of change” that can inform future efforts to be more “fit for purpose”. Such a theory of change will be very important not only to guide reform efforts going forward but also to measure progress and demonstrate impact, including the impact of collective efforts on development results.

We are currently developing and testing an independent draft theory of change for the UN development system, based on the central hypothesis that functioning “as a system” is a prerequisite for continued relevance, improved strategic positioning, and strengthened delivery of results and impact. The paper argues that a global “division of labour” for the SDGs is not sufficient to really deliver an integrated 2030 Agenda that so clearly underscores intersectionality and interlinkages. Also central to such a theory is recognizing that the UN is a complex system, that is non-linear, co-evolving, and interdependent – and change efforts must therefore be diversified, flexible and decentralized.

Previous reform efforts have often only been partially implemented, making it much harder to assess success and impact. These efforts, such as the “Delivering as One” pilots have often focused on the country level and the question is now whether more systemic change is needed. Further, as many external observers have argued, change is not only a technocratic process, but is in the end dependent on political will and commitment of Member States, and of the system itself. *The question then is what else does the UN system need to do to be ready for the SDGs, and how much of this is “policy amendable” to deliberate design by the UN development system?*

Looking forward, to drive the change that is needed, the paper argues that the UNDS will need to accelerate current efforts including rolling out “Delivering as One” in all countries where the UN is present, but also to significantly boost its investment in critical areas such as financing mechanisms that can help drive coherence; leadership at all levels; the capacities and mobility of UN staff; strategic capacity to analyze, plan and evaluate “as a system”; change management for the UN at a system-wide level; shared metrics for success, and strengthened evidence of the contribution of collective efforts to development results. Many of these areas for investment are also relevant for other actors in the context of the new agenda.

These are investments that we need to make. Because it is going to be very challenging, both conceptually and practically, for all of us – governments, the UN, civil society - to implement such an integrated, intersectional agenda. Yet at the same time, we cannot hope to effectively implement an integrated agenda if we ourselves operate in silos. It will also be challenging precisely because, as noted earlier, there is a multiplicity of players – and so many stakeholders and interests, engaged in this agenda. If we are not nimble, responsive and ready, there is a real risk that we will be left behind. The financing needed is huge – yet we saw no new commitments on the table at Addis. And the financing incentives for the UN do not support coherence, they are much more geared to fragmentation and competition. This is also the case for many CSOs – we need a new compact for aid effectiveness that goes beyond traditional

donors to really harness resources for shared strategic objectives. It's going to be especially challenging to implement the new agenda in widely differing country contexts, and most critically of all, in the fragile and conflict affected countries which saw such limited progress on the MDGs. And it's going to be a challenge to really keep the level of ambition in the SDG framework, as we finalize the indicators, and move into the implementation phase, and ensure that countries – and we ourselves – avoid dropping the “harder” issues – tougher politically and often harder to measure – such as inequality, gender equality, and Goal 16.

4. Implications for gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment.

So what does this all mean for our collective efforts – and in particular the work of the UN system – to achieve gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment? How can the UN development system be more “fit for purpose” for gender equality?

First, the five key elements identified by the UN CEB are directly relevant for the way the UN system supports countries to implement the 2030 Agenda and its gender equality commitments, together with international commitments for gender equality and women's rights:

- *Universality* – the 2030 Agenda is universal and applies in all countries – and no country has achieved gender equality and the full realization of women's rights. The UN system has a role to play in supporting all countries to implement, monitor and report on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including the gender equality commitments that are at the heart of the SDGs. And it won't truly be a universal agenda unless we support governments to implement gender equality commitments in all countries regardless of their development status.
- *Human rights* – human rights and the normative commitments governments have made must truly underpin the new agenda and its implementation, including the principles of participation and accountability. The UN system will need to support countries to implement these commitments, build their capacity to do so, and really accelerate integration of human rights in development efforts at all levels. There must be no cherry-picking of the agenda. Most critically, we cannot achieve the realization of human rights unless we fully realize the human rights of women and girls. This must be central to the UN's work going forward.
- *Inequality* – the UN system will need to support all countries to address inequalities and tackle the exclusion and discrimination that limit progress towards sustainable development. And as we know, we cannot address inequalities – and ensure no-one is left behind – unless we tackle gender inequality and gender-based discrimination, the most persistent form of inequality that underpins all other inequalities.
- *Integration* – the UN system will need to support countries to fully integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development, help to ensure policy coherence on cross-cutting, multi-sectoral challenges, and engage all stakeholders in issue-based, multi-sectoral partnerships and coalitions to do so. And the UN itself must work in a much more cohesive and joined up way across the pillars of the UN system – human rights, development, peace and security and humanitarian action. At the same time, we cannot hope to deliver an integrated agenda unless gender equality and women's empowerment are fully integrated across the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.
- *Data revolution* – the UN will need to really step up its support to National Statistical Commissions, and ensure use of disaggregated data, develop greater analytical capacity for measuring and analyzing all forms of inequality, risks and vulnerabilities, and use data and evidence much more effectively and transparently. The data revolution must be a gender data revolution. We must not only ensure

disaggregation of all indicators, but also the collection of, analysis and reporting on core gender indicators, including the nine indicators on ending violence against women, and the 52 gender equality indicators adopted by the UN Statistical Commission – in all countries.

Second, and linked to this, the (re)emerging focus on the UN’s normative role offers an opportunity to much more explicitly focus on and promote women’s rights. While UN agencies’ normative mandates differ significantly, the UN system must now consider how best to collectively leverage its normative, policy support function in support of the SDGs, in particular to address inequalities, and really leave no-one behind. A much stronger focus on promoting achievement of women’s human rights including CEDAW implementation, monitoring and reporting, will be key. Also critical will be to effectively support the role that the CEDAW Committee, and the Commission on the Status of Women, will play in monitoring SDG implementation, including by conducting thematic reviews of progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Third, with regard to financing, given the focus on mobilizing domestic resources in support of the new agenda, UN Country Teams will have an important role to play in national budgetary processes, including to ensure budgetary allocations are accountable and transparent. Gender responsive budgeting will be a key tool in this regard and the UN system will have an important role to play in accelerating use of GRB, including at the sub-national level.

Fourth, the UN will need to really accelerate efforts to provide much more differentiated support in different country contexts – not only in fragile and conflict affected settings and LDCs, but also in middle and higher income countries. Developing new parameters for support that go well beyond income alone will be key and the UN system will need to ensure that a country’s inequality profile, including the status of women and of gender inequality, is a key criteria in developing any new approach to providing country support.

Fifth, it’s absolutely clear that partnerships will be central to the new agenda, and the UN will play a key role in convening and supporting such partnerships including at global and country level. Ensuring that partnerships are inclusive and accountable, and are in line with international normative standards and commitments, including gender equality standards and commitments, will be a key role for the UN system going forward.

Sixth, the UN system itself must be much more accountable and transparent for what it delivers and with what human and financial resources. This includes much more openly and transparently reporting on gender equality results – across all agencies; and tracking commitments and expenditure for both gender specific and gender mainstreaming work. It includes much greater acceleration of efforts to achieve gender parity across the UN system – a long-standing commitment that has continued to see slow implementation and impact¹². This includes appointing more women in leadership roles – up to and including the next UN Secretary-General! Also key will be to ensure an “open UN” that really engages with different constituencies and population groups, including women’s civil society organizations, not only to promote and support their engagement in SDG delivery and monitoring but also to ensure they are fully engaged in the UN system’s own work at all levels.

¹² For data on this point see the UN Secretary General’s annual report on “Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system” E/2015/58

Seventh, in the context of an integrated sustainable development agenda, it will be absolutely key to ensure that gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment are fully integrated in the UN’s human rights, humanitarian, peace and security, and development efforts at all levels. There can be no more excuses for not ensuring an integrated approach that puts women’s rights, needs and interests at the center, not least in crisis and conflict situations.

Eighth, the UN system must really accelerate implementation of “Delivering as One” as the platform for the UN’s support at country level. We now have good evidence to show that countries that have adopted the DaO approach do better in promoting and giving priority to gender equality and women’s empowerment including in common country programming and advocacy with government¹³. In this context, implementation of the Standard Operating Procedures for Delivering as One is good news for UN gender advocates and we need to see accelerated adoption of DaO in all countries.

Finally, in the context of an intersecting, interlinked agenda the UN must play a role in highlighting, promoting and monitoring inter-sectionality at all levels. We cannot afford to think or work in silos, but rather, must understand and respond to the reality that focusing on implementation of one goal or set of targets alone is not sufficient – our efforts must contribute to the achievement of the SDGs as an integrated whole. We must understand where investments will have the greatest impact across the framework – in areas such as girls’ education which is proven to have multiple positive impacts across different development domains. As importantly, we must also avoid negative unintended consequences. This means that the UN system must function “as one” to ensure we not only prioritize gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment, but avoid actions and investments in other areas that would undermine these critical efforts.

5. *Questions for discussion and reflection.*

In light of the discussion above, the following questions are included for the consideration of EGM participants:

- *What is the role of civil society organizations in pushing for UN coherence in support of gender equality, women’s rights, and women’s empowerment – as civil society did for the establishment of UN Women?*
- *How can civil society and other actors best advocate for and monitor greater accountability of the UN system, in particular at the country level?*
- *What role should the UN system be playing to ensure new partnerships in the SDG era are inclusive and accountable?*
- *How can we accelerate efforts to ensure gender parity within the UN system at senior levels?*

¹³ See for example the most recent review of the Gender Scorecard <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/UNDG-TT-Scorecard-Desk-Review-2012-2014-Final-Report-7-July-2015.docx>