



Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

31 May 2024

BACKGROUND NOTE

The role of effective governance, by governing bodies, in promoting multilateralism and United Nations development system effectiveness in accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

As the global community finds itself at a crossroads, grappling with multifaceted challenges ranging from poverty and inequality to climate change and conflict, there is strong recognition of the need for coordinated and effective governance to ensure that multilateral systems, including but not limited to the United Nations development system (UNDS), effectively support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The joint meeting of the Executive Boards (JMB) provides a platform for the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP to discuss issues of common interest. In 2024, the Executive Boards have requested a discussion on the role of effective governance in promoting multilateralism and UNDS effectiveness, with an emphasis on accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

2. Reinforcing multilateralism and promoting UNDS effectiveness through effective governance

Since the creation of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP with General Assembly resolution 48/162 of 20 December 1993 on further measures for the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields, and the subsequent addition of UNOPS and UN-Women, each Executive Board has provided intergovernmental support and supervised the activities of the respective entities.

The roles and responsibilities of the governing bodies of the United Nations funds and programmes, the Executive Boards, are clearly defined in that they are “responsible for providing inter-governmental support to and supervision of the activities of each fund or programme, in accordance with the overall policy guidance of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, in accordance with their respective responsibility as set out in the Charter”, which includes “implementing the policies formulated by the Assembly and the coordination and guidance received from the Council” (A/RES/48/162).¹

¹ General Assembly resolution 48/162 (1993): Further measures for the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields, paras. 21, 22 (a) ([A/RES/48/162](#)).

Hence, they play a fundamental role in supporting the operationalization of multilateral agreements and promoting UNDS effectiveness.

The strategic direction, oversight and accountability provided by the Executive Boards play a crucial role in ensuring that these organizations can more effectively and efficiently deliver their respective mandates and achieve system-wide results, including towards the implementation of the SDGs.

More specifically, Executive Boards:

- *Constitute a crucial platform for decision-making* among member states, facilitating constructive dialogue, negotiation, and compromise, leading to consensus-based decision-making;
- *Provide strategic guidance* by setting priorities, defining objectives, and outlining strategies which ultimately support the achievement of the SDGs;
- *Promote transparency and accountability*, strengthening the credibility and legitimacy of multilateral institutions vis-a-vis stakeholders;
- *Oversee the implementation of UNDS activities*, reviewing performance reports, evaluating the impact of interventions, and holding UN entities accountable for the efficient and effective use of resources;
- *Enable coordination and collaboration among UNDS entities*, fostering synergies, facilitating dialogue, information sharing, and joint planning among different parts of the system, and promoting coherence and integration in development programming;
- *Support innovation as appropriate*, encouraging the adoption of innovative approaches, leveraging of new technologies, and exploration of emerging trends to address complex development challenges more effectively.

Given the fundamental role Executive Boards play in ensuring that United Nations entities can deliver on their mandates and collectively deliver results as part of the UNDS, ensuring that they remain relevant and fit-for-purpose is imperative.

In General Assembly resolution 71/243 of 21 December 2016 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, Member States stressed “the need to enhance system-wide coherence and efficiency, reduce duplication and build synergy across governing bodies of the entities of United Nations development system”, calling upon: (a) the respective bureaux to initiate discussions on improving the working methods of the joint meetings of the Executive Boards so that they offer a platform for exchange on issues with cross-cutting impact; (b) Member States to initiate discussions on the working methods of the respective governing bodies in order to improve the efficiency, transparency and quality of official sessions, ensure more systematic follow-up by the entities of the United Nations development system on issues raised by their governing bodies and ensure timely follow-up on the implementation of the present resolution; and (c) entities of the United Nations development system to adopt and abide by clear rules, including on the dissemination of all documents and draft decisions, thereby allowing adequate time for prior consultation with Member States in their decision-making processes.

In May 2018, the General Assembly, in resolution 72/279 on the repositioning of the United Nations development system, urged “Member States to continue making practical changes to further enhance the working methods of the Boards, with the aim of improving the efficiency, transparency and quality of

governance structures, including through deciding on ways to improve the functions of the joint meeting of the Boards”.

In response to these requests, at the second regular sessions of 2018, the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS (in decision 2018/22), UNICEF (in decision 2018/4), UN-Women (in decision 2018/7), and WFP (in decision 2018/EB.2/29), all adopted decisions to build on the discussions initiated in 2017 on the working methods of the Executive Boards and requested the bureaux of the boards “to launch a joint consultative process with Member States, with a view to examining the efficiency and quality of its current sessions, as well as the functions of the joint meeting of the Boards.”

This exercise provided recommendations on the working methods of the joint meeting of the Executive Boards, the working methods of the respective governing bodies, as well as on rules, documentation and decision-making of the Boards.

The Secretary-General’s 2019 report on the implementation of the QCPR resolution 71/243 (A/74/73-E/2019/4) noted that “the role of the executive boards of agencies, funds and programmes remains, more than ever, a critical element in the governance of operational activities for development. Governing bodies hold the key to accelerate efforts in support of the 2030 Agenda and to unlock the transformation of agencies, funds and programmes, towards an integrated, effective and efficient whole-of-system response.”² It also addressed strengthening executive guidance and oversight of agencies, funds and programmes, underlining the ongoing efforts “to further enhance the working methods of the boards and their joint meetings to enhance system-wide coherence and efficiency, reduce duplication and build synergy across governing bodies of the United Nations development system.”³

The COVID-19 pandemic and the related need for the Executive Boards to embrace agility and resilience in their working modalities prompted the adoption of changes in the organization of meetings, which have now been retained and become permanent. Examples of these changes include transitioning informal briefings and consultations to virtual formats, using video conferencing platforms; digitalization of documentation, which is no longer distributed in paper; and virtual pre-session decision negotiations.

In recent years, the Executive Boards took decisions to further strengthen the functioning of the Boards and, more specifically, their role in promoting transparency and accountability:

- In decisions 2022/15 (UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS), 2022/15 (UNICEF) and 2022/5 (UN-Women) the Executive Boards requested that they receive regular closed briefings from the UNDP Office of Audit and Investigations (OAI), the UNFPA Office of Audit and Investigation Services (OAIS), the UNOPS Internal Audit and Investigations Group (IAIG), the UNICEF Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) and the UN-Women Independent Evaluation and Audit Services in a timely manner and throughout the year, as needed, on potential red flags, audit findings and the status of investigations; and comprehensive assessments on the independence of each office. The WFP Executive Board has been receiving regular closed briefings on internal audit and investigation since 2017.
- In decisions 2022/22 (UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS), 2022/21 (UNICEF) and 2022/8 (UN-Women) the Boards requested the organizations to include, as a permanent annex in their annual reports to the Executive Board, a concise agency-specific summary of the oversight functions responsible for audit, investigation, ethics, evaluation and whistle-blower protection; and further requested OAI, OAIS, IAIG and OIAI to include in the executive summaries of their reports shared with the Executive Board, as

² A/74/73-E/2019/4, Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, 2019, para 191.

³ Ibid, para 195.

appropriate, potential red flags, emerging risks and internal control issues, audit findings and the status of investigations, which require specific attention from the Executive Board. The WFP Executive Board has been receiving annual reports from the inspector general on internal audit and investigation (since 2017), ethics (since 2017), the ombudsman (since 2016), evaluation (since 2005), a statement on internal control alongside audited annual accounts of WFP (since 2012) and a full management review of significant risk and control issues (since 2020).

- In decisions 2023/7(UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS), 2023/13 (UNICEF) and 2023/5 (UN-Women), the Executive Boards requested the UNDP Audit and Evaluation Advisory Committee, the UNFPA Oversight Advisory Committee, the UNOPS Audit Advisory Committee, the UNICEF Audit Advisory Committee (AAC)⁴ and the UN-Women Advisory Committee on Oversight to present their annual reports and key considerations to the Executive Board at the annual session. The WFP Executive Board has been receiving an annual report from the Independent Oversight Advisory Committee since 2009.

In mid-2022, the WFP Executive Board Bureau agreed to undertake an assessment of the governance frameworks and processes of WFP to identify opportunities for practical ways to improve governance efficiency and effectiveness. The review, conducted by an independent consultant in 2023, identified opportunities for improvement so that the Board could provide the best possible strategic advice and support to WFP. A working group was then established in 2023 to consider the independent consultant's recommendations, and possibly those from other governance initiatives, and develop an implementation plan for the selected recommendations to be taken forward by the Board.

Additionally, in 2023, at the request of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women, an assessment conducted by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU)⁵ on the governance and oversight functions of the three Executive Boards, focused on making recommendations to improve the efficiency, transparency and quality of the governance structures. The review highlighted opportunities for improvement in key governance areas, including roles and responsibilities, structure, processes and systems.

These recent reviews and decisions offer inputs for additional reflection on how Executive Boards can be further strengthened to better perform their governance and oversight roles and steer more effectively the individual entities and the UNDS towards the accelerated achievement of the SDGs.

3. Towards a future-fit governance to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs

With less than six years until 2030, and only 12 per cent of the SDGs currently on track,⁶ addressing the future of multilateralism and development cooperation is a key priority for Member States to accelerate the global development agenda.

In their Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations,⁷ Member States agreed that “[T]here is no other global organization with the legitimacy, convening power and normative impact as the United Nations.... Our challenges are interconnected and can only be addressed

⁴ “In addition to making its annual report available to the Executive Board since the AAC’s establishment, the practice of the Chair of the AAC also delivering a statement on the key considerations from their annual report during the Executive Board’s annual session has been operational since 2018.

⁵ JIU/REP/2023/7 – Review of governance and oversight of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund/United Nations Office for Project Services, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

⁶ [The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet](#)

⁷ Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.

through reinvigorated multilateralism.”⁸ They pledged to “work together with partners to strengthen coordination and global governance for the common future of present and coming generations.”⁹

Member States, therefore, requested the Secretary-General to offer recommendations to advance “our common agenda and respond to current and future challenges.” The Secretary-General presented his *Our Common Agenda* report¹⁰ in 2021, noting that we are at an inflection point in history, with “challenges that can only be addressed by an equally interconnected response, through reinvigorated multilateralism and the United Nations at the centre of our efforts.”¹¹ The report stressed that *Our Common Agenda* is ultimately an agenda of action designed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the SDGs, and the establishment of a more robust system of global governance, with an inclusive, networked and effective multilateral system, anchored within the United Nations.

As outlined in his *Our Common Agenda* report, the Secretary-General appointed in 2022 a High-Level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Effective Multilateralism to identify concrete, actionable recommendations that support a radical shift in international cooperation for the resolution of shared challenges and advancement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹²

The HLAB report “A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance” (2023), developed through global multi-stakeholder engagement, advocates six transformative shifts¹³ to promote a more effective and efficient multilateralism to strengthen international cooperation and support accelerated achievement of the SDGs.

In the *Our Common Agenda* report, the Secretary-General also noted that “once the Advisory Board has reported its findings, it will be important to hold a high-level, multi-stakeholder Summit of the Future to advance ideas for governance arrangements in the areas of international concern mentioned in this report, and potentially others, where governance arrangements are nascent or require updating.”¹⁴

In resolution 76/307 adopted by the General Assembly in September 2022 (A/RES/76/307), Member States decided that the Summit of the Future “has an important role to play in reaffirming the Charter of the United Nations, reinvigorating multilateralism, promoting human rights, boosting implementation of existing commitments, agreeing on concrete solutions to challenges and restoring trust among Member States” under the “multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow.”¹⁵

A key outcome from the Summit of the Future will be a *Pact for the Future* which will embody commitments to more effective multilateral action and the revitalization of the global institutional framework, ensuring it is more inclusive, networked and effective in delivering on the 2030 Agenda. Member States have agreed to the scope of the Pact, which inter alia shall include “the commitment to end poverty and hunger everywhere, to combat inequalities within and among countries, to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources and creating conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities; as well as the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary General, 2021.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [A Breakthrough for People and Planet \(highleveladvisoryboard.org\)](https://www.un.org/development/dga/our-common-agenda/high-level-advisory-board)

¹³ Rebuild trust in multilateralism – Improve legitimacy and effectiveness through inclusion and accountability; Planet and people – Regain balance with nature and provide clean energy for all; Global Finance – Ensure sustainable finance that delivers for all; Digital and data governance – Support a just digital transition that unlocks the value of data and protects against digital harms; Peace and Prevention – Empower equitable, effective collective security arrangements; Anticipatory Action – Strengthen governance for current and emerging transnational risks.

¹⁴ Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General, page 66.

¹⁵ Modalities for the Summit of the Future (A/RES/76/307).

realization of the human rights of all, the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls will be taken into account in the relevant chapters.”¹⁶

The Summit of the Future will be a crucial milestone to create the necessary political momentum to bolster global governance and foster a commitment to further reinforce multilateralism and adapt it to current political and economic realities, thereby accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

4. Conclusion

Effective functioning of and leadership by the governing bodies provide important contributions to promoting multilateralism and UNDS effectiveness.

The Summit of the Future is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance international cooperation on critical challenges, reaffirm existing commitments and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and positively influence current and future generations.

As the Summit of the Future is fast approaching, and several ongoing parallel negotiations processes among Member States are taking place, the focus of the joint meeting of the Boards is timely and pertinent and will offer important reflections on how the role of governing bodies and governance can be further strengthened in promoting multilateralism and UNDS effectiveness in accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

Guiding questions for discussion at the Joint Meeting of the Boards

1. What could the Executive Boards do to further promote multilateralism and UNDS effectiveness towards the acceleration of the implementation of the SDGs?
2. How can the findings from assessments such as the Joint Inspection Unit review of governance and oversight of the Executive Boards of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women and the independent consultant assessment on the governance frameworks and processes of WFP inform dialogue efforts to enhance the role of the Executive Boards?
3. How can the work of the Executive Boards and other governing bodies more effectively feed into key intergovernmental processes such as the Summit of the Future?
4. How can the fundamental role of Executive Boards in advancing multilateralism and UNDS effectiveness and accelerating the achievement of the SDGs be more clearly communicated to the broader public?

¹⁶ Scope of the Summit of the Future (A/77/L.109).