ECOSOC OAS - Dialogue with the Executive Heads
Looking to the Future: Current and emerging strategic priorities
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Remarks by John Hendra, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director for Policy and Programme

Your Excellency, Vice-President of ECOSOC
My Fellow UN Colleagues
Members of ECOSOC,

Good afternoon, I’m very pleased to be participating in this panel on behalf of our Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Nguka, and UN Women.

As we all know, the QCPR calls on the UN system to deliver together, to reduce transaction costs, and to strengthen system-wide accountability for results. Just as importantly, the QCPR gives impetus to increased investment in, and focus on, gender equality, greater coherence and coordination on gender equality, including in country programming, and greater accountability for gender equality at all levels. And the ACPR provides the UN system with a strong mandate to become better positioned - and in effect more “fit for purpose” - to support Member States to deliver the current and future development agenda.

These priorities, as set out in the QCPR, are more important than ever. As has already been highlighted, we must remain relevant as a UN system to properly support any new integrated sustainable development agenda.

Already we have seen very important progress made towards ensuring greater coherence. This includes building on the “Delivering as One” (DaO) experience, through the UNDG’s development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and an integrated guidance package for countries adopting the DaO approach.

In addition the UNDG has finalized a Plan of Action to implement measures at HQ, to facilitate implementation of the second generation of DaO on the ground. This Plan identifies 55 actions that will help to step up coherence efforts in DaO settings. It is expected to help accelerate needed HQ reforms to remove bottle-necks that prevent countries adopting the DaO approach from fully realizing efficiencies on the ground.
With regard to gender equality and women’s empowerment, as you know the Funds and Programmes have significantly strengthened their focus on gender equality in their new Strategic Plans, and 55 UN entities and Secretariat Departments are reporting under the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP). These are all important steps in the right direction.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in ensuring system-wide coherence at all levels. Overlapping mandates—and mandate gaps; the costs and time associated with effective coordination; UN development system versus specific UN agency identity; horizontal and vertical accountability; the drive for harmonization versus safeguarding individual agency business models; and funding behaviours among donors, continue to constrain, and even undermine, coordination and greater coherence.

We are all very aware of these challenges and constraints. In the context of our discussion today, I will briefly focus on five challenges in implementing QCPR mandates, especially as these relate to system-wide coherence and implementation of the DaO approach and the need to be “fit for purpose”.

First, we need to recall that at the outset, the “delivering as one” approach did not yet have the broad support of Member States— or indeed of UN Agencies. It was enhanced national ownership and leadership which really drove the eight pilots, and many of the challenges the first generation DaO countries encountered were due to difficulties with different UN Agency systems, mandates, branding, and business models.

Yet, despite these constraints, the first generation DaO pilot countries were able to improve the strategic positioning and relevance of the UN on the ground. In doing so, they demonstrated that “delivering as one” is not only about efficiency and effectiveness, important though these are. Ensuring policy coherence and providing more effective integrated policy support in often critical cross-Government areas such as social protection or responding to climate change is also critical.

Post the first generation DaO pilots, there is growing support and interest in the DaO approach among governments, to the point where it is becoming the preferred modality in over 40 countries. Looking forward, the challenge is to ensure that we build on the lessons learned, and the insights generated—without overly bureaucratizing the DaO approach, continuing to allow for flexibility and innovation, and ensuring that we really push forward to increase our strategic positioning as the UN system at the country level.

Second, it is sometimes challenging for the UN to speak with one voice on key policy issues. Agency mandates all too often intrude. Yet speaking with one voice—and responding as one UN system—to the multi-sectoral development challenges that increasingly characterize our world
will be increasingly essential. It’s for this reason that communicating as one, not originally one of the DaO pillars, was included in the SOPs.

Just as critical is moving from “one voice” in our advocacy to convening more joined up substantive policy support. And I would argue that the UN development system has at times done so effectively and can do even more so going forward. The UN globally has demonstrated its ability to speak with one voice, in the process of supporting the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda. This includes the UN Task Team report, which represented the views of 60 plus agencies, the UNDG consultations which saw 11 global thematic discussions and almost 90 country consultations, and the support provided through the UNTT to the Open Working Group.

We’ve also seen UN Agencies work closely together and join with external public, private and foundation partners to develop and deliver many of the new global issue-based partnerships, such as Every Women, Every Child, Sustainable Energy for All and Education First. We need to really build on these positive examples, in part by maximizing the comparative advantages the UN as a system can bring to the table - its convening power, its normative mandate, and its ability to leverage a myriad of different partners around a clear development priority.

Third, and building on this, perhaps the most important challenge for system-wide coherence going forward will be the ability to deliver coherent, strategic, policy advice, in particular on critical and often sensitive issues, in line with normative standards and commitments. Yes, the UN still faces many challenges in really bringing together, and maximizing its full mandate - development, peace and security and human rights - but there are good examples.

And here UN Women, itself a product of Member States’ desire to see greater UN system-wide coherence, offers a potential blueprint for the direction the UN could take in future. Recognizing that no country has achieved gender equality, the UN General Assembly very importantly gave UN Women a universal mandate, a normative, coordination and operational functional mandate, across all three pillars of the UN’s work - development, peace and security and human rights.

In the increasingly complex environment in which the UN development system works, with the needs and expectations of the countries we support changing so rapidly, the UN’s rights mandate, and the role we play in helping develop global normative standards, and supporting governments to implement them, will only become more critical.

Much of UN Women’s work is already squarely in this arena - but it’s a shift that the UN system must make as a whole. Going forward, for the UN system to be really relevant in the new sustainable development agenda, we must better leverage the UN development system as an
effective platform to bring together the normative, coordination and operational roles in support of effective policy options.

Fourth, as we all know, we’re facing a difficult international financial environment, a critical challenge that is making it harder for the international community to mobilize resources and accelerate implementation of key agreed goals, including the accelerated achievement of the MDGs. As UN Women we feel the pinch acutely. We need to continue to strengthen our work as UN Women, and as the broader UN system through more effective UN Country Teams, to ensure that critical gains made towards gender equality and achievement of women’s rights are not reversed. But we can only do so if we have a robust and sustainable funding base.

To put it simply, donors get what they fund, and currently what is being funded is more short-term than sustainable, more competitive than coherent, and more driven by individual donor priorities than collective commitments. This is not only the case for the UN development system itself but also for investment in gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment. This has to change.

Finally, there are still significant challenges when it comes to ensuring system-wide coherence and “delivering as one” on gender equality and women’s empowerment, a very important element of the QCPR. Initiatives such as the UN System Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (the UN-SWAP) have helped drive greater performance and coherence. We’re making progress in tracking resource allocations and expenditures, including through increasing use of gender markers, and UNDG guidance that has been developed to allow different marker systems to be compatible.

Still, there is a significant way to travel in terms of issues such as resource allocation as they relate to our work on gender equality, as well as capacity assessment, evaluation and gender parity within UN organizations. And we really need to boost our efforts to achieve gender equality outcomes, taking a two-track approach, through specific gender equality programming, and robust and effective gender mainstreaming.

The most effective way to make sure we achieve gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment is through effective collaborative action. It’s no accident that the Independent Evaluation of the Delivering as One pilots found that the DaO countries were able to really lift the profile of, and focus on, cross-cutting issues, including gender equality and women’s empowerment, by UN Country Teams.

These are important lessons for being more “fit for purpose” for the new development agenda. If the MDGs were vertical and somewhat siloed, the next generation of sustainable
development goals (SDGs) will most likely be more horizontal and will need to be addressed in a much more integrated and joined-up manner.

As we move forward on the post-2015 and “fit for purpose” discussions, we need to be clear about the comparative advantage and added value of the UN development system. As we’ve seen through Delivering as One, through the UNDG’s support to a multitude of consultations, and broader UN System support to the post-2015 agenda and the SDGs, as well as through dynamic, public/private issue-based partnerships, the UN development system can have the greatest impact in circumstances where it can really leverage “the System” and bring together its extensive knowledge, its normative perspective and standards, its public policy advocacy and its incredible range of stakeholders.

This is our overall challenge with respect to the emerging new development agenda, and it’s a challenge we will all need to rise up to.

Thank you.