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Member States Resume Talks on the Future of the System-wide Coherence Process

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Member States met on Thursday, 7 February 2008, in a closed session at the United Nations to discuss the issue of System-wide Coherence. The meeting was the first of its kind during this session of the General Assembly. The President of the General Assembly, Sgrjan Kerim, and his two newly-appointed Co-Chairs, Ambassadors Augustine Mahiga of Tanzania and Paul Kavanagh of Ireland, presided over the discussions that focused on how to integrate and improve the fragmented UN development system. The following analysis looks at some of the main statements delivered at the meeting as well as the road ahead.

In his opening remarks President Kerim underlined the importance of the coherence process as a crucial way to improve the development services of the UN. "Without ambitious and far-reaching reforms the United Nations will be unable to deliver on its promises and maintain its position at the heart of the multilateral system," he told delegates.

"But," Kerim cautioned, "in order to do so, and like any other organization, it [the UN] must renew and retool itself to respond to emerging challenges. The very name of our consultations is in itself a recognition that at some level the system is in-coherent."

Although last year had seen some encouraging signs of progress, for instance the adoption of the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review (TCPR) in December 2007 and the positive atmosphere at the UNDP/UNFPA board meetings, he noted that, "the UN can only continue to attract resources if it can demonstrate its effectiveness and deliver results."

The report of the "High-level Panel on the System-wide Coherence of the United Nations operational activities" from 2006 contained a number of recommendations on how to improve developmental services within important policy areas. The recommendations were comprehensively considered during eight consultations in the 61st session, and the pilot project "delivering as one UN" (or simply "One-UN") – aimed at providing a more coherent organizational response at country level - have been closely monitored by Member States.

"So far eight pilot countries are testing the 'One UN' approach. The results of these pilots should be an essential element for the intergovernmental consultations on operational effectiveness," Kerim said, and he warned against "a one size fits all approach." Instead, Member States "need to take a pragmatic and considered approach. One that focuses on substance and the broader strategic issues to ensure that the UN plays its full role in delivering the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]; that development remains at the heart of the UN system's activities; and, that the system is performing well enough, not only to maintain current levels of voluntary funding, but also to attract additional resources in the fight against poverty."

After President Kerim's remarks, Ambassador Mahiga of Tanzania delivered a statement on behalf of the two Co-Chairs. "Through the consultations the Co-Chairs should work towards an

agreement [in June] on the modalities for implementing greater coherence across the United Nations development activities system,” he said, and added that “this will necessitate a thorough assessment of progress made so far, in particular, the implementation of the 'One United Nations' pilot projects, as well as obstacles encountered and opportunities for further implementation.”

The Ambassador noted that the Co-Chairs had been encouraged by the advances made by the pilot-countries, but he cautioned that “it will be 2009 before we have any definitive evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach in delivering development assistance.” The Co-Chairs would tour four pilot-countries, and report back to the membership in mid-March. Moreover, he observed that the Chief Executives Board (CEB) as well as the Secretary-General had been making positive steps towards the harmonization of business practices, and thereby “eliminating internal administrative and related blockages to greater coherence.” Senior secretariat officials are reportedly going to brief the membership on this issue in April.

“In light of this activity and taking account of the variety of interests and priorities among the membership,” Mahiga said, “a pragmatic approach is the best, indeed it is the only feasible way to try to move ahead in our work,” and he added “we believe that as a practical proposition, it would be extremely difficult to seek to move ahead on all aspects of the High Level Report at the same time.”

Although the Co-Chairs understood that some Member States were opposed to moving ahead on a selective basis, Mahiga underscored that the Co-Chairs would seek the broadest and most balanced way forward. “The gender issue not least has been underlined to us by some members. In this connection, once again we need to be pragmatic.” A more detailed program of work is expected shortly

Slovenia, speaking on behalf of the European Union, welcomed last year’s widespread agreement on the goal of better delivery of country-level services, as well as efforts to “promote a bottom-up approach in exploring ways for the UN to work more coherently and effectively.” However, the Slovenian Ambassador cautioned that to move the process forward, all stakeholders would have to agree on their respective roles: “The UN should act in a coordinated and coherent way. Pilot countries should define and own their development strategies. Donors should endorse the ‘Delivering as One’ process.”

Although gender equality and human rights could be given higher profiles, the European Union expressed overall satisfaction with the process, and especially last year's TCPR and "bottom-up approach." “It focuses at the innovations from the field, demonstrating a better functioning of the UN system, and then feeding the findings into the reform process taking place at the central level.” Lastly, the Ambassador noted that the European Union's support is based on the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. “The Paris Declaration captures the consensus of the donor community and partner countries on how development assistance can become more effectively supportive of partner countries development plans and strategies.”

Cuba, speaking on behalf of the G77 and the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), and under the collective name of the Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC), reaffirmed their previous statements, and in this regard, stated that; “1. Both groups would prefer an integrated process instead of a divided one; 2. Funding, development and governance are areas of priority interest for both groups. 3. There should be no artificial deadlines.” Moreover, Cuba said that in the view of the JCC, sustainable development should be the centerpiece of the deliberations, and they reiterated that development should be demand-driven, guided by the TCPR, aimed at ensuring greater effectiveness and not be a cost-cutting exercise. “Significant consideration should be given to avoiding the unnecessary elimination or erosion of mandates which play

important developmental roles,” Cuba said, and added that conditionalities within crosscutting issues, such as human-rights and gender would under no circumstance be accepted.

Japan highlighted that “the ultimate objective of the pursuit of coherence should be finding the most effective means of delivering services to communities and people in need” and underlined the importance of cross-cutting issues as an integral part of improving system-wide coherence. Finally, Japan said the issue of gender could be approached from an “on the ground” perspective.

Iceland spoke on behalf of the Nordic Countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Norway). In their view more could be done on the issue of gender and on gender equality, as work on these issues are currently under-funded and characterized by fragmentation. Iceland also underscored the importance of supporting “country-owned and demand-driven gender-specific programs at the country level.”

New Zealand, on behalf of CANZ (Canada, Australia, New Zealand), also supported a strengthened gender architecture.

Albania made a few comments in a brief statement. As a pilot country, Albania said that although a “one size fits all” approach is not desirable, predictability of funds are equally important. Moreover, in their view, the role of the Resident Coordinator could be better defined.

The United States noted that the reform process should not be seen as a cost-cutting exercise. Instead, saved money should be channeled back into developmental work.

WHAT'S NEXT?

While the meeting was largely a stock-taking exercise, it did give some hints as to where the process is heading. On one hand, the large donor groups; the European Union, Japan and CANZ, continued to focus on increased efficiency and accountability "on the ground," while the G77 & NAM, on the other hand, largely prioritized overall funding, development and governance, as well as strengthening global partnerships, demand-driven development cooperation based on national programs and support for reforms that would improve organizational effectiveness provided that any savings are devoted to development projects.

Several diplomats interviewed for this article feared that these opposing views could stall the future process, especially if the G77 & NAM chose to adopt “a holistic development agenda.” In UN jargon this is often understood as an all or nothing approach.

However, some new issues seem to be emerging that could cause realignment of positions, and move the debate away from an entrenched dispute pitting donors against the G77 & NAM.

The question of “delivering as one UN,” in particular, has been undergoing an interesting development that could allow for some progress. Ambassador Mahiga’s statement clearly illustrated that the "One-UN" project will be taking center stage this coming spring.

Reportedly the project seems to be growing in popularity from the bottom of the hierarchy of the G77 & NAM and up, with some 30 small and medium-sized states currently interested in joining the project as pilot-countries.

By many accounts the project has already reached a point of no return and further progress appears somewhat inevitable. In that regard, an interesting question seems to be what influence the project can have on the other issues within the overall coherence debate. The spillover effects of the "bottom-up approach" mentioned by the European Union.

Many donor countries are currently hoping that the "One-UN" project will eventually come to include other clusters, and even guide the entire coherence process. For example - and according to some reports - while efforts already are underway to strengthen and streamline "gender" and "environment" structures at country-level, discussions are unlikely to proceed much further in New York. According to one source, the "bottom-up" approach, in which progress in New York is determined by efforts "on the ground" seems especially compelling to the EU.

Moreover, such a slow-moving process could eventually develop into some sort of fait accompli without forcing the overall membership to resort to resolutions or major arrangements. As one European insider noted, "we don't need an agreement, because the process is already moving quietly along, and we would not want to provoke a showdown with the 'big ones' [of the G77]."

The appointment of the two ambassadors - Paul Kavanagh of Ireland and the European Union, and Augustine Mahiga of Tanzania, a prominent pilot-country, sent a clear signal to the membership in general, and the G77 & NAM in particular, that the main focus will be on the further implementation of the "One UN." In addition, many are also quietly hoping that Ambassador Mahiga can use his stature within the G77 & NAM to create a positive environment.

Compromise will be important to move the process forward. All sides agree on the importance of the "One-UN" project, however, some important questions remain to be answered; are the donor countries willing to compromise on gender and human rights issues and how will the "big ones" of the G77 & NAM react?

**This update is an analysis of some of the main ideas discussed at the meeting and does not represent a complete and official account of all positions expressed by Member States.*