International Humanitarian and Development Coordination Architecture

14 November 2023

1. Overview

This Entry summarizes the current international humanitarian coordination structures. In addition, it also touches on areas where humanitarian and development coordination intersect. The Entry should be read in conjunction with the Entries on the Cluster Approach, and the Refugee Coordination Model.

2. Main guidance

Underlying rationale / objective of the approach or system

Recent humanitarian emergencies have required a larger and more complex humanitarian response. Humanitarian actors have also had to become more accountable to the populations they serve. Public scrutiny of humanitarian action has increased. These factors have galvanized efforts to make UN coordination effective.

For UNHCR, the pursuit of effective coordination is not an end in itself, but a means to maximize the positive effects that UNHCR and its partners have on protection, the delivery of humanitarian responses, and solutions to displacement.

UNHCR and other agencies have promoted the connection between humanitarian action and development for many years. By recognizing this and promoting ways of working that increase complementarity, the Global Compact on Refugees has underscored the need to involve development actors. Connections with development should be made from the preparedness phase onwards, and the link is especially crucial when countries emerge from the emergency phase and transition into a phase during which development issues, such as livelihoods and employment, predominate.
Policy, strategy and/or guidance

Chief Executive Board

The UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) is the longest-standing and highest-level coordination forum of the United Nations system. It meets biannually and is chaired by the UN Secretary-General.

It provides broad guidance, coordination and strategic direction for the system as a whole in areas under the responsibility of executive heads. While ensuring respect for organizations' independent mandates, it focuses on inter-agency priorities and initiatives. The CEB is composed of 31 United Nations entities, including the United Nations, executive heads of United Nations Funds and Programmes, Specialized Agencies such as the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), and related organizations (the WTO, IAEA and IOM).

The CEB works through two high-level committees: the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP), and the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM).

UNHCR is a member of the CEB and its three constitutive pillars; it is represented by the High Commissioner.

UN Reform

The Secretary-General (SG) has initiated an ambitious reform agenda to enhance UN performance across the three pillars of UN work: peace and security, human rights, and development. Overall, the reform agenda seeks to improve performance at headquarters and in the field by adopting integrated, decentralized, and impact-oriented approaches wherever approaches have been fragmented, centralized or process-heavy.

In 2017, the SG initiated three reforms, to strengthen the UN development system (UNDS), UN (internal) management, and the UN's capacity to sustain peace (its peace and security architecture). The SG is also reviewing UN gender policies to enhance gender parity; UN efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse; various components of the counter-terrorism architecture; and the UN's whistle-blower policy. It is important to note that UNHCR strongly supports efforts to revitalize the UN development system because doing so is key to bridging the humanitarian/development divide and delivering responses that are sustainable.

The SG has put 'prevention' at the centre of the reform effort. His vision of prevention requires the UN system to do everything possible to help countries avert the outbreak of crises that take a high toll on human life, undermine their institutions, and weaken their capacity to achieve peace and development. Elements of preventive action include: early identification of risks; intensified diplomacy; acceleration of UN development work; and strengthened member state engagement. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to prioritize efforts to raise prevention concerns with relevant intergovernmental bodies and mechanisms, such as the Security Council, the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Peacebuilding Commission. The SG has formed a High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation to provide him with advice on mediation initiatives and to
support specific mediation efforts around the world. The Board is composed of 18 current and
former global leaders, senior officials, and experts. He also relies on the SG's Executive
Committee, composed of the Principals of all Secretariat agencies, which raises and discusses
issues of critical risk and pursues an overall risk mitigation and prevention strategy.

With regard to peace and security, a broad set of measures seeks to ensure that: risk analysis
and responses to risk are shared; women and youth are meaningfully engaged in peace efforts;
peace funding increases (including a ‘quantum leap’ in support to the Peacebuilding Fund); and
partnerships for peace multiply, including partnerships with regional and sub-regional
organizations and with the World Bank.

In addition, the Security Council is leading a major review of the UN's peacekeeping operations
(PKOs), which may change how the Secretariat manages peace and security functions within the
UN. Management reforms mainly focus on the UN Secretariat. They seek to improve the
efficiency, transparency and accountability of a system that, according to some, is often slow,
unresponsive and ineffective. Ongoing UN change processes are taking steps to: review and
simplify human resources procedures to raise the quality and speed of staff recruitment,
deployment and development; achieve gender parity; improve workforce planning, training and
development, paying special attention to the profile of leaders and managers; refocus the UN's
strategy on information and communications technology; and improve global supply chain
management. Of the three areas of reform, reform of the UNDS currently has the most direct
impact on UNHCR operations at country level. After the 2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive
Programme Review initiated the UNDS reform process, the Secretary-General issued a report
containing proposals for action, most of which Member States approved in the GA Resolution on
UNDS reform of May 2019.

**UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG)**

At global level, the UNSDG provides a forum for joint policy formation and decision-making. It
guides, supports, tracks and oversees coordination of development operations in 165 countries
and territories. It brings together 36 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments
and offices that play a role in development.

The UNSDG's current **strategic priorities** are to: assist countries to achieve the Sustainable
Development Goals (SDGs) more swiftly and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development; assist national partners to implement their human rights obligations and integrate
human rights principles and international standards into the work of the UN; and deliver effective
support that will help crisis and post-crisis countries to build resilient societies and achieve
sustainable recovery.

The UNSDG's current **strategic approaches** are to: promote coherent development results
across the entire UN development system in order to improve transparency and accountability;
ensure that Resident Coordinator systems are participatory, collegial and mutually accountable;
simplify and harmonize business practices more swiftly; develop effective partnerships and wider
multi-stakeholder engagement; strengthen capacity development as a core function of the UN
development system; and integrate planning, programming and policy more completely.
Implementation of UNSDG strategic priorities and work plans is driven by working mechanisms - working groups and task teams - that focus on fostering system-wide norms, standards, and policies, as well as operational effectiveness.

The UNSDG meets twice a year under the chairmanship of its Chair, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General, who chairs the UNSDG on behalf of the SG. The UNDP Administrator, Mr Achim Steiner, serves as Vice-Chair.

The UNSDG is composed of the executive heads of UNSDG member entities. The UNSDG Vice-chair convenes the UNSDG Core Group, whose members include DESA, FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, WFP, WHO, the rotating chair of the Regional Economic Commissions, and chairs of the UNSDG Strategic Results Groups.

**Resident Coordinators**

The new Resident Coordinator system (RCS) remains focused on sustainable development; its overarching objective is ‘the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions’. As of January 2019, it is independent (separate from UNDP). Resident Coordinators (RCs) report to the SG through the UN Deputy Secretary-General. The UN Development Coordination Office (DOCO) in the UN Secretariat will manage and oversee the system, reporting to the Deputy Secretary-General. RCs will have authority to lead UN Country Teams (UNCTs) when they implement the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and assist countries to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this context, they have authority to:

- Ensure agency programmes for development are fully aligned with national development needs and priorities as well as with the UNSDCF.
- Ensure inter-agency pooled funding for development is used to further national priorities.
- Coordinate the UN’s operational development activities in support of countries’ efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda.
- Appraise the performance of UN country team heads.

Where international humanitarian assistance is required, and a separate Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) or lead agency is not designated, the RC leads and coordinates the response efforts of UN and other relevant humanitarian actors. In refugee crises, UNHCR is the designated lead agency and leads the response. To enable the RC to deploy and coordinate the UN development response coherently and effectively, UNHCR should brief the RC on all aspects of this work.

**The accountabilities of UNCT agencies**

Members of a UNCT are accountable and report to their respective agencies on matters relevant to their mandates. They are also expected to report periodically to the RC, on the activities of their individual agencies and on their agencies' contributions to the collective results of the UNSDCF. UNCT heads also report to the RC. In compliance with a recent UNDS resolution, they must now report on all activities that relate to the UNSDCF.

**Funding**
Funding for the new system will come from the following sources:

- A 1% coordination levy on tightly earmarked non-core contributions to UN development-related activities, to be paid at source.
- A doubling of the current UNSDG arrangement for cost-sharing between UN entities.
- Development system entities.
- Voluntary, predictable, multi-year contributions to a dedicated trust fund that will provide resources for inception periods.

Additionally, a Joint SDG Fund for Agenda 2030 has been created. It will receive voluntary contributions to implement country-level projects that support initiatives to achieve the SDGs. The aim is to raise and disburse USD 290 million annually. Because this target had not been reached at the end of 2019, the 2020 funding formula may be revised.

**Regional set-up**

Regional development structures (regional offices of UN agencies, regional UNSDGs, regional economic commissions) are being revitalized. The UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) coordinates global and regional UN development programmes. It provides oversight, guidance and capacity building, addresses policy guidance issues related to country-level operations, and supports the Resident Coordinator system.

**UN country teams**

UNCTs organize UN inter-agency cooperation and decision-making at country level. The UNCT includes every entity of the UN system that delivers operational activities for development, emergency, recovery and transition in a country. Its main purposes are to ensure that UNCT members plan and work co-operatively, within the Resident Coordinator system, to deliver tangible results in support of the Government’s development agenda.

The UN Resident Coordinator (RC) is the designated representative of the UN Secretary-General for development issues. The RC leads the UNCT. The UNCT meets at least once a month to make decisions through a consultative process. All UNCT members are collegially accountable to the RC and the UNCT, as well as directly accountable to their own organizations, for producing results under the UNSDCF and the joint UNCT workplan.

UNHCR can use the UNCT mechanism to exercise its protection leadership role and advocate for the inclusion of refugees in the UNSDCF. Advocacy is recommended both to engage UNCT members in support of UNHCR’s advocacy objectives, and ensure that people of concern to UNHCR (PoC) are included in the UNSDCF and other national planning mechanisms.

**The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework**

The UNSDCF is a multi-year strategic programme framework for UNCTs. Each national UNSDCF is designed to streamline UN development programmes at country level by introducing shared objectives, strategies and timeframes; it is prepared in close cooperation with the national Government. The World Bank may also participate in a UNSDCF when it contributes to development programmes.
The UNSDCF process starts with a Common Country Analysis (CCA). The CCA identifies needs and achievable changes. It provides the essential evidence base from which the UNSDCF's theory of change is derived and sets the direction and content for a strategic UN development assistance framework (UNDAF). CCAs are forward looking. In developing them, the UN system uses its convening power to consult and engage with the Government and other stakeholders. The analysis itself is the UN's, and does not require formal endorsement by Government. At the same time, preparing a CCA creates opportunities to build partnerships with key actors in a country, including international financial institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Unlike humanitarian and refugee planning exercises, the UNSDCF does not include NGO or civil society programmes, although these organizations may be consulted and may be implementing partners. Inter-agency humanitarian plans, IASC-led humanitarian response plans (HRPs), and UNHCR-led refugee response plans (RRPs) will continue to be independent but as far as possible should complement the UNSDCF.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

The IASC is a global humanitarian forum established in 1992 under UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182. Led by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), who is also head of OCHA, its members are operational organizations that have links to the UN system. Standing invitees include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction, OHCHR, the World Bank Group, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. In practice, no distinction is made between ‘members' and ‘standing invitees', and the number of participating agencies has expanded significantly since 1992. The IASC's main purpose is to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action by coordinating the activities of IASC members and other humanitarian actors, assigning responsibilities, and sharing resources and knowledge. The IASC develops and agrees system-wide humanitarian policies and resolves disputes or disagreements between humanitarian agencies or over system-wide humanitarian issues.

Role of partners involved

Overview of UNHCR's role in the IASC

- The IASC system deals with humanitarian issues that do not involve refugees. General Assembly Resolution 48/116 (December 1993) provides the legal foundation for UNHCR's engagement with internally displaced persons (IDPs). It is supported by the 2005
Humanitarian Reform that in turn led to the cluster approach and the Transformative Agenda. UNHCR is actively involved in the IASC. It leads the protection cluster, and co-leads the camp coordination/camp management cluster (CCCM) and the shelter cluster. (On shelter, UNHCR leads in situations of conflict and IFRC leads in natural disasters.)

- The High Commissioner is a ‘Principal’ (head of agency) in the IASC.
- The Partnership and Coordination Service of the Division of External Relations represents UNHCR in IASC Working Group meetings.
- The Division of Emergency, Security, and Supply represents UNHCR in the Emergency Directors' group.
- UNHCR has made firm commitments to fulfil its global and national cluster roles and obligations, and to report to the ERC on these.

It should be borne in mind that, in line with the new IDP policy:

- UNHCR will always strive to lead the protection cluster. Because UNHCR is not operational in all countries, however, in natural disaster settings leadership may be allocated to other agencies that have strong in-country capacity (such as UNICEF, OHCHR or UNFPA), subject to the agreement of peers.
- UNHCR will strive to lead the shelter and CCCM clusters in forced displacement settings. In general, UNHCR is not in favour of merging these clusters because each requires distinct technical expertise.
- The IASC/ERC does not lead on refugee matters, which are exclusively the domain of the High Commissioner, who reports directly to the UN General Assembly. (The ERC reports to the Secretary-General on matters that concern the IASC.)
- The ERC activates cluster-based responses to IDP and natural disasters via the IASC. The ERC does not have authority to declare a refugee emergency. Equally, UNHCR may not issue a system-wide emergency declaration or initiate cluster coordination at its own initiative.

One of the central roles of the IASC is to declare that an emergency has been scaled up. In November 2018, protocols for ‘system-wide scale-up' replaced the previous arrangements for activating ‘Level 3 emergencies'. An IASC system-wide scale-up mobilizes the entire IASC humanitarian system in response to a sudden onset crisis, or a rapidly deteriorating situation, in a country or region. System-wide scale-ups are called when the local or regional capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity, and urgency of a crisis. The five criteria for determining a system-wide scale-up emergency are: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity, and risk of failure to effectively deliver to affected populations.

Key steps include:
1. Consultation with the IASC Principals.
2. Mobilisation of cluster lead agency response capacities.
3. Immediate deployment of cluster coordination teams, possessing information management expertise, with capacity to scale up.
4. Activation of clusters, including designated leads.
5. Appointment and empowerment of a Humanitarian Coordinator. The HC:
○ Leads the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). The HCT draws up a Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA), and uses it to prepare a strategic statement and response plan.
○ Leads requests for Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocations.
○ Seeks consensus in the HCT on key decisions, but has authority to finalize proposals.
○ Raises any cluster lead performance problems with the ERC for discussion with IASC Principals.
○ Oversees effective coordination and delivery, monitoring, reporting and reviews.

**Important processes**

**The World Humanitarian Summit**

UNHCR took part in the World Humanitarian Summit, convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in Istanbul in May 2016.

In addition to subscribing to 32 commitments under the five core responsibilities of the [Agenda for Humanity](https://www.unhcr.org/agenda-humanity.html), UNHCR made 33 individual commitments and joined several initiatives. Among these, UNHCR undertook to steer inter-agency efforts to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action, ensure predictable engagement in situations of internal displacement, and champion efforts to end statelessness.

In line with its commitment to the ‘[Grand Bargain](https://www.unhcr.org/grand-bargain.html)’ which key donors and humanitarian organizations approved at the summit, UNHCR is making internal changes to improve its effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and accountability. It has also prioritized fulfilment of the [Commitment to Action](https://www.unhcr.org/commitment-to-action.html), also signed at the Summit, which calls for a ‘new way of working’.

Through the Agenda for Humanity platform, UNHCR reports annually on its progress towards achieving these commitments.

**Commitment to Action: a New Way of Working and collective outcomes**

Against the backdrop of the SDGs, which promise to leave no-one behind and end needs by reducing risks and vulnerabilities, the New Way of Working is now a shared commitment in the UN and the IASC. Building on major global processes, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the World Humanitarian Summit, the [Global Compact on Refugees](https://globalcompactonrefugees.unhcr.org/), the [Compact on Facilitating Safe and Orderly Migration](https://www.unhcr.org/compact-safemigration.html), and twin resolutions on Sustaining Peace, the introduction of new working methods is recognized to be an imperative for both humanitarian and development action. From UNHCR's perspective, the aim should be to improve the protection environment and contribute to peace and prevention of conflict. To reduce the impact of protracted crises on affected populations, it is necessary both to meet immediate needs and make investments in the medium- and long-term that will reduce the chronic vulnerabilities and risks faced by affected communities.

It is widely recognized that aid actors must evolve their thinking and working methods to address these issues more coherently. The adoption of ‘collective outcomes’ analysis and a ‘whole-of-society' approach may make it possible to bring together sectors and intervention timeframes that have traditionally been separate. IASC expects to release Collective Outcomes Guidelines in 2020.

Collective outcomes analysis seeks to employ the comparative advantages enjoyed by different
agencies to transcend conventional thinking, silos, and other attitudinal, institutional, and funding obstacles. In practice, participating agencies define a collective vision based on a joint analysis of context and risks (in the short-, medium- and long-term) and agree strategies, roles and responsibilities based on the comparative capacity (advantage) of participating actors to deliver the different outcomes. It is important to remember that the definition of comparative advantage includes an organization's mandate, capacity, and ability to act.

Concretely, HCTs and UNCTs are applying the New Way of Working by:
1. Jointly conducting predictable situation and problem analyses.
2. Planning and programming in ways that are more inclusive and coherent, enabling humanitarian and development actors to agree collective outcomes.
3. Strengthening leadership and coordination.
4. Introducing financing modalities that can support collective outcomes.

Adopting a collective outcome approach implies objectives that deliver sustained positive change and, in particular, make future humanitarian interventions unnecessary by reducing vulnerability and risk. In most cases, achievement of such objectives requires multi-year action. 'Positive change' might include humanitarian, development and peace-building elements. Humanitarian action might continue to be relevant but would be implemented in ways that promote sustained positive change.

**Refugee coordination**

Under its Statute, UNHCR provides international protection to refugees and seeks permanent solutions for them, acting on the authority of the General Assembly (GA). In that capacity, it is the lead agency with respect to refugee protection, responsible for seeking solutions in the UN system in association with a wider array of stakeholders. As set out in subsequent GA resolutions, its responsibilities include coordination, provision of protection and assistance, obtaining solutions, and advocacy. Importantly, UNHCR also has a supervisory role: it is the UN entity most immediately responsible for ensuring that States adhere to internationally accepted standards with respect to refugees and stateless persons and for strengthening States' capacity to protect both groups.

UNHCR has led and managed refugee operations effectively for decades. For many years, however, it did not articulate a model of refugee coordination that took account of changes in the humanitarian landscape. The Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), formalised in 2013 and further updated in 2019, makes UNHCR's approach to coordination more predictable by clarifying roles and responsibilities. Recent UN General Assembly Resolutions have confirmed the RCM and UNHCR's mandate to lead and coordinate the refugee response ([A/RES/69/152](https://www.un.org/en/ga/resolutions/votes/69/152), [A/RES/70/135](https://www.un.org/en/ga/resolutions/votes/70/135)).

States are primarily responsible for protecting refugees. However, several factors can inhibit their capacity to fully discharge this responsibility. Over two thirds of all refugees live in low- and middle-income countries that face economic and development challenges. The arrival of large numbers of refugees strains already over-stretched infrastructures and service delivery. In addition, the institutions of many States across the development spectrum are not equipped to appropriately receive, protect or otherwise respond to the challenges of receiving large numbers of refugees. For these reasons, it has long been recognized that international cooperation is
required to support States that receive refugees. This understanding lay at the heart of UNHCR's creation and the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. The importance of cooperation was subsequently confirmed in a range of regional instruments and was underscored by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which stated that "there is an urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world's refugees, while taking account of existing contributions and the differing capacities and resources among States. Refugees and host communities should not be left behind." The GCR calls for a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach to reach this objective, to achieve which UNHCR plays both a support and catalytic role.

UNHCR is mandated to affirm and support the right of every refugee to a safe and dignified voluntary return to his or her own country. UNHCR provides advice and guides UN action to facilitate voluntary return to countries of origin where conditions are such that return is safe, dignified and sustainable.

The UN system expects UNHCR to advise it on refugee returns, based on its assessment of the country's readiness to receive returnees, guarantee their security, provide essential services, and do so sustainably over time.

In practical terms, UNHCR's coordination responsibilities fall operationally in the following broad areas:

1. **Preparedness.** It works with Government and partners to: assess the likelihood of refugee inflows; determine the impact of inflows on national response mechanisms; and, depending on the level of risk, take preparedness actions.
2. **Advocacy.** It intervenes politically, diplomatically and legally to influence legislation and national practices. When doing so, UNHCR may engage directly with host Governments.
3. **Strengthening national capacity.** It may strengthen the capacity of national institutions and local actors to protect refugees and find solutions for them.
4. **Delivery.** It delivers protection and assistance and facilitates solutions.
5. **Coordination.** It involves UN partners and other stakeholders in developing and implementing a protection and solutions strategy that supports refugees and assists host countries to support refugees.
6. **Participation.** It works with refugees and host communities in ways that are sensitive to age, gender and diversity, and ensures they participate in designing responses to their needs that are appropriate, accessible and inclusive.
7. **Resource mobilization.** It raises funds for responding to refugees, including through inter-agency plans and appeals. **Inter alia,** it sets protection objectives; coordinates resource mobilization; drafts initial inter-agency plans; reports on their implementation and impact; and tracks contributions.
8. **Broadens the support base.** It seeks out and works with a wide array of stakeholders, including private sector, multilateral and bilateral development actors, to strengthen institutional capacity and assist host communities to address their urgent humanitarian needs. Where applicable, it works with such stakeholders to overcome shocks that result from conflict or large refugee arrivals.
9. **Monitoring and reporting.** It monitors and reports on the situation of refugees and application of the international protection regime.
10. **Prevention.** UNHCR uses the High Commissioner's good offices to prevent situations that cause refugees to flee, address root causes of migration and displacement, and promote the involvement of refugees in efforts to sustain peace.

11. **Solutions.** It promotes durable solutions; designs refugee responses that facilitate solutions; and ensures that solutions are implemented in ways that are safe and sustainable. This work includes efforts to secure return and reintegration, resettlement, local integration, obtain complementary pathways, and achieve other local solutions.

For more information on the interface of refugee coordination with the development and cluster systems, see the Entry on the [Refugee Coordination Model](#).

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### 3. Links

- Chief Executive Board
- IASC
- Cluster Guidance
- UN Reform

### 4. Main contacts

Contact the Partnership and Coordination Service in UNHCR's Division for External Relations:

- Annika Sandlund, at: [Sandlund@unhcr.org](mailto:Sandlund@unhcr.org)
- Maria Kiani, at: [Kiani@unhcr.org](mailto:Kiani@unhcr.org)