# THE UNITED NATIONS: REVISITING THE CHALLENGES OF THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

*Promoting development was part of the original United Nations mandate and is one of the three pillars of the UN Secretary-General's proposed reforms. The 2030 Agenda is the roadmap for development policies and strategies, but to be implemented successfully structural problems must be solved on governance, effectiveness and solvency and enhancing the multilateral system's legitimacy.*

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The development agenda is a central axis of the debate on the role of the United Nations and the need to adapt the institution to the changes in international society over the last decades. Development is one of the three pillars, together with Management, and Peace and Security, on which the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres structured his reform agenda at the beginning of his first term. According to Guterres (2018) it will be a reform "more focused on people and less on processes, more on results and less on bureaucracy". This area of reform is closely linked to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) whose motto is "Leave no one behind".

Expectations of change emerge every time a new secretary-general is elected, but they often fail or are frustrated for multiple reasons. As the former Director-General of the World Health Organization Gro Harlem Brundtland has pointed out, most of the blame lies with member states (Brundtland, 2019). Resistance to change is unlikely to be lower on this occasion, however, there is a general feeling that it is not possible to continue business as usual due to an accumulation of dysfunctions in the current development model that affect its sustainability. The United Nations system faces a crisis of gover-

nance that erodes multilateralism in its current form, calling into question its effectiveness in terms of contributing to development. But, above all, it is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy that makes an in-depth review of the system more necessary than ever on the 75th anniversary of the UN's founding. In addition, it faces an endemic funding crisis that has been aggravated by the COVID-19 outbreak. Reform means renewal, but it also means learning from the lessons of the past and avoiding repeating previous mistakes. Many of the difficulties reforming the institution result from political confrontations between states that prevent the achievement of the aspirations of the people to whom the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations was addressed and to whom universal economic and social progress was promised.

### A look at the past to envisage the future

International cooperation "in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character" is part of the original mandate established in Article 1 of the United Nations Charter, an objective intrinsically linked to the maintenance of peace and security. The right to development has been one of the central themes of debate since the Third World movement emerged from the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the claims for the emancipation of peoples in the aftermath of the decolonisation process. This movement encouraged the first Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, the creation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965 and the adoption of four successive ten-year development strategies. The East/West confrontation during the Cold War and the North/South tensions after the decolonisation process conditioned the claims and demands of developing countries and, coupled with the effects of the first oil crisis in 1973, led to historic General Assembly resolutions 3201 S-VI, approving a programme for the establishment of a new international economic order, and 3281-XXIX establishing the Charter of the Economic Rights and Duties of States, both in 1974. A year earlier, the Club of Rome's report "The Limits to Growth" warned of the impossibility of continuing the current growth model for the whole planet.

**THE REFORM OF THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IS CLOSELY LINKED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA AND THE SDGS WHOSE MOTTO IS "LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND".**

In 1978 the Independent Commission on International Development Issues chaired by Willy Brandt issued the report "North-South: a programme for survival", which called for a conference on cooperation and develop-

ment to be held in 1981. This was shortly before the foreign debt crisis and the rise of the neoliberal wave led by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. This disruptive conjuncture set back development demands for nearly a decade and the dictates of structural adjustment programmes dominated the international economic agenda. A decade later, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the recognition of the failure of previous development decades led to an intense review of development strategies. Then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali initiated an intense period of international conferences that shaped shared agendas in strategic areas of development policies, creating the basis of what today is the Sustainable Human Development Agenda: among others, were the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994; the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995; and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul in 1996.

Under the leadership of Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Millennium Summit was convened in 2000 to push for a new development agenda more focused on the basic needs of the poorest countries by concentrating efforts on the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For the first time, clear indicators and time-bound targets were defined, as well as monitoring mechanisms, through periodic reports. Despite the achievements of the MDGs in reducing poverty and increasing access to basic needs some critics raised questions about their reductionism, because the limited goals did not include all the dimensions needed for growth and social progress, nor did they take into account the inequality gaps between and within countries. Kofi Annan also began his mandate in 1997 by presenting a reform package. He promised "greater unity of purpose, greater coherence of effort and greater agility in responding to an increasingly dynamic and complex world" (UNSG, 1997). In March 2005, a few months before the end of his second term, Annan presented the report "In Larger Freedom: Towards development, security and human rights for all" (UNGA, 2005). Despite facing strong resistance to changes in the General Assembly during both mandates, he intended to save part of the reform on the eve of the Millennium+5 Summit, but his initiative was aborted after a never-ending list of amendments diluted the proposal into vagueness and the bulk of the reforms were stalled.

**THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL IN 1989 AND THE RECOGNITION OF THE FAILURE OF PREVIOUS DEVELOPMENT DECADES LED TO AN INTENSE REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES.**

His successor, Ban Ki-moon, took office in January 2007 and focused his re-form proposals on security and improved management. During his second term he also pushed forward the process of drawing up the SDGs for the 2030 Agenda with a firm commitment to an unprecedented consultative and participatory process that would truly constitute a universal agenda. The global objectives were aimed not only at overcoming poverty and hunger, but also at solving problems of violence, discrimination, environmental degradation and sustainability, equity, human rights and good governance. However, the implementation of this ambitious agenda requires structural problems to be solved that have been dragging the organisation down for decades.

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT AGENDA REFORM PROPOSED BY GUTERRES IS HINDERED BY MULTIPLE CRISES THAT WERE DIAGNOSED LONG AGO, BUT TO WHICH NO SOLUTION HAS YET BEEN FOUND.**

## A multifactorial crisis

The implementation of the United Nations development agenda reform proposed by Guterres is hindered by multiple crises that were diagnosed long ago, but to which no solution has yet been found.

First, there is a *crisis of governance* which makes it difficult for the international institutions to make decisions and to respond quickly to changing situations. At this level, one of the challenges that the organisation has faced is to ensure the coherence of the whole system. The functionalist design that the organisation has adopted since its inception, with multiple sectorial independent bodies, has been an obstacle to the coherence of the whole system, despite the reforms made to strengthen the role of UNDP and the implementation of programmes on the ground. The report of the current Secretary-General on "Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: ensuring a better future for all" (ECOSOC, 2018) calls for a paradigm shift with strong changes in strategic planning. According to Guterres's report, "the current model has reached its exhaustion point and is insufficient to match the ambition, effectiveness and cohesion required by the 2030 Agenda" (ECOSOC, 2018). This is why entities need to adopt an inter-agency approach that goes beyond coordination to encourage collective action in favour of the same agenda, both among the different agencies and in the field. One of the aspects that has been identified as crucial for the reform is to intensify coordination at regional level. The current lack of precision in the division of labour leads to duplications, overlaps within agencies and the misuse of regional platforms for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the monitoring of progress in each region.

Second, the above-mentioned organisational shortcomings also lead to a *crisis of effectiveness*. Concerns about the accountability of the United Nations has been a recurrent issue for many years, but the 2030 Agenda makes it more necessary to address these problems head-on. The intergovernmental oversight mechanisms that have been established must provide strategic direction, foster a culture more focused on results than processes, give room for innovation and demonstrate greater flexibility in order to take rapid corrective actions based on empirical evidence and incorporating lessons learned. At present, there is a data gap to adapt the decision-making process to reality. The SDGs agenda requires an improvement in the quantity and quality of data available to all. The data revolution should be accompanied by governance that ensures equitable access to new technologies and quality information on development indicators on a universal basis. Initiatives such as The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSD) launched by the General Assembly in 2015, which created the Data4SDGs Toolbox, and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) are important elements, but there are still multiple gaps at the national and local levels. In its 5-year strategy, GPSD describes how:

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> too many people are invisible in the data and therefore invisible in the decision making. Too many countries simply do not have the resources for integrated birth or detention registration systems, for mapping camps and houses, for assessing the impact of climate change, and for collecting and sharing information on people's health, access to water, food and other basic services (GPSD, 2019).

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how asymmetries in access to knowledge and technologies limit the effective response to a health crisis.

Third, another of the shortcomings facing the process of implementing the SDGs is the *legitimacy crisis*. The United Nations development system is the product of an intergovernmental structure that hinders interaction with other development agents. While the current structures have been incorporating other actors, they are not fully prepared to support the demands of inclusive alliances and participatory planning processes. In the process of preparing the 2030 Agenda, citizens and others contributed to shaping it. Now they should be fully involved in its implementation. The Global Alliance convened by SDG17 requires stronger collaboration between governments,

the private sector and civil society, together with the United Nations, to mo-
bilise the fulfilment of the agenda's objectives. To achieve this, it is necessary
to seek alliances for sharing specialised knowledge, technology and material
capabilities. The United Nations reform process can learn from the experi-
ence of the participatory process of preparing the 2030 Agenda to incorpo-
rate bottom-up dynamics, not only in the consultative process, but also in
the dynamics of updating and evolving regional, national and local develop-
ment strategies. In line with the necessary increase in democratic legitima-
cy, the demand for a United Nations Parliament
seems too complex given the large number of
member states, but the idea of an assembly of
parliamentarians from regional organisations to
liaise with national parliaments is plausible and
could help strengthen the regional dimension
of the development strategies.

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Fourth, and overwhelming all the weaknesses
previously mentioned, there is a persistent *fi-
nancial crisis*. On the one hand, there is the de-
faulting of some states on their mandatory quo-
tas, which puts the system under permanent
pressure. In October 2019 the Secretary-General
had to raise the alarm about the lack of liquid-
ity to pay for salaries and basic services (UNSG,
2019). But there is also a problem with the way development programmes
are financed, most of which are voluntary contributions, and 91% of which
are earmarked for single-entity projects. This high level of earmarked funding
limits the system's ability to act coherently and causes problems for policy
integration, data management and partnership building. This form of fund-
ing also undermines accountability for system-wide results. In addition, frag-
mented funding creates incentives for competition rather than collaboration.
Finally, there is a clear lack of resources to achieve the ambitious goals of the
SDGs. The 2019 High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development noted
that current financing is not enough to achieve the goals adopted in the
coming ten years. An independent study has estimated that the financial
gap for eradicating poverty in Developing countries to implement the 2030
Agenda is $222 billion per year (Marcus, Manea, Samman and Evans, 2019).
But according to IMF study "delivering on the SDG agenda will require addi-
tional spending in 2030 of US$0.5 trillion for low-income developing coun-
tries and US$2.1 trillion for emerging market economies" (Gaspar, Amaglobeli,
Garcia Escribano, Prady and Soto, 2019). The United Nations should be able to
monitor this gap through greater scrutiny of the Financing for Development
Agenda alongside financial agencies and the private sector.

**Conclusion: The 2030 Agenda as a driver of change**

Since the SDGs already provide a roadmap for the orientation of development policies and strategies, Guterres's proposals for development system reform focus on achieving greater coordination and accountability in the functioning of United Nations agencies on the ground (UN-SDG, 2019). However, the kind of structural change needed cannot be achieved without generating political support from member states and a recovery of the legitimacy of multilateral institutions. For the time being, the position of the current United States administration does not make this task easy. The threat made by the Unites States to cut funding to the World Health Organisation at the height of the COVID-19 crisis is an example of its lack of commitment to the international cooperation system. The outcome of the United States presidential elections in November 2020 will undoubtedly be a major conditioning factor in the performance of a reform agenda leading to a reinvention of a system that too often shows signs of fossilisation. But an even more important factor is that the United Nations should show itself to be closer to the needs of the people and less hostage to the spurious interests of governments and financial lobbies. More transparency, more representation and more effectiveness are necessary elements to advance in a reform that emphasises results and leads to greater and better alliances with other organisations, states and civil society. This is the only way to mobilise resources and political will. The 2030 Agenda is a unique opportunity and a drive for change as never before. However, it will need to address the same obstacles that have always hindered international cooperation and confront the dramatic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which has revealed the weaknesses of the current design of the international institutional structure.

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