

Evaluation

**The role of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development, *in the context of* UN development system reform
2017-2023**

Brief

Mr. Alexander MacKenzie

August 2023

Executive Summary

In 2015, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#)¹ (SDGs) led to efforts to reposition the United Nations Development System (UNDS) to respond to complex, interlinked global challenges. The reform of the UNDS is intended to produce a UNDS that is *'fit for purpose'*: more integrated, more focused on delivery on the ground... and with resources that are better aligned to support member States to achieve the 2030 Agenda².

At the regional level, the reform is intended to strengthen collaboration, transparency and efficiency in support of country level results. Regional commissions are positioned as the *'policy backbone'* of the UNDS, to translate the SDGs into concrete action and ensure that Member States can benefit fully from regional policy and technical expertise.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has engaged actively in the reform process. Together with other UN organizations (UNOs) it implemented a range of measures to strengthen the regional UN architecture, engage in country coordination mechanisms and frameworks.

This evaluation has determined, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of UNECE efforts, *in the context of UNDS reform*, to become *'fit for purpose'*. The scope is organization-wide from 2017 to 2023. It aims to understand: (1) How the UNECE changed in response to UNDS reform – its ways of thinking and working internally and with others, and (2) To what extent these changes *made a difference* to the UNECE programme and its support to member States to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The evaluation used a mixed-method approach: document review and analysis, key informant interviews, and confidential electronic surveys of UNECE and external stakeholders.

Relevance: Actions taken by UNECE to engage in UNDS reform at the regional and country levels were aligned with and contributed to the strategic directions of UNDS reform. Internal repositioning measures helped the UNECE to better position itself and communicate its *'offer'* among the UN family at regional and country levels; the UNECE offer can be summed up as: its knowledge and expertise, based upon the regulatory instruments developed by the inter-governmental sectoral committees.

UNECE regulatory and technical cooperation is highly relevant to member States. Analysis of programme and technical cooperation plans and reports demonstrate a high level of alignment between the work of the UNECE sub-programmes and the SDGs and/or SDG targets and indicators. However, UNECE efforts to engage in UNDS reform did not significantly increase this relevance. A strategic aim of the UNECE is to promote synergies³ between UNECE cooperation and work of other UNOs, in particular through the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC) system and with UN Country Teams (UNCTs). UNECE plans and reports offer limited evidence of these.

Coherence: Actions taken by the UNECE Secretariat to engage in UNDS reform efforts at the regional and country levels were broadly coherent with those of other UNOs. UNECE actions to support the establishment and working of the Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) and Issues-based Coalitions (IBCs) have enhanced their overall functioning and effectiveness. At country level, UNECE actions enhanced the visibility and alignment of its technical cooperation in UN Cooperation Frameworks

¹ Adopted by the UN General Assembly ([A/RES/70/1](#))

² The reform was launched with General Assembly (GA) resolution [A/RES/72/279](#), June 2018. It responded to proposals of the UN Secretary General (UNSG) ([A/72/124](#)) to reposition the UNDS to support Member States to achieve the 2030 Agenda and SDGs

³ This is meant to: (1) Enhance national ownership and increase the alignment of TC with national priorities; and (2) Strengthen cooperation with UNOs and partners at the country level to find **cross-sectoral synergies and linkages**, and (3) Enhance the impact and sustainability of UNECE TC. UNECE-EXCOM, [Technical Cooperation Strategy](#), Informal Document 2021/11, 17 May 2021. Para 6, 10.

(UNSDCF) and Joint Work Plans (JWP) and enabled UNRCs and UNCTs to better understand the UNECE 'offer'. Results are not consistent across all programme countries, but overall there has been notable and tangible progress for UNECE positioning at country level. The roles of Regional Advisers (RAs) are especially important in this work.

The nexus approach helped to drive cross-sector collaboration within the UNECE Secretariat and to communicate the UNECE 'offer' and value added to external stakeholders but its ongoing relevance is in question. The high level themes appear to have greater relevance and to resonate more strongly with member States

The UNECE has sufficient policies, reflecting UNDS priorities and strategies, to mainstream gender equality, disability inclusion, the environment and human rights. While gender and environment and climate concerns are well integrated into the programme, human rights and disability inclusion are less visible in both plans and reports⁴.

Effectiveness: The findings above affirm that UNECE used the opportunity of UNDS reform to: (1) Better position itself and communicate its offer among the UN family; and (2) Enhance the coherence and functioning of regional and country coordination architecture and frameworks. Overall UNECE made considerable effort to engage and was perceived as a valuable team player and as a leader on several complex initiatives.

The question of effectiveness is about whether these achievements made a difference – in terms of UNECE support to member States to implement the 2030 Agenda and achieve the SDGs. Responses from key informants and UNECE plans and reports offer mixed or limited evidence for this. Three issues emerge:

- 1) There is still insufficient focus and priority for UNECE cooperation in programme countries; UNECE cooperation is perceived as fragmented and too 'projectized';
- 2) While Regional Advisers (RAs) have enhanced the relevance and coherence of UNECE at country level there are questions about whether the representation, coordination, and strategic functions are best carried-out by RAs and about their long-term effectiveness and sustainability;
- 3) The contribution of UNECE cooperation to the achievement of the SDGs by member States is difficult to see at the outcome level and the influence of UNECE engagement in UNDS reform appears limited.

Efficiency: UNECE engagement with regional and country level coordination mechanisms and frameworks was done in an efficient manner. A small group of staff carry large and complex workloads to sustain this work. While current staffing is sufficient to 'station-keep' it is insufficient for UNECE to engage more comprehensively with country coordination mechanisms and frameworks and to seek out the strategic synergies expected from collaboration, especially in programme countries.

Engagement by the UNECE in UNDS reform has not contributed to a significant increase in extrabudgetary resources (XB). While the RAs, backstopped by the PMU, were successful at integrating UNECE activities into the CFs and JWPs of the programme countries, this engagement has not led to a substantial increase in new joint initiatives with the UN system or an increase in related XB resources. This includes joint programmes and access to pooled funds.

Sustainability: The regulatory instruments produced by the UNECE are sustained mainly through the work programmes of the sectoral committees. These are supported by the UNECE sub-programmes.

⁴ This finding aligns with 2023 OIOS evaluation related recommendation. OIOS, Evaluation of UNECE: Subprogramme 4, Economic cooperation and integration, and subprogramme 6, Trade, E/AC.51/2023/5, 08 March 2023, Section G, para 72. While the finding is specific to the Division of Economic Cooperation and Trade (ECTD) and sub-programmes 4 and 6, similarities in working methods and the demand-driven nature of the work of the commission and secretariat suggest that it can be reasonably and plausibly applied to all of UNECE

Engagement through country coordination mechanisms and frameworks has the potential to support programme countries to implement UNECE regulatory instruments. UNECE reporting offers limited evidence that these linkages and synergies are being made in a systematic manner.

Conclusion: There has been a tangible and valuable increase in the visibility and understanding of the UNECE offer within the UN system, particularly in the programme countries. UNECE informants widely acknowledge that: 'They [*the wider UN system*] know us better – and what we can offer'. This is corroborated by all external informants and by survey results.

So far, these wins appear to be mainly internal for UNECE and for the UN family. They are not yet significantly enhancing the effectiveness or sustainability of UNECE cooperation, in terms of greater programmatic synergy, to support members States. Nor have they translated into significantly more joint initiatives, including joint programmes at country or regional level, with opportunities for resource mobilization.

Recommendations: There are five priority recommendations

- 1) The UNECE Secretariat should undertake a more strategic prioritization process tailored to each programme country. This should identify the top 3 to 4 specific priorities for technical cooperation where UNECE has an exclusive knowledge niche and where regulatory instruments and expertise can be marshalled for concerted action in partnership with the UNRC, UNCT and government.
- 2) The UNECE Secretariat should consider how to strengthen the country focal point role of RAs to achieve the representation, coordination, partnership and resource mobilization results it wants from engagement with country coordination mechanisms and frameworks.
- 3) The UNECE Secretariat should enhance its reporting on cooperation results to emphasize collaboration and synergies with the UN system; requirements for this should be included in reporting guidance, where feasible.
- 4) *Within available resources*, the UNECE Secretariat should realign available human resources to support engagement with country and regional coordination mechanisms and frameworks. Mindful of regular budget constraints and at the next opportunity, the UNECE Secretariat should pursue one additional post to focus on cooperation with the UNDS.
- 5) To sustain the cross-sector approach and promote collaboration across the sub-programmes, the UNECE Secretariat should continue to focus on the high level themes and take steps to reactivate the nexus approach.