



UNITED NATIONS
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GROUP



**Guidance on UN
Country-level
Strategic
Planning for
development in
exceptional
circumstances**

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UNSDG Guidance

UN country-level strategic planning for development in exceptional circumstances

In line with the 2020 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (A/C.2/75/L.61), as a general rule, all countries that have a programmatic presence of the United Nations Development System (UNDS), where there is a Resident Coordinator (RC) and an established UN Country Team (UNCT), are expected to have a UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) as the most important planning and implementation instrument of development activities, prepared and finalized in full consultation and agreement with national Governments (OP71). The 2019 UNSDCF guidance is clear in its objectives and yet also allows significant flexibility such that it can be applied in the wide variety of country contexts. The agreement with the host government is formalized through joint signature of the UNSDCF.

In exceptional cases, however, the necessary conditions may not be in place to develop a full-fledged UNSDCF and/or to co-sign it with the host government in full compliance with the guidance. By definition, in such circumstances it is not possible to predict all the scenarios where this might occur. Exceptional circumstances may include: (a) countries undergoing violent conflict, hindering the ability to undertake medium term strategic planning; or (b) absence or lack of clear, unified authorities with whom to plan.

The purpose of this section of the guidance is to describe possible options and steps to be followed in such exceptional circumstances. It is *not* the purpose of this guidance to offer criteria or fixed definitions of these circumstances. Rather, the guidance provides parameters for RCs and UNCTs who determine that it is not going to be possible to proceed with a UNSDCF. The decision to proceed with an alternative unsigned option rests with the Chair of the UNSDG and the Principals of the UNSDG entities, following the escalation procedure outlined below. In cases of integrated settings (option #4 below), lead departments must be part of the decision process.

It is of utmost importance that alternative unsigned options should be sought **only in truly exceptional circumstances**, i.e. a tiny minority of cases at any given time. More to the point, alternative options (outlined in the menu below) **must be a temporary, time-bound solution**, and the shift towards a Cooperation Framework should be made as soon as possible.

A commitment to joint UN analysis – the Common Country Analysis (CCA)

As described elsewhere in this guidance, the UN Common Country Analysis (CCA) is the UN development system's independent, collective, integrated, forward-looking, and evidence-based assessment (i.e., a description of a country situation) and analysis (i.e., a description of causes and their implications) of a country situation. As a flagship product, the CCA becomes the foundation for the design of the UN's programmatic development response through the UNSDCF. The CCA being a UN system-wide exercise – including development, peace and security, humanitarian, human rights and other perspectives – also contributes to a sound common and comprehensive analytical understanding of the country context. At the same time, the analysis – especially if periodically updated - can inform UN programme adjustments across pillars, as well as decision-making processes of Government and other stakeholders and partners.

In any setting, and within the overall framework of guidance, the RC and UNCT will have to make decisions about how to apply the overall CCA/UNSDCF guidance to its local circumstances, doing the best they can to pursue all the elements. In exceptional circumstances, data may be limited or non-existent, and the ability to dialogue with stakeholders and work on certain topics may be significantly curtailed. This further strengthens the case for the UN system – across its various pillars – to undertake joint analysis and identify challenges and opportunities in these circumstances. The CCA involve all UN actors, including Peacekeeping Missions, Special Political Missions, Special Envoys or any relevant UN entities that may have information/data on the country, even if they are not operationally present in a country. The CCA should draw on information about any relevant humanitarian needs or peacebuilding dynamics, for example, Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) or gender-sensitive conflict analyses, as well as on good practice in information analysis the area of humanitarian-development-peace collaboration. To the extent possible, the UN should consult with partners beyond the central government, including local governments and other relevant national entities, line ministries, civil society, the private sector, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and development and humanitarian partners. Where possible, the UN should consider joint analysis with the EU and the World Bank (WB) Group - which could inform the EU National Indicative Programme and the WB Country Diagnostic and Country Partnership Framework¹, as well as with other partners such as regional organizations. The general expectation is that a summary of such analysis should be published, or at the very minimum, where this is not feasible, made available to stakeholders.

Options for joint UN planning and implementation frameworks for development

In all circumstances, a joint UN planning and implementation framework for development² is required. Below are four options to make this happen:

Option 1: Extend and adjust the existing planning and implementation framework (UNDAF/UNSDCF)

Even in challenging settings, RCs and their UNCTs can seek to extend the existing framework. This option can serve to accommodate further time for consultations with national partners, while providing continuity of the state party's accountability, irrespective of the government in place at the moment of the extension, and hence a stronger legal framework for continued development assistance. To avoid situations where the framework becomes substantively redundant through such an extension, the RC and UNCT – in line with the Cooperation Framework guidance – can (based on an updated CCA) adjust the programmatic priorities (particularly at the CF output level [e.g. transitional work, geographic coverage etc.]) and/or relevant indicators and targets in the results framework of the existing framework. This adjustment allows the UNCT to incorporate changes in the country context in the planning and implementation instrument. In principle, where feasible, national authorities' agreement to the extension of the CF should be sought and obtained where there is a change to two or more of the CF outcomes.

Option 2: Transitional UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

If extending the existing instrument is not an option, the RC and UNCT can create a Transitional UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The exact label can be adjusted to suit the context. Being positioned as transitional, this framework recognizes that the context poses significant obstacles to routine UN functioning, and more time is required before a regular

¹ 2008 Tripartite Agreement.

² i.e. all non-humanitarian UN work focusing on sustainable development, including peacebuilding.

medium-term Cooperation Framework (usually three to five years) can be negotiated and put in place. There is no standard template for a transitional UN plan. The RC and UNCT shall aspire to pursuing the Cooperation Framework guidance as much as the context allows. All Cooperation Framework guiding principles apply.³ Transitional Frameworks will generally run for two or maximum three years. Transitional Frameworks shall focus on a few transitional/non-negotiable priorities and/or time-bound deliverables. If it is decided that a UNCT should pursue such an option (see Procedure, below), a mechanism will be put in place to coordinate relevant regional and HQ inputs and support to the framework design. Transitional Frameworks will be signed by the RC and UNCT, with Government signature where possible. Where the latter signature is impossible, a formal communication will be sent to Member States informing of this situation in line with the Procedure described below, and the UN system's development action shall be authorized by respective UN entities' approval mechanisms for UN agency new country programme/extensions aligned to the UN Transitional Framework.

Option 3: Short-term UN Development Action Plan

The RC and UNCT may develop a short-term UN Development Action Plan, that covers the totality of UN development action in the territory. This plan serves to i) ensure UN coordination, ii) ensure strategic coherence between analysis and programmes, iii) communicate to partners, and iv) provide a basis for accountability.⁴ The exact title, 'positioning', and timeframe will depend upon the actual circumstances. All Cooperation Framework guiding principles apply. The Action Plan may be a very minimal document, i.e. annotated, summary workplans identifying actions that development agencies aim to undertake to pave the road toward pivoting out of emergency humanitarian assistance. In cases where the short-term UN Development Action Plan will not be co-signed by national authorities, a formal communication will be sent to Member States informing of this situation in line with the Procedure described below, and the UN system's development action shall be authorized by respective UN entities' approval mechanisms for UN agency new country programme/extensions aligned to the UN Development Action Plan.

Option 4: Applicable in integrated mission settings: Development Strategic Planning intrinsic to the Integrated Strategic Framework

Where an integrated UN presence is in place or is being considered, the Integrated Assessment and Planning (IAP) Policy requires the integrated conduct of assessments and planning. The Policy states that the UN leadership in country (SRSG and DSRSG/RC/HC) in consultation with the UNCT and UNHQ, can decide to use the Cooperation Framework as the joint overall strategic planning document for the UNCT and a mission focusing on sustaining peace if it meets the minimum standards listed in the Policy. In exceptional circumstances, where there is no unified and/or functional authority or there are insurmountable obstacles to an agreement with the authorities in place, the unsigned Integrated Strategic Framework (ISF) will function as the single UN framework unless the agencies, funds and programmes are implementing significant development activities that cannot be covered in an ISF. In such cases a UN Transitional Framework or a Development Action Plan can complement the ISF for these specific activities. In these cases, a formal communication will be sent to Member States informing of this situation in line with the Procedure described below, and the UN system's development action shall be authorized by respective UN entities' approval mechanisms for UN agency new country programme/extensions aligned to the UN Development Action Plan.

³ Leaving No One Behind, Human Rights-Based Approach, Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, Resilience, Sustainability, and Accountability.

⁴ Including to governing bodies of UN entities, where possible and/or relevant.

Criteria that apply to all options:

In all the above options, to the extent possible all the regular tools (e.g. roadmap), instruments (e.g. Joint Work Plan) and management arrangements (e.g. inter-agency results/thematic groups) of the Cooperation Framework should be used and the guiding principles followed. This also applies to coordination and consultation with external partners, including the host country/de facto government and member states at both the country level, including to the extent possible central and/or line ministries, local authorities, and other partners including civil society, as well as at regional and headquarters (e.g., member states briefings and consultations).

In all the above options, the UN Framework/Plan for development shall promote coherence and complementarity across the peace and security, human rights, development and humanitarian⁵ work of the UN, by complementing and linking to humanitarian or political/peace frameworks that may already exist, ensuring as appropriate a focus on recovery, resilience, prevention, and durable solutions. In addition to joint analysis (refer to above), UNCTs are encouraged to explore common theories of change across the UN Framework/Plan and the Humanitarian Response Plan, the ISF, and/or other plans (e.g. refugees response), and/or the incorporation of collective outcomes across these plans, to ensure cross-pillar coherence and collaboration.⁶ Consultations with OCHA, DPPA, and EOSG are naturally encouraged. In some circumstances, Security Council resolutions may also need to be factored into the UN development system planning frameworks.

All of the above options are intended to be short-term and time-bound. However, they may all be extended, should circumstances require, provided the appropriate approval is received from the UNSDG.

1. Procedure

The UN development system has a responsibility at country, regional and global level to do its best to pursue the negotiation of a UNSDCF, *but also to anticipate possible major challenges to do so.*

Country-level responsibilities

- Resident Coordinators (RCs), in consultation with UNCTs, should identify any existing or anticipated obstacles at an early stage, i.e. 12-18 months before the conclusion of the current UNSDCF/UNDAF and as soon as they begin to discuss a roadmap for the preparation of the new CCA and CF.
- If it seems possible that a UNSDCF will be difficult to negotiate, the RC, in consultation with the UNCT – and other UN entities as relevant, in particular mission leadership in integrated settings – raises this with the Development Coordination Office (DCO) Regional Director, as Chair of the Peer Support Group (PSG), outlining what is expected to be possible to achieve in the circumstances, following as much as possible the principles contained within the UNSDCF guidance, and confirming which of the above options may be most feasible, and why.

⁵ As appropriate and in line with safeguarding humanitarian space and principles.

⁶ Realizing the triple nexus: <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/humansecurity-tools/>

Regional-level responsibilities

- The DCO Regional Director brings the case to the attention of the Regional Directors of the concerned UN entities, both UNCT as well as other relevant entities including OCHA and DPPA/DPO.
- The Regional Directors of the concerned UNCT entities, in conjunction with DCO and UN entities – including mission leadership as relevant – and in consultation with their legal offices as required, formulate a collective position proposing which option the UNSDG Principals should authorize, and for how long.
- The DCO Regional Director informs DCO Headquarters, as Secretariat of the UNSDG, of the developments and of the Regional Directors' collective position.

Headquarters-level responsibilities

- DCO HQ informs UNSDG Principals (copying UNSDG focal points) and relevant Departments (e.g. DPPA, DPO, OCHA) of these developments and of the field leadership's perspectives and the Regional Directors' collective position, seeking non-objection from Principals on the proposed course of action.
- The UNSDG Principals shall confirm the suggested RC and UNCT action. Where agreement cannot be reached, an ad-hoc meeting of the concerned UNSDG Principals or Deputies and other heads of UN entities as relevant shall be convened.
- If necessary, the Chair of the UNSDG supported by DCO, shall support the RC with negotiating a positive outcome, keeping the UNSDG Principals and Regional Directors closely informed.
- Any final decision of the Chair of the UNSDG to allow a UNCT to pursue any of the above-mentioned options related to exceptional circumstances should be formally communicated to Member States. This communication should specifically highlight instances where no counter-signature by host authorities is expected.

Other

- At the technical level, the PSG supports the RC and UNCT in the design of the instrument. The PSG should collaborate closely with technical focal points of mission and humanitarian entities as relevant.
- At the regional level, the Regional Directors should be anticipating any possible challenges in the negotiation of UNSDCF. Thus, on a yearly basis at the time of reviewing which countries in their respective regions have plans for undertaking CCA/UNSDCFs, any concerns about the viability of negotiating frameworks successfully should be identified, discussed with RCs and UNCTs, as well as mission and humanitarian entities as relevant, and submitted to UNSDG for discussion.
- In line with QCPR (OP74), DCO will make the relevant instrument and/or its outcome matrix available to Member States and the governing bodies when the draft country programme document is presented for consideration, to enable UN entities to derive their country programme from the UN development instrument.



The United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) unites the 37 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments and offices that play a role in development.

At the country level, 132 UN Country Teams serving 162 countries and territories work together to increase the synergies and joint impact of the UN system.

The UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) serves as the secretariat for the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) at the regional and global levels. DCO provides managerial and oversight functions for resident coordinators. Its activities are advanced through collective ownership by the UNSDG.

The Office acts as a key conduit for supporting the UN's activities for sustainable development, which inform policy, programme and operations on the ground.

For more information or queries, please contact:
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