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Report of the joint meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

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Report of the joint meeting of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)/the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP)

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1. The Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards (JMB) of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women, and WFP takes place annually and provides a platform for Member States to discuss issues of common interest across agencies, involving both the Members and Observers of the four Executive Boards as well as the Principals of six agencies. In 2024, the Executive Boards requested a discussion on the role of effective governance, by governing bodies, in promoting multilateralism and United Nations Development System (UNDS) effectiveness, in accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. The meeting was opened by the JMB Chair, the President of the Executive Board of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS. The Chair expressed his appreciation for the presence of the Board Presidents as well as of the Principals and deputy of all JMB partners. In his remarks, the Chair underlined that the governing bodies of the United Nations funds and programmes played a crucial role in supporting and supervising the activities of each agency, as well as in ensuring that United Nations entities carry out the respective duties emanated from various multilateral agreements and joint initiatives. The strategic direction, oversight and accountability provided by the Executive Boards played a crucial role in ensuring that these organizations could more effectively and efficiently deliver on their respective mandates, and achieve system-wide results, including the SDGs. Ultimately, the Executive Boards ensured the effectiveness of the UNDS. As the world changes and becomes more complex, the United Nations governing bodies must evolve too. The decisions taken by the Executive Boards in recent years were testimony to the fact that the Boards were not only aware of the need to evolve but that they were taking proactive action.
3. The Chair stressed that United Nations entities’ effectiveness in countries hinged on the effectiveness of their Executive Boards, which ensured that all actions taken were grounded in pragmatism and were responsive to the needs of communities. He noted that multilateral collaboration through fora such as the JMB was critical for addressing mounting development challenges in a fast-changing world. With only six years remaining until 2030 and growing crises, the Boards ensured that United Nations agencies could fulfill their mandates and remain fit for purpose. This required adapting the working methods, rules, decision-making and meetings modalities of the Boards themselves.
4. The Chair referred to the requests made by the Executive Boards for expert reviews of their oversight and governance functions. For example, in 2023, WFP undertook an assessment of its governance frameworks and processes to identify opportunities for improving efficiency and effectiveness. The review, conducted by an independent consultant, provided a set of recommendations for the Board to provide the best possible strategic advice and support to WFP. A working group of the Executive Board was then established to review the recommendations and develop an implementation plan for those recommendations approved by the Board. The Chair also noted that in 2023, at the request of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women, an assessment was conducted by the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on the governance and oversight functions of the three Executive Boards. The review highlighted opportunities for improvement in key governance areas, including roles and responsibilities, structure, processes, and systems.

5. Both these reviews offered opportunities for reflection on how Executive Boards could be strengthened to enhance their governance and oversight roles. In the Boards' collective effort to foster multilateralism, every dollar invested should lead to tangible outcomes. A fundamental principle of multilateralism is equality among nations. In this spirit, the Chair encouraged Members to explore new platforms for working together to strengthen governance frameworks for enhanced United Nations system effectiveness, including through intergovernmental processes like the Summit of the Future. Through stronger collaboration and open communications, all parties could forge ahead with renewed determination towards achieving the SDGs.
6. The Assistant Secretary-General for Development Coordination, speaking on behalf of the Deputy Secretary-General, highlighted the critical role of governing boards in advancing multilateralism and sustainable development, and leading change within the United Nations system. This was possible because of the alignment of Board decisions with broader decisions of the United Nations on governance coordination. Expressing gratitude to the entities that had led this journey, he noted that Member States wished this progress to continue. The scale and ambition of the SDGs necessitated that multilateral institutions keep pace with changing needs. Governing bodies of United Nations entities needed to seize all opportunities to reflect on the guidance they received and to build upon their positive working relationships. Significant opportunities existed to build even stronger linkages among United Nations governance processes.
7. The JIU report had provided useful guidance in this regard. For the first time, a full overview had been provided of how United Nations agencies had integrated the requirements of reform. Entities' first round of discussions on this would be much anticipated. Executive Boards would have a central role in advancing the implementation of a new funding compact. In the last Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) cycle before 2030, it would be possible to set an ambitious course for the next four years. As the Summit of the Future drew near, it was time to renew the focus on these goals. The President of the Executive Board of WFP reiterated that the Summit of the Future and other multilateral processes were important opportunities for identifying ways to improve global governance and influencing the vision for a more effective and unified multilateral system to ensure that no one is left behind. The Executive Boards' roles included ensuring collaboration with other United Nations partners to achieve the long-term goals of resilience and sustainable development. In the light of challenges facing the world, it was critical to reflect on whether these entities' governance was fit to address these pressing challenges and to deliver as one for achieving the SDGs.
8. The JMB session provided an opportunity to exchange views on the 2023 JIU review which highlighted the possibilities for improving governance system and functions and how to make the most of these possibilities. Over the course of the session, the heads and deputy of the six entities had an opportunity to express their opinions regarding their agencies' governance arrangements and how they could be enhanced. This was also an opportunity to collectively consider how the JMB could be more efficient and effective in providing oversight. The Pact for the Future document, currently being negotiated in the lead up to the Summit of the Future, envisages a section on transforming global governance to overcome the challenges facing the world today. As heads of organizations, those present at the JMB session had a fundamental role to play. The President of the WFP Executive Board encouraged all Board Members and entities Principals to use this unique platform for bringing ideas from their respective entities to the table. Only through open dialogue could United Nations partners work together with governments to address the challenges each of them faced and maximize their effectiveness in order to achieve the SDGs.
9. The UNFPA Director of Communications and Strategic Partnerships opened a panel discussion with the Principals and deputy of the six participating United Nations agencies. The aim of this discussion was to engage directly with agencies' senior management and gather their perspectives on the role of governing bodies – and Executive Boards more specifically – and how agencies can more effectively work with the Boards towards enhancing the effectiveness of the UNDS and accelerating the achievement of the SDGs.

10. The Executive Director of UNFPA highlighted that the Executive Boards were a quintessential expression of multilateralism–inclusive platforms for cooperation and decision-making by consensus. They were not only crucial in ensuring that agencies can deliver their mandates effectively and efficiently but were also critical in achieving system-wide impact. Achievement of the SDGs very much depended on accountability: the Executive Boards play a crucial role in holding United Nations agencies accountable for their performance. Strong linkages existed between the Boards and the results achieved on the ground, which is ultimately what United Nations agencies were measured against. In line with the Secretary-General’s UN 2.0 vision, the Executive Boards play a key role in promoting agility, a focus on people, risk management, and the use of data and foresight – not only for individual United Nations agencies but for the entire UNDS.
11. Responding to a question about whether Executive Boards had steered United Nations agencies to more effectively coordinate on cross-cutting themes, the Executive Director of UN-Women highlighted the interconnected challenges the world was facing. In this context, the success of United Nations agencies’ work would depend on their combined ability to deliver as one. How United Nations partners addressed intersectionality and mainstreamed cross-cutting themes was critical to achieving all SDGs – especially SDG 5: Gender Equality. Without women and girls’ participation and leadership, the other SDGs would not be achievable. The Summit of the Future, Beijing+30 Anniversary, and other convenings constitute prime opportunities to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment.
12. UN-Women reiterated its commitment to effective coordination, coherence, and gender mainstreaming throughout the United Nations system. Gender-equality acceleration plans would be a key driver and accountability tool for all partners. Board guidance was critical for this level of inter-agency coordination. For example, Executive Boards had been steering agencies on: (i) promoting system-wide action on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment, and fostering safe working environments; (ii) developing integrated solutions, including joint assessments, needs analyses, collaborative planning (44 percent of United Nations joint programmes focused on SDG 5 and gender equality in 2023), joint field visits and a QCPR annex for harmonized reporting; and (iii) aligning strategic planning processes for the harmonization of outputs and strengthened United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs).
13. The Executive Director of UNOPS responded to a question on how United Nations entities, with guidance from their governing bodies, could adjust to new ways of working internally within each organization and externally with other United Nations entities and partners as they strove for greater impact and efficiency. Questions about new ways of working not only needed to be addressed by participants in the JMB but across the entire United Nations system in its collective response to the UN 2.0 initiative. He highlighted three new ways in which UNOPS was working. First, its internal journey of transformation went beyond addressing a single crisis and constituted a full review of the organizational culture: building capacities for evidence and learning; strengthening management of projects and portfolios; and ensuring that processes and information systems were fit for purpose. This included a revision of financial regulations, renewal of policy frameworks, a new risk-management framework, and ensuring transparent management for net-zero revenue. The Executive Board held the organization to account in the process and provided guidance and support throughout a challenging and successful journey. Second, to increase its efficiency, UNOPS had established mission hubs to accelerate the SDGs and collaborate across the UNDS. UNOPS was aligning its way of working through partnerships with other agencies. Third, UNOPS had committed to accelerate climate action within its operations and through its projects with partners. In addition, UNOPS continued to engage with UNDS partners towards common back offices and made use of global shared services such as United Nations Web Buy Plus and the Booking Hub. Partner agencies were encouraged to use more shared service platforms. As a project-based, non-programmatic, non-normative entity, UNOPS would support the UNDS through the Resident Coordinator system, which enabled inter-agency collaboration and facilitated partnerships with Member States.
14. The Administrator of UNDP provided examples of how agencies have relied on their Executive Boards to adapt to different circumstances – for example during crises – and become more resilient. Taking note of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 48/162 that

defines the roles of Executive Boards, he highlighted the importance of the Executive Boards as guardians of General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) decisions that define all United Nations entities' mandates and overall management support. In crisis settings, Executive Board leadership was critical for calibrating agile management responses in order to keep delivering within communities. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, UNDP's Executive Board supported management in making decisions that allowed rapid disbursement and reconfiguration of financing in an evolving and complex context.

15. The Board also supported advocacy and resource mobilization, which allowed UNDP to develop 131 national socio-economic response plans alongside Resident Coordinator Offices and UNCTs. The Administrator emphasized the importance of continuous dialogue between the Executives of United Nations agencies and the Presidents of the Boards and the Bureaus, which facilitated timely guidance and aligned the decisions of Executives and the Boards. The Administrator provided an example of this continuous dialogue and partnership with the UNDP Executive Board related to the development of the UNDP's Strategic Plan in parallel with the unfolding UNDS reform and forthcoming decisions by the UNGA. The Executive Board's adoption of a 'reform-ready' Strategic Plan provided both the Board and management with the flexibility to respond to a changing context. These engagements also helped to ensure that Executives provided Boards, to whom they are accountable, with clear and timely information to make informed decisions that enable agencies to deliver results.
16. Speaking about the role Executive Boards have played in enhancing collaboration and UNDS effectiveness, the Executive Director of UNICEF highlighted the importance of the aligned decisions among the Executive Boards. The common paragraphs among Executive Board decisions facilitated alignment at the country level. She reflected that the UNICEF Annual Survey on UNDS Reform provided evidence that United Nations agencies were better able to assist Member States in meeting development priorities as a result of UNDS reforms. The Executive Director provided practical examples of alignment, describing how a joint programme in Micronesia on digital transformation had made great strides in education, gender equality and maritime security. In Jamaica, joint work had helped the Government to implement public expenditure review recommendations, introducing a new system for projecting educational resource requirements. As United Nations partners sought to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda, these examples showed the potential of delivering together through joint programmes to scale up existing efforts.
17. The Deputy Executive Director of WFP reflected on what more was needed from Executive Boards to facilitate the work of agencies and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. Noting the unprecedented gap between needs and available resources, he stressed that Boards could bring attention to resource constraints, assist in mobilizing resources and help United Nations agencies to work more efficiently so they could find creative ways to close the resource gap. In an increasingly complex political environment and growing involvement of the UN Agencies, fund and programmes in humanitarian operations, Boards' guidance was also crucial to help ensure that United Nations agencies could continue adhering to humanitarian principles. These principles were sometimes challenged, and agencies needed support to remain consistent and take a principled approach. Finally, he emphasized the importance of consensus and unity within Executive Boards especially surrounding challenging issues. In a polarized world, agencies needed Member States to come together and show consensus on their mandate as UN entities. The upcoming Summit of the Future could be a prime opportunity to affirm this common global mandate.
18. The second portion of the panel discussion offered reflections on the future. Executive leaders were asked what agencies could do to improve their support to governing bodies in their path towards becoming more 'future fit'.
19. The UNFPA Executive Director noted that the political support agencies received from the Executive Boards was crucial. While formal sessions only took place three times a year, the Executive Boards accompanied the agencies day by day. This constant dialogue ensured that programmes could remain responsive to constantly evolving needs. Interventions by Member States at Board meetings carried tremendous weight well beyond the walls of the Board rooms. Executive Boards pushed agencies to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. They were also

- first in adopting different working modalities during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the ways agencies could support Executive Boards in becoming more future-fit was by developing solid communications and storytelling strategies that helped Executive Boards to communicate more effectively about agencies' work, building trust and engagement. Organized field visits – such as the Joint Field Visit and the visits of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board – allowed the Executive Boards to directly observe the work and impact of agencies on the ground. Agencies also organized more informal briefings to allow for in-depth technical dialogue, providing the Boards with real-time data for decision making.
20. The Executive Director of UN-Women highlighted the Secretary-General's bold vision for a forward-thinking UN 2.0 and for making the agencies and their governing bodies future-fit. UN-Women's business model, implementation modalities and global footprint continue to evolve in order to deliver on the agency's mandate and push back against gender equality resistance. UN 2.0 and UN-Women 2.0 can serve as powerful catalysts for boosting United Nations-wide innovation and implementation capacity, including in agencies' support to the work of their governing bodies. However, fulfilling this goal requires greater trust, increased capacities, and more resources at all levels – towards a more coherent, coordinated, and efficient UNDS focused on delivering the SDGs.
 21. Stressing that agencies should be ready to go beyond the 'how' to the 'what ifs' and the need for more focus on foresight, the Executive Director of UNOPS reflected that the Covid-19 pandemic had come as a surprise to many, even though it was part of several foresight exercises. The Summit of the Future would provide an opportunity to address policy and financing gaps, as well as implementation gaps and make the United Nations more resilient to unexpected crises. Despite adequate funding and policy reforms, the bankability of projects was being undermined by a lack of capacity and technical assistance. Conversations about what has worked and aligning project implementation with SDGs could go a long way to address the capacity gap. Executive Boards could also take the lead on topics that could not be addressed by a single agency, such as sustainable energy and food-systems transition. Discussions among Executive Boards would contribute to concrete inter-agency collaboration on these issues, building on the recommendations in the JIU report.
 22. The UNDP Administrator highlighted that agencies could improve their support to governing bodies through more efficient information flows between the Chief Executives and Executive Boards, and by improving the quality and user-friendliness of information. The Administrator emphasized the importance of sharing the vast amount of information and insights collected by UNDP – for example through its Human Development Report, Future Trends Report and Report on Small Islands Digital States – to support Board members in fulfilling their oversight and governance functions. Noting the capacity constraints that Board members face, he highlighted the importance of optimizing the frequency of interactions between management and Boards. The Administrator emphasized the critical role the Boards play in protecting the transparency and accountability of the United Nations governance system.
 23. Reflecting on the importance of collaboration, the Executive Director of UNICEF emphasized programme effectiveness and leadership. Alignment among agencies stemmed from the strong support of governing bodies. Agencies that had aligned programming documents with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and ECOSOC could further enhance inter-agency collaboration. She explained that future programme effectiveness involves sharing burdens effectively. The UNICEF Executive Director went on to state that when the system produces mainstreaming guidance, and the Executive Boards recognize its importance, the United Nations system could programme more effectively. Positive examples of this approach included the System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity and the United Nations Youth Strategy. Because of their Executive Boards' support, United Nations agencies were doing incredible work. Resource gaps remained, but the upcoming funding compact could help United Nations agencies to address those issues.
 24. Expressing his appreciation for the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Executive Board through the governance review, the Deputy Executive Director of WFP noted that this process – owned by Member States – had triggered much internal reflection about transparency and openness. Transparency required trust instead of fear of repercussions for putting sensitive issues

on the table. Informal meetings with the Board could contribute to information asymmetry among Board Members because not all Members were able to attend. Fewer, but more strategic, engagements supported by the right information, would go a long way to address asymmetries. Board guidance was required for agencies to understand the top priorities and what should be de-prioritized in a tighter funding environment.

25. During an interactive discussion between Member States and the Principals of the United Nations entities, delegations raised the following points:
- Effective UNDS governance not only depended on oversight but on the ability to identify needs. Executive Boards should be equipped to guide agencies in fulfilling their mandates. Asymmetries and capacity gaps should be addressed in order to avoid undermining the principle of equality under the pretext of efficiency.
 - Practical actions to avoid duplication included aligning agendas on key focus areas and enhanced communications. In addition, continued support to the Resident Coordinator system was critical for bringing these results to the community level. Through improved efficacy and regularity of assessments and reviews, Executive Boards would continue to support improved delivery.
 - The Board appreciated the JIU review and looked forward to deliberating on the response to the JIU report – an opportunity to enhance coordination and ensure that governance and oversight structures remained fit-for-purpose. The 2024 JMB was aligned with the process of self-reflection stemming from WFP’s governance review and the JIU assessment. Learning and adopting good practices from across the United Nations were fundamental. This conversation was just one component of a deeper reflection on the system through the QCPR. Board Members recommended the creation of a working group to deliberate on JIU recommendations and voiced their support for this process.
 - Member States found it challenging to stay abreast of many activities and ensure robust, streamlined governance. There was optimism that JIU recommendations would result in clear, risk-informed governance processes aligned with broader United Nations reform. Board Members acknowledged their role in providing harmonized governance to support the difficult changes agencies needed to make. Any governance failure would have severe repercussions for public confidence in the United Nations, and therefore for funding and delivery of SDGs. They also acknowledged the urgency with which governance needed to evolve, given the significant needs worldwide.
 - It was encouraging that agencies were ready to work together with their Boards. Interactions such as these made multilateralism more visible and demonstrated its effectiveness. Building solidarity and trust would also necessitate taking into account the asymmetries between countries.
 - With humanitarian needs increasing, it would be fundamental to ensure that efficient and strategic governing bodies held United Nations agencies accountable. There was agreement on the need for further reflection on better and more fit-for-purpose engagements – not more reporting. Board Members welcomed further opportunities to discuss these important topics, towards a more coherent multilateral system that can deliver more with less.
 - Promoting multilateralism would ultimately depend on open dialogue and inclusive spaces among governing bodies. Members asked how the JIU assessment could be used to enhance coordination, and whether agencies’ experiences with United Nations reform could be shared with governing bodies to improve their governance.

26. In response, the Executive Director of UNICEF expressed that this was a challenging time for many communities around the world. United Nations agencies could only respond to this level of need by working together. Boards would be critical to this work, and their support and trust were very much appreciated. The trust placed in agencies by their Boards contributed to their effective oversight. The Executive Director of UNFPA appreciated the Board's role as a conduit for programme delivery. Integrated governance and working at the nexus of humanitarianism and peacebuilding was critical – especially as resources continued to shrink. Localization and delivering through local organizations were promising solutions, and the Board's oversight was appreciated to ensure accountability. Together, agencies and their Boards should ensure that communities' needs would not be politicized.
27. Highlighting the importance of risks and assurance, the Deputy Executive Director of WFP stressed that robust governance systems ultimately enabled agencies to deliver assistance where it was most needed. Operating in complex environments presented risks: agencies needed their Boards' support in understanding and sharing these risks. He recommended that partnerships should not be structured from headquarters but should be delivery-focused and tailored to each country's context. These partnerships might also include partners from outside the United Nations system. The Executive Director of UNOPS underscored the importance of proper risk management while delivering in contexts where there was not a significant United Nations presence. It was impressive that agencies stayed and delivered in these contexts, protecting people in difficult situations. The discussion needed to focus on what was learned in these contexts and on the problems undermining the humanitarian-peacebuilding-development nexus. This dimension of risk required more open discussion across United Nations agencies.
28. Highlighting the importance of agencies' partnerships with their Boards, the Executive Director of UN-Women detailed these relationships' immense value to United Nations agencies. Along with its partners, UN-Women stood ready to act on the Board's recommendations for improving governance. The entity supported all opportunities to make the Executive Boards more effective. Amid many challenges for women and girls worldwide, UN-Women would act on the Board's guidance to deliver to the highest standards. The interactive session concluded with the UNDP Administrator's reminder that United Nations personnel often work in extremely difficult contexts, putting their lives in danger in the line of duty. He reminded participants that the discussions held today had very real implications all over the world. The risk management work United Nations agencies and their Boards had been engaging in had yielded very real impacts on communities worldwide.
29. The Vice President of the UNICEF Executive Board expressed his deep gratitude to all present for participating in this important forum. Strengthening multilateralism would be more important than ever in the years to come. Recapping the day's discussion, he stressed that Executive Boards were crucial for the effective and efficient operation of United Nations agencies, guiding them towards individual and system-wide results, and moving towards a more modern, future-oriented United Nations. Reviews of governance and oversight had played a crucial role; the JIU report would be at the center of discussions going forward. Along with a renewed commitment to multilateralism among United Nations entities, he reiterated the need for balanced engagement. Discussions on more harmonized, data-driven, and efficient engagement between United Nations agencies and governing bodies had been positive. The upcoming Summit of the Future would be another opportunity for continued multilateral engagement around critical issues facing the development community.
30. The President of the UN-Women Executive Board concluded the session by highlighting the importance of the JIU review and WFP governance assessment. It would be important to share recommendations identified in the assessments of different Executive Boards. Best practices identified in one assessment could be shared to increase the efficacy of all Boards. Capacity building and periodic informal sessions would be critical to enhance new Board Members' understanding of governing bodies' functions. This would facilitate equitable and inclusive participation among all Members. Active participation in the Summit of the Future would be particularly essential to ensure that the Board's priorities were reflected in its outcomes. Integration of these outcomes into organizational oversight bodies' plans and strategies would likewise be fundamental for better governance and effective action. Several interventions had

concerned the need to improve communication in order to convey the governing bodies' important roles to all United Nations Member States, the public and other stakeholders. The discussion had underscored the importance of maintaining open, systematic dialogue to keep everyone informed and ensure that valuable feedback was utilized. Member States and agencies would need to listen to each other in order to understand where communication bottlenecks lie.

31. In streamlining governance within United Nations organizations, women and girls – comprising half the world's population – could not be overlooked. In addition to women and girls, the focus on people with disabilities and older persons also needed to continue, since these groups are at the core of development. Working together, it would be possible to face and overcome the challenges that lie ahead, giving priority to human survival.
32. The session was formally closed by the President of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board, who thanked all in attendance for their participation, and UNFPA for coordinating the meeting. He concluded by underlining the importance of the reflections offered during the JMB in the lead-up to the Summit of the Future and beyond.