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Report on the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP, 27 May 2021

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Report on the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards (JMB) of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and the WFP

27 May 2021

1. The President of the Executive Board of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS opened the virtual meeting by announcing the theme of the 2021 JMB: “QCPR and UNDS reform in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; what has happened in the last 12 months since the last JMB.” She welcomed the Presidents of the Executive Boards of UNICEF, UN-Women and the World Food Programme, the Deputy Secretary-General as a guest speaker, as well as the principals and deputies of the participating agencies.
2. In her opening address, the Deputy Secretary-General noted that the JMB was a well-timed opportunity to follow-up on the discussion within the ECOSOC Operational Activities Segment and to consider actions that would be needed from the six entities and their Executive Boards in supporting the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. She reiterated the excellent progress collectively made over the past year by the UN development system (UNDS), especially in the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. She noted that the response to the pandemic had been a litmus test for the development system and a success.
3. The Deputy Secretary-General highlighted that the coordination role given to the Resident Coordinator (RC) and the programming for the UN country teams (UNCTs) for the 2030 Agenda has been a great impetus for the system to do more for the recovery from COVID-19. She cautioned, however, that the pandemic was far from over and there was a need to step up collective action as a system in support of delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She outlined seven areas in the review of the RC system where the attention of entities and the support of the Executive Boards was needed:

i. Developing new Strategic Plans for 2022-2025 - she noted that this is a critical opportunity to strengthen the alignment of the business models of agencies, funds and programmes and the programming approaches to the reform, focusing on SDGs and the principle of “leaving no one behind.”

ii. Funding to support integrated work and accelerate SDG implementation - the Deputy Secretary-General stressed the major need for integrated approaches to be backed up by more unearmarked and flexible funding from Member States, with the view to support pooled funding arrangements, as called for in the Funding Compact.

iii. Aligning agencies’ programmes and Cooperation Frameworks - the Deputy Secretary-General emphasized that despite many improvements made in the last 12 months, attention must now be focused on their implementation, noting the need for closer collaboration in the process of developing common system-wide measures to assess contributions by the entities to the SDGs and to use common platforms like UN INFO.

iv. Enhancing the principle of dual accountability of the new RC independent system, both to the entities and to the Secretary-General - the Deputy Secretary-General noted that all six agencies covered by the JMB are among the eighteen entities that have formalized reporting requirements



among their representatives and the RCs as part of their performance and appraisal systems. At the same time, there are a number of reports from the RCs about country representatives from across the system not engaging proactively in this process. She further added that there is a need for clear messages and direction by the entities and their governing bodies to the country level to that effect, in line with the requirements that have been set out in the internal guidance provided by the country-level Management and Accountability Framework.

v. Advancing system-wide approaches - strengthening system-wide approaches at the regional level, including the rollout of regional collaborative platforms under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary-General, the UNDP regional director and the regional commissions executive secretaries as vice-chairs, is a positive new development with important implications for entities' regional offices.

vi. Improving efficiency - the six entities have a crucial role to play in achieving efficiency through common business services and premises and good progress has been made so far. The Deputy Secretary-General encouraged the Executive Boards to continue to deepen the dialogue with entities regarding efficiencies, including those coming from single entities or generated bilaterally.

vii. Continuing support for the RC system and UNDS reform - more is needed to ensure strong and consistent messages at all levels in support of the RC system and UNDS reform. Also, more work is needed by individual entities to ensure familiarity with and understanding of the obligations and expectations, ensuring that the RC benefits from the right combination of accountability and incentives.

4. The Deputy Secretary-General also highlighted that, three years into the reform, the improvements that have been generated by an independent, impartial and empowered RC system can be clearly seen, alongside a new generation of UNCTs. However, there were messages from the Member States pointing to the significant gap between ambition and reality, expectations and deliverables of reform. Therefore, all options should be explored to ensure that the right accountability and incentives are in place to close that gap.
5. Finally, the Deputy Secretary-General expressed gratitude to the six agencies for their engagement, commitment and support, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown that the investments in repositioning the UNDS are very fruitful.
6. In his introduction to the topic of the JMB, the President of the Executive Board of WFP emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic is a defining global crisis with devastating health and socio-economic consequences. He also noted that the major priority moving forward must be preventing famine and addressing food insecurity as a primary means to build resilience to shocks. The pandemic has already created the largest disruption in education in history with millions of students experiencing interruptions in learning and subsequent missed meals, impacting longer term skill development and economic prospects. The pandemic also rolled back progress on gender equality, health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, unpaid care and domestic work, gender-based violence, and the overall achievement of the SDGs. The President of the Executive Board of WFP further noted that there has never been more need for unity and cohesiveness across the UNDS. Against this backdrop, the President invited the participants to reflect on the lessons learned from the pandemic and the ways in which the agencies, funds and programmes can leverage the QCPR



(Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review), the common agenda and the UNDS reform to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

7. The UNOPS Executive Director mentioned that although the pandemic has put to the test the agency's ability to respond to the challenges and needs of its partners, UNOPS was able to quickly adapt to the changing realities and continued to provide support to its partners, including longer-term solutions towards a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery. This ability to mobilize quickly was rooted in the demand-driven, self-financed business model of UNOPS. In a short time, the agency signed agreements for some 900 millions USD in projects in support of the COVID-19 response. The Executive Director provided the example of the Idai Recovery Project in Zimbabwe, implemented in collaboration with FAO, IOM, UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO, and of the National Resilience Programme in Bangladesh, where the agency delivered quality and cost-effective solutions for its partners, in partnership with the Government, UNDP and UN-Women. She highlighted the Idai Recovery Project as an example of collaborative work with other sister agencies in "delivering as one" to address the immediate and medium-term recovery needs of countries.
8. Concurring with the previous speakers, the UNDP Administrator noted that the UNDS did mobilize its full capacity across 131 UNCTs as never before to support countries in response to the pandemic. UNDP was entrusted by the Secretary-General, in close coordination with the Deputy Secretary-General as the technical lead for the UN socio-economic response to COVID-19, working closely with the newly empowered and independent RC system but also with the sister agencies within the wider system of the UNCTs. The framework covers integrated priorities, including strengthened health systems, social protection, jobs, livelihoods, macroeconomic and social cohesion. The Administrator mentioned the willingness of many countries to address emerging challenges with new standing and focus, and the readiness to invest in an accelerated pace of change through digitalization, and investing in a green economy.
9. He noted that UNDP had developed a green recovery pathway together with UNEP, UNCTAD, ILO and FAO to ensure that countries receive the best possible support from the system, be it in energy transition, climate adaptation and nature-based solutions. Also, new mechanisms are being developed to address the challenges of crushing debts that countries face. The Administrator further highlighted that accelerated progress towards a digital green future where no one is left behind will be UNDP's priority during the next Strategic Plan period, as it has been during the pandemic.
10. Highlighting the pandemic's painful economic consequences on children and their families, the UNICEF Executive Director acknowledged the UNDS' central role in providing an inclusive and sustainable recovery for all. UNICEF joined 11 agencies and two international NGOs to maintain a steady flow of affordable personal protective equipment, to keep people, including frontline workers safe. From procurement to quality assurance, from packaging to transportation, the UN Procurement Hub in Copenhagen led this effort, which resulted in delivery of over 140 thousand metric tons of supplies to 173 countries. Through the COVAX facility, UNICEF was working with other agencies, governments, transportation logistics organizations and the pharmaceutical industry to support the shipment of 75 million vaccine doses to 125 participating countries.
11. UNICEF also worked with other agencies to support long-term economic recovery through innovative social protection programmes. This joint work has expanded the coverage of national social protection programmes for over 47 million households in 128 countries.



12. The UNFPA Deputy Executive Director warned the participants that the impact of the pandemic has rolled back progress for women, girls, and young people, including access to sexual and reproductive health services. Gender-based violence has increased and the pandemic has disrupted contraceptive use for millions of women around the world, increasing the proportion of unintended pregnancies, particularly in low-income countries. In coordination with the United Nations country teams, UNFPA has developed innovative approaches to ensure the continuity of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights through the pandemic, addressing harmful practices and gender-based violence, ensuring the supply of contraceptives and reproductive health commodities, as well as the provision of personal protective equipment.
13. The UNFPA Deputy Executive Director informed that, in a recent internal survey, UNFPA country offices reported that UNDS reforms had provided a solid foundation for UNCTs to facilitate timely and effective responses to the pandemic. RCs are seen as playing a key role in enabling the effective and inclusive participation of UN entities in response to the priorities of women and girls.
14. On other aspects of reform, the Deputy Executive Director of UNFPA specified that about 70 percent of the agency's country offices reported some forms of efficiency gains by undertaking joint procurement with other agencies and entering long-term agreements for service providers. At the same time, given the need to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Deputy Executive Director highlighted the importance of flexible funding by Member States as well as adhering to their commitments in the Funding Compact.
15. The WFP Deputy Executive Director commended the manner in which the agencies responded to the COVID-19 crisis as one of the best examples of UN coordination, unity and cohesion. At the same time, he questioned why coordination had not been achieved prior to the crisis. In his view, the pandemic generated multiple lessons about developing and implementing socio-economic responses with partners and system interoperability, calling for "building forward together" and focusing on the multi-dimensional and layered needs of the vulnerable, and developing a joint understanding of the drivers of that vulnerability. He stated that none of these needs can be addressed through the mandate of one single agency. Joint analysis, action and programming on health, nutrition, and social protection were seen as safeguards against future shocks that would protect the development gains and the investments that have been made and would build long term sustainable solutions.
16. Recalling that even before the pandemic hit, the world was not close to achieving the goals and aspirations of the Beijing Platform for Action, the UN-Women Deputy Executive Director underlined the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls, widening gender gaps. She stressed that while the pandemic cast a light on existing inequalities, it also created new problems, with women's increased caregiving responsibilities, therefore making it difficult for them to participate in the labour force, and further sharpening digital inequalities. Against this backdrop, working jointly with UN partners and building on its triple mandate, UN-Women has sought to advance a coherent and integrated focus on gender equality in its response to the pandemic.
17. The Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women highlighted three ways in which UN-Women had played an important role in this process: *i.* advancing thought leadership and shaping the discourse in the UN system on the impact of the pandemic on women and girls; *ii.* gathering, publishing and using data regarding the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls and reflecting this in socio-economic response plans; *iii.* including both gender markers and financial targets for



gender programming within the Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) and the UN Trust Fund for Response and Recovery, having a crucial impact on joint programming and on including a gender lens in the responses.

18. The President of the Executive Board of WFP was pleased with WFP's alignment with the UN common frameworks and the continuing promotion by the agency of innovation as part of the reform work, with the view to align itself with the priorities of the host countries and avoid redundancies among the mandates of various agencies. At the same time, he expressed concern about the massive challenges that lay ahead, with 270 million people around the world facing hunger. He stressed the focus on strengthening Member States' resilience to shocks, which allows them to respond in an individual capacity when a crisis arises.
19. In their comments, Member States thanked the Heads of agencies and the Deputy Executive Directors for providing updates on their collective efforts to address the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic under very difficult circumstances. They generally approved of the cooperative work done through the crisis and encouraged these efforts to continue and to be replicated across the system to build long-term resilience, accelerate SDG implementation and "leave no one behind."
20. Speaking as a donor, one speaker highlighted that the pandemic had shown how intertwined global challenges are, reflecting the need for multilateral solutions and creating much-needed momentum for a coordinated global crisis response, and the importance of strong partnerships to achieve this. He thanked the agencies for their strong embrace of the conclusions of the 2020 QCPR. Moving forward, he stressed the need to persist with a coordinated response and expand it to other areas, namely: *i.* climate change adaptation and mitigation, and nature-based solutions; *ii.* a system-wide digital strategy for the post-pandemic world; *iii.* full gender recovery from the effects of COVID-19; and *iv.* further operationalizing the "leaving no one behind" principle. He also suggested these priorities should be reflected in the new Strategic Plans.
21. Some delegations took the opportunity to highlight other priorities which, from their perspective, were important in order to reverse the adverse effects of the pandemic. These included generalizing the distribution of vaccines, promoting innovative financing mechanisms and supporting local economies.
22. Another speaker called for continued efforts to enhance harmonization between agencies' activities within the Cooperation Frameworks. It was noted that close to 40 percent of UN entities have yet to take action in harmonizing their agency-specific programming in line with the Cooperation Framework guidance. Similarly, agencies were encouraged to further enhance collaboration to meet the humanitarian-development-peace nexus through more joint development activities, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile settings.
23. The need to further strengthen multilateral cooperation along with South-South, triangular, and North-South cooperation was also mentioned by the delegations.
24. Noting that 47 percent of UN agencies have not changed the job description of their country representatives to make it clear that they now report to the RC, delegations urged agencies to do so, as well as to take further steps to ensure that the leadership of the RC is fully respected and supported at the country level.



25. Looking ahead to the implementation of the 2020 QCPR, and through the example of the Procurement Hub which worked through the COVID-19 pandemic to support 436 organizations with emergency transport, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies, delegations wanted to see joint programming increasing in the future. In addition, agencies were encouraged to prioritize the connection on data and statistics with the view to improve and accelerate collective planning and implementation.
26. To maintain the momentum on UNDS reform, the six agencies were encouraged to continue to advance their reform commitments in order to ensure harmonized and efficient policy, programmatic and common approaches. This includes joint programming efforts which bring together the collective expertise of the UNDS to address country needs and priorities.
27. Partnering with international financial institutions was also stressed as a way to help advance achievement of the SDGs. Delegations found that the examples taken from country responses once more highlighted the potential for cooperation with these institutions through data sharing and cross-organizational policy approaches.
28. Reflecting further on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, one delegation highlighted the importance of gender data and the support for countries to access funding to address gender statistics.
29. Noting the pivotal role of multilateralism and solidarity, some delegations highlighted that the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions must continue to be the overarching goal of the agencies' work. Their policies must continue to be aligned with the QCPR, the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, while keeping the focus on countries in special situations.
30. Delegations recognized the importance of flexible funding and core contributions, the deficit of which is affecting the capacity of the UN system to respond to the pandemic and fulfill the mandate to reposition the UNDS.
31. In response to the comments and questions by Member States, the UNOPS Executive Director referred to her role as Chair of the High Level Committee on Management (HLCM). She explained the work and the purpose of the Committee to ensure better platforms for interagency collaboration, simplify business practices and become more efficient. The Committee is consensus-based and proved to be quite efficient through the pandemic. It also aims to build more transparent relationships to enable Member States to hold the agencies accountable and help them manage expectations from the outset. The Committee also focuses on building strategic partnerships to achieve the SDGs.
32. The UNOPS Executive Director reaffirmed the agency's full support for the UN reform. As a non-programmatic, self-financed agency, UNOPS highlighted strong demand for its services and emphasized transparency, added value, flexibility and the quality and speed of its services, elements which, the Executive Director mentioned, will be incorporated into the agency's Strategic Plan for 2022-2025.
33. The UNDP Administrator noted the multifaceted dimensions of COVID-19 while the agency was working actively to understand the impact of the pandemic, identify where the vulnerabilities were the greatest and the setbacks most profound. He stated that UNDP was reflecting deeply on the



lessons learned on how to best use the analyses that emerge from the assessments and data that UNDP generates nationally and internationally, in order to target areas where UNDP can bring the greatest impact.

34. Referring to the comments regarding the priorities for the next Strategic Plans, the UNDP Administrator explained that the imperative of green recovery will be quite central to the way the agency will be moving forward. Similarly, poverty eradication, social protection and digitalization will be essential to support economic recovery, while the QCPR, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda will serve as the template for implementation. The Administrator further added that national ownership remains a reference point for UNDP.
35. On the topic of UNDS reform, the Administrator clarified that UNDP had revised the terms of reference for its Resident Representatives very early on, to explicitly refer to the core elements of the Cooperation Framework in UNDP's work. He further highlighted that the principle of mutual accountability must be strengthened on the basis of implementing the Management and Accountability Framework. The Administrator invited Member States to exercise due care in ensuring that agencies, funds and programmes can maintain their accountability in the context of the UNDS reform and to their Boards, while keeping in mind that the reform narrative must not only focus on the mechanics of coordination, but on the actual impact that it generates.
36. Continuing on the theme of UN reform and the Strategic Plan, the UNICEF Executive Director mentioned three priority areas that her agency will be focusing on: *i.* the adaptation needs of climate change; *ii.* digitalization for education; and *iii.* nutrition. She further added that the UNICEF country programmes are being fully aligned with the Cooperation Frameworks.
37. The UNICEF Executive Director also spoke about the efficiencies that the agencies can generate following the UNDS reform, and which can bring great advantages, including by investing them into country programmes.
38. Acknowledging the value of inter-agency cooperation on procurement activities, based on the experience of the joint response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Executive Director of UNICEF highlighted that the UN system can be a trusted procurement source and that this is an area in which the UNDS can grow.
39. Responding to the Member States' comments regarding the interoperability of data with the view to improve and accelerate collective planning and implementation, the UNICEF Executive Director pointed to the critical need of flexible funding for agencies to be able to realize such interoperability and fund platforms like the UN INFO data system.
40. The UNFPA Deputy Executive Director confirmed that the entity's country programmes are fully aligned with the Cooperation Frameworks and the country representatives are evaluated against the Management and Accountability Framework as a measure of their performance. He reiterated the agency's commitment to joint programming, noting the significant increase in funding UNFPA had received from inter-agency pooled funds, a trend which is foreseen to increase in the years to come. He also reiterated the importance of non-earmarked and flexible funding to promote joint programming by the agencies.



41. The UNFPA Deputy Executive Director concurred with the delegations mentioning the importance of sex-disaggregated data for evidence-based planning, including in the context of the ongoing global health crisis. He noted that UNFPA has established a COVID-19 Population Vulnerability Dashboard, providing data disaggregated at the national and sub-national levels and updated on a daily basis.
42. Referring to the next generation of Strategic Plans, the Deputy Executive Director of WFP reiterated their importance in reflecting UNDS reform in a well-coordinated manner, noting the importance of creating new strategic plans aligned with the 2020 QCPR and the Cooperation Frameworks. He also emphasized the role played by the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and its impact on resilience and preparedness, as well as the need for shock-responsive social-protection systems to prepare countries for future crises.
43. The Deputy Executive Director of WFP emphasized the Management and Accountability Framework as a crucial foundation to ensuring mutual accountability and highlighted the WFP's strong engagement in this regard.
44. He also emphasized the importance of incorporating lessons learned from the pandemic into the understanding of the RCs role with heightened responsibility to lead and as a point of cohesion.
45. Recalling the 2008 financial crisis, the Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a truly integrated crisis on many fronts. She cautioned of the danger of more inequalities arising from it, which is already being seen in the unequal access to vaccines. She further observed the real possibility of societies looking quite different in the aftermath of the pandemic, with widened gender gaps and women no longer visible in leadership positions or participating fully in the economy.
46. The nature of this crisis is necessitating an unprecedented partnership approach which the agencies cannot accomplish alone. The UN-Women Deputy Executive Director mentioned several examples of UN-Women working together with other agencies in response to the crisis such as: *i.* the partnership with UNFPA on the Spotlight Initiative to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls; *ii.* the collaboration with UNDP on the Gender Policy Tracker monitoring global gender policy measures to tackle the COVID-19 crisis; and *iii.* the work with the WHO on disaggregating data on COVID-19 cases by sex and age.
47. The UN-Women Deputy Executive Director added that these partnerships will have to extend beyond the UN system in order to be successful. The UN-Women Deputy Executive Director cited the Generation Equality Forum as one such platform for external partnerships, bringing together not only the UN system, but also leveraging partnerships with civil society, the private sector and international financial institutions. In addition, she mentioned the opportunity to influence multilateral processes, such as the G20, COP26 and G7 to ensure that the SDGs are at the center of those discussions.
48. The UN-Women Deputy Executive Director noted the extremely limited funding for gender equality in the UN system, with less than two percent of resources spent actually going specifically towards advancing gender equality. She noted that this underscores the need for an integrated approach to ensure that gender is not only part of the Strategic Plans but also of joint programming.



49. In his final remarks, the Vice-President of the UN-Women Executive Board and moderator of the session's interactive discussion, underscored that moving towards the achievement of the SDGs will require significant collaborative efforts. Acknowledging the added burden on the UN system, he recognized the collaborative work by the agencies to deliver results under very challenging circumstances. Looking ahead at the development of the entities' Strategic Plans, the moderator underlined the importance of people-centered, gender-responsive and human rights-based approaches, while addressing the interlinkage between health, trade, finance and economic and social development.

50. In closing of the meeting, the President of the Executive Board of UNICEF echoed the Member States' messages to the agencies, encouraging them to work together more closely, while at the same time noting the progress already achieved as shown in the examples discussed during the meeting. In addition, he stressed the importance of the agencies' unique mandates and comparative advantages, each contributing their own innovative ideas, talents and resources to the collective effort. He found that, while the pandemic revealed new ways of working together, the work and examples that were discussed were vital and encouraging to solving the world's interrelated problems.