Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN Women and WFP
30 May 2025

BACKGROUND NOTE

Topic 1:
United Nations governance and strategic direction in an evolving global landscape: Considering the new 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review and strategic planning toward 2030

I. Introduction

1. The global landscape today is more complex and unpredictable than it was just a decade ago, shaped by a cascade of interconnected challenges that evolve at an accelerating pace. While these challenges place mounting pressure on the advancement of peace, prosperity and sustainable development, they also present a pivotal opportunity for United Nations entities to adopt a proactive approach to strategic planning to demonstrate that they are fit for purpose in a highly dynamic global environment.

2. Extreme weather events are compounded by longer-term environmental trends, disrupting agricultural productivity while also contributing to rising forced displacement and migration. Simultaneously, conflicts continue to drive forced displacement and exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in fragile regions, and with devastating and differentiated impacts for women, girls and children.[1] Twenty-five percent of humanity live in countries affected by conflict, half of them children.[2] Economic instability, driven by rising inequality and debt vulnerabilities, further strains the social and economic development of many countries, especially in the Global South. Some 3.3 billion people live in countries where debt interest payments exceed spending on health or education[3]. Demographic shifts, including ageing populations and changing fertility rates, combined with urbanization and migration, present both opportunities and challenges, requiring adaptive strategies for employment, social services, health, education, and infrastructure – with slow progress in parallel in investing in these areas and expanding safety nets in low-income countries, negatively affecting human capital and resilience building. Moreover, progress on equal opportunities for all and elimination of violence targeting women and girls remains uneven.

3. The global geopolitical landscape is equally turbulent, marked by shifting power dynamics, increasing fragmentation of global governance and multilateralism, constraints on financial resources allocated for development and pressure on fundamental human rights. The increasing influence of diverse political movements and non-state actors contributes to an environment of uncertainty and risks, weakening cooperative frameworks that have

[1] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 2024. Humanitarian Action for Children appeal.

[2] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2025. *The Landscape of Development: Setting the scene for the UNDP Strategic Plan 2026–2029*.

[3] United Nations. 2023. "Warning 'Time Is Up for 3.3 Billion People', Secretary-General Urges Deep Financial System Reforms to tackle Unfolding Public Debt Crisis, at Report Launch". Secretary-General Statements and Messages (SG/SM/21872).

historically addressed global crises. Technological breakthroughs, including digital transformation and the expansion of artificial intelligence, offer new opportunities but also introduce complex challenges, such as digital security, access, and workforce adaptation. These advancements, while promising, must be harnessed carefully to bridge the digital divide and ensure that they benefit the most marginalized. Collective solutions are needed, as underlined by recent agreements such as the Political Declaration following the SDG Summit in 2023 and the *Pact for the Future* last year.

4. This fast-evolving global context creates challenges for organizations as they address immediate needs while confronting structural shifts and global dynamics that impact the future of sustainable development. However, it also represents a critical opportunity for several United Nations entities that are designing their next strategic plans to demonstrate efficiency, effectiveness, and that they are relevant dynamic partners for the international community. The landscape of development cooperation is in flux. Significant reductions in official development assistance are expected, leading to substantial funding shortfalls for development and humanitarian efforts by United Nations agencies. This scarcity of funding presents a significant risk to the successful implementation of the new strategic plans and will require entities' ability to adapt.

5. Meanwhile, the resolution on the 2024–2028 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) offers the United Nations development system guidance on improving United Nations development activities. The 2025 joint meeting of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Plan (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 WFP is an opportunity to consider these dynamics and potential impact on the agencies' ability to fulfil their mandates effectively. It is also a chance to explore opportunities for fostering complementarity and synergies around areas from the QCPR shaping the next generation of strategic plans – to ensure that the six entities, as part of a broader United Nations family, are well-equipped to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving world and accelerate progress as we approach 2030.

II. Rallying synergies around new opportunities including from the 2024-2028 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

6. In December 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/79/226 on the QCPR of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. By way of this resolution, Member States have provided a guide for how the United Nations development system can continue to strengthen actions to end poverty and promote peace and prosperity for all over the next four years including through the next iteration of entities' respective strategic plans.

7. The QCPR speaks to the entirety of the United Nations development system and how it can function collectively to maximize impact for results. As UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP represent only a fraction of the entire development system, the following section speaks to some areas where the six entities have clear complementarities and can strive to ensure continued alignment with the spirit of the QCPR, embedding its core elements into their next generation of strategic plans, and promoting strong synergies, efficiencies and effective results.

III. Adapting to an evolving world: strategic planning for a changing future

8. In the face of a volatile global landscape, the United Nations system must demonstrate cohesion and responsiveness to remain relevant and ensure that no one is left behind. UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP are actively evolving their strategic planning processes to ensure their priorities and operational frameworks are responsive to the complex challenges of today's world to deliver effective, efficient, impactful solutions that are grounded in the interdependence of peace, development, and human rights. The new QCPR presents several levers emerge for the six entities to position themselves to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow and deliver on the global commitments for sustainable development.

a) Fostering complementarity and integrated approaches

9. To effectively address rising needs amid global challenges and with limited resources, United Nations entities must work together cohesively, ensuring system-wide coherence. The 2024 QCPR underscores the imperative for the United Nations development system to continue "*enhancing system-wide coherence, coordination, harmonization, efficiency, transparency, and impact for development, reducing duplication and building synergies*". This includes conducting solid analyses to identify gaps in assistance and avoid overlaps from the global to country level; fostering strategic partnerships within and beyond the United Nations that leverage respective strengths and capabilities; and breaking down silos to create integrated solutions at scale. Collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace continuum is pivotal to maximize synergies, resources, expertise and influence, and amplify collective impact. Advocacy is also a key dimension of joint efforts. By speaking with one voice, United Nations agencies can mobilize critical support for sustainable development, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, and civil society, to foster collective action. By pooling their connections and convening power, they help to raise awareness of issues critical to sustainable development, including the most sensitive issues and most vulnerable populations and promote evidence-based policy and normative change to spur the international community into action.

b) Enhancing flexibility and prioritizing the most vulnerable for greatest impact

10. The speed and unpredictability of global challenges require that United Nations entities remain agile in their operations. This calls for alignment of skills and competencies, enabling staff to respond effectively to changing needs. Additionally, the incorporation of innovation and technology is critical in enhancing efficiency and versatility across programmes and operations. As outlined in the United Nations Secretary-General's UN 2.0, by harnessing digital tools and innovative approaches, United Nations entities can better tailor their responses, streamline operations, and increase their reach, ensuring that assistance is delivered in the most effective manner while also being better able to support Member States into the future.

11. This vision is further refined in the QCPR resolution, which calls upon United Nations development system entities to deploy the latest, evolving digital technologies today to help achieve the long-term development goals of tomorrow. With ever changing and innovating breakthroughs in technology, the United Nations needs to be flexible, curious and adaptable to exploring how new technologies can unlock long desired achievements of global development. Furthermore, the United Nations development system has a key role to play in helping expand access to these technologies for communities globally, helping to close the digital divide. Additionally, sustained efforts should be undertaken to embed strategic foresight into United Nations entities and Member States to strengthen our collective

capacity to build a more agile system, better equipped to address volatility, anticipate major shifts and prepare for future challenges.

12. Prioritization and focus are another cornerstone of strategic planning processes. As we near 2030, the QCPR calls for accelerated action by the United Nations development system to urgently address the key drivers of extreme poverty, hunger, malnutrition, lack of access to clean water and sanitation. In an era of limited resources and competing demands, evidence-based decision-making is vital to ensure that United Nations agencies focus their efforts where they can have the greatest impact and address issues that are most critical to achieving sustainable development. We must prioritize in a way that is consistent with human-rights principles, commitments, and humanitarian values, designing programmes that reach the most vulnerable populations, especially women, girls,[4] adolescents, children, and marginalized groups, in an impartial, neutral, and independent way.

c) Implementing strong quality assurance and accountability mechanisms

13. Assurance systems and processes are critical to ensure transparency and accountability, even more so at a time when the environment is highly volatile and many entities are operating in high-risk contexts. They allow to track resources allocated to humanitarian and development interventions, monitor their safe and effective use, and help build trust with stakeholders – including donors, governments, and affected communities – through robust results-based management systems by providing evidence that resources are achieving the desired outcomes. As needs outpace funding available for humanitarian and development interventions, ability to ensure robust assurance mechanisms may be impacted. The 2024 QCPR called upon the United Nations development system and individual entities "[…] *to continue to strengthen results-based management, focusing on long-term development outcomes, developing common methodologies for planning and reporting on results, including on agency-specific activities, and on inter-agency and joint activities, improving integrated results and resources frameworks, where appropriate, and enhancing a results-oriented culture in the entities of the United Nations development system*." New strategic plans need to equip entities to address complex risks across all settings. At the same time, the support of Member States is required to ensure entities can take an adaptive, dynamic approach to risk management, embedded across the organizations.

d) Adopting innovative, diversified approaches to funding

14. The diversification of funding and financing sources is key to bridge the gap between the growing needs and the available resources. UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP are increasingly integrating innovative financing models into their strategies, looking beyond conventional funding mechanisms and expanding partnerships with non-traditional donors. This diversification aims to attract more resources to meet the needs of the most marginalized and underserved communities, while also providing the flexibility needed to address unforeseen challenges and harness new opportunities. The provision of flexible resources remains critical, as their scarcity undermines the drive to end extreme poverty and hunger and promote sustainable development, limits the ability to most effectively leverage partnerships and resources, increases the risk of competition, poses challenges in upholding United Nations norms and standards, and reduces the ability to invest in quality assurance, oversight, transparency and coordination. Now in the seventh year of the United Nations development system reform implementation, the six entities remain

[4] In line with system-wide initiatives including the implementation of the United Nations System-wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan, continued mainstreaming of gender equality and women's empowerment in United Nations sustainable development cooperation frameworks and the application of the gender equality marker as a systematic approach to gender-responsive programming.

committed to scaling up coordination efforts, strengthening mechanisms, and improving efficiencies to address persistent and emerging global challenges. These efforts, however, are increasingly challenged by growing projectization and widening funding gaps.

15. In line with this aspiration, the new QCPR welcomes the Funding Compact, which is a new iteration of the voluntary pact between Member States and the United Nations development system that affords the opportunity to improve the quality of resources in return for greater efficiency, reporting, visibility, transparency and effectiveness.

IV. Conclusion

16. In this era of accelerating change, entities in the United Nations development system must remain agile, cohesive, and responsive to meet evolving needs while ensuring that their strategies are future-ready to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving world. The design of their next strategic plans offers an opportunity for UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Woman and WFP to proactively adapt and strengthen their position as dynamic, efficient and effective partners for the international community to deliver maximum impact for the most vulnerable.

17. The 2024–2028 QCPR provides a vital roadmap to strengthen synergies across the United Nations development system and maximize impact for results. It presents new opportunities for the six entities to consider as they shape their next strategic plans. A strengthened commitment among the entities and Member States to collective action, fostering greater synergy, prioritizing the most vulnerable, diversifying financing, and enhancing accountability will be key to accelerating progress in the years leading up to 2030.

18. The joint meeting of the Boards offers important reflections on how the six entities can leverage and build upon their complementarities further to ensure that they remain fit for purpose amidst global and system-wide changes, and are equipped to promote peace, prosperity and build better lives and futures for today and future generations.

Guiding questions for discussion at the Joint Meeting of the Boards:

a) What would you like to see entities focus on in terms of joint approach to maximize impact, adaptability and agility in a dynamic operating environment?

b) How can the Executive Boards work in a more coordinated way to advance key principles and values in support of the most vulnerable?

c) Which aspects of the 2024 QCPR can be tapped into to maximize collective impact and results on the ground through the respective new strategic plans?