

WHO and reform of the United Nations system

Report by the Secretariat

INTRODUCTION

1. In 2005 the World Summit Outcome¹ provided new impetus to the United Nations reform debate by placing increasing emphasis on the need for a more strategic, comprehensive and results-focused approach to reform of the United Nations system. This new approach also permeates the Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment, entitled "Delivering as One", submitted to the Secretary-General on 9 November 2006.

2. There is much to be gained by working together rather than in isolation across the United Nations system. It will provide opportunities for cost savings, greater efficiency, and sharing of experiences across organizations, for improving effectiveness and impact, and for the United Nations to demonstrate how it can reform itself in order to make its actions relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century.

3. The Secretariat has participated since the 2005 World Summit (New York, 14–16 September 2005), in a range of processes designed to improve the work of the United Nations system, including broad internal consultations. This report outlines seven components and priorities relating to WHO's perspectives on the United Nations reform agenda.

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC DIRECTION

4. For its reform efforts to be effective in an increasingly globalized world, the United Nations system needs to re-position itself around its core functions, on the basis of an overarching vision shared by all stakeholders and a framework for action designed to produce results. The division of labour, in particular, needs to be better defined.

5. The United Nations system needs to concentrate its efforts on areas where it can make a real difference. In the area of development, this is likely to require the phasing-out of some operations in favour of more strategic and catalytic functions, such as supporting countries in policy formulation and the development of sustainable national capacities. With increasing globalization, the ability of the United Nations to negotiate global norms and standards is likely to be one of its main attributes in the

¹ United Nations General Assembly resolution 60/1.

future. If the United Nations system is to be relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century, it needs to be proactive on global issues, and in the forefront of knowledge generation, innovation and policy development. WHO is well placed in many of these areas and needs to build on this base.

6. The challenge in reforming the United Nations system is to achieve results in a complementary, coherent and effective manner, through appropriate articulation of the critical functions of the system. Some refinement of these functions may well be needed at global level; coherence at country level will be critical. The diversity of the United Nations system is a source of strength that needs to be managed on the basis of clear responsibilities, including those of national governments and the wider development community. Experiences in selected areas have demonstrated that such reforms are possible. In the areas of HIV/AIDS and humanitarian assistance, for example, the United Nations system has collectively developed efficient working mechanisms and an agreed division of labour.

MAXIMIZING IMPACT ON HEALTH

7. The increasing demands in relation to global health, including the areas of humanitarian assistance, human development and health security, and the gaps in the current response, have placed health issues more prominently on the international agenda. However, this agenda goes beyond what the multilateral system alone can do. WHO cooperates with UNICEF, UNFPA, and many other United Nations system partners to take forward that work, but, with the number of stakeholders in health increasing well beyond the United Nations system, WHO's work at all levels requires stronger leadership, coordination and partnerships. These partnerships, including close working relationships with partners with a more operational role and capacity on the ground, are formed on the basis of complementarity of roles and competencies.

8. WHO also contributes to global cross-cutting issues, including environment, gender and human rights, and provides the health input to the work of other organizations that have a leading role in related issues such as education, agriculture, trade and economic development. At the same time, WHO receives the support of partners from other sectors, where appropriate. WHO's contribution to United Nations reform is expected to enhance its own ability and that of other organizations in the United Nations system to form effective partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders in pursuit of health outcomes.

FOCUS ON PRODUCING RESULTS

9. Reform efforts can only be effective to the extent that an adequately defined framework enables the different components of the United Nations system to contribute to achieving agreed outcomes. A results-based management approach would enable the system to demonstrate results more clearly and achieve greater complementarity between member organizations, thereby ensuring appropriate targeting of resources and greater transparency and accountability. A robust results-based management framework for the United Nations system, including performance monitoring, feedback and evaluation, would enable the individual entities clearly to define their contributions in the light of their respective mandates and relative strengths. Commitment to such management processes will increase mutual understanding of the diverse roles and responsibilities and promote convergence of processes. WHO is actively sharing its results-based management experiences across the system.

COUNTRY OWNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

10. National needs and priorities for health and development form a central element of WHO's activities at all levels. Its Member States, with the support of the Secretariat, collectively define the Organization's strategic directions, objectives and expected results, and monitor and assess their implementation, all of which form the basis for WHO's work in and with countries, including support for national poverty reduction strategies and national health-sector strategies and plans. The WHO Country Cooperation Strategy is the instrument through which WHO aligns its actions with and in countries with global and regional priorities, and national priorities and plans. The Country Cooperation Strategy also ensures consistency with the internationally agreed development goals and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

11. The Eleventh General Programme of Work, 2006–2015, approved by the Health Assembly in resolution WHA59.4, reaffirms WHO's role in countries as a central component of its work. WHO's presence in countries and a close working relationship with health ministries are fundamental if the Organization is to be able to discharge its mandate. WHO's work at country level includes support in building national capacities and implementing norms and standards; keeping abreast of continuously emerging and re-emerging health risks capable of developing into threats to global health, development and security; and following up on global agreements, such as the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, and the International Health Regulations (2005).

12. The need to reform the United Nations system's work at country level is acknowledged by Member States and United Nations organizations alike, in line with the broader commitment of donors and beneficiaries to alignment and harmonization at country level.¹ The United Nations system, and in particular the specialized agencies, not normally representing a major source of funding, have a strong role to play in providing technical support and in capacity building.

13. The United Nations resident coordinator system, traditionally the country-level coordination mechanism, is currently the subject of extensive review, in which WHO is actively engaged. Much has been achieved in relation to the function of Resident Coordinator, including a more system-inclusive approach to selection and recruitment, induction, performance assessment and accountability. Greater complementarity between the roles and responsibilities of the individual members of the United Nations country team, and their relation to the Resident Coordinator needs to be achieved.

14. To ensure that United Nations acts "as one" in delivering at country level, the core components of the system need to be appropriately articulated. This will require a collective approach to obtaining an appropriate mix of high-quality staff with competencies tailored to meeting individual country needs. The development of an adequate human resources team will be one of WHO's contributions to the United Nations reform efforts at country level. In certain circumstances, joint programmes, focusing on specific objectives and results, can also contribute to greater coherence and effectiveness.

COST-EFFECTIVE BUSINESS-SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

15. With due regard for the policies of individual organizations, modern management practices need to permeate the United Nations system, including in the areas of human resources and pension matters.

¹ Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005).

To ensure that harmonization and alignment of United Nations system business practices remain cost-effective for all participating organizations, evidence of economies of scale and a focus on common standards will be needed. Efforts such as systematically introducing joint programming, common services or joint offices will have to be assessed against these criteria.

16. WHO is fully involved in all these reform efforts through CEB. Common services are either already in place or being explored in the areas of staff security, telecommunications, and travel. Joint offices may be considered if they result in reduced costs and enhanced collaboration.

COORDINATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

17. WHO has been actively involved in relevant coordination mechanisms, the number and complexity of which have increased considerably since the start of the reform debate. Effective coordination is the basis of all United Nations system efforts, and in this area there is room for continuous improvement. To this end, and for the system to remain credible, a strategic approach to system-wide coordination is essential. This will include the streamlining and alignment of the respective roles, responsibilities and workplans of the individual coordination mechanisms, with a clear focus on priorities and results.

18. A coherent or even unified management coordination platform will be essential to ensuring effective implementation of relevant reform initiatives. The functionality of CEB and the United Nations Development Group needs to be reviewed. In addition, membership and decision-making processes of individual coordination mechanisms need to reflect adequately the constituencies they serve.

COHERENT AND EFFECTIVE FUNDING OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

19. Governments need to be at the forefront of effective and efficient financing of the United Nations system. WHO's responsibilities as a specialized agency of the United Nations system for global normative health work include working with countries in translating norms and standards into appropriate country actions, and responding to specific national needs and priorities. Appropriate funding enables the Organization to act in a global, impartial and efficient manner. In this context, the steady increase of specified voluntary contributions creates potential difficulties for WHO, on account of increased transaction costs and the need for accountability to its collective membership.

20. More predictable funding is therefore needed, through assessed contributions or core voluntary contributions in order to enable WHO to improve its planning and its implementation capabilities, and, hence, its impact capacity. The Executive Board will review this subject at the current Board session, during its consideration of the draft Medium-term strategic plan and the Proposed programme budget 2008–2009.¹

21. The debate on the wider United Nations system approach to improved financing, especially at country level, is expected to continue. A coherent approach to government funding of all parts of WHO, including assessed and voluntary contributions, would enable the Organization both to improve

¹ Documents EB120/17 and MTSP2008–2013/ PPB2008–2009.

its own effectiveness and to contribute its experiences in that regard to the current United Nations reform efforts.

CONCLUSION

22. As the United Nations specialized agency with the largest country-level presence and one of the largest budgets, WHO should continue to work closely with its system partners to forge and take forward the reform agenda. In an increasingly globalized world, with multiple actors and stakeholders active in health matters, WHO has undertaken a process of reform in recent years, in order to sharpen its focus and position its work around activities that it is uniquely well suited to perform. There are important opportunities for improving coherence and efficiency in the United Nations system as a whole, and WHO is committed to contributing actively its efforts, experiences and lessons learnt in support of this objective.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

23. The Executive Board is invited to note the report.

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