



## **The United Nations System Leadership Framework**

### **I - Introduction: Our Mission**

1. The United Nations system has been charged with an awesome responsibility: to advance peace, human rights, development, environmental stewardship, and economic and social progress. Essential to our success will be an understanding of what 21<sup>st</sup> century UN leadership looks like.
2. Yes, we have seen important progress. We have built up a system of international law to protect human rights, labour rights, refugees, and the environment. We have negotiated an end to many violent conflicts. Absolute poverty has fallen sharply, greater numbers of people have access to healthcare, and fewer children are dying before their fifth birthday. Most recently, we saw the adoption of ambitious new global frameworks for sustainable development, climate action, and development finance.
3. And yet, peace, human rights, and social and economic progress remain elusive for far too many. Weapons flow freely across borders, while people are blocked by walls and barbed wire. Wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few – creating spiralling inequality – while the forces of climate change, stubborn poverty, and discrimination severely strain societies, feeding social unrest that often cascades into violent conflict, the scale of which we have not witnessed since the Second World War. In sum, UN leadership has never been more needed.
4. To press our case for peace, dignity and prosperity *for all*, we need a three-pronged approach: (1) a principled defence of our norms and standards; (2) a much greater focus on prevention and (3) robust implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in a universal, all-out effort to tackle poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, instability, insecurity, and injustice. We need to move from managing crises to preventing them in the first place. And the best means of prevention, and of sustaining peace, is inclusive, rights-based, sustainable development.
5. Now, more than ever then, we need the United Nations to truly *lead* on these issues, to be a defender of peace, justice and universal values; to be *the* place where effective collective measures for the prevention of conflict are taken; and to do its part to ensure that indeed *no one is left behind*. We need to break down our silos and fully embrace a new way of working to better connect our work across efforts at sustaining peace, human rights, sustainable development and humanitarian action. For this we need visionary and principled UN leadership – *across the system*.

6. It is in this context that this new UN System Leadership Framework is both *a call to action* – and *a call for change* – for all UN personnel. Of course, senior UN leaders have particular responsibilities under this framework. But UN leadership occurs in many contexts and at all levels. We are *all* called to lead. As such, the framework applies to all personnel of the UN system, regardless of their level, duties, or location.

7. In today’s challenging world, we need UN personnel who stand up for the values inherent in the Charter: peace, justice, respect, human rights, tolerance and solidarity; who are able to nimbly manoeuvre complex political spaces and leverage multi-stakeholder coalitions; who think creatively and truly connect cross-pillar knowledge and experience; and who consistently seek more system-wide solutions that reach beyond individual entities and interests.

8. We need UN personnel who are transparent in how they manage, in how they use the resources entrusted to them, and who commit to accountability to the people we serve. In a world where fundamental human rights are at risk, we need principled personnel, who embody the very international norms and standards that have come under threat, and who are not afraid to defend them openly. At the same time, all UN personnel must be able to count on the full support and protection they need when acting with courage and principle. We need to live up to our own principles *within* the UN system. There must be zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse of any kind. And, as a global organization, we must do much better in bringing the diversity of the world into our own workforce, including with regard to the imperative of gender equality.

9. Yes, we live in challenging times. But these are precisely the challenges for which the United Nations was founded. We must lead in a manner true to the vision of our Charter. To that end, for UN system entities ready to take the next step towards this collective commitment, this framework will serve as a common foundation upon which we can develop current and future UN leadership.

## **II - Who We Are: The Eight Defining Characteristics of UN Leadership**

10. What does it mean to be a *UN* leader? What are the essential elements of UN leadership? What distinguishes it from other models and approaches? Where does one find the foundations of the UN leadership model? And how has that model changed as the UN system itself has evolved?

11. To answer these questions, we must look first to the United Nations Charter; the norms and standards of the UN as contained in its treaties and declarations; its core mandate to promote peace and security, protect human rights, address humanitarian needs, and advance economic and social progress and development; the imperatives of the sustainable development agenda; and the UN policy framework<sup>1</sup> constructed to advance those imperatives and to deliver results.

12. Properly understood, this approach reveals eight defining characteristics of UN leadership:

- It is **Norm-based**, in that it is grounded in UN norms and standards, beginning with the Charter itself. In other words, UN leaders *stand for something* – something quite specific. The UN is a norm-based organization, bound to promote and protect human rights, peace and security, humanitarian principles, economic and social progress and development, gender

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<sup>1</sup> Including the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, Human Rights Upfront, the Resident Coordinator (RC) Job Description and UNCT Guidance notes, and others.

equality, environmental stewardship, and countless other areas *in accordance with* the norms and standards contained in the international treaties, resolutions and declarations adopted under the auspices of the United Nations. UN personnel are duty-bound to defend these in every case, and must therefore be ready, able and equipped to do so.

- It is **Principled**, defending its norms and standards and their application without discrimination, fear, or favour even – especially – in the face of pressure and push-back from powerful actors. It seeks out, and promotes evidence over prejudice and popular assumptions for the basis of its work. Sometimes, this means telling government interlocutors, corporate actors, senior officials in our own organizations, and others – including the public – not just what they want to hear, but what they need to know. It means a principled approach to alleviating human suffering and protecting the lives, livelihoods and dignity of populations in need, without discrimination. UN personnel can never turn a blind eye to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, war crimes, crimes against humanity, corruption, discrimination, environmental degradation, or other abuses, regardless of (inevitable) pressures to remain silent. This means our personnel must be equipped with the skills and tools to maintain principled, constructive engagement with all stakeholders on the most sensitive of issues. And it means that they must know that, at highest levels of the United Nations, they will be supported in making, implementing and defending tough decisions. In sum, UN personnel must form part of an unbroken ‘blue line’ of principle, across the organization, and at all levels.
- It is **Inclusive** of all personnel and stakeholders irrespective of age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, grade, contractual status, and other personal characteristics. This means rejecting discrimination in all its forms, embracing diversity as a strength, and practicing cultural and gender sensitivity. It requires actively reaching out to those less likely to engage in group settings, facilitating multi-stakeholder access and engagement, and demonstrating empathy in interpersonal relationships. It means as well recognizing the authority of host communities, and treating all human beings with respect, whether peers, supervisees, supervisors, or external partners and stakeholders. And it means working to maximize geographic diversity and to achieve gender parity within the UN system, while maintaining the highest standards of competence and integrity.
- It is **Accountable**, mutually within the system, and to beneficiaries and the public beyond. This means that, even as personnel ensure accountability from others, they equally accept their own accountability, striving for 360 degrees of mutual accountability. UN personnel embrace accountability as a gauge of progress, as a check against waste, fraud or abuse, and as an opportunity for transparency, communication, and learning. They are skilled in results-based management, in constructive performance appraisal, in transparent leadership approaches, and in approaches that support a culture of individual growth and development, where good performance is incentivized and underperformers are held to account. UN personnel are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of their staff, especially those who serve in volatile crisis contexts. And, most of all, they recognize that our ultimate accountability is to the people that we serve – especially the most vulnerable, excluded, or marginalized – for the causes that we serve – peace, human rights, sustainable development, humanitarian relief, and so on.

- It is **Multi-dimensional**, integrated, and engaged across pillars<sup>2</sup> and functions.<sup>3</sup> It is now seen as axiomatic that the three pillars of the UN Charter (peace and security, human rights, and development) are interdependent, and that all UN functions, whether humanitarian, political, security, or others, impact on one another. That's why today's UN leader is required to learn, access, and shape new ways to connect cross-pillar knowledge and experience, and to ensure coherence while safeguarding a principled approach. S/he must be prepared to help unpack complex challenges and to build a shared understanding of problems, enabling collective support for effective solutions beyond the scope of individual organisations. The Resident Coordinator (RC) job description, for example, frames the RC as a multi-dimensional leader, responsible for leading on sustainable development, human rights, humanitarian,<sup>4</sup> political and security matters. SRSGs head multi-dimensional peace missions of similar composition. And the SDGs themselves are a fully-integrated framework, incorporating economic and social development, environment, human rights, peace, and other elements into a single whole. Leadership, for the UN, does not reside in silos.
- It is **Transformational**, of ourselves and of those we serve. The mission of the UN is to achieve positive *change* – to bring greater peace and security, human rights, economic and social progress and development, and a healthier environment. The SDGs themselves constitute a major change project – and a significant change effort is therefore needed to better support their implementation while 'leaving no one behind.' The UN system needs to invest in strong transformational leadership at the individual, team and organizational levels. It needs to strengthen its own agility and adaptability to change. Transformational leadership requires a focus on redefining approaches to partnership building, strategy, and systems thinking. It is heavily reinforced by attitudinal and behavioural adjustments, by development of leadership capabilities, and by strong vision and leadership for change. UN personnel facilitate change through role model behaviour, recognizing and rewarding the contributions of others, fostering a work culture of reflection, and through creating empowering conditions based on commitment and principled collaboration rather than compliance.
- It is **Collaborative**, within and beyond the UN system. Today's UN personnel comprehend the interdependent imperatives of the UN Charter, as well as the comprehensive nature of the 2030 Agenda and the multiplicity of stakeholders beyond the Organisation and its Member States. They seek collective 'as one' cross-Charter thinking, joined-up approaches and solutions. And they use the UN's convening power to actively create safe and meaningful opportunities to hear the voices of the people themselves, civil society, local communities, the marginalized and excluded within them, and those most at risk of being left behind. The UN leader recognizes that better connecting universal goals to people-centred initiatives requires investment in collective UN efforts to achieve them. This requires new behaviours that strengthen collaboration within and beyond traditional organizational boundaries. UN personnel should be able to scope constituencies, opportunities, and tipping points for progress that harness the latest technological advances of the scientific and technical community, collaborative system thinking, and enterprising partnerships with both traditional and non-traditional partners. This requires creating collaborative spaces for innovative thinking and experimentation at the country and global levels, and the exploration of tailored

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<sup>2</sup> Peace and Security, Human Rights, and Development.

<sup>3</sup> Development, human rights, humanitarian, political, environmental, safety and security, etc.

<sup>4</sup> If humanitarian assistance is required, and where a separate Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) position has not been established.

problem-driven solutions across constituencies and in dynamic environments and varying country contexts.

- It is **Self-applied**, that is, modelled in our own behaviour. A UN leader is expected not just to preach UN principles and norms to others, but to live them. S/he seeks to inspire, not to command. This means that in interactions within offices, teams, agencies, and across the system, the UN leader is fully respectful of all colleagues at all levels, is gender-sensitive, promotes and celebrates diversity as a strength, fosters teamwork, empowers staff, recognizes and rewards merit, and operates with integrity, transparency and fairness. And it also means that every UN leader exhibits these principles in all interactions with the people, communities and constituencies they serve, with partners in government and civil society, and, not least, with the vulnerable, marginalized, and those most likely to be left behind.

### **III - What We Do: UN Leadership In Action**

13. Four ways of working exemplify these leadership characteristics. They will of course manifest themselves differently, depending on the level and role of the personnel in the organisation. These are:

- **Focusing on impact.** We must unambiguously focus on achieving impact for the people we serve. This requires focusing on where the UN can add the greatest value and provide the best return on investment, rather than on mandate alone. And it necessitates a more rigorous results orientation. The keystone to achieving impact is accountability: we must embrace accountability for ourselves and for others.
- **Driving transformational change.** The 2030 Agenda challenges the UN system profoundly to change the way it does business. Because environments are fluid, volatile and rapidly changing, we need to constantly adapt ways of working to achieve maximum impact. This requires being willing to learn and to help the organization learn, and constant innovation. To achieve results at scale, UN leaders need to drive transformational change both within and outside their organization to influence the behaviour of the systems with which they interact.
- **Systems thinking.** The interconnectedness and indivisibility of Agenda 2030, and the realities of the world in which we work require us to deal with complexity at an unprecedented scale. As such, we need to identify, understand and develop appropriate ways of applying systems thinking to collectively define and address the challenges that we confront. We need to think across and beyond one area of expertise or mandate and to understand how our actions contribute to the overall UN objectives. We need to analyse the environment as a set of complex, live ecosystems, and to understand underlying organizing principles as well as the linkages, interactions, dependencies and power distribution among components and constituencies. And we must strategically identify leverage points in these systems to achieve maximum impact. UN leaders must therefore shift from linear thinking to non-linear, systems thinking.
- **Co-creation.** This approach requires us all to work with colleagues across the three pillars of the Charter and through multi-stakeholder partnerships. We need to catalyse action by building context- and issue-specific networks, coalitions and partnerships, leveraging the diverse contributions of all relevant stakeholders within and outside the UN. Providing safe,

collaborative space, and positioning ourselves as conveners and connectors rather than mere project implementers, we need to facilitate inclusive group processes to jointly analyse problems and co-create solutions to achieve results. Ultimately, we must shift from collaboration to co-creation.

#### **IV - How We Will Do It: Operationalizing the Framework**

14. The UN Leadership Framework exemplifies a common approach to leadership for all UN agencies, funds and programmes that promote and uphold the universal leadership characteristics, behaviour, principles, and mind-sets envisioned in this document. The framework should serve as an organizational tool, going beyond human resources interventions. And the leadership characteristics defined here can be embedded in all areas of work of the United Nations system.

15. To these ends, each implementing agency has broad flexibility on defining the best implementation roadmap at entity level, with due regard to their own mandates, unique value offerings, and specific needs. This will provide an opportunity for agencies to be creative and develop tailored proposals.

##### 1. Knowledge and skills

16. Knowledgeable leadership is empowered leadership. UN personnel must be well versed in this leadership approach, in the substance of the Charter's three pillars, of mandates from across the system, the demands of the broader 'eco-system' of actors, and the needs and aspirations of the people and communities we serve.

17. Further, 21<sup>st</sup> century UN leadership must have a firm basis in evidence, which is also central to the SDGs, essential to addressing root causes of problems, and key to combating prejudice, unpacking false assumptions, and moving beyond the failed approaches of the past. A commitment to continuous learning and professional/leadership development is therefore a key attribute of the UN leader.

18. As part of the learning process, UN leaders should be aware of risk-management techniques and ensure that lessons are well captured to promote a positive development experience inside organizational structures. Measured risk-taking should be included as part of efforts to build leadership capabilities, in order to promote creativity and innovation.

##### 2. A Culture of Change

19. Operationalizing the UN System Leadership Framework will require alignment of the organizational culture of the UN system and of its constituent entities to it.

20. We need to build models and prototypes of both vertical and horizontal leadership approaches where innovation, entrepreneurship and thinking outside the box become the norm rather than the exception. There is a need to build a reiterative model where we adopt, try and test, validate and then go on to the next level. This is applicable at all levels, but first and foremost at the top levels of UN Leadership. Of course, changing an organization's culture – let alone that of an entire system – is a long-

term process that requires dedicated leadership and a purposeful, sustained effort over time. And it will also require changing *the very way we drive change* in the UN.

21. Individual behaviours are among the building blocks of organizational culture. We must therefore aim to change key behaviours in the UN system, just as we must work to change associated mind-sets and attitudes. Old ways of doing business or holding status quo expectations cannot serve the ever-changing UN context. UN leaders are expected to showcase adaptability and continuous learning to make the organization relevant for the changing and growing demands of the world. In shepherding behavioural change, we should rely principally on *pull* rather than *push* factors and make adherence to the desired behaviours attractive, instead of merely imposing them through formal compliance instruments. We should capitalize more on horizontal and bottom-up dynamics, instead of relying too heavily on the usual – and seldom effective – vertical and top-down drivers.

22. More fundamentally, we should recognize that we will not succeed in changing the behaviour of *all* personnel in *all* UN entities at once. But we can focus on empowering existing change agents – those who already display the desired leadership characteristics.

23. UN entities will therefore have to consider how they will demonstrate their commitment to this framework and their level of involvement in it. But agencies that are ready to commit to and be associated with the framework will see their progress and successes recognized.

24. Lastly, transparency – vis-à-vis both UN staff and external stakeholders – should be harnessed as a powerful lever of culture change.

### 3. Managing Change

25. To advance this vision, it is recommended that the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), under the leadership of the Secretary-General as its Chair, promote system-wide initiatives to align the organizational culture of the UN system and its entities to this framework. Such initiatives should focus on three key drivers:

- **Ownership by UN senior leaders:** senior leaders provide the authority and credibility necessary for successful culture change, and must be accountable for it;
- **Active engagement and involvement by staff:** at all levels, staff ownership and buy-in is crucial for any culture change process to succeed; and
- **Organizational alignment:** relevant structures, systems, policies, and processes of individual UN entities that commit to participate in this framework and of the UN system will need to be aligned to the framework to enable and incentivize desired changes and behaviours.

#### 4. Steering Change

26. In order to build on the roadmap, a number of high-impact system-wide interventions will be conducted with ‘champion’ UN offices, agencies, funds and programmes ready to initiate and understand the details of the UN Leadership Framework implementation. UN agencies choosing to opt in to this initiative would develop internal implementation road maps based on their individual business models and their individual circumstances. This will provide a flexible mechanism to implement the system-wide core values of the leadership model while respecting the diversity of UN system organizations and their specific needs at the early stages of the implementation of the framework.

27. A **steering group** consisting of the three pillars of the CEB will be established to shepherd the implementation aspects of the Framework, and will involve UN entities that demonstrate commitment to aligning their organizational culture to the framework.

- Continuous senior-level ownership and sponsorship is key to the success of the Framework. The three pillars of the CEB will regularly conduct a **review of progress** made under this joint framework. Bottlenecks of progress identified through such reviews would, as appropriate, be brought to the CEB for strategic guidance.
- The steering group should develop:
  - a) A **road map** listing a limited number of high-impact system-wide interventions to jump-start alignment of the UN culture to this framework, with clear deliverables and timelines. These could include:
    - Launching a **platform to crowd-source ideas**, engage staff, and enable them to self-organize around changing the UN culture;
    - Promote the concept of **staff mobility** both vertical and horizontal inside the organization and across UN agencies.
    - Mandating **transparency** as default in a wide array of systems and processes;
    - An **advocacy** and information package to familiarize staff at all levels in all agencies and entities with the framework;
    - A **mapping** of existing UN leadership development efforts, with a mind to advancing coherence between them, obviating duplication, and filling gaps;
    - Training and **learning** events on UN leadership, incorporating the core elements of this framework;
    - Review and updating of relevant **assessment, performance review and guidance** materials and tools to ensure alignment with the model;
    - Establishment of a dedicated interagency **leadership development** mechanism, working closely with relevant UN and external partners, to inform, incentivize, and inspire system-wide leadership development as well as engagement around specific strategic issues and challenges faced by UN leaders, and to help to translate the elements of the UN leadership model into everyday practice;
    - Launching an **inter-agency initiative** to develop UN leaders aligned with the framework.
  - b) **Criteria** and tools to measure progress in changing the UN culture at UN entity and system-wide level.

- Each participating UN entity that has committed to this initiative should develop an **internal road map** outlining the steps it will take to align its organizational culture to the framework in the three focus areas identified above: (i) senior leadership ownership; (ii) staff engagement and involvement; and (iii) organizational alignment.

## **V - Conclusion: The Imperatives of Leadership**

28. This framework is situated within the broader context of the reform initiatives launched by the Secretary-General since the onset of his tenure. These include the reform of the UN development system and of the Secretariat peace and security architecture; furthering Secretariat management reform; making the UN Operations and Crisis Centre an integrated information hub; and establishing the Executive Committee to assist the Secretary-General in taking decisions on issues that span across the three pillars of the UN's work. Conceptualizing all these change efforts, as well as the proposed leadership framework, as part of a single whole, will enable the identification and leveraging of synergies and the application of change management tools to maximize success.

29. A critical success factor of this framework will be the extent to which UN senior leaders model the desired behaviours and hold others accountable for doing so. Weak accountability, rooted in a weak management culture, hampers reform efforts in any organization. Strengthening the UN's management culture at all levels is therefore a key prerequisite for this or any other meaningful change effort to succeed.

30. Now, as the UN system begins its dedicated efforts to help realize the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, as it confronts chronic poverty, expanding armed conflict, climate change and environmental degradation, unprecedented humanitarian crises, massive inequalities, and gross violations of human rights, more intensified efforts will be required to reinforce and extend this model of leadership across the UN at the global, regional and country levels.

31. The challenges that confront us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be met by mere deference to power, reliance on a shaky status quo, or operation in old silos. Rather, they demand a model of leadership that is norm-based, principled, inclusive, accountable, multi-dimensional, transformational, collaborative, and self-applied.

32. That is, a *UN* leadership model.

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