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# A Vision of a Sustainable UN

>>> 2020



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**A Vision of a Sustainable UN**

**>>> 2020**



*“Member States have given us a mandate. The United Nations must respond by pursuing sustainability in all our operations, facilities and work practices. To do so, we will have to seek out and adopt the latest thinking and technology and be prepared to embrace – as well as advocate for – change. The journey has begun. We are working to reduce the environmental footprint of our peacekeeping missions, and our Nairobi and New York headquarters are setting new standards in energy efficiency. But, we still have a long road to travel.”*

- Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General, United Nations

# Foreword

**H**ow we respond to the challenges of the future is a question for every member of the UN family. Just as people are demanding action from their leaders, the United Nations rightly faces the same scrutiny – the same impatience – the same demands for accountability.

In the Rio+20 outcome document – the Future We Want – governments made it clear what they expected from the UN in respect to realizing a sustainable century. They called for advances on integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development within the UN system. More specifically member states requested that the UN improve the management of facilities and operations by taking into account sustainable development practices, building on existing efforts and promoting cost effectiveness.



This report takes an innovative approach to unravel what this means for the UN. Based on interviews with a broad spectrum of leaders with key UN agencies and organizations, it focuses on the question of what a sustainable UN would look like: one that works in support of people and planet wherever it operates, and that has sustainability built into its operations and actions.

This report is not designed to provide answers but to open a debate and give voice to conversations that are already underway in respect to how best to adapt and accelerate a transition towards a sustainable UN.

Now is the time to get down to work, to design our future practically but also with a sense of adventure and above all leadership in order to deliver both the Future We Want and the future we need.

**Achim Steiner**

Chair of the Environment Management Group  
Executive Director, UNEP  
Under-Secretary-General, UN

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# 1. What will life be like in 2020?

On the one hand, 2020 might seem far away and impossible to anticipate with any certainty. Looking back over the last eight years, so much has happened from political events to technological developments that have changed our working lives. It seems that, when so much change can happen in a decade, any attempt to look forward would be too speculative to be useful.

On the other hand, there are long-term trends that will continue to develop. For example, we know with some certainty that the population will continue to grow and could be pushing the 8bn mark by 2020. We also know that pressures on natural resources will continue in light of increased population and consumption per capita. And of course, climate change will be accelerating, making the need for mitigation and adaptation responses all the greater.

We are entering a critical period globally. Multinational organizations in particular need to be prepared: both to flourish organizationally and – especially the UN – to help shape the global response.

At the Rio+20 conference in June 2012, member states called on the UN system to improve the management of its facilities and operations by taking into account sustainable development practices, building on existing efforts and promoting cost effectiveness.

This report is designed to start a discussion about how the UN might adapt to a changing environment and help to lead the world in sustainable development. Though we can't predict exactly what the future will look like, we can start to think through global trends, create a shared vision of what a sustainable response might be, and help the UN system prepare for the future.

## Methodology

To open the debate, 20 leaders from across the UN system were interviewed about their views for a sustainable UN (see interview questions in Appendix 1). Common themes and areas of difference were identified and analysed, as well as interesting ideas and approaches. This information was then brought together to create a shared vision of a sustainable UN.

The report contains three sections: the rationale for making the UN more sustainable, a vision of a sustainable UN and 'day-in-the-life' of a UN staff member, which paints a picture of what it might be like to work for the UN in 2020 if all the changes mentioned in the report came to be.

The report is not intended to be a prescriptive and tight definition of what a sustainable UN must be. Rather, it is hoped that readers will take it as a starting point for a discussion of sustainability in the UN, to understand the journey that the organization could go on to truly – in the words of so many of the leaders we interviewed – 'walk the talk'.



*“If we had taken certain steps 15 years ago, we wouldn’t be facing this now. What will the future be like for future generations? This is how we need to think about creating a sustainable UN, and we as agency heads must champion this individually and collectively.”*

- Kanayo F. Nwanze, President, IFAD

## 2. Rationale

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) convened The Brundtland Commission in 1983 to address growing concerns about “the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development.” The Commission published *Our Common Future* in 1987, setting out what has become the classic definition of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Following this, in 1992, the Rio Declaration agreed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the ‘Earth Summit’) set out the principles of sustainable development.

Twenty years later, at the Rio+20 conference in June 2012, member states called on the UN system to improve the management of its facilities and operations by taking into account sustainable development practices, building on existing efforts and promoting cost effectiveness.

Through these high-profile positions and also through agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate change (UNFCCC) and the Millennium Development Goals, the UN has been at the centre of sustainable development policy for the last 30 years.

The UN has taken significant steps towards climate neutrality and sustainability in its own operations in recent years. Following approval of the UN Climate Neutral Strategy by the Chief Executives Board (CEB) in 2007, collaborative efforts have led to publication of the first ever inventory of UN

greenhouse gas emissions in 2009, and the launch of a common website - [www.greeningtheblue.org](http://www.greeningtheblue.org) - in 2010. Organizations in the UN system have been working together in an inter-agency network since 2008 (the Issue Management Group, or IMG, on Environmental Sustainability Management), supported by the Sustainable United Nations facility (SUN), set up for the purpose by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Whilst there is broad consensus that the UN needs to become sustainable in its operations, what this means in practice and how it can be achieved remain somewhat fuzzy. A common vision is missing. There are aspirations to move towards a more sustainable footing, but targets have not yet been set.

The experiences of the past four years in implementing the UN climate neutral strategy have revealed a clear and urgent need for strong leadership within each UN organization. Without this, the formal engagement of the CEB cannot be brought to life. This conclusion is shared not only by members of the IMG network, but has been reiterated in reports from the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) in 2009 and the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) in 2010. The IMG network and Sustainable UN team therefore decided to turn to the leaders of the UN organizations concerned to develop a shared vision of their sustainability ambitions and a clear route for getting there.

As a result, 20 leaders of UN organizations were interviewed (see Appendix 2). Where leaders were not available in person, some organizations supplied written responses. The summary of their responses is outlined below.



*“As a leading organization on sustainable human development, UNDP is walking the talk on tackling climate change by reducing and offsetting greenhouse gas emissions from our operations.”*

- Helen Clark, Administrator, UNDP

### 3. Responses from the leaders

The interviews with leaders covered the broad sustainability issues that they are prioritizing in the coming years, their vision for a sustainable UN and the barriers and opportunities for that vision to be realized.

#### **Question: Why should the UN take a leadership position on sustainability?**

None of the leaders interviewed challenged the idea that the UN should take a leadership position on sustainability. In fact all were very much in favour that the UN should be more prominent on the issues. There is an a priori case for UN leadership on sustainability given the UN's central position in the sustainability policy arena and the commitment to the agenda by the Secretary General.

But, according to them, there are many other reasons why the UN should move to the fore, or "walk the talk" as many of them put it. The reasons can be grouped together as follows, with examples of the types of comments we heard:

#### **1) The changing external context**

Uncertainty about future global economic prospects, the impacts of climate change, a widening gap between rich and poor in some countries, all threaten sustainability.

Many of the most critical indicators are moving in the wrong direction. For example, biodiversity loss is estimated at around 150 – 200 species every 24 hours, approximately 1000 times the 'background' extinction rate. Greenhouse gas emissions were at their highest ever in 2010, up 6 per cent on the previous year, bringing the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere ever closer to levels suggested by the IPCC to make 'dangerous climate change' likely. All this means that the sustainable development imperative is becoming more critical by the day. As we approach 2015, these trends threaten to undermine progress on the eight Millennium Development Goals and add complexity to the work required by UN programmes. The UN must take a strong lead on articulating the argument for a sustainable future both within the organization and externally at a global level.

***"Expectations are shifting. If the UN doesn't change, it will find itself at the sharp end of public scrutiny."***

**- Achim Steiner,  
Chair of the Environment Management Group  
Executive Director, UNEP and  
Under-Secretary-General, UN**

*“If we want to leave a legacy for the people and the territory we deal with, we have to do it now.”*

- Edouard Dayan, Director General, UPU



*“At national and international levels: major environmental and social constraints for a larger world population will make absolutely necessary a more ethical approach in our daily lives, by adopting long-term altruistic goals*

*versus short-term self-centred gains. In such a delicate situation, leading by example will become absolutely crucial for the UN System.”*

- Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, UNWTO

## 2) If not the UN, then who?

Tackling complex global issues will require strong, sustained leadership, to unite nations around a common agenda, inspire action and inform direction. Leadership at the national level is imperative, but it is the UN alone, as the custodian of the Brundtland definition, that is in a position to connect these efforts and develop a strategic roadmap to a sustainable future. Crucially, the UN must demonstrate pioneering practice internally, to stimulate this transition on a wider scale.

***“The ‘human footprint’  
on the planet is  
straining the earth’s  
capacity to sustain  
all forms of life. We  
have agreed that  
development is a  
human right, but how  
much development is  
rightfully ours?”***

**- Irina Bokova,  
Director General, UNESCO**

## 3) Financial benefits

Against a background of budget squeezing and financial austerity, increasing investment in sustainability could appear counter-intuitive. But throughout the corporate world the business case is being built up that shows the long-term savings that can be made through short-term commitments. Money spent today on more efficient buildings, for example, will be recouped through savings in energy bills.

The UN can learn from this approach. To successfully deliver its vital work all over the world, it is essential that as much budget as possible is fed into the delivery programmes of the UN. Embedding sustainability in the core of the organization will achieve both long and short-term savings through energy efficiency, the mitigation of cost-heavy risks and the avoidance of duplication.



## 4. A vision of a Sustainable United Nations in 2020

Having expressed themselves on the need for the UN to walk the talk and show coherence by including sustainability both in their internal management and in their operations, the leaders expressed their vision for their own agencies and for the UN system at large.

The vision below is based on the views of those consulted and every effort has been made to accurately reflect those views accurately. Inevitably, from interviews with 20 people representing 20 agencies, there was a wide range of responses. The vision is based first and foremost on issues and ideas that came up frequently.

There was, in fact, a striking level of agreement across the interviewees, despite the diversity of their organizations, and this has influenced the construction of the vision. In particular:

1. There was an agreement on the main underlying issues and barriers to embedding sustainability into the business practices of the United Nations;
2. There was an impressive level of commitment to the principles of sustainable development and an absolute and unanimous call for the United Nations to demonstrate leadership. Interviewees felt that this commitment was self-evident in the UN's programmes. But there was frustration at the speed of movement internally. Some interviewees compared the UN to a multinational

business in terms of size and scale, but felt that businesses are able to act more quickly and boldly;

3. Many interviewees found it difficult to separate administrative sustainability (the remit of this research) from programmatic sustainability, seeing them as inextricably linked;
4. Finally, many interviewees were willing to consider quite radical changes, even structural ones, to help build a more sustainable organization. All interviewees mentioned the need for the UN to cut down on international flights in order to reduce both costs and carbon emissions. Yet, while there was recognition that videoconferencing was one way to achieve this, the key barrier mentioned by interviewees was the political pressure on people to travel to meetings in the first place.
5. A common conclusion was that, if the UN is to become environmentally sustainable, in the medium-term it has to be ready to embrace cultural and structural change.

The vision has been organised into an overarching statement and five sub-statements. These are interlinked. Success in one is dependent on and drives success in the others. For example, focusing on outcomes, becoming more dynamic and more networked are building blocks for achieving efficiencies and driving commitment.

# The year is 2020...

*and the United Nations system is a leading voice on sustainability globally, committed to minimising its own environmental impacts by operating with maximum efficiency. Flexibility, dynamism and a focus on positive outcomes for people and the environment characterize the everyday operations of the UN, and help to ensure that it is truly sustainable.*

## Committed

The UN continually demonstrates its commitment to sustainability through setting the agenda and long-term vision for sustainability, and exercising visible leadership. A common approach is taken across the UN. Funding flows match the commitment.

## Efficient

The UN fully captures the synergies of cost and environmental efficiency measures. It makes wise use of resources and minimizes waste, enabling more funds to be directed towards programming priorities. Pooling assets, reducing the number and scale of international meetings, and a more 'virtual approach' to collaboration have freed up vital resources.

## Outcomes-focused

The UN is strongly focused on its core mission and outcomes across all its agencies, funds and programmes. This has allowed it to become more

agile and responsive, and freed it from some of the bureaucratic baggage that had built up in the past. In turn, this makes the UN more sustainable as fewer resources are tied up in politics and bureaucracy, and funding flows more easily around the system.

## Dynamic

The UN is open to change and embraces flexibility in its processes. The system has the capacity to adapt and react to rapid shifts in its operating environment. This has allowed it to respond nimbly to crises as they occur, for example, keeping peacekeeping operations secure in the face of social and environmental unrest.

## Networked

The UN functions as a network of expert technical bodies, bringing in expertise from outside when necessary. Agencies, funds and programmes communicate actively about sustainable development and share best practice on operations and procedure.





*“We cannot credibly advise others if we do not look in our own backyard.”*

- Jacques Diouf,  
Former Director-General, FAO

*“The UN needs to walk the talk, so agency heads need to champion the whole thing in their institutions, and not delegate to colleagues in management. So agency heads need to educate themselves on topics to champion.”*

- Kanayo F. Nwanze, President, IFAD

*“The UN network on sustainable procurement is doing great things, largely through awareness raising.”*

*“No programme without sustainability.”*

- Laura Londén, Former Director of Administrative Support, UNRWA

*“The UN cannot afford to be a follower, we have to get on with it and be at the forefront, helping to shape the global agenda. The UN should be a role model on sustainability.”*

- Jan Mattsson, Executive Director, UNOPS

## 4.1 A committed UN

***The UN continually demonstrates its commitment to sustainability through setting the agenda and long-term vision for sustainability, and demonstrating leadership. A consistent approach is taken across the UN. Funding flows match the UN commitment on sustainability.***

In 2018 the UN held a virtual conference to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Brundtland Commission. Participants from around the world celebrated virtually the UN's leadership in pursuit of its vision for a sustainable future.

The UN sustainability vision was signed off in 2013 and not only asserted the UN's continuing commitment to sustainability but brought different agendas - such as ethics and gender - under the sustainability banner. Accompanied by a clear mandate from the General Assembly for a sustainable UN, this moved the organization away from approaching different elements of sustainability separately, in particular climate change, to thinking more holistically, making the connections between the human, social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability more explicit.

Funding streams were pooled to create a central fund to kick-start significant sustainability initiatives. A new annual virtual conference of agency heads and high-profile non-UN sustainability experts was set up to allocate this funding. Cross-agency working groups are able to submit ideas and the meeting acts as an apolitical environment to allocate funds to the most innovative and promising projects.

Over the years projects that have received funding have included developing a cross-agency approach to carbon offsets, seeding local economies to set sustainable development in motion, and activation of renewable energy potential in peace-keeping stations. The UN has also embraced the approach to innovation that has been so successful in multinationals to open up innovation both internally and to external experts – the UN's open-innovation approach to sustainability is much admired as having generated many solutions.

Technical expertise in the field of sustainability has become a source of pride across the UN. A central group provides technical support to all agencies, for example, in relation to buildings emissions and sustainable procurement.

The UN is particularly renowned for its cross-agency financial network that has developed mechanisms to assess the impacts of capital investment and

***“We can tinker along with the photocopying and lighting but that’s really not going to make much of a difference.”***

***- Laura Londén, Former Director of Administrative Support, UNRWA***



*“The UN must integrate sustainability into its daily operations. It must not be marginal or temporary, it must be a permanent function.”*

- Maria Neira, Director of Public Health and Environment, WHO

*“Trying to make the UN, with all of its offices in virtually every country of the world, a kind of innovation platform for bringing the latest technologies, building management systems into countries that otherwise would not see a commercial operator come for another 5 or 10 years.”*

- Achim Steiner,  
Chair of the Environment Management Group  
Executive Director, UNEP and  
Under-Secretary-General, UN

*“The distinction between the administrative and the programmatic is artificial. If you want to walk the talk, this has to go across both aspects.”*

- Flavia Pansieri, Executive Co-ordinator, UNV

other financial flows for sustainability purposes. These new models for assessment have changed the approach to funding not only in the UN but also in the corporate world. The UN employee pension fund is an industry-leader in sustainable investment and a staff engagement programme has encouraged employees to help develop guidelines for the fund, ensuring the delivery of long-term value for the beneficiaries of the fund.

Emerging from the economic downturn, the UN developed a compelling business case for a sustainable UN, published in 2014, setting out efficiency gains, risk-avoidance and strategic benefits. This has been used widely to translate long-term financial savings into more immediate and relevant metrics, clearly demonstrating the level of financial savings made that have then been ploughed into delivery programmes.

A strong commitment to sustainability is evident throughout the UN and sustainability literacy is considered an essential part of staff development.

Senior managers across the UN system attend an intensive training programme in sustainability and learn how to use the new UN tools and systems that have been developed to embed sustainability into every project and programme. One of the core competencies the UN has succeeded in disseminating system-wide is holistic reporting. Following a drive to value natural and social capital, the organization has embedded sustainability accounting into its financial reporting procedures.

Policy is consistent across agencies and programme and operational agendas. For example, though it has been demonstrated that biofuels which do not compete with agricultural food production represent a promising solution for the aviation sector, the UN and its Member States need to cooperate more closely to optimize the sustainability and availability of these fuels through coordinated policies that incentivise their maximum development and deployment.

***“We need a truly global compact including citizens, as sustainability will require dramatic changes in lifestyle for all people.”***

**- Flavia Pansieri,  
Executive Co-ordinator, UNV**



*“We must value environmental as much as financial factors, so some form of carbon budgeting will likely be required in the future.”*

*“We must manage travel more effectively, since it contributes a very large percentage of greenhouse gas emissions for UN organizations.”*

- Irina Bokova, Director General, UNESCO

*“We need to review the whole process of procurement at the UN, which can currently lead to irrational decision-making. The UN, through its procurement, could be a tremendous catalyst for economic transformation.”*

- Achim Steiner,  
Chair of the Environment Management Group  
Executive Director, UNEP and  
Under-Secretary-General, UN

*“We need fewer processes, to use modern technology more effectively, to continue consulting stakeholders and working together, and at the same time reduce our footprint.”*

- Flavia Pansieri,  
Executive Co-ordinator, UNV

## 4.2 An efficient UN

***The UN fully captures the synergies of cost efficiency and environmental efficiency measures. It makes efficient use of resources and minimizes waste, allowing it to prioritise resources for programming. Pooling assets, reducing the number and scale of international meetings and a more 'virtual approach' to collaboration and inter-agency working have freed up vital resources. Through engagement in the evolving offsetting regime, the UN has been able to offset within the system, which has created further efficiencies.***

A key driver for the UN's commitment to sustainability has been the potential to realise efficiencies and plough the savings back into programming. This has required quite a cultural shift. In the past, many saw sustainability as a set of extra costs, rather than as a means of doing business, and as budgets were cut, sustainability became threatened. This is now a distant memory and sustainability is rightly seen as a vehicle for achieving operational efficiencies.

In the early 2010s, a full audit of all UN building stock captured in one place all the assets owned across the UN system. A cross-agency task force was put in place to work out how to use these assets more efficiently and to realise added value – for example by renting out meeting space when buildings aren't in use. The online portal and central team that manage the asset register are now mainstreamed and agencies are benefiting from the resources that have been freed up.

Another working group in the early 2010s looked at the issue of carbon offsets and how to tackle these within the system. All agencies are now used to the energy hierarchy – which puts reducing energy use and switching to renewable sources firmly above carbon offsets – and this has reduced the need for offsets. Sustainable procurement is fully embedded within the UN. This goes beyond looking for the most efficient products and services in each category and now focuses on whole-life costings and prioritises closed-loop production models. Where possible, the procurement team works with suppliers to create closed-loop systems,

using waste from one part of the UN system as raw material for another. Notably, sustainable procurement by UN agencies and offices has been instrumental in stimulating new local markets, enabling developing nations to be part of a green economy in a global market place.

A majority of UN meetings now take place virtually. In the mid-2010s, the UN worked with a group of technology suppliers to make a switch to paper-free offices through notepad technology and other approaches, which have changed people's approach so much that paper use has almost been eliminated. Partnerships with leading corporates have been fundamental to implementing the latest technologies, and the UN has become an innovation platform, demonstrating the viability of new solutions in its offices throughout the world.

Through these measures, the UN is moving towards genuine decarbonisation, and comprehensive evaluation processes are capturing the volume of cost savings achieved by these efficiencies.

***“Meetings are growing in number and size. Virtual conferencing is one solution.”***

**Andy Winbow,  
Assistant Secretary-General/Director,  
Administrative Division, IMO**



*“The UN system is outmoded. It was created to respond to ad hoc situations. It should be more strategic and proactive as a body, taking a more integrated approach to sustainable development across the organization.”*

- Ahmed Djoghlaoui,  
Former Executive Secretary, UNCBD

## 4.3 An outcomes-focused UN

***The UN is strongly focused on its core mission and outcomes across all its agencies. This has allowed it to become more 'fleet of foot' and responsive, and freed it from some of the bureaucratic baggage that had built up in the past. This makes the UN more sustainable as fewer resources are tied up in politics and bureaucracy, funding flows more easily around the system, and international travel has been greatly reduced.***

Delivering on the UN's vision for sustainability has been no easy task, and has required some fundamental cultural shifts across the system. It was realised early on that just asking people to fly less, for example, would not create behaviour change and this needed to be driven from the top.

In signing off on the UN's vision for sustainability, the Chief Executives Board decided that one key approach would be developing an 'outcomes-focused' mentality. This became a mantra throughout the mid-2010s and was referred to in personal target-setting, meeting agenda-setting and throughout the internal reporting cycle. Accordingly, evaluation processes that measure the impact of UN programmes have evolved to become a pillar of learning throughout the organization.

Becoming 'outcomes-focused' meant a commitment to reducing the bureaucracy and politicisation of meetings. It was starting to be felt that meetings were becoming an end in themselves and that people were turning up in order to be seen there, rather than because they were necessary to the agenda. People were locked into this behaviour pattern and it had become impossible to change.

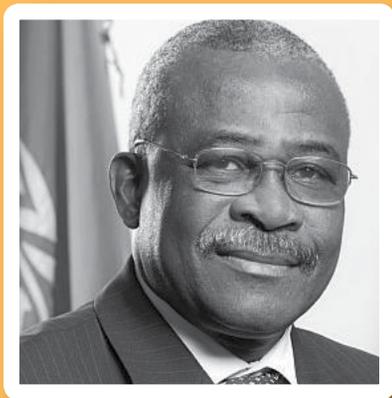
The circuit breaker was the introduction of a requirement to outline desired meeting outcomes and to justify the proposed presence of each participant before a meeting could be convened. An additional, interim, step was therefore added to convening meetings where the desired outcomes were outlined in advance, and how each participant would contribute to the outcome was set out. The cross-agency leadership group would periodically review a sample of these outlines and challenge any that they felt were not compliant.

***“Despite investment in teleconferencing facilities, air travel worldwide is not dropping.”***

***- Irina Bokova,  
Director General, UNESCO***

*“We should allocate more financial and human resources to sustainable development activities whenever possible or do better with less. We should also encourage coordination and cooperation among organisations to ensure a stronger and more coherent governance of sustainable development in the UN.”*

- Edouard Dayan, Director General, UPU



*“The way that different agencies function varies, and can be disparate and disconnected in some areas.”*

- Kanayo F. Nwanze, President, IFAD

There were many grumblings as this system went into place and it was very onerous for the first few years. After three years, however, a corner was turned and people began to appreciate the focus and the time it freed up. They then started looking for ways to apply this elsewhere, unleashing a wave of outcomes-focused behavioural shift, which has further reduced bureaucracy.

Looking back, people remember how hard this period was, but without it the dramatic reduction in flights taken and number of meetings held would never have been possible. The impacts are now being felt on the agencies' bottom lines, with savings in both time and money. A comprehensive evaluation process allows these savings to be quantified and allocated to core delivery programmes.

In addition, staff performance appraisals are aligned with sustainability and employees are encouraged to take the initiative when it comes to suggesting more streamlined work processes. It took a while for this to become integrated into the organizational culture, but over the last five years, new communications channels have made it much easier for staff to contribute. Huge savings have been made by gathering and scaling up solutions from within the workforce – instead of commissioning an external consultancy, and the feeling of ownership has also increased the success of implementation.

***“The paradigm of United Nations operations needs to move from an administering of the status quo...towards managing for efficiency and managing for results.”***

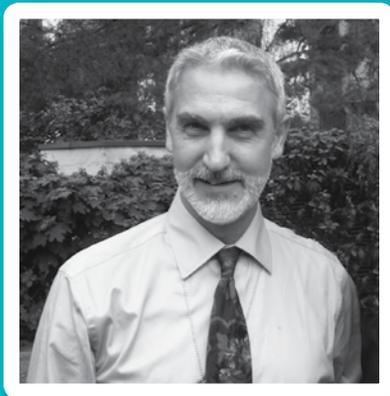
**- Achim Steiner,  
Chair of the Environment Management Group  
Executive Director, UNEP and  
Under-Secretary-General, UN**

*“A sustainable UN requires a sea change in organizational culture at every level.”*

- Irina Bokova, Director General, UNESCO

*“Greater coordination between agencies involved in development work and providing funding, ensuring complementarity and avoiding overlapping and duplication of work, favouring joint initiatives and alliances, as well as more efficiency in identifying the best areas to act upon, etc.”*

- Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, UNWTO



*“Resistance to change and inertia eventually give way to openness and willingness to change.”*

- Kyle F. Ward, Chief, Programme Support and Management Services, OHCHR

## 4.4 A dynamic UN

***The UN is open to change and embraces flexibility in its processes. The system has the capacity to adapt and react to rapid shifts in its operating environment. This has allowed it to respond nimbly to crises as they occur, and for example keep peacekeeping operations secure even in the face of social and environmental unrest.***

With this cultural shift, the UN has not only started to become more open to change, but it encourages and embraces flexibility across the system. This is manifested on different levels.

At the macro-level, the ability of the UN to respond to crises is now unparalleled. This has been vital as the impacts of climate change start produce an increasing number of extreme weather events and overall uncertainty of weather patterns. 2016 was a particularly bad year, with a devastating hurricane season in central America, drought across Africa and crop failure in Asia. However, the UN was been able to bring aid to those who need it most, while deploying a record number of peacekeeping forces to trouble-spots around the world.

At the micro-level, dynamism within the UN system is illustrated by a new administrative flexibility. Approval lines have been shortened, expectations have been raised about the speed at which issues will be addressed, and it is easier to raise new items of expenditure.

UN staff no longer talk about inertia or complain that 'nothing changes around here'. As the system has adopted technologies that have allowed it to reduce bureaucracy and trim travel, the spirit of change has become contagious so that staff now actively seek new ways to do things. Staff move more readily between agencies and job-sharing across agencies is now commonplace.

Complementing the physical movement of staff is a sophisticated co-ordination mechanism, implemented in 2019. Managers and programme

coordinators utilise this system to rationalise resources for common goals and integrate budgets, even at short notice. Although it took some agencies a year or so to master this technology, it has brought considerable flexibility whilst maintaining, and in some cases improving, standards.

After a decade of these work practices, the UN has become increasingly known for its progressive approach to operations and attracts an increasingly diverse workforce, keen to be part of a cutting-edge organization. The injection of new skills and expertise has been welcomed and online forums within agencies unlock innovation within the workforce.

***“We need to create a more dynamic culture in which people stay for shorter periods in their jobs and shift around the UN more. We should look at major multinational companies and the way they organise for effectiveness.”***

***- Andy Winbow,  
Assistant Secretary-General/Director,  
Administrative Division, IMO***



*“One of our opportunities is to serve as the platform to bring private and public sector stakeholders together and partnering to green our future ; the UN can help in mainstreaming resources and working on cross country issues.”*

- Edouard Dayan, Director General, UPU

*“A more decentralised structure could decrease the amount of travel and bureaucracy. For example, reduce the size of the HQ and delegate more authority to the field.”*

- Kyle F. Ward, Chief, Programme Support and Management Services, OHCHR

*“Each agency currently has its own strengths in sustainability. Defining future UN sustainability targets centrally will allow these strengths to be shared across agencies and ensure that the UN can progress towards sustainability as one entity.”*

- Maria Neira, Director of Public Health and Environment, WHO

## 4.5 A networked UN

***The UN functions as a network of agencies and expert technical bodies, bringing in expertise from outside when necessary. Agencies communicate actively about sustainable development and share best practice on operations and procedure.***

The UN of 2020 is highly networked. Partly through embracing technology, partly through the other cultural shifts that have happened, there is a new concept of the UN as a truly networked system with all parts drawing on each other and open communications among the agencies.

Collaboration is now the norm, not just with other UN agencies, but with outside partners and those best able to do the work. The motto “it’s not who you are, but what you know” is often invoked as people decide who to work with.

The foundation of this shift has been better technology, which has allowed the agencies to understand more easily where expertise lies within the system. Just as physical assets are seen as more of a common resource, so is knowledge and expertise. This has reduced the duplication of effort among agencies, and good ideas now spread quickly.

The downside is that there is a lot of information and many places to look for help, and this can be confusing. However, as the cultural shift has gained ground, people are getting used to it and becoming better at navigating their way around.

People will always have preferences over where to find information, but the overall shift has been to a widening of sources and an increased feeling of shared ownership of knowledge.

The networked UN reduces the need for co-ordination bodies and meetings, which has stripped out a layer of bureaucracy and improved organizational efficiency.

As well as an increasing number of secondments, a collection of agencies has worked together to develop an e-learning platform. Employees provide content that is integrated into a learning programme and made available to staff of other agencies, allowing for further professional development.

Work has been carried out over the past few years to grow the world-class UN mentor programme. Along with offering intra-agency mentors, this programme builds mentor relationships strategically across agencies and with key external businesses and organizations. Developing these relationships has opened up more opportunities for collaboration and joint delivery with corporations and NGOs across the world.

***“In the UN we need to work much more on building knowledge and partnerships, linking up with others that are further ahead.”***

**- Jan Mattsson,  
Executive Director, UNOPS**



## 5. A day in the sustainable United Nations, 2020

Cycling through the park, Samuel catches sight of the office as the sun glints off the solar panels, installed on the roof of the building almost 7 years ago following a big energy-efficiency drive. Although they were quite a spectacle back then, today many other roofs boast panels in all shapes and sizes and are now simply part of the landscape.

Early as usual, Samuel takes a minute to admire the butterflies in the biodiversity garden before locking up his bike and heading towards the building. He has some time before his meeting at 9am with an overseas colleague, so chooses a desk next to the window and turns on his notepad. He was working at home last week, so it's quite refreshing to be back in the office. Initially he was concerned that being away from the office would limit how effectively he could work, but the cloud-computing system the UN implemented back in 2014 gives him access to all the documents, databases and functions he needs. Designed and built specifically for the UN by one of the leading technology innovators, this system has also made Samuel's job easier; they are quickly able to build tailored systems, making responding to emergencies more effective. As it's no longer necessary to spend precious time sifting through piles of papers searching for relevant documents, Samuel has a few minutes to make himself a coffee before his meeting.

Coffee in hand, Samuel makes his way to one of the small meeting rooms. He remembers back to the days when this meeting would have involved a huge roll-call of people, to cover chains of command and internal politics. He's grateful for the straightforward approach the senior teams adopted to change this. Now, he looks forward to meetings, as decisions are often made more quickly and time can be spent on implementation rather than deliberating. Samuel hooks his notepad up to the telepresence screen

and places a call through to his colleague in China. Although Samuel knows some Chinese, he switches on the real-time speech translation to prevent any misunderstanding. The screen in front of him projects a perfect real time image of his Chinese colleague, and talking to him in this way feels as natural and relaxed as a real face-to-face meeting.

Choosing a hot-desk in an airy, open-plan part of the office, close to the natural ventilation flow, Samuel settles down to work on a project update report for management. For the past five years the UN has been using a form of connected reporting across all agencies, both internally and externally, to bring their accounting processes in line with their wider strategy: placing sustainability at the heart of all they do. Integrating social and environmental factors with financial reports has helped Samuel to understand the links between sustainability, financial performance and strategic direction. It's now much easier to appreciate the long-term view required when it comes to planning. Samuel has become somewhat an expert on this approach and has run a few workshops within the agency (open to staff from other agencies of course) to train colleagues in how to apply it.

Making his way to lunch in the cafe, Samuel passes the public gallery, which is busy with visitors. Since the sustainability overhaul in 2014, implemented with a leading construction firm, part of the building has been open to the public as a working demonstration of the latest sustainable building technology and architecture. Visitors are able to track the sustainability journey of the UN over the last 8 years and view its ambitious plans for the future. A number of displays also feature details of UN buildings around the world that are leading the way on energy efficiency, retrofitting, renewable energies and collaborative utilisation. Samuel enjoys the lively atmosphere this exhibition brings to the building.

# timeline >>> 2012

Calls at Rio+20 for the UN to integrate sustainability into programmes

The café menu is based on local and seasonal food, some of which is grown by a team of employees in the gardens of the building. In the queue, Samuel bumps into a colleague who has just returned from a secondment at another agency as part of a professional development and knowledge sharing programme. They spend an hour catching up over plates of fresh food, occasionally glancing up at the sustainability monitor on the wall above them, which tracks energy and water use in real-time for all agencies, a visible reminder of the priority placed on sustainability in the UN these days, but enjoyed by most as a means of competing with other agencies to show how low they can go on resource consumption.

UN sustainability vision signed off by the General Assembly

2013

2014

Full audit of UN building stock. All assets owned across the UN system captured in one place

Implementation of cloud computing system

2015

Business case for sustainable UN published

UN agencies adopt an integrated approach to reporting

2016

Introduction of new guidelines to outline meeting requirements and justify presence of participants

Samuel heads into another meeting after lunch, this time with his mentee. He signed up to the programme last year, and has been meeting regularly with a more junior colleague from another agency. Their professional roles are slightly different, but Samuel is able to share his experience and understanding of strategic planning and project management as well as offer advice and direction. Not only does he find this role incredibly fulfilling, but the programme, which runs across the entire organization, has helped to break down communication barriers that often used to hamper progress in many areas of the UN.

UN offices become largely paper-free through a range of technology solutions

2017

2018

Virtual conference to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Brundtland Commission

Switching his notepad back on Samuel glances out of the window. A few years ago he would have had to spend this evening at the airport, preparing for a late night flight. But since the conference he is attending tomorrow is virtual, there is no need for him to travel, saving him time and cutting back on a huge amount of expenditure. He spends a moment wondering what games his son will want to play this evening, before turning back to his work.

Resource coordination system implemented

2019

# >>> 2020

# Appendix 1 - Interview questions

1. Changes in the external environment will provide the context and rationale for greater sustainability in United Nations operations. In your view, what are the biggest challenges to sustainable development globally over the next two decades?
2. How do you see United Nations operations (i.e. administrative functions rather than programmes) changing in future, to prepare for these sustainable development challenges?
3. Thinking forward to 2020, what is your vision of a sustainable United Nations?
4. In your view what are the most significant barriers and opportunities in achieving this change?
5. Finally, what do you see as your role in making your organization (i.e. agency level not the United Nations) more sustainable in future?

## Appendix 2 - People and organizations consulted

Name	Title	Organization	Full organization name
Mr Ahmed Djoghlaif	Former Executive Secretary	UNCBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
Dr Jacques Diouf	Former Director-General	FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
Mr. Raymond Benjamin	ICAO Secretary General	ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
Mr Kanayo F. Nwanze	President	IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
Mr Peter Poschen	Director, Job Creation and Sustainable Enterprise Department	ILO	International Labour Organization
Mr Andy Winbow	Assistant Secretary-General/ Director, Administrative Division	IMO	International Maritime Organization
Mr Kyle F. Ward	Chief, Programme Support and Management Services	OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Dr Hamadoun Touré	Secretary General	ITU	UN agency for information and communication techniques
Ms Helen Clark	Administrator	UNDP	UN Development Programme
Ms Irina Bokova	Director General	UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
Mr Achim Steiner	Chair of the Environment Management Group; Executive Director, UNEP; and Under-Secretary-General, UN	UNEP	UN Environment Programme
Mr Kassym-Jomart Tokayev	Director-General	UNOG	UN Office at Geneva
Mr Jan Mattsson	Executive Director	UNOPS	UN Office for Project Services
Ms Laura Londén	Former Director of Administrative Support	UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees
Ms Flavia Pansieri	Executive Co-ordinator	UNV	UN Volunteers
Mr Taleb Rifai	Secretary-General	UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
Mr Edouard Dayan	Director General	UPU	Universal Postal Union
Ms Josette Sheeran	Former Executive Director	WFP	World Food Programme
Dr Maria Neira	Director of Public Health and Environment	WHO	World Health Organization
Mr Joachim Müller	Director, Resource Management Department	WMO	World Meteorological Organization
Mr Pascal Lamy	Director-General	WTO	World Trade Organization

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# About the partners

## The Environment Management Group

The Environment Management Group (EMG) is a United Nations (UN) System-wide coordination body. Its Membership consists of the specialized agencies, programmes and organs of the United Nations including the secretariats of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements. It is chaired by the Executive Director of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and supported by a secretariat provided by UNEP.

The EMG furthers inter-agency Cooperation in support of the implementation of the international environmental and human settlement agenda. It identifies issues on the agenda that warrant joint efforts, and finds ways of engaging its collective capacity in coherent management responses to those issues. The current issues under consideration by the group include: IMG on Land, IMG on Biodiversity, IMG on Green Economy, IMG on Sustainability Management, Inputs for International and Environment Governance (IEG) and the EMG Consultative Process on Environmental and Social Safeguards.

[www.unemg.org](http://www.unemg.org)

## UNEP Sustainable UN

Sustainable United Nations (SUN) is a UNEP initiative that provides support to UN and other organizations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and improve their sustainability overall.



SUN was established in response to the call from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon at the World Environment Day 2007 (5 June) to all UN agencies, funds and programmes to reduce their carbon footprints and "go green." In October 2007 a decision of the UN Chief Executives Board committed the UN system to move towards climate neutrality.

SUN is using a "whole-organization" approach in identification of sources and causes for emissions and opportunities for reduced emissions and improved sustainability. Opportunities for improvements are typically found within one of the three major focus areas for SUN:

- Physical assets: building, equipment, vehicles...
- Management processes: procurement, travel, management systems...
- Organizational Culture: office behaviour and "corporate" culture, green meetings...

SUN operates in synergy with existing initiatives and networks such as the Sustainable Buildings and Construction Initiative, the High Level Committee on Management Procurement Network, the UN Global compact, the Marrakech Task Force on Sustainable Public Procurement and many others.

[www.greeningtheblue.org](http://www.greeningtheblue.org)

## Forum for the Future

At Forum for the Future, we are passionate about creating a brighter, more sustainable future for everyone.



Forum for the Future is a global sustainability non-profit who work with others to solve tricky global challenges. We share what we've learned so that others can benefit – and act.

Working with pioneering partners, we transform the essential systems of food, energy and finance to secure a more fulfilling life for us and future generations.

[www.forumforthefuture.org](http://www.forumforthefuture.org)

*What are the drivers for the UN to be more sustainable in its operations? What would a sustainable United Nations look like? And what are the anticipated benefits of being more sustainable? These are just a few of the questions that were put to the heads of 20 UN organizations as part of an innovative project to create a shared vision of a sustainable UN. So come with us on a voyage of discovery to the year 2020...*

**To know more, consult:**  
[www.greeningtheblue.org](http://www.greeningtheblue.org)

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