



# The UN80 Reform Initiative: Why, How, and For Whom?

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### SYNOPSIS

*The United Nations stands at a critical juncture as it approaches its 80th anniversary. A reform initiative, “UN80”, signals a bold ambition to address inefficiencies, mandate overlaps, and structural fragmentation within the system. These challenges could not be more consequential than for humanitarian assistance and disaster response, where clarity, coordination and efficiency are of utmost importance.*

### COMMENTARY

An initiative to reform the United Nations, “UN80”, lays out urgent, system-wide reforms to make the United Nations more “effective, nimble, and fit for the challenges of today and tomorrow”. The initiative builds on the outcome of the Summit of the Future 2024 – the Pact for the Future – that laid out the vision and priorities for the much-needed change to the system. [Facing mounting internal and external pressures](#), ranging from financial constraints to the growing complexity of crises, the initiative presents a pivotal opportunity to revitalise the UN system.

The initiative is structured around three priority areas for action: identifying inefficiencies and improvements under current arrangements; mandating implementation review; and considering the need for structural changes. In a push to advance reform and as part of a broader [“humanitarian reset” that rethinks and restructures the entire humanitarian system](#), UN Secretary-General António Guterres established seven thematic clusters. Among them is the Humanitarian Cluster coordinated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration, to reform UN humanitarian operations.

Considering UN80's priorities, it is increasingly apparent that the expectations for the United Nations' humanitarian mandate will be to do more with less. This raises serious challenges. A leaner response capacity risks sidelining crucial aspects of humanitarian effectiveness that are built upon context-specific and specialised responses. While expected to address operational inefficiencies, this streamlining of humanitarian operations could also regress to recentralisation, where decision-making is concentrated within a few agencies. This means the UN humanitarian system reverts to a previous version of itself, which may no longer be fit for purpose in responding to the scale and complexity of present and future humanitarian crises. Streamlining humanitarian action without addressing these power asymmetries risks replicating [dysfunctions in the humanitarian system](#), such as tokenistic aid and non-inclusion of crisis-affected people.

Whether UN80 leads to the transformation Secretary-General Guterres hopes to see or merely reshuffles inefficiencies within the system will depend on how these reforms prioritise [decentralisation, inclusion, and local ownership, which are crucial for an effective response](#). Without tackling the deeper, systemic issues, UN80 risks becoming a missed opportunity.

### **A Cautious View**

While the UN80 reform initiative is ambitious in its intent to streamline and modernise the humanitarian system, it also raises important questions about the potential for recentralisation. Concentrating decision-making authority within a smaller number of agencies, particularly amid a period of [budgetary constraints](#), could undermine the local and field-level actors that have been regarded as [key to providing an effective humanitarian response](#). Recentralisation could take decision-making away from where a crisis occurs and lead to slower responses. It could [exclude local actors and affected communities from meaningful participation](#) and lead to a response that is not reflective of actual needs on the ground. Not to mention that [centralising authority introduces operational bottlenecks](#), as all decisions would go through the same group of agencies or individuals.

Efforts to reduce inefficiencies could unintentionally promote a one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks the complex, overlapping realities present in humanitarian contexts. It is worth noting that the introduction of the UN Cluster System in 2005 aimed to develop [sectoral leadership based on agency expertise](#) to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Ironically, in seeking to streamline, the reform risks imposing uniformity where and when flexibility and contextual appropriateness are required, diminishing the hard-fought progress made earlier in humanitarian response. Ultimately, reforms that prioritise administrative or operational efficiency over response effectiveness risk exacerbating the crises they aim to resolve.

### **An Optimistic View**

While no reform comes without risk – and in the case of the United Nations, a reform with particularly high stakes – recentralisation can also be viewed as potentially yielding positive impacts if approached strategically. A well-designed and executed recentralisation can pave the way for eventual decentralisation. A streamlined humanitarian system would entail eliminating middle layers of bureaucracy, clarifying

roles across agencies, addressing duplicative mandates, and empowering local and field actors to lead on the ground.

Introduced shortly before the launch of UN80, the [Humanitarian Reset](#) by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher, reflects a growing recognition of the urgency to reform the humanitarian system. While its focus is on operational shortcomings, strategic alignment with the objectives of UN80 could help build momentum in its efforts to drive long-term impact. The shared priorities of the two initiatives (identifying inefficiencies, reviewing mandates, and strategically realigning programmes) underscore the need for reform. This combined push signals the UN leadership being on the same page – a step in the right direction.

Past efforts, such as [pooled funds](#) to support collective outcomes, have encouraged inter-agency collaboration, and they offer valuable lessons for UN80. One specific example is the [Myanmar Humanitarian Fund \(MHF\)](#). Established in 2007, the MHF model [brings services closer to the people and empowers national humanitarian partners](#). As a [rapid and flexible funding mechanism](#), the MHF demonstrates how pooled funding can cut bureaucracy (less overhead costs), strengthen local leadership and speed up aid delivery (by [shifting decision-making closer to humanitarian needs](#)). This directly aligns with commitments made under the Grand Bargain, a 2016 agreement between donors and humanitarian organisations aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, including a stronger focus on localisation. Models like the MHF provide the UN80 initiative with tangible evidence that reform can deliver both greater operational efficiency and deeper localisation in humanitarian action.

While calls to rebalance the power dynamics between headquarters and field operations are not new, past reforms have often fallen short. Notably, the Grand Bargain [has not delivered the intended impact](#) for localisation. UN80 represents a renewed opportunity to enable more locally led and community-informed humanitarian responses that leverage the system-wide strength and resources of the United Nations.



UN80 provides a renewed opportunity to empower local, community-led humanitarian responses that leverage the United Nations' system-wide strength and resources.

*Image source: Unsplash.*

## The True Challenge

As the UN80 reform initiative moves forward, the bigger question is not whether the system will transform but whether the transformation will be impactful; the reasons for reform have long been known, but impactful reform remains elusive. The convergence

of mounting pressures may finally provide the necessary momentum to break [longstanding resistance to change](#) and push reform forward.

Reform cannot be reduced to mere administrative, operational, or institutional repackaging or reorganisation. For the UN80 reform initiative to be meaningful, it must be driven by a clear purpose, the “why”, focused on addressing systemic issues. It must be shaped by inclusive processes, the “how”, by including the crisis-affected in relief systems. And it must be grounded in partnerships, the “for whom”, with those who work closest to the crises on the ground.

The reform must not just improve policy and operational coherence or resource utilisation. The measure of success lies in whether change is felt on the ground, in crisis zones, and in the lives of the vulnerable populations, where it matters most.

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