



# Chief Executives Board for Coordination

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## First regular session of 2025

Helsingør, Denmark, 8 and 9 May 2025

## Summary of deliberations

### I. Introduction

1. The first regular session of 2025 of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), chaired by the Secretary-General, was held at the Marienlyst Strandhotel in Helsingør, Denmark, on 8 and 9 May 2025.
2. The Secretary-General welcomed the Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Anacláudia Rossbach, and the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel, Elinor Hammar skjöld, who were attending a CEB session for the first time.
3. The session consisted of three segments, on the following themes: (a) state of the world; (b) adapting to new realities: leveraging the UN80 Initiative; and (c) upholding respect for international law.

### II. Segment 1: state of the world

4. The Secretary-General presented an overview of the state of the world, reflecting on the current geopolitical landscape and the multiple crises facing the international community and the United Nations system, notably the funding crisis and major challenges to the rules-based international order, deepening global divides and tensions, the growing complexity of conflicts, climate change and unregulated digital technologies. He emphasized the critical role of the United Nations system in upholding the values and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the rule of law, the need to engage with a wide range of actors to maintain the international order, and the importance of implementing internal reforms and supporting broader global reform efforts.
5. In the ensuing discussion, the Board considered global economic trends and prospects, as well as recent developments in the areas of international trade, human rights and humanitarian affairs. Principals also reflected on the impact of geopolitical trends on peace and security, sustainable development and nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Challenges to the rules-based trade system, high levels of debt, combined with limited access to finance, climate threats, demographic changes, digital technologies,



cybercrime and misinformation and disinformation, were identified as major risks that jeopardized the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **III. Segment 2: adapting to new realities: leveraging the UN80 Initiative**

6. Opening the segment, the Secretary-General observed that the eightieth anniversary of the United Nations presented a timely opportunity to deepen efforts to strengthen how the United Nations system delivered on its mandates, with a view to realigning it with today's global realities, building on his earlier reform initiatives to strengthen effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. While budgetary constraints added urgency to those efforts, he stressed that reform needed to be guided by a strategic, long-term vision. The Secretary-General had established a UN80 Initiative Task Force to produce a set of recommendations to that end. Without prejudging its conclusions, he offered some reflections on the path towards effective reform, seeking reactions from CEB members.

7. He outlined a vision of a possibly smaller, but more coherent, efficient and effective United Nations, capable of delivering better results at less cost for the people it serves, while at the same time preserving the diversity of its workforce. He aimed to move swiftly on the three UN80 workstreams: (a) identifying efficiencies within current arrangements in the United Nations Secretariat with the aim of achieving meaningful reductions in the overall budget level, including through reductions in posts; (b) reviewing the implementation of mandates, starting with the Secretariat, with a view to optimizing delivery; and (c) assessing the need for structural changes and programme realignment across the United Nations system to improve results for the people it serves.

8. The Secretary-General proposed the establishment of thematic clusters to explore ways to improve coherence, increase impact and improve efficiency in seven areas.<sup>1</sup> Opportunities for structural changes and programme realignments would be closely related to the outcomes of the workstream on mandate review and any related decisions taken by Member States in that regard. The Secretariat and other United Nations system entities would necessarily proceed to implement reform initiatives in accordance with their respective legal regimes and governance arrangements.

9. The Chair of the UN80 Initiative Task Force, the Under-Secretary-General for Policy, Guy Ryder, offered brief framing remarks in his role as moderator, recalling the context within which the UN80 Initiative was advancing.

10. Speaking as Chair of the High-level Committee on Management, the Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, Catherine Pollard, stated that, at its forty-ninth session, the Committee had recognized the urgency of the moment and committed to move forward together. She provided an overview of operational efficiency measures being explored under the Committee, highlighting proposals in areas such as shared services, finance, procurement, supply chain and human resources. Those efforts, she assured, would complement the work of the UN80 Task Force's working group on efficiency and cost reductions in the management and operations of the Secretariat, which she also chaired. She emphasized that decisions on resources and funding must ultimately be strategic and could not be taken in isolation from the discussions on opportunities for programmatic realignment and without assessing the impact on the people the United Nations serves.

<sup>1</sup> Peace and security, development (United Nations Secretariat), development (United Nations system), humanitarian, human rights, training and research, and specialized agencies.

11. Stressing the imperative of upholding the principles and values of the United Nations, the Chair of the High-level Committee on Management also noted that the Committee was developing a set of common principles applicable to contribution agreements, grounded in the legal framework of the United Nations. Those principles would facilitate more structured, strategic and consistent engagement with donors. The Committee had also established a rapid response mechanism to address donor conditionalities in real time, through systematic information-sharing, coordinated responses and collective engagement with donors.

12. In her role as Chair of the UN80 working group on efficiency and cost reductions, the Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance reported that the group was focusing on opportunities in the Secretariat to consolidate and rationalize administrative services in high-cost duty stations and to shift administrative functions to lower-cost locations. While operational efficiency gains were important, she observed that significant budget reductions would only come from the consolidation of structures that resulted in fewer posts.

13. The Chair of the High-level Committee on Programmes, the Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, recalled that, at its forty-ninth session, the Committee had acknowledged a general cooling effect among donors and growing pressure on United Nations system entities to focus on their core mandates. She underscored that Committee members saw an opportunity for organizations to work more efficiently and in a more integrated manner, and to become more agile, client-oriented and technology savvy. At the same time, they felt that programmatic requirements needed to guide actions to enhance efficiency and reduce costs. Moreover, Committee members were united in their commitment to protect and uphold the norms and values of the United Nations, and felt it was important to enhance advocacy in that regard.

14. In the ensuing discussion, CEB members expressed appreciation to the Secretary-General for providing a sense of direction and ambition in the present context. They agreed that current realities presented an opportunity to be seized and that the UN80 Initiative provided a chance to set out a bold, strategic and forward-looking vision for the United Nations. Members felt it was necessary for the UN80 Initiative proposals to reaffirm and embody the principles and values enshrined in the Charter and other foundational documents. There was widespread recognition that the desired reform would succeed only with political support from Member States, particularly on mandate rationalization, structural change and multilateral funding modalities. Strengthened engagement with governing bodies was needed to ensure intergovernmental ownership of reform processes.

15. Members welcomed the efforts within the High-level Committee on Management to jointly pursue efficiencies and shared services, including on procurement, information technology, treasury and other administrative functions. In assessing the opportunities, a variety of factors needed to be considered, such as the potential for economies of scale, the cost benefit for organizations and the ability to maintain service quality. Data-sharing within the United Nations system was identified as another area to explore for potential efficiencies. Opportunities to innovate and improve service delivery by leveraging modern tools and strengthening inter-agency partnerships in the field were also highlighted.

16. The Board recognized the need for the United Nations system to demonstrate readiness to streamline mandates for enhanced effectiveness, at the same time taking into consideration the unique roles of and technical expertise within the varied United Nations system organizations. A complementary, transparent, Member State-led review to identify obsolete and overlapping mandates would enable structural change, programme realignment and more strategic programme delivery.

17. Members saw value in the Secretary-General's proposal for clustering, viewing it as a practical way to identify opportunities to strengthen coordination and integration, reduce duplication and realign structures for coherence and synergy in a manner aimed at avoiding fragmentation and creating incentives for collaboration. It was stressed that structural consolidation must not weaken the ability of the United Nations to deliver on its mandates, particularly in the human rights and development pillars, nor should it lead organizations to compromise on core values. Rather, any consolidation must be strategic and prioritize the needs of the people that depend on the United Nations.

18. There was widespread support for a stronger, more strategic communications approach to articulate – both internally and externally – the purpose, plan and potential impact of the UN80 Initiative reforms. A proactive communications strategy targeting Member States, partners and the public was needed to improve transparency about changes that had already been implemented, as well as those to come. The importance of open communication with staff was stressed.

19. In the inter-agency context, CEB members were informed of progress on the humanitarian reset advancing under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. As part of the process, members were considering ways to renew the humanitarian sector, including exploring changes such as new financing models and shared delivery platforms, with an expectation to end up smaller and closer to the people the humanitarian system serves. Simultaneously, the United Nations Communications Group was working on a strategy to manage misinformation and disinformation, motivate a broader range of actors and mobilize surrogates to amplify communications. In addition, the United Nations Legal Advisers Network was preparing to collaborate to ensure that reform proposals would be based correctly on the underlying legal processes of the relevant decision-making bodies.

20. In his concluding remarks, the Secretary-General reiterated the necessity of pursuing reforms with strategic and principled ambition, emphasizing that the UN80 Initiative presented a historic opportunity to reshape the United Nations to be more unified, responsive, efficient and effective. He underscored the need to ensure that limited resources were used to maximize value and impact for the people the United Nations serves. At the same time, streamlining efforts must preserve workforce diversity and protect core values, such as inclusion.

21. Noting a general convergence of perspectives among members, the Secretary-General urged the leads of the thematic clusters to systematically engage and guide relevant United Nations system organizations to develop concrete proposals – including on structural integration, co-location of services and mandate rationalization – with the aim of streamlining efforts and maximizing synergies for improved effectiveness. Given the operational complexity and legal heterogeneity across the United Nations system, the Secretary-General recognized the need for differentiated implementation paths while maintaining common reform objectives. In closing, he acknowledged the sense of collective determination and shared responsibility expressed by Board members, as well as their resolve to strengthen the United Nations system and their commitment to put forward concrete and ambitious proposals for a renewed United Nations for the consideration of Member States.

#### **IV. Segment 3: upholding respect for international law**

22. In introducing the segment, the Secretary-General emphasized the importance of the topic and the timeliness of the discussion. He reflected on how adherence to international law had changed over the decades and how respect for international law underpinned multilateralism and the work of multilateral institutions. For example,

as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, he had experienced a time when both developed and developing countries expressed a strong commitment to respecting international refugee law, which facilitated large-scale refugee resettlement programmes. The situation today was very different. Member State actions and reactions to global events over the past few years were indicative of the degradation of their respect for international law and, by implication, the value they assigned to international law as a feature of international relations. Consequently, the United Nations as a multilateral institution was negatively affected by systematic violations of international law and lacked the capacity to overcome the difficulties created by such violations, while public opinion expected it to do more. The Secretary-General affirmed that the deterioration of universal respect for international law was one of the most concerning challenges facing the world today, and that the moment required strong and vocal institutional commitment by the United Nations system to the values and principles of the Charter and for the championing of international law across the board.

23. The moderator for the segment, the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, Melissa Fleming, expressed concern about the growing disregard for international law, particularly humanitarian and human rights law, and the dramatic increase in impunity, lack of accountability and human rights violations. She highlighted linkages to the risks presented by the phenomenon of misinformation and disinformation that undermined trust in institutions and disrupted social cohesion. International bodies such as the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice were particularly vulnerable to false narratives as their authority and credibility depended on perceived legitimacy and fairness. In recent years, intense disinformation campaigns had undermined public trust in the Courts' proceedings, accusing them of bias and discrediting judges, prosecutors and witnesses. The moderator introduced the segment's objectives as twofold: (a) to consider the main threats to international law and its underlying principles, as well as opportunities and strategies for bringing the United Nations system together around upholding respect for international law and the rules-based international order; and (b) to discuss ways in which the United Nations system could come together to promote respect for international law and effectively safeguard United Nations values and principles, including through bilateral engagements and public outreach.

24. The Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel opened the discussion by warning of the cumulative effect of the selective application of international law, which not only weakened the authority of the United Nations but also eroded the credibility of the multilateral system as a whole. She identified four priorities for the United Nations system to promote international law in the current context: (a) to consistently reference applicable international laws and norms in official statements and remind Member States of the obligations to which they had agreed, such as those in the Pact for the Future; (b) to consistently defend the interests of the United Nations and its privileges and immunities; (c) to consistently reference the international law underpinning key global challenges, such as climate change and artificial intelligence, in United Nations messaging; and (d) to consistently abide by international laws, standards, rules and regulations in all spheres of operations, including the universal application of privileges and immunities in host country agreements and the principle of non-discrimination in donor agreements.

25. The Legal Counsel emphasized the importance of using the legal toolbox to protect the United Nations, noting that growing litigation required a stronger defence of United Nations privileges and immunities and that concessions in host country agreements could undermine legal protections across the system. She cautioned against compromising on norms under external funding conditions and stressed that internal consistency in the United Nations was essential to maintaining legal credibility.

The United Nations system should also defend existing legal frameworks and engage in shaping new ones, including in areas such as climate change and artificial intelligence. The Legal Counsel reminded the Board that many existing legal frameworks regulating everyday operations, such as maritime law, were working well and that there were encouraging examples of Member States using international law to address global problems. These included the signing of a new convention on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, the entry into force of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction and ongoing efforts to establish a convention on crimes against humanity. In this context, the Legal Counsel urged entities to contribute to emerging legal discourse without weakening current standards, and to this end she called for enhanced legal literacy across the system, stronger coordination among in-house lawyers through legal networks and the mainstreaming of international law as a strategic enabler in all United Nations engagements.

26. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, complemented the Legal Counsel's introduction by recalling the history of international law alongside the evolution of sovereignty and individual rights. He recalled the roots of international human rights law against the backdrop of global labour rights, feminist, anti-slavery and anti-apartheid movements and noted that there were now nine core instruments of international human rights law, with accompanying institutional frameworks to guarantee norm compliance. Highlighting the role of the United Nations in this regard, the High Commissioner emphasized the importance of denouncing violations of international law to prevent the erosion of norms, for the absence of strong reactions against non-compliance could allow new interpretations of the law to emerge. He underlined the importance of impartiality and universality in the application of human rights, stressing that accusations of double standards and selectivity were often used to avoid scrutiny and must be addressed by maintaining principled consistency across all issues in all country contexts. Public statements on non-compliance often provided entry points for bilateral engagement and opportunities for improvement. The High Commissioner elaborated on different levels of non-compliance, ranging from partial implementation and non-implementation to withdrawal from legal instruments. He expressed deep concern that the latter was gaining popularity, citing withdrawals from the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction as a recent example. He also noted that the absence of adequate human rights protections in legal frameworks governing emerging issues, such as cybercrime, risked further human rights violations.

27. In the discussion, members stressed the importance of universality in the application of international law and human rights, both internally within the United Nations system and at the multilateral level. They shared examples of how they had used international law in support of operations and discussed worrisome as well as positive trends as they looked towards the future. At the normative level, members underscored the indivisibility of human rights and noted that in some contexts the promotion of civil rights was perceived as being at the expense of economic, social and cultural rights, so careful messaging was needed to tackle misinterpretations. Some Board members cautioned that the legitimacy of Member States' buy-in at the time of signing international agreements might not always be as strong as is commonly assumed due to geopolitical power dynamics, and that some Member States also claimed that the conditions that made the agreements universally acceptable had changed over time. CEB members also noted the contradictory behaviour by some Member States, which upheld international law when addressing political rivals but remained silent over non-compliance by their allies, risking the

credibility of the international rules-based order. In this regard, clearer messaging explaining the distinction between the actions and responsibilities of Member States and those of the United Nations system was also recommended.

28. At the organizational level, the Board highlighted the constitutive role of international law in the creation and evolution of the United Nations system, starting with the Charter, and stressed that defending international law was an existential issue as the work of the United Nations and international law were intimately intertwined. For example, the United Nations played a central role in the development of international environmental law, from mobilizing political will to convening Member States and supporting the implementation of agreed norms such as the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the various treaties that followed. United Nations human rights frameworks were also integral to multilateral peace and security. Without human rights monitoring there would be limited verifiable data documenting realities on the ground affecting the basis for Member States' discussions. Crucial Security Council mandates such as the protection of civilians and the protection of children in armed conflict would not be implemented without the human rights components of United Nations missions and country teams. Members also highlighted the crucial role of the United Nations system in upholding international laws and standards at the multilateral level, such as through public statements, the deployment of expertise in support of international courts and tribunals and the sharing of expert notes on populations at risk, such as the recent guidelines on the protection of seafarers in foreign jurisdictions.

29. At the national level, members highlighted the legal underpinnings of United Nations programmes, such as the application of international humanitarian law in the protection of displaced persons and asylum-seekers through rigorous status determination and inter-agency protocols and the use of Human Rights Council universal periodic reviews to guide United Nations country team needs assessments and programming. They further highlighted the increasing use of legal frameworks to mitigate political interference. References to human rights, gender equality, climate and the Sustainable Development Goals were increasingly targeted in funding agreements and strategic plans, and the legal foundations of United Nations programming were often used as a practical way of defending United Nations values and mandates while also protecting and promoting international law. It was noted that in reaffirming the universality of international law, the United Nations, as the custodian of the international rules-based order, should always act with critical reflection on how it can best uphold and apply international norms and standards within its own operations. Other potential system-wide means of addressing negative trends were highlighted, such as the need for greater inter-agency solidarity and cooperation to defend institutional mandates, particularly when the principal mandate-holding entity faces operational challenges. Greater system-wide effort to engage local populations and build alliances with social movements and communities that defend United Nations values was also recommended.

30. Looking to the future, members expressed concern over the capacity of the United Nations to defend international law if its security and other essential services were reduced due to financial cuts, noting also that the political and security vacuum after mission withdrawals often led to an increase in violations. In this regard, members discussed the need to forge strong partnerships with each other and with regional and other international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. They also discussed the need to engage the private sector in shaping legal frameworks on the environment, artificial intelligence and autonomous technologies to avoid unilateral or exclusive norm-setting, and recommended more collective engagement with multilateral legal and technical standard bodies to ensure that emerging rules were inclusive and reflected public interest. At the normative

level, it was noted that legal accountability in climate action was rising, with the increased use of strategic litigation at the national and global levels, leading to emerging norms and greater enforceability of commitments on climate (such as recent developments on “ecocide” and the rights of nature, and the adoption of a regional treaty protecting the rights of environmental human rights defenders).

31. In concluding, the Legal Counsel emphasized the importance of identifying the United Nations system as one that defends international law and human rights, and that this should be part of the discussions about its future. She highlighted the relatively high degree of ownership over international laws and norms at the local level by civil society, young people and the business community, as well as at the international level by Member States. For example, over 90 Member States had brought a case on climate justice to the International Court of Justice, marking its largest ever hearing. The challenge facing the international rules-based order was therefore less about Member States questioning their degree of ownership and more about selective bias as to when and how international laws were to be applied. The High Commissioner for Human Rights concurred, adding there was also a high degree of ownership over human rights by the global South. Both presenters offered their support to the United Nations system in the drafting of public messaging and bilateral agreements so that they better reflected and promoted international law. At the programmatic level, the United Nations Legal Advisers Network could be leveraged to provide real-time support to United Nations country teams, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, together with the Office of Legal Affairs, could hold strategic dialogues with other entities to explore the legal and human rights dimensions of their mandates and ways to advocate for greater accountability in that regard.

32. Concluding the segment, the Secretary-General emphasized that there was strong consensus among Board members that defending international law was an essential tenet of the United Nations system, and he commended their commitment to using all instruments at their disposal to promote international law and advocate for compliance. The values of the Charter and the universal application of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and the treaties established under the auspices of the United Nations were resolutely essential for the orderly organization of the international community.

## **V. Other matters**

### **A. Tributes to Board members**

33. The Secretary-General paid tribute to the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, Natalia Kanem, and the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Achim Steiner, who were attending a CEB session for the last time.

### **B. Endorsement of documents**

34. The report of the High-level Committee on Programmes on its forty-ninth session ([CEB/2025/4](#)) and the report of the High-level Committee on Management on its forty-ninth session ([CEB/2025/3](#)) were endorsed electronically outside the CEB session.



**C. Date and venue of the forthcoming session**

35. The Board members were informed that the second regular session of 2025 would be held in New York on 30 and 31 October.

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