Bridging Global Mandates and Local Realities: Intermediary Clusters and Interorganizational Collaboration for International Development

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ABSTRACT

Addressing international sustainable development is an urgent and critical challenge. Existing research has focused on the role of individual intermediary organizations in supporting and shaping inclusive local markets to enhance development. However, it has overlooked how clusters of organizations act as intermediaries to build development capacity, and how they do so through local public institutions. This study focuses on the United Nations (UN) system and examines a specific transnational governance arrangement (Delivering as One) that envisioned the creation of local clusters of UN organizations to facilitate institutional capacity-building in developing countries. By comparing the evolution of the eight pilot UN arrangements, we distil a model of how intermediary clusters facilitate local capacity-building through a process of contextual bridging driven by interorganizational collaboration within the cluster. Our findings identify four mechanisms of contextual bridging. The first two—functional amalgamation of operations and development of a cohesive collective voice—strengthened internal collaboration among cluster members; subsequently, sharing authority with local stakeholders and the local calibration of interorganizational collaboration (IOC) allowed the entrenchment of IOC into the local context. Our work contributes to the literature on interorganizational collaboration and transnational governance in the face of global challenges.

Keywords: International relations, Public sector and administration, Comparative case study, Longitudinal qualitative, Inter-organizational collaboration, International development, Transnational governance, Capacity-building

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INTRODUCTION

Addressing grand challenges—complex, large-scale problems that cross global boundaries—requires coordinated and collaborative efforts (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). One critical area requiring such collaboration is international development, a multidimensional effort to improve the global quality of life (UN General Assembly, 1997). Emerging from post-World War II reconstruction (Hjerthom & White, 2000), international development has evolved into a dynamic space where public, private, and third-sector organizations converge (Canales, Bradbury, Sheldon, & Cannon, 2024) to build capacity in underdeveloped regions. These efforts, ranging from local initiatives to multilateral engagements, frequently involve international governmental organizations (IGOs) as key players who navigate significant operational and political challenges (Lake, Martin, & Risse, 2021).

Unlike non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can interact directly with communities, IGOs, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, typically engage host governments in capacity-building initiatives, requiring a nuanced approach to interorganizational collaboration (IOC) (Gray, 1989; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). Implementing global standards, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, demands that these organizations skilfully adjust their strategies to local contexts (e.g. Djelic & Quack, 2010; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Jacobsson, 2006). While research has examined how individual intermediary organizations bridge global initiatives with local realities (Mair & Marti, 2009; McKague, Zietsma, & Oliver, 2015), less attention has been paid to how clusters of organizations—what we term 'intermediary clusters'—engage in these efforts.

Our study examines a UN transnational reform aimed at creating local clusters of UN agencies to enhance institutional capacity in developing countries (Mele & Cappellaro, 2018). Through an extensive analysis of 115 interviews and over 700 documents, we investigated eight pilot UN clusters in Albania,

Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Vietnam from 2007 to 2015. By comparing more effective cases with those that were less effective, we uncover the dynamics involved in strengthening institutions and development interventions in host countries.

Our findings reveal four key mechanisms facilitating locally owned capacity-building through intermediary clusters. First, the functional amalgamation of operations across UN agencies streamlines processes and creates a unified approach when interacting with host countries. Second, developing a cohesive collective voice within the cluster strengthens internal collaboration, aligning member organisations and fostering trust with local stakeholders. Third, sharing authority with local stakeholders ensures that interventions are relevant and aligned with local needs, fostering ownership and sustainability. Finally, local calibration of interorganizational collaboration allows clusters to tailor their strategies to the unique political, social, and economic conditions of the host environment, embedding their efforts more effectively.

The findings contribute to the debate on interorganizational collaboration and transnational governance in the face of global challenges by elaborating on the role of intermediary clusters in local development. We embrace a perspective on interorganizational collaboration as a multifaceted process characterized by strategic fine-tuning to the unique demands of local contexts (Gray, 1989; Hardy et al., 2005). We address the call to move beyond market-focused interventions (Bothello, Nason, & Schnyder, 2019; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006), and we focus on contextual bridging among multiple organizations aimed at building capacity through public institutions, a necessary component of sustainable development. The comparative research design allows us to identify the mechanisms of action of such clusters and show how they are based on a bundling of inward (intracluster) and outward-looking (relationship between the cluster and local stakeholders) strategies. These move from mitigating internal turf conflicts by employing local expertise as a criterion to prioritize interventions, leveraging global expertise to build trust with host governments, absorbing the transaction costs of coordinating

diverse international actors and carving out the role of neutral intermediary between the country and international donors.

By showing how a common template for interorganizational collaboration is adapted across different settings, we provide deeper insights into the balance between repetition and adaptation in transnational governance. This has important implications for understanding the effectiveness of international aid. Rather than assuming that cooperative relationships are automatic, our findings underscore the importance of carefully aligning the interests and strategies of international organizations with those of host governments (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010). Creating a trust-based relationship with governments enables intermediary clusters to advocate effectively for the design of policies on sensitive political issues.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Interorganizational collaboration as a form of transnational governance

Most of our current societal problems, from extreme poverty and migration to climate change, are considered grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015). Among the most distinctive features of these challenges is that they span national boundaries and are characterized by interdependencies.

Consequently, spheres of economic and social life that used to be regulated under the compass of national institutions cannot be effectively tackled through individual state-centred approaches alone and are increasingly directed and orchestrated through transnational forms of governance. Transitional arrangements transcend the capacity and powers of states and include a variety of public, private and hybrid organizations (Cappellaro, Compagni, & Dacin, 2024; Perobelli, Cappellaro, & Saporito, 2024). Furthermore, the interdependent character of grand challenges requires interorganizational collaboration (IOC), a pervasive arrangement beyond the hierarchy–market dichotomy (Gray, 1989; Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2022; Hibbert & Huxham, 2010) whose main currency is the diversity that members bring to the fore—often a combination of their institutional nature, expertise and perspectives.

Thus, transnational governance and IOC are inextricably linked. Clusters of organizations (Jacobsson, 2006) coalesce around a policy issue based on their familiarity with it (Gray, 1989; Hardy & Phillips, 1998) and strive to achieve change by developing collaborative solutions (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Maguire & Hardy, 2005) and exert authority on states based on expertise rather than hierarchal superiority.

Internally, these clusters need to align the visions and activities of the members. At the same time, externally, they govern by drawing from a toolbox that rarely includes command and control measures and instead privileges orchestration (Abbott & Snidal, 2000) and global standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2002; Djelic & Den Hond, 2014; Kerwer, 2005). Governance arrangements, often in the form of groups of international governmental or non-governmental organizations, define the parameters or scripts within which states operate (Jacobsson, 2006). They then deploy various tactics, such as holding consultations and summits, indicators and relying on rankings and peer reviews to engage governments (Kruck & Zangl, 2019) and create a common orientation and shared direction. Often, reliance on soft forms of governing is the only option for international organizations when states are unwilling to approve or follow more coercive transnational rules (Baccaro & Mele, 2011, 2012; Mele & Schepers, 2013).

Because international orchestrators distil scripts from their experience across time and space, they sometimes lean towards a one-size-fits-all approach (Börzel, Pamuk, & Stahn, 2008; Rodrik, 2001) that prioritizes repetition over contextual adaptation. However, states are embedded in and contribute to shaping transnational dynamics—that is, they modify, appropriate and sometimes reject the scripts (Djelic, 1998; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Jacobsson, 2006; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Understanding these dynamics is essential because the effectiveness of transnational governance relies on organizations' abilities to collaborate and adapt to the unique characteristics of local contexts. The specificities of the local places as carriers of meaning and localized interactions (Dacin, Zilber, Cartel, & Kibler, 2024) are crucial in determining the impact and success of global initiatives (Djelic & Quack,

2010). We posit that one promising way to explore how transnational arrangements aimed at building capacity in developing countries are enacted in local contexts is by drawing from studies on institutional voids and, more precisely, contextual bridging.

Institutional voids and contextual bridging

Studies on institutional voids have initially focused on the hurdles faced by multinational companies in emerging economies, conceived as settings where private actors willing to operate in foreign countries have to fill gaps left by missing institutions or fix dysfunctional ones—that is, institutional voids (see Fisman & Khanna, 2004; Khanna & Palepu, 2010; Webb, Khoury, & Hitt, 2020). This view of institutional voids has attracted criticism not only for its more or less implicit derogatory conception of non-Western countries but also for its failure to account for alternative institutional forms, such as informal networks and exchanges, which in different contexts represent the backbone of local markets (Bothello et al., 2019).

A strand of research that is more cognizant of the peculiarities of different social and economic landscapes has further explored the concept and dynamics around institutional voids, conceived of as spaces characterized by institutional plurality (Mair et al., 2012). These studies maintain that there are contexts in which institutional arrangements do not result in well-functioning markets. However, rather than proposing voids as the absence of specific institutions, they argue that voids emerge from the contradictions among spheres that are particularly incoherent (Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021), such as political, community and religious spheres in the study of Mair et al. (2012). The analysis of market limitations—and how to overcome them—is broadened to include societal consequences—the exclusion of specific groups, often women, from participating in market activities along the value chain. Set in the empirical context of developing economies, such as Bangladesh (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2012; McKague et al., 2015), India (Venkataraman et al., 2016) and Ethiopia (van Wijk et al. 2020), these studies refer to extreme resource constraints and affirm the need to alleviate poverty and empower

neglected segments of the population. The trajectory of the cases analysed mostly follows the process through which an exogenous actor, an NGO that has gained experience abroad or in other parts of the country, acts as an institutional entrepreneur who moulds the local market into a more inclusive one.

This research strand acknowledges that international NGOs do not operate in a vacuum. They strengthen existing local institutions by inviting and giving voice to new actors, reconciling conflicting interests, finding a common denominator, and bridging perspectives and purposes embedded in different formal and informal structures. As vividly put by Mair and colleagues, 'Regardless of how efficient a particular organizational arrangement has proven itself in a specific context, the efficacy and impact of that same institutional assembly will likely vary in a different context' (2012, p. 820). Therefore, NGOs work as intermediary organizations whose success in dealing with institutional voids hinges on their ability to know, understand and interact with the local context while implementing standardized solutions.

Some scholars point to how intermediary organizations determined to deal with institutional voids and bring about social change must function as *bricoleurs* who mix the practices they developed through their experience over the years with local practices (Mair & Marti, 2009). Others emphasize the ability of intermediary organizations to deal with institutional voids by shaping a social space in which local participants negotiate new relationships and standards of production. Intermediaries do so through contextual bridging—that is, by importing principles and practices adapted to the specific context, facilitating the exchange between and the establishment of ties among participants in the value chain and supporting experimentation with new market practices (McKague et al., 2015; Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016). Similarly, they employ distinct strategic approaches that change existing institutional arrangements, create new social structures, and enable the participation of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Venkataraman et al., 2016). When intermediary organizations fail to recognize and manage the recursive synergy between standardized interventions and the local context

(van Wijk et al., 2020), their solutions only temporarily fill institutional voids and do not endure after they exit.

In sum, through their focus on contextual bridging, studies on institutional voids offer crucial analytical and empirical ammunition to unpack the last mile of enacting transnational governance when intermediary organizations implement solutions on the ground. Recent literature has started to explore how cross-sector collaborations as collective actors perform void bridging (Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021) and point to the role of key individuals in enabling the collaborations. However, concentrating primarily on individual cases provides limited insight into the mechanisms of interorganizational collaboration among clusters of international organizations committed to international development and capacity-building across diverse local settings. We specifically ask: How do clusters of international organizations operating as intermediaries engage in collaboration with local players to bridge their global mandates with local contextual needs in an effort to achieve capacity-building in international development?

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

We studied a specific transnational governance arrangement (e.g. Djelic & Quack, 2010; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006), represented by clusters of different UN organizations that strengthened their interorganizational collaboration to support international sustainable development. In development assistance, UN organizations act as intermediaries (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2012; McKague et al., 2015; Venkataraman et al., 2016; van Wijk et al., 2020) between donor and recipient governments to bridge institutional voids—that is, by building institutional capacity around economic development, social development, and environmental protection in countries where the population is in need.

Institutional capacity is often viewed as a precursor to development. While the meaning and challenges of development have evolved significantly since the adoption of the UN Charter, the core principle that 'no one should be left behind' remains central, as do the core problems of development rooted in a 'mix of exclusion and oppression of people, mismanagement of natural resources, corruption,

governance failures in both the private and public sectors, the lack of decent jobs and opportunities and the frustration and alienation that accompany unemployment' (UN General Assembly Resolution 2016/67/226: 3). Within this framework, building institutional capacity has been a cornerstone of the UN's development strategy.[1] Despite some ambiguity surrounding the concept, its key tenets focus on strengthening public institutions rather than diminishing them (Fukuyama, 2004), endorsing national ownership where governments and communities take responsibility for sustaining development initiatives (Kühl, 2009) and implementing development assistance as an internal process that builds on existing social structures (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010). External actors, particularly donors, through bilateral or multilateral cooperation, are encouraged to support or accelerate existing processes rather than starting from scratch or replacing established social infrastructures (Franks, 1999).

Given this backdrop, two imperatives of the UN sustainable development strategy have been enabling locally owned capacity-building and integrating the operations of UN organizations within countries to avoid unnecessary and costly duplications. These priorities were central to the Delivering as One (DaO) reform, which formed the focus of our study.

Until the early 2000s, each UN system organization whose mandate was related to development operated independently, not only in its headquarters but also in the countries of operations, following its own strategic perspective on building institutional capacity at the local level. Around 2005, political commitment by the international community to achieve shared global development goals and dissatisfaction with such bilateral strategies of UN system organizations led the General Assembly to launch the DaO reform. It was a novel transnational governance collaborative design that exemplified the tensions between replication and adaptation (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Jacobsson, 2006). As

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The relevance of capacity building for sustainable development is confirmed by decisions taken by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development at its fourth (1996), fifth (1997) and sixth (1998) sessions and by the UN General Assembly (1997). More recently, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 17.9 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a target entirely dedicated to capacity building.

far as replication was concerned, a central actor, the UN Development Group (UNDG) orchestrated the establishment of enduring local IOCs among clusters of UN system organizations in a specific developing country, providing a common template of interorganizational collaboration for all local IOCs. UN system organizations operating in the country would form a UN country team under the peer lead of a 'resident coordinator' and develop one common UN strategy based on national priorities that would gradually substitute the individual strategies of UN system organizations, enhancing local ownership and limiting duplications of efforts.

Individual membership in the UN cluster (i.e. the UN country team) was a voluntary decision taken by the autonomous UN system organization, although almost all UN system organizations operating in a country joined as members of the local IOC. Furthermore, the UNDG aimed for a flat, egalitarian structure where all members of the cluster enjoyed equal rights, while a newly established office, led by a resident coordinator, assumed a central coordinating role locally, serving as the 'first among equals'. The UNDG also provided templates for firewalls and codes of conduct to avoid stalemates due to a lack of familiarity among members. Both arrangements were soft agreements, that is, voluntary declarations of intent, whereby each organization committed to work towards shared goals and refrained from individual advocacy or fundraising actions. Regarding adaptation, each member had to agree on common development priorities in the country, incorporating the feedback of the local government when elaborating on a strategic plan to maximise resource and activity interdependencies.

During the pilot phase of the reform from 2007 to 2015, eight local UN clusters were established in Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Vietnam (Campos, 2021; Mele & Cappellaro, 2018). The selection of these pilot countries was based on the willingness of the host national governments to volunteer, combined with the UNDG's decision to test the collaboration in countries that significantly differed in geographical location and development stage. Despite this shared and, to some extent, replicable collaborative design, the eight UN clusters showed differences in

terms of capacity-building, thus allowing us to distil and theorize the different dynamics of inter-organizational collaboration.

METHODS

Our study is based on a comparative case study design of all eight IOC cases, bounded temporally by their setups in 2007 and by the end of the pilot phase in 2015. The DaO reform context and the analytical focus on all eight collaborative UN clusters provide a unique opportunity to address our research question. The eight IOCs, established following the common governance provisions set by the UNDG, reported different perceived outcomes regarding their ability to foster locally owned capacity-building. Such perceived outcomes were not correlated with the initial level of development of the host country. Rather, through our analysis, we could disentangle the role of interorganizational collaboration in achieving locally owned capacity-building.

Data collection

We collected data from multiple sources (see Table I).

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We conducted 115 semi-structured interviews during 2012 and at the end (2018–2019) of the pilot period. We interviewed representatives of the UNDG and other transnational actors (Secretariat, the UN organizations' headquarters, and donor countries) on the reform drivers, the collaboration design, and their role in the process (21 interviews). We then interviewed the members of the local UN clusters—that is, the resident coordinators' offices and the representatives of the member organizations (94 interviews)—in all eight developing countries: Albania (13), Cape Verde (12), Mozambique (14), Pakistan (11), Rwanda (11), Tanzania (11), Uruguay (11) and Vietnam (11). We asked the informants to describe the activities they conducted, the challenges they faced in the collaborative process, the evolving attitudes and feelings towards the country team as a collective and their perceptions of the capacity-building outcomes, making them specifically reflect on the reasons for such perceived outcomes. Except

for three, the interviews were all recorded (1278 pages). In the first wave of our study, we conducted interviews to gather information about events as they occurred in real time. In the second wave, however, we followed established guidelines for collecting retrospective data (Huber & Power, 1985), even though the period between the events and the interviews was relatively short. The interviewees were asked to anonymize not only their personal identities but also the specific UN system organization they represented in the cluster. Therefore, in the findings, we indicate the country teams the interviewees belonged to, but not their specific organizations.

We triangulated the interviews with archival analysis (713 documents). For each local cluster, we analysed its strategic and financial plans and reports, newsletters, strategic communication plans and press releases. We complemented this with more reflexive archival data, such as the sections 'Lessons Learned' and 'Open Issues' of annual reports. We also analysed documents at the UNDG level, including guidelines and documents, legislative policies, and resolutions. Finally, we examined reports and policy briefs issued by external stakeholders, including donor countries, the independent commission for DaO, and government-led independent evaluations of local UN clusters.

Data analysis

After developing a chronological timeline for the DaO reform in the first step, we compiled preliminary tables with descriptive elements of each of the eight UN clusters. Descriptive information included the number and type of UN member organizations participating in the cluster and their history of presence in the country, the financial resources allocated over time to the cluster, the nature and capacity of the coordination office of the resident coordinator, and the evolution in the activities of the cluster in terms of both strategic planning and operations. At this stage, we also collected descriptive information on the developing countries hosting the UN cluster to better assess the nature of the social and economic concerns they faced.

In the second step, we analysed the cases more in depth according to the core outcome of interest—that is, the different degrees of perceived 'institutional void bridging' achieved by each UN cluster by the end of the study period. As elaborated in the theoretical framework, we used locally owned capacity-building as a proxy for institutional void bridging, and we analysed the eight IOCs according to this construct. To assess this, we predominantly considered the voices of the UN cluster members through interviews and archives and, whenever possible, the voices of host governments. Examples of evidence of locally owned capacity-building are a stronger alignment to national priorities, a decrease in the level of duplications, or an increased focus on high-quality upstream and crosscutting policy work. We categorized the eight countries based on such evidence and classified them into two groups: (i) strong evidence of locally owned capacity-building (Tanzania, Vietnam, Mozambique, and Rwanda); (ii) doubtful or little evidence of locally owned capacity-building (Albania, Pakistan, Uruguay, and Cape Verde).

In the third step of our study, we focused on understanding the reasons behind the observed differences in perceived outcomes. At this stage, sensitized by the international development literature, we recognized that the results of capacity-building efforts might vary depending on the developmental context in which these activities took place. While important, we wanted to rule out a simple and univocal context-based explanation. Hence, we cross-tabulated the capacity-building perceived outcomes with the level of development of the country (i.e. the typical proxy to study different development contexts): low- or middle-income countries (Albania, Vietnam, Uruguay and Pakistan) or least-developed countries (Tanzania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Rwanda). Our analysis—summarised in Table I—shows that more and less effective cases were present across country development levels.

The finding that the local context was not the only driver pushed us to further unpack the underlying mechanisms. We constantly compared the more and less effective cases in meta-dimensions that—by triangulating the literature on IOC, transnational governance and institutional void—we

expected to be salient. The first dimension pertained to the dynamics within the UN cluster. We interrogated our data and openly coded any actions, practices and dynamics of interorganizational collaboration that consistently characterized more effective cases. As we moved through the analysis, we noted how such codes broadly referred to strategic planning, leadership and communication strategies. We thus aggregated, discarded and relabelled open codes into five first-order codes, such as 'locating responsibility in thematic working groups' or 'harmonizing communication'. We then further aggregated the first-order codes into two second-order themes that captured the key dynamics of interorganizational collaboration, characterizing the positive cases (functional amalgamation of operations and developing a cohesive collective voice towards the host country). The second meta-dimension pertained to the relationship between the UN cluster and the local context. Again, we were particularly attentive to open-coding the data to identify any action or practice characterizing the more versus less effective cases. Evidence gradually pointed to different sets of practices that, overall, prioritized the active role of government in the collaboration, favoured a brokerage role of the UN cluster, both with donors and with the international community, and leveraged the strength of having multiple members (as opposed to being a single organization) to advocate for sensitive issues or reduce costs of negotiations with the local communities. We aggregated multiple open codes into six first-order ones and further collapsed them into two second-order themes (sharing authority with local stakeholders and local calibration of the purpose of the IOC) (see Figure I).

-- Figure I here --

Finally, we longitudinally arranged the codes pertaining to each mechanism to further unpack the temporal relationships between constructs. It is important to acknowledge that although the local context, such as the level of development, was not the sole influencing factor, it still played a significant role as a mediating variable that heightened the relevance of certain dynamics in specific contexts over others. For example, managing competition was a key dynamic in successful middle-income countries (e.g.

Vietnam), while it played a less relevant role in successful least-developed countries (e.g. Tanzania or Rwanda). Thus, while the broad dynamics conceptualized as both aggregate dimensions and second-order themes pertain to all more effective cases, some first-order codes might be specific to a subgroup of countries, given their common contextual features. We account for this important characteristic of our analytical approach in the narrative.

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed that the more effective UN clusters—those in Tanzania, Rwanda, Vietnam and Mozambique—facilitated locally owned capacity-building through the development and implementation of four key mechanisms of contextual bridging. The first set of mechanisms focused on intracluster dynamics, in which the clusters strengthened internal collaboration by functionally amalgamating operations and creating a cohesive collective voice when interacting with the host government. The second set of mechanisms extended this collaboration to include local stakeholders and was achieved by sharing authority with them and calibrating the purpose of interorganizational collaboration (IOC) to fit the local context. These two sets of mechanisms were interconnected, as the internal cohesion of the cluster was propaedeutic to deeper integration and effectiveness within the local environment. Below, we first describe each mechanism and provide supporting evidence. We then account for the absence or scarcity of evidence in less effective cases (Pakistan, Uruguay, Albania and Cape Verde). See Figure II for the analytical model that emerged from our analysis.

--Figure II here--

Strengthening the IOC to serve the country

The four cases that we considered more effective were able to appropriate the centrally prescribed governance design and adapt it to the needs of local realities. The process of contextual bridging started through two mechanisms aimed at strengthening collaboration among the IGO members of the newly

formed local clusters. At the same time, the process fostered informed interactions with local stakeholders (i.e. host governments, donors and NGOs).

Functional amalgamation of operations. In all four country teams, the IOC did not rely exclusively on the transnational governance design centrally prescribed by the UNDG. Instead, we found that emerging practices and a new approach to leadership based on thematic expertise allowed the team to appropriate the collaboration template and improve functional cohesion—that is, the teams' ability to decide, plan, and speak with a coherent mandate aimed at serving the host country. This was done in two ways. First, our interviewees reported that after a brief initial phase in which planning together was an assemblage of the plans of individual organizations, the IOC started to produce strategies for intervention in the country based on conjoint planning. This shift took time and energy: 'We spent more time that wasn't a zero-based approach' (Interview, Rwanda). However, it became a modus operandi that could not be reversed, where organizations did not even submit their individual plans but had meetings, consultations, and confrontations and then drafted a joint plan together. In other words, planning over time shifted from being a collection of the efforts of individual organizations to a platform for the exchange of solutions, perspectives and targets:

> You see, agencies don't submit their own plans; they come together and discuss and submit a joint plan. And then they come together and discuss what they've done and submit a joint report twice a year, mid-year and at the end. (Interview, Tanzania)

The incremental process that led from assembling individual plans via sharing information and aligning activities to conjoint planning based on the search for synergies and common priorities was vividly captured by one of our informants:

> First, it was simply a 'cut and paste' of putting together the ongoing country programmes; we did eliminate some things, and there was some sort of differentiation, but it was really more a bringing together in a relatively fast and simple manner the ongoing programmes […]. Then it became a way of working: you didn't think anymore that you could just decide to do a programme without consulting other agencies, at least to find out what they were doing, and then it was very much working together and looking for a much more prioritised approach. (Interview, Vietnam)

Second, in all four countries, going beyond the collaboration template provided at the central level, the local teams developed solutions to empower the working groups that coalesced around thematic priorities, ranging from economic development to gender equality. Respondents referred explicitly to a 'shift of power' (Interview, Mozambique) from the heads of individual organizations to the heads of the programme working groups in different domains. Connected to this intentional shift of responsibility, in some countries, the 'performance-based allocation' of funds was calculated and assessed by the group leaders against the contribution of the specific organization to the achievement of such priorities:

> So, they get money because they performed well as a working group, and then within that, as an agency, so there's an incentive there at that level, and there is an interagency performance assessment team that looks at their performance and provides those allocations accordingly. (Interview, Tanzania)

Group leaders were responsible for implementing and reporting activities.

> And the thing is that it is the head of the working group with the team [who] can, or at least should, be able to make decisions on how to move forward to get the implementation of the activities. So, everything was actually interconnected between agencies and between staff of different agencies. The other members of the working group have to report to the head of agencies to say what is happening and what decisions are being made. (Interview, Tanzania)

> *Challenges to the functional amalgamation of operation: Evidence from less effective cases.* We

found two main sources of evidence for the partial or failed achievement of functional amalgamation of the operations in the less effective IOCs. First, respondents pointed out that, although in principle, planning together carried benefits, the joint documents they saw were mostly a ritual sum of individual plans, an exercise that remained 'a little bit bureaucratic' or 'artificial, because if the agencies were not consulting before establishing joint programmes, it would not be a joint programme' (Interview, Uruguay). Even when the joint plan was assembled, this did not necessarily signal that activities were going to be carried out together: 'If different programmes are put under the same outcome or output, it does not mean that we have a real joint programme in the country just because we are simply mentioned in the same section of a report' (Interview, Albania).

Second, critiques questioned the very purpose of a joint plan that, even if well drafted, 'did not have advantages'. The comprehensive nature of these plans displayed limitations: 'It's always a conglomerate, and it needs to be' (Interview, Pakistan). For some respondents, this represented a weakness rather than a strength: 'It is a piece of paper with not much value. Let's say, put cultural heritage, and some economic activity and something on children … all of that in one paper. Nobody in any country would be interested in the reading of such a paper' (Interview, Albania). In addition, respondents mentioned that joint plans remained a requirement for DaO rather than a lived process of confrontation and coalescing around shared objectives. Respondents attributed this to a lack of physical proximity:

> Of course, we have 20 agencies in the UNCT, and most of them are not resident agencies, meaning that these are coordinated by offices in the region, regional offices. Most of them are located in Dakkar, Nairobi and some in Geneva. So that means that due to the lack of presence, physical presence, of these agencies it is difficult to have a day-to-day communication and day-to-day kind of exchange. We are using model tools like Skype or other teleconferences to gather once per month with all of Cape Verde's focal points. (Interview, Cape Verde)

Developing a cohesive collective voice towards the host country. The functional amalgamation of operations was followed by the development of a collective voice that guided the interaction of the UN teams with the local government and the country at large. The establishment of a joint communication unit and securing ad hoc resources 'facilitated the kind of process where you have a more centralised, if you want, or a more coordinated discussion with the government and with the government counterparts' (Interview, Mozambique). The teams also tightly coordinated the presence of each organization on traditional and social media, either by centralizing the communication or by allowing individual organizations to speak individually while cross-referencing their interventions.

> You know, we also then have One UN Facebook, One UN Twitter, you know, all these sorts of things are a joint thing; some agencies also, of course, have their own, but they're linked to each other, they pick it up from each other, and that reinforces the message, you see? (Interview, Rwanda)

Lastly, there was also communication about the UN as a whole in the form of theme days, which were employed to raise awareness about specific policy issues and social problems and celebrate what the UN was doing in the country concerning a specific challenge.

Besides harmonizing communication, a second significant feature of the collaborative arrangement that was not initially planned and emerged as a common practice, although at different points in time, was the decision to speak with one voice towards the different constituencies, as opposed to having a spokesperson for each organization promoting or advocating based on its narrow mandate. The unified spokesperson was deemed particularly effective for issues that interested multiple areas of policy and government:

> I love challenges that are cross-government, things like social protection, access to justice, climate change, all of those issues that are a cross-government challenge. It makes a lot of sense for the UN to speak with one voice; you have more impact and more credibility. (Interview, Vietnam)

There were two primary modalities for implementing this approach. The first modality saw the role of a *super-partes* spokesperson. This role was performed by the resident coordinator and their office—that is, the neutral representative of the UN in the country—after consultation with the organizations involved in the specific programme or policy position being communicated. In the case of multiple commitments or unavailability, the resident coordinator could delegate a single organization, typically to its director. This was the approach pursued in Rwanda, a country where, in the first phase, this more hierarchical approach was deemed necessary by the resident coordinator to curb the 'conflict of interest between shining as an agency and shining as a group' (Interview, Rwanda). This top-down approach, however, became engrained in the routines and came to be recognized as neutral, hence 'fair', by the different organizations: 'The resident coordinator speaks on behalf of all the agencies, but it makes sure it reflects and reviews the ideas of everybody' (Interview, Rwanda). Alternatively, an expertise-based spokesperson was selected to maximize the legitimacy and impact of the message: 'One Voice means on behalf of the UN we have a common voice that can be whoever might be the most credible voice on that

issue' (Interview, Mozambique). Heads of organizations were typically responsible for speaking on substantive areas close to their mandate but were keen on acknowledging and drawing attention to what other organizations were doing in that specific area.

The countries where interorganizational collaboration mostly unleashed its potential referred to the importance of allowing the mandates, approaches, and identities of different organizations to emerge in a coherent yet distinct way. This point is effectively captured by one of our interviewees, who referred to the UN as a fruit salad rather than a soup:

> The reason a fruit salad is nice is because when you taste it, you like to be able to recognize that this is a strawberry, this is a banana, this is, you know, whatever. And I think that's what we want to achieve. To make sure that the various flavours of every specific UN agency are allowed to shine, but of course, in a consistent and coherent manner. I think what we want to avoid is a situation where we end up speaking only about the UN does this, the UN does that, because then, I think, we're not helping to promote the very specificities and the values, the value addition that the UN agency, be they specialized agencies or programmes and funds, can bring to the table. (Interview, Tanzania)

Challenges to the development of a cohesive collective voice with the host country: Evidence from less effective cases. We showed that all eight countries devised joint communication activities over time. However, these activities were less incisive when the communication office performed a rather formal exercise, collecting information from single organizations and pasting it together. Furthermore, some organizations in the country teams interpreted the attempt to harmonize communication and identify a spokesperson as an intrusion into their operational freedom and as a barrier to their ability to speak, especially to the highest levels of the host government:

> The idea here is that only the resident coordinator should discuss with the high level of the government and also ask to be present when the head[s] of agencies discussed with the minister, and of course, I say that I don't see any written paper saying that, as a representative, I would not have a direct relationship with them, including the president. (Interview, Albania)

The perception of a markedly hierarchical approach to speaking with one voice is mirrored in the words of resident coordinators, who asserted the importance of centralizing host government contacts

and the media under their authority and recognizing the support of their local interlocutors in enforcing

this unified approach:

> If there is a UN agency that tries to go straight to the president or they have a mission and are in contact with the foreign minister, the foreign ministry or the presidency will actually phone me and say, 'Should we give them a meeting with the foreign minister? There is this agency that is asking for a meeting with the ministry. Who are they? (Interview, Uruguay)

Similarly, centralizing and harmonizing communication with local stakeholders did not

automatically lead to a shared sense of unity. In Albania and Cape Verde, several respondents referred

to it as a move that thwarted any attempt to display the distinctive features and know-how of the UN, as

exemplified by this quote:

> It was decided that it would be agency-neutral, so suddenly, we were called 'the UN funds and programmes', which nobody really knows what it was about, and it defeated the purpose of putting forward expertise and experience from some solid agencies that in any case our partners are still naming; so our partners were naming them, but we shied away from that which was a complete mistake. (Interview, Cape Verde)

Local entrenching of the IOC

As intracluster collaboration was strengthened, UN country teams moved from interacting with the local

government and stakeholders to incorporating them fully into the IOC. This mechanism—which we label

local entrenching of the IOC—was based on sharing authority with local stakeholders and on local

calibration of the purpose of the IOC.

   Sharing authority with local stakeholders. Over the years, and as collaboration among members

of the UN country teams strengthened in the four pilot countries, the respective local governments were

invited to participate in joint forums with UN organizations, especially those with consulting powers. In

the four countries, this approach was stretched to the point of sharing authority in specific areas with the

host governments: 'So there are formal mechanisms [for] allocations of funding, for discussion of reports

and [for] approval of reports' (Interview, Tanzania). This decision was perceived as a real commitment

to empowering recipients: 'We go a little outside the DaO; that's more like a declaration of the alignment

with government priorities' (Interview, Rwanda). Sharing authority entailed the inclusion of high-level

representatives of the host government, mostly ministers, in the meetings for budget allocation: 'The UN system here decides where it wants to go, together with the government, where it wants to allocate those resources, in terms of prioritisation, and in terms of the likely highest impacts' (Interview, Mozambique).

Informants reported that the inclusion of the host government in selecting projects to be funded also helped to regulate internal competition between organisations, making them more willing to accept decisions on priorities defined directly by users. In the words of an interviewee:

> [The presence of government in the project selection committee] forces us to refine what we are doing in the projects, to make their outputs much clearer and gain faster access to the funds than the projects that are less coherent. So the competition is actually positive competition, because at this point in time you have to fight for a case, for why your project is good, and you have to make your project really stand out, because the projects are not just supported by UNCT; they also have to go through the assessment by the government. So, I would actually say it's positive competition. (Interview, Mozambique)

A second authoritative procedure that involved the host governments was the approval of the country teams' annual reports. In three of our four teams, the formal accountability to the host country for results was not from each single UN organization through its headquarters, but from the whole team of DaO. 'The annual report was discussed at what we call the joint steering committee, which is the committee between the government and the UN; [it] is co-chaired by the Ministry of Finance and then the resident coordinator' (Interview, Tanzania). This arm-length control increased the sense of scrutiny towards UN operations and, at the same time, further increased internal cohesion, especially within working groups:

> [During the meetings with governments,] issues are discussed at the upper level and questions are asked, so we are put under more scrutiny than before. So, if a working group hasn't done well, there is an internal pressure that is, like, created to make sure that the next time around this is addressed and more efforts are put in place. (Interview, Tanzania)

Not only did the four teams bring host governments within the IOC governance arrangements, but they also played a brokering role between the host government and donors. They relied on forms of tripartite arrangements aimed at including their constituencies in strategic planning and at tightening the connection between the two actors. For example, the team in Vietnam established a 'tripartite national

task force that was the overall governance mechanism' (Interview, Vietnam) while also facilitating a better understanding of the specific development challenges faced by the country through ad hoc research co-sponsored by donors: 'We did a lot of assessment; we did an independent study with the donor group on the challenges facing middle-income Vietnam' (Interview, Vietnam).

Respondents from the UN team in Tanzania referred to the importance of holding regular meetings with donors and government representatives concerning the country's needs and how development partners, including but not limited to the UN, provided development assistance:

> In Tanzania, we have a critical role of being the impartial partner, so you play the buffer between the donor community and the government, and that is very, very important, because up to 40% of the national budget is externally financed, so I used to chair all the donors. (Interview, Tanzania)

In the words of a respondent from the Rwanda team, being at the centre of a network with the government and donors made the interaction among UN organizations more explicit:

> So, the government knows what is to be provided as support across all the areas where the UN works and also the same for the donors. Their funding is as useful as possible because we are all discussing it with each other; we've devised a common programme. (Interview, Rwanda)

Challenges to the sharing authority with local stakeholders: Evidence from less effective cases. While all eight teams pursued an attempt to include the host government in the IOC's strategic activities, consistent with the basic tenets of DaO, the teams where the collaboration potential was not fully unleashed experienced challenges in doing so effectively. In Pakistan, political turbulence made it challenging for the UN team to interact effectively with the host government. In other countries, including the host government in UN formal decisions, such as allocating funds and accounting for results, created some disruption in the team's equilibrium, and the team did not effectively play a brokering role between the government and donors. Elsewhere, some degree of ambiguity in the interaction with the host government emerged from our interviews, because participation in the UN country team activities came to be seen as an instrumental gateway for broader development assistance rather than a joint endeavour. Furthermore, the host government occasionally played the role of convener

rather than invitee, altering the team dynamics: 'Sometimes, instead of being aligned to the executive, our joint activities mirror the division of labour among the line ministries' (Interview, Uruguay).

Similarly, the strong emphasis on fundraising reported by our interviewees in Albania and Uruguay led to an increase in internal competition for funding. One respondent acknowledged that 'regrettably there are still organizations in our team that keep working one-to-one with individual ministries and national institutions, and they want to maintain their own channels with donors' (Interview, Albania). Interviewees in Pakistan saw these separate channels not as a challenge but as the only way to successful fundraising:

> If you did that [joint communication and fundraising with donors], no one would have any money because the donor's not going to listen to me, and I've worked in marketing! It's not about that; if they want to listen if they want to fund a project, they want to hear it from the person who is actually doing the project. (Interview, Pakistan)

Local calibration of IOC purpose. Besides sharing authority with local stakeholders, local entrenching saw an active attempt by the UN country teams to leverage their transnational and collective strengths to benefit the host country. Local calibration was based on three sets of actions: absorbing transaction costs, tapping into global expertise and developing trust-based local relevance. First, despite DaO being framed by the UNDG as a reform aimed at achieving efficiency, members of the country teams experienced a marked increase in transaction costs as a result of its implementation. Teams reacted differently to this circumstance and built alternative narratives. Common to the narratives in the four countries was the absorption of transaction costs by the IOC. Interviewees and archival data in Rwanda acknowledged the rise in transaction costs due to the alignment of goals and programmes, both among organizations and external stakeholders, notably government and donor countries. However, respondents revealed that after a start-up phase, the harmonization of business processes resulting from this alignment generated savings and improved the coherence of UN support to the host country:

> It takes a long time to meet, to agree, to inform each other, to plan together and to implement together. Thus, the transaction costs have certainly increased. But in Rwanda we are experimenting [with] a business operational strategy and we've identified 15 million dollars' savings in reduced

costs. So, it takes time, but there is also efficiency in coordination, and essentially, we are able to provide coherent support to the government across all sectors. (Interview, Rwanda)

Our interviewees from the teams of Mozambique, Tanzania and Vietnam systematically referred to an increase in transaction costs that undermined the ambition of efficiency gains: 'So it's not as if we're doing more with less; we're doing more with more in reality' (Interview, Tanzania). However, they explained that just as systematically the UN had absorbed the costs previously borne by the local stakeholders: 'So what we mean by system-wide coherence is avoiding duplication; it's reducing the transaction cost of delivering whatever systems the UN delivers, and when I mean transactions cost it's essentially transaction costs for the government, the recipient government. Now these are our costs' (Interview, Tanzania). Another respondent nailed down the shift: 'We know the transaction costs for governments have gone down, transaction costs went up for the UN, because coordination is time-consuming' (Interview, Vietnam). Respondents in all four teams repeatedly mentioned that DaO was 'making it easier' for the host governments and the development partners. Illustrative of the attitude of embracing the additional burden of collaboration, one respondent quantified the transaction costs and argued that:

> UN agencies are coping with the additional workload that comes with Delivering as One. The recent independent evaluation of Delivering as One shows that the increasing transaction cost as a result of the Delivering as One implementation is about 20 persons in Tanzania. And I can confirm this. But that's fine, because if our partners in the country need 20 people less to deal with us, it is probably worth it. But that is the reality. (Interview, Tanzania)

Another interviewee pointed to the inevitability of rising costs offset by the quality of development assistance:

> Oh God, the workload increased because we had to be in all these, you know, working groups or on the steering committees [with government and donors]. Because coordination, participation does take time, you know, ah, this African proverb—if you want to go far, go alone. If you want to get better results, you know, go slower. […] I'm talking about the sincereness, the trust and the genuineness of all the country team members, we really felt, Hey! We're contributing to something much better, something much more whole; we're contributing to a better Mozambique. (Interview, Mozambique)

A second common action emerging from the interviews was the distinctive feature of the UN team tapping into global expertise and applying it locally, as reported by one of our informants: 'We have the expertise at international and global levels, then we transfer that expertise, which is global, to the country level' (Interview, Vietnam). Drawing from global expertise meant illustrating specific solutions implemented elsewhere: 'The local office kind of first puts together a framework and we provide other examples from other offices in the world' (Interview, Mozambique). It also meant employing the specific knowledge developed by the UN as a system of specialized organizations across time and space:

> We can help in defining their [of the host government] own foreign economic policy, their own international trade negotiation and their own economic agenda. And to do it, in our assistance, in what we do in the country for their policymakers, we will look at that dimension, and because we have the right expertise on all these subjects at the global level, we transfer that expertise, which is global, to the country level. (Interview, Rwanda)

Interviewees seemed mindful of the distinctiveness of this feature compared to NGOs, other international organisations and the private sector. For example, one interviewee stated:

> You see, we work with children and we are recognized worldwide. Also, Save the Children works in the same area. Sometimes we even work together and it is great. But what makes us special, or I at least [feel] we are, is that we can work on children with the help of the WHO, UNESCO and the ILO, because child labour is still a big issue here. (Interview, Vietnam)

Along these lines, one respondent pointed to the comparative advantage of the UN team vis-à-vis the private sector: 'We could also bring technical capacity from elsewhere in a very short time and with limited costs. Providing technical assistance through a private entity would likely be less specialized and cost much more' (Interview, Mozambique). Notably, the teams were perceived as legitimate global experts owing to their positioning as independent agents of development.

Finally, being considered independent players was also a precondition for gaining what we term 'trust-based local relevance', manifested in improved technical assistance and policy advocacy. Relevance was associated with having a significant impact on the host country beyond the internal efficiency of the IOC. This meant being able to deliver effective development assistance by supplementing some of the institutional weaknesses in the host countries:

> We thought that positioning ourselves adequately because the government had been showing a lack of absorption capacities and technical conditions to implement most of the development strategies, we realised that the UN could be a good partner—a good technical partner—which was not attached to any agenda to implement the very goals that governments were setting up, such as government plans and poverty reduction strategies. (Interview, Mozambique)

The awareness of being a strategic partner is echoed in an interview with a Rwanda country team member: 'We realized that we could become a strategic partner, become a kind of repository of technical resources that the government could trust and use' (Interview, Rwanda).

In addition to the variety of expertise, the analysis of archival data and interviews revealed that one key feature of UN technical assistance in the four countries was the 'trust' enjoyed by each team's 'independent agenda'. In turn, this allowed the teams to express their views on sensitive issues:

> We definitely saw relevance and we definitely saw strategic positioning. So the impact of the UN doing the joint programming and working together with partners, speaking with one voice, having common policy positions, launching publications together and doing joint research, that's what has the impact. (Interview, Vietnam)

We found extensive evidence that team members valued policy advocacy as relevant and were enabled by the critical mass of the UN organization working and speaking together as well as the role of trusted partner that the team carved out in each country. Respondents repeatedly mentioned that the UN managed to include 'gender rights and human equality' in development projects, mainstreaming them as cross-cutting issues (Mozambique, Rwanda, Vietnam). This process was not straightforward or unproblematic. One interviewee shared the dilemmas faced by their team when trying to strike a balance between a collaborative relationship with the host government and constructive support for the rights of vulnerable groups:

> This is very political because we were discussing the latest draft of the revision of the new constitution, and some questions emerged about the issue of human rights. So, we had a discussion and then the discussion was—what should be the position of the UN system? Should we issue a letter? Should we make a comment? Should we say this or that in a way that, you know, we would get a message across without breaking trust with the government? (Interview, Tanzania)

Notwithstanding tensions and precarious interactions, interviewees in all four teams proudly recollected policy changes as one of the most remarkable achievements of their professional experience.

Illustrative of this type of attainment, the team in Vietnam ascribed a regulatory change in a politically

sensitive area to the UN working together and being perceived as a trusted interlocutor of government:

> We worked on administrative sanctions, which meant that intravenous drug users and sex workers were put into administrative detention, or in other words, locked up, and the UN had a joint position. We didn't blame them [government officials], but we explained how to look at it from a forced labour point of view. Look at it from a health and harm reduction point of view, look at it from an HIV point of view, a human rights point of view, basically saying that this was not an appropriate solution. As a result of the UN's advocacy, the government changed the law so that sex workers were no longer imprisoned, although there is still a lot to do and there's still quite a hard line on intravenous drug users. (Interview, Vietnam)

Challenges to the local calibration of IOC purpose: Evidence from less effective cases. While, as

discussed above, respondents in all eight teams referred to an increase in transaction costs, interviewees

from Albania, Cape Verde, Pakistan or Uruguay did not share with us how the additional workload was

offset by an improvement of the incisiveness of the operations or of the host government's experience

while interacting with the UN system. Instead, it could be argued that the increased costs of collaboration

were seen as sunk costs. In the words of an interviewee from the Pakistan team, 'It's a no-brainer that

it's an added layer, and God knows, we didn't need it' (Interview, Pakistan).

In these teams, the distinctiveness of the UN as a partner of local stakeholders able to bring

differentiated global expertise to the country was problematic in so far as it required that such global

expertise be embedded in shared UN proposals, whose joint formulation demanded resources and time:

> So, the capacity is not enough, and at the same time, it is difficult for us to be specialists in everything. I can mention the example of what we did with nutrition security in another country, but I cannot be a specialist in agricultural assistance, at the same time be specialist in education, at the same time be specialist on HIV, etc. So, in fact, we are expected to be global specialists, but especially now we have a programme developed at the more upstream level, working with the government in these frameworks, programmes, laws, strategies, etc. and analysis and so on. So, this is the kind of thing putting us under high pressure all the time. (Interview, Cape Verde)

Unlike the cases where the IOC was more evidently strengthened, relevance was gauged and expressed,

especially in terms of fundraising capacity:

> This DaO approach is a really good framework to convince donors to put money into the funds, because together we can demonstrate the UN presence in the country much more, and we are also able to demonstrate much more joint force. (Interview, Albania)

This was echoed by another respondent, who stated:

> In many cases, the whole UN system looks a little bit too bureaucratic for outside donors, and this is a really good framework to push us to find more synergies in the system in order to at least persuade donors. (Interview, Uruguay)

Lastly, the two pillars of technical assistance to and political engagement with the host government were seen as two sides of the same coin—that is, the legitimacy of the UN as a trusted partner. However, we found evidence of a particularly challenging tension between these two broad mandates, expressed as mutually exclusive:

> In my opinion, the DaO concept only included development work: it didn't take into consideration the political work done; it didn't take into consideration the humanitarian side. Now we have the issue [that] the government doesn't like talking about humanitarian [topics], so this alleged 'one programme' isn't very 'one', to be honest. (Interview, Pakistan)

Other respondents argued that technical assistance and policy advocacy are not only hard to reconcile, but even posed a conflict of interest:

> If you are an implementing agency, how can you play your normative role as a critical partner? This is my question, I mean, because you have to decide. Or you are an implementing agency, or you are a UN agency. Maybe I'm very strong about that, but you can see the conflict of interest. (Interview, Albania)

Locally owned capacity-building outcomes

In line with our premises, we acknowledge that there have been improvements across all eight pilot projects. However, we have provided evidence showing that the four country teams in Tanzania, Rwanda, Vietnam and Mozambique achieved particularly strong results in terms of locally owned capacity-building outcomes. In Mozambique, country-led evaluations and annual reports acknowledged that the interventions of the different UN organisations were streamlined and duplications progressively reduced following an assessment of which organisation had a stronger issue-specific competitive advantage. By the end of the pilot phase, special advocacy plans on politically sensitive issues were developed and implemented annually. In 2013, for example, two special advocacy plans on the themes of extractive

industries and the elimination of violence against women were implemented, illustrating the ability of the UN to put forward 'signature initiatives' for fundraising.

In Rwanda, country-led independent evaluations showed an increasing level of acknowledgement by the Rwandan government that DaO strengthened the UN alignment to national priorities and decreased the level of duplication. Specifically, the UN reduced the areas of intervention and accelerated its efforts to provide support to the government in several strategic sectors, such as education, social protection, HIV/AIDS, governance, environment and natural resources, health and population, nutrition and gender mainstreaming. Moreover, the UN supported the host government in orchestrating international foreign aid.

In Tanzania, consistent with the goal of increasing national ownership, country-led independent evaluations showed increasing harmonisation between the UN contribution and national poverty reduction strategies due to DaO. Annual and financial reports (2011, 2012) indicated the exact alignment of the planning cycle and fiscal year between the UN and the government. The UN exerted a credible and legitimate normative role with the host government, consolidating its position as a key player in the national human rights context, including, but not limited to, gender rights and the rights of international refugees.

Finally, in Vietnam, annual reports pointed to an increased focus on high-quality upstream and crosscutting policy work as well as the enhanced UN role in engaging different stakeholders and expanding partnerships (2012). There is also evidence of a more visible normative role within the UN team engaging collectively in public advocacy, especially on the sensitive issues of human rights and corruption. Lastly, the UN team encouraged donors and since 2011 had obtained multi-year resources for the entire IOC, marking a significant shift in donor support that had previously only secured funding for individual organizations for the projects they selected.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The growing complexity of global challenges ranging from climate change (Ansari et al., 2013) and refugee crises (Kodeih, Schildt, & Lawrence, 2023) to pandemics (Compagni, Cappellaro, & Nigam, 2024) highlights the urgent need for improved transnational collaboration. Our study focused on interorganizational collaboration (IOC) within the United Nations development assistance framework, analysing how clusters of UN organizations operate in countries with varying economic statuses (Mele & Cappellaro 2018). Our investigation was motivated by a lacuna in the existing literature: while the roles of individual organizations in tackling global problems are well documented, there is less understanding of how groups of organizations work together as intermediaries to achieve collective capacity-building goals in diverse local settings.

Our analysis contrasts four more effective cases with four less effective ones, leading us to derive an analytical model of intermediary clusters' actions. This model outlines how intermediary clusters of organizations facilitate contextual bridging through four interconnected mechanisms: functionally amalgamating operations, developing a cohesive collective voice, sharing authority with local stakeholders, and locally calibrating interorganizational collaboration. In practice, UN clusters leverage their international expertise, highlighting this unique attribute to local stakeholders. Specifically, they present themselves as brokers of proven technical solutions that have been tried and assessed, thereby gaining credibility with local partners and highlighting their competitive edge over other development actors. To become effective participants in the host country, the UN clusters' perceived role as independent partners must complement their extensive and diverse technical expertise with proven efficacy. This dual approach underscores the importance of fostering trust in local capacity-building initiatives (Mair et al., 2012; McKague et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2020; Venkataraman et al., 2016).

Our research departs from previous studies by showing that intermediary organizations facilitate participatory engagement with local stakeholders and involve host governments in formal decisions

concerning internal collaboration. In addressing the need to navigate institutional differences in developing countries, we go beyond the singular focus on market-creating institutions (Bothello et al., 2019; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006) by illuminating how institutional capacity-building can be shared by and serve local communities. At the same time, our findings highlight the potential drawbacks of overreliance on collaborations with local governments. Such dependencies can become problematic when weak or ambiguous relationships or logistical challenges obstruct effective collaboration and engagement with local stakeholders. These insights enhance our understanding of effective transnational governance to address wide-ranging global issues.

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the literature on interorganizational collaboration and transnational governance, particularly in addressing grand challenges and bridging institutional voids.

First, by focusing on the construct of intermediary clusters and by unpacking the four mechanisms through which they enact contextual bridging, we advance a conceptualization of interorganizational collaboration not just as a mechanism for resource sharing and joint action but as a nuanced process that involves strategic adaptation to local contexts. Such adaptation is essential for aligning global mandates with local actions sensitive to developing countries' specific needs and conditions. While the literature on transnational governance (Djelic & Quack, 2010; Jacobsson, 2006) describes the conflict between the global and local aspects of actors and solutions that must be resolved, our findings demonstrate that 'being and acting global' can serve as a valuable resource in strategic adaptation to local needs. This approach aids in achieving a 'complementary articulation between transnational cosmopolitanism and national rootedness' (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, p. 393).

Second, unlike most studies in this area, which focus on NGOs as intermediaries (Mair & Marti, 2009; McKague et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2020; Venkataraman et al., 2016), our research explores the unique role of (clusters of) IGOs in contextual bridging. We propose that the differences between IGOs

and NGOs are significant and underexplored. NGOs, as institutional entrepreneurs, have the freedom to develop and implement innovative solutions to social issues (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2012). Even when misaligned with governmental priorities, which may affect resource availability and intervention acceptability (van Wijk et al., 2020), NGOs can engage directly with communities and sometimes lawfully circumvent government structures (Mair et al., 2012). In contrast, the work of IGOs, which are made up of member countries, is heavily influenced by multilateralism (Findley, Milner, & Nielson, 2017), and it is mediated by the governments of the host countries. As our findings show, this relationship impacts the mechanisms employed by these organizations to collaborate and interact with local communities. Since IGOs primarily build capacity through governmental channels, their interactions are more formal and reciprocal than that of NGOs (Venkataraman et al., 2016). Hence, our findings diverge from earlier research; we observed that intermediary clusters composed of these organizations not only facilitated participatory engagement with local stakeholders (van Wijk et al., 2020; Venkataraman et al., 2016) and created spaces for social interaction (Mair et al., 2012; McKague et al., 2015), but they also involved host governments in making formal, authoritative decisions about internal collaborative processes.

Third, our study of how capacity-building varies across different settings contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between repetition and adaptation. These dynamics are often cited as key to the impact and efficacy of transnational governance, yet empirical investigations are scarce (Djelic & Quack, 2010). Our research explicitly examines the initial steps required to engage countries, beginning with the establishment of local operational frameworks. We have recognized the importance of tailoring operations to leverage local expertise in areas deemed critical to the context. This expertise allows institutional entrepreneurs to gain credibility with local stakeholders (Jacobsson, 2006) and can help navigate and mitigate internal conflicts. Moreover, in our more effective case studies, we noted a distinct pattern among institutional entrepreneurs, represented here by clusters of UN organizations. They

establish local trust based on their technical proficiency, absorb transaction costs and utilize their global knowledge and reach, positioning them as a neutral intermediary between the country and international donors. The ensuing relationships with governments enable these entrepreneurs to foster discussions and advocate for policies on sensitive political issues, including human rights violations.

Taken together, our findings about the varying degrees of success in bridging global mandates with local needs observed among the eight UN clusters underscore the necessity for a more nuanced approach to IOC—one that transcends one-size-fits-all solutions and embraces the complexities of local contexts.

From a practical standpoint, our study offers valuable insights for policymakers, international organizations and practitioners involved in international development efforts. By highlighting the critical role of contextual bridging and the need for strategic adaptation in IOC, our research suggests that more effective collaboration can be achieved through mechanisms that foster mutual learning, respect for local knowledge and shared authority with local stakeholders. Additionally, our findings highlight the importance of developing flexible governance structures that adapt to the evolving needs and dynamics of local contexts.

Limitations and future research avenues

This research, while offering significant insights into IOC within the UN for capacity-building, acknowledges several limitations that also pave the way for future inquiries. First, the study's focus on the UN system may limit the generalizability of the findings to other transnational and multilateral organizations engaging in similar development efforts. Future research could explore IOC dynamics in a broader array of international development contexts, including non-UN organizations and public–private partnerships. Additionally, the longitudinal aspect of our analysis covering the period from 2007 to 2015 suggests that evolving global challenges and shifts in international development paradigms may necessitate ongoing investigation into how the IOC adapts over time. Our analysis focused on

collaboration dynamics and institutional bridging within different clusters. We distinguished country teams based on how effectively they harnessed their collaboration potential. While our study provides valuable insights, further research could take a more structured approach to exploring the impact of IOC on institutional capacity-building (Vallejo & When, 2016). Additionally, the comparative nature of our research, spanning eight different countries, is rooted in a dynamic understanding of place that transcends traditional geographic boundaries (Dacin et al., 2024). Future studies could delve deeper into how the political dimensions of space influence the dynamics of contextual bridging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study enhances our understanding of the intricacies of the IOC in transnational governance, particularly in the realm of international development. By exploring how UN clusters balance internal collaboration with contextual adaptation, we offer new theoretical insights into the mechanisms that foster locally owned capacity-building across diverse environments. Our analysis of how intermediary clusters reinforce IOC and embed their efforts locally highlights the vital role of aligning global initiatives with local realities through strategic collaboration and a nuanced understanding of context.

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Table I. Research Design, Background Characteristics of the Eight Local UN Clusters, and Data Sources

	UN Country Team Uruguay	UN Country Team Albania	UN Country Team Cape Verde	UN Country Team Pakistan	UN Country Team Tanzania	UN Country Team Rwanda	UN Country Team Vietnam	UN Country Team Mozambique
Case characteristics								
Level of Development*	Upper Middle income	Lower Middle income	Least-developed	Low income	Least-developed	Least-developed	Low income	Least-developed
IOC members	Resident coordinator office + 17 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 16 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 17 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 22 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 19 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 22 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 16 organizations	Resident coordinator office + 19 organizations
Outcome								
Locally owned capacity building	Weaker evidence	Weaker evidence	Weaker evidence	Weaker evidence	Stronger evidence	Stronger evidence	Stronger evidence	Stronger evidence
Data sources								
Interviews	11: Rc office (3), Fao, Ilo, Iom, Undp, Unesco, Unfpa, Unicef, Who	13: Rc office (2), Fao, Iaea, Unaids, Unctad, Undp (2), Unesco, Unfpa, Unicef (2), Who	12: Rc office (3), Fao, Undp (2), Unfpa, Unicef (2), Unido, Unv, Who	11: Rc office (2), Fao, Undp, Undss, Unesco, Unfpa, Un-habitat, Unhcr, Unicef, Who	11: Rc office (3), Fao, Ilo, Undp,Unep, Unesco, Unicef, Unhcr, Who	11: RC office (2), Ilo, Iom, Undp, Unep, Unesco, Unfpa, Un-habitat, Unv, Who	11: Rc office (2), Fao (2), Ilo, Iom, Un-habitat, Unido, Undp, Unfpa, Who	14: Rc office (2), Fao, Ilo, Iom, Undp (2), Unfpa, Un-habitat, Unicef (2), Unicri, Unido, Who
Archival Sources	97 (1177 pp.) Letter of request DaO (1), Reports – financial, stocktaking, lessons learned, country-led evaluation, annual (16), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding (3) Press releases and newsletter (15), action plans (2)	48 (1247 pp.): Letter of request DaO (1), Reports: financial, stocktaking, country-led evaluation, program, annual (25), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding (4), newsletter and brochures (13), action plans (2)	81 (1231 pp.): Letter of request DaO (1), Reports: financial, stocktaking, country-led evaluation, annual, retreat (17), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding & Terms of reference (5), press releases (3), action plans (5)	70 (1630 pp.) Letter of request DaO & note of stakeholders (2) Reports: financial, stocktaking, country-led evaluation, annual, retreat, joint audit (16), Codes of conduct & Memorandum & Terms of reference (11), press releases (7), action plans (2)	105 (1351 pp.) Letter of request DaO (1), Reports: financial, stocktaking, lessons learned, country-led evaluation, annual (15), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding & Terms of reference (7), newsletter (51), action plans (2)	27 (1200 pp.) Letter of request DaO (1), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding (5), Reports: financial, stocktaking, country-led evaluation, program, annual (19), action plans (2)	77 (1514 pp.) Letter of request DaO (1), Reports – financial, stocktaking, lessons learned, country-led evaluation, annual (19, Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding (8), DaO updates (7), action plans (5)	93 (1710 pp.) Letter of request DaO (1), Codes of conduct & Memorandum of understanding (4), Reports: financial, stocktaking, country-led evaluation, annual, retreat (24), newsletter (31), action plans (2)

*: LDC and OGHIST data (2007, year of initial implementation of the DaO reform)
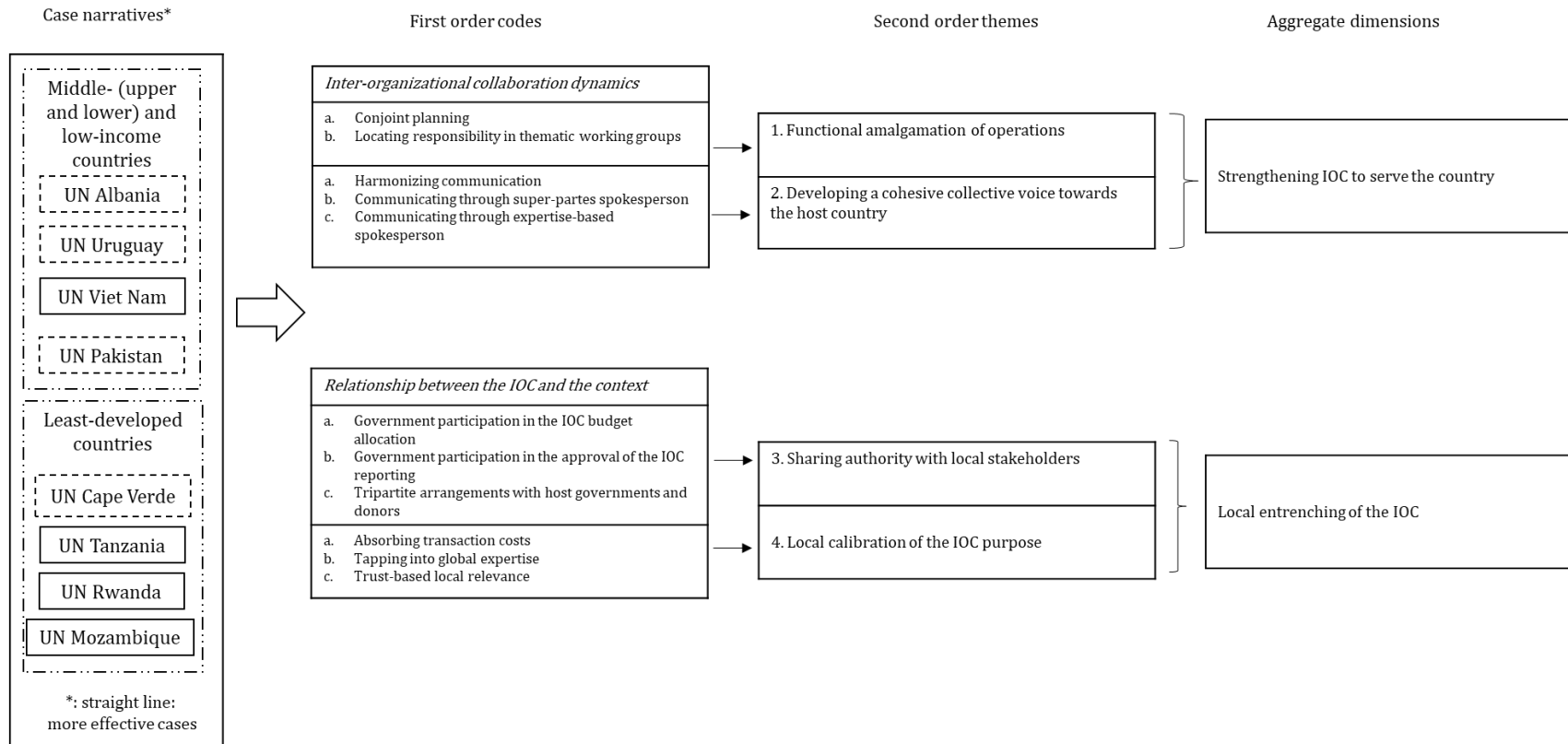
Figure I: Data Structure

Case narratives*   First order codes   Second order themes   Aggregate dimensions

Middle- (upper
and lower) and
low-income
countries

UN Albania

UN Uruguay

UN Viet Nam

UN Pakistan

Least-developed
countries

UN Cape Verde

UN Tanzania

UN Rwanda

UN Mozambique

*: straight line:
more effective cases

Inter-organizational collaboration dynamics

a. Conjoint planning
b. Locating responsibility in thematic working groups

a. Harmonizing communication
b. Communicating through super-partes spokesperson
c. Communicating through expertise-based spokesperson

1. Functional amalgamation of operations

2. Developing a cohesive collective voice towards the host country

Strengthening IOC to serve the country

Relationship between the IOC and the context

a. Government participation in the IOC budget allocation
b. Government participation in the approval of the IOC reporting
c. Tripartite arrangements with host governments and donors

a. Absorbing transaction costs
b. Tapping into global expertise
c. Trust-based local relevance

3. Sharing authority with local stakeholders

4. Local calibration of the IOC purpose

Local entrenching of the IOC

Table II: Details of the coding structure and additional evidence

Core Constructs	Evidence by IOC: Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Viet Nam

Strengthening IOC to serve the country

1. Functional amalgamation of operations

Conjoint planning

That's what the working group brings. It allows agencies working in the same sector to understand what each other's doing and look for synergies, areas of collaboration. And that's something that we recognize we are, we are doing but we still could go much further and so each year we try to push a bit further where we can really come together and be more than the sum of our parts. (interview, Tanzania)

One of the challenges that I think we had that we had to overcome is the UNDAF in the DaO context, the idea is that everything that all the agencies do is supposed to be in the UNDAF. So that is sort of the dogma. The dogma is that the United Nations agencies should not be doing anything that is not in the UNDAF, well as a technical agency we have a tremendous Mozambique (interview, Mozambique)

Locating responsibility in thematic working groups

In conjunction and to anchor this change, the UN put in place a different common organizational structure, so called Development Results Groups, with the intention of clustering programme staff across all agencies of the UN around outcomes and focus areas of the UNDAF under the leadership of one head of agency. The purpose has been to optimize the use of UN's technical resources, strengthen UN's programme portfolio and effectiveness. This in the spirit of Delivering as One (Mozambique, Annual report One Fund, 2012)

We have a formal mechanism through the One Fund of incentivizing or rather providing benefits to the working groups and the organizations through giving them One Fund money. It's performance based allocation. (Interview, Tanzania)

2. Developing a cohesive common voice towards the host country

Harmonizing communication

The future strategy will gather all UN institutions around a common set of goals and messages, utilize in a coordinated fashion the wide set of skills and competencies that the UN family has, pool resources and working practices to prevent duplication of efforts; thus creating a platform that will enable the UN to Communicate as One on programme issues. (Mozambique, UN Dao Newsletter 3)

So I think this is something again it's a W.I.P. you know and it really has come off the ground and we are doing nice things, I think we picked like four-five international days let's say International Women's day, World Environment day, Human Rights Day and so on and so forth which are issues of common interest mostly so then we celebrate these things also jointly and also maybe another innovation that you can write down is for communication, basically we have a 2.5% charge against the One Fund that is then creating a budget for communication you see? So it's not only talk, we can actually put money behind it so that's why we are able to produce these materials and have events etc.(Interview, Viet Nam)

Communicating through super-partes spokesperson

'The resident Coordinator speaks on behalf of all the agencies but makes sure it reflects and reviews the ideas of everybody' (Interview, Rwanda)

High-level representation in public events is coordinated by the UNCT to ensure that the UN speaks with one voice through the RC, on behalf of the UN. (Mozambique, One Operational Plan 2007-2009)

Communicating through expertise-based spokesperson

And they're pursuing the harmonization agenda, the Communicating as One, One Voice agenda. So they each have a lead agency on there. So that lead agency take responsibility for day-to-day coordination of those working groups. So they meet on a regular basis to discuss what they're doing and of course at the time of the annual work plans or the reviews they come together to collectively complete those requirements. (Interview, Tanzania)

On official occasions, heads of agencies represented the entire UN system in Rwanda with One Voice (2011 Annual Report, Rwanda)

Local entrenching of the IOC

3. Sharing authority with local stakeholders

Government participation in the IOC budget allocation

I think that is a very positive thing to be able to bring as many people around the table, to bring in their expertise, especially because in Rwanda it's very necessary often we have the government we're striving at, so UN has to make itself relevant and useful and to be able to have a wider participation (Interview, Rwanda)

Core Constructs	Evidence by IOC: Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Viet Nam
	Government participation in the approval of the IOC reporting
	The annual report has been examined and fully supported by the relevant governmental counterparts (2011 annual report, Tanzania)
	The Annual UNDAF Review under the leadership of the UNDAF Steering Committee will serve as the main mechanism for monitoring and analyzing progress towards the achievement of UNDAF results and taking stock of lessons learnt and good practices (2012-2015 Strategic Plan, Mozambique)
	Tripartite arrangements with host governments and donors
	Over the past couple of years, progress has been made in terms of aligning UN planning, monitoring and evaluation tools and coordination mechanisms with those of the Government and other development partners. The establishment of a Working Group on implementation of the Paris Declaration, composed of donors and the UN, under the chairpersonship of the Resident Coordinator, has helped in the implementation of various activities to improve harmonisation and alignment and to coordinate the monitoring of joint commitments, including merging of UN and EU project databases, sector alignment of MoUs and the mapping of all ongoing Paris Declaration activities to identify gaps and initiate a systematic mechanism to monitor progress (Mozambique, One Operational Plan 2009)
	The donors were a partner of how it was done in Vietnam and so we used to have a tri-partite taskforce which would meet quite regularly at the beginning and there would be donor representatives on that and we have a tri-partite review (Interview, Vietnam)
4. Local calibration of the IOC purpose	*Absorbing transaction costs*
	Rwanda has been viewed as a good model especially when it comes to the BOS the business of strategy in terms of the administrative side and reducing the transaction cost and that has also been viewed as a model, so I would also say that without knowing too much of the other countries; (Interview, Rwanda)
	I think that the philosophical idea of DaO is well-known and I think that it's available in all the documents but in my mind it's really to bring more coherence, more effectiveness of UN interventions at the country level and we do that by trying to make it easier for the governments and the development partners to do that and the way we do that is by working together wherever and whenever possible at country level to implement our agenda (Interview, Mozambique)
	We absolutely have to, as the United Nations become more unified and really we have to make the most of synergies and we have to make the most of collaborations between the different agencies, especially to make things easier for the government because it's extremely complex for the government to manage (Interview, Mozambique)
	Tapping into global expertise
	We were looking at the independence of the UN, looking at the global presence of the UN, which could bring good practices and could fit a certain reality" (Interview, Mozambique).
	The role of the UN in the health sector will be articulated around two major axes defined on the basis of the UN system's comparative advantage in relation to the Rwandan context.(UNDAF Planning document 2008-12, Rwanda)
	Trust-based local relevance
	Previous efforts to strengthen UN's work in advocacy and UN's role in responding to emerging issues, will be built on and expanded. Departing from the concept of annual adoption of signature/flagship issues, the UNCT will also develop advocacy plans on a number of select core issues of common interest. This is in line with the aim of more upstream policy work in areas such as Youth Employment and in helping substantiate these in the new/next governments' policy priorities post-elections. This will show better our relevance to highest priority issues on the national development agenda (Mozambique One UN Fund - Consolidated Narrative and Financial Annual Report 2013)
	It's much more powerful when the whole UN speaks on those issues than when just UN AIDS or just UN Women or just one agency is doing that; so I particularly love challenges that are cross government, things like social protection, access to justice, climate change, all of those issues that are a cross government challenge, it makes a lot of sense for the UN to speak together, you have more impact and more credibility.(Interview, Vietnam)
	Depending on the comparative advantage with the One UN family, capacity development will be a prerequisite and a crosscutting theme over all key support areas. The mainstreaming of other crosscutting issues such as environment and gender will be kept high on the UN agenda (2012 Annual Report, Rwanda)

Figure II: Analytical Model of how Intermediary Clusters Facilitate Capacity Building through Contextual Bridging
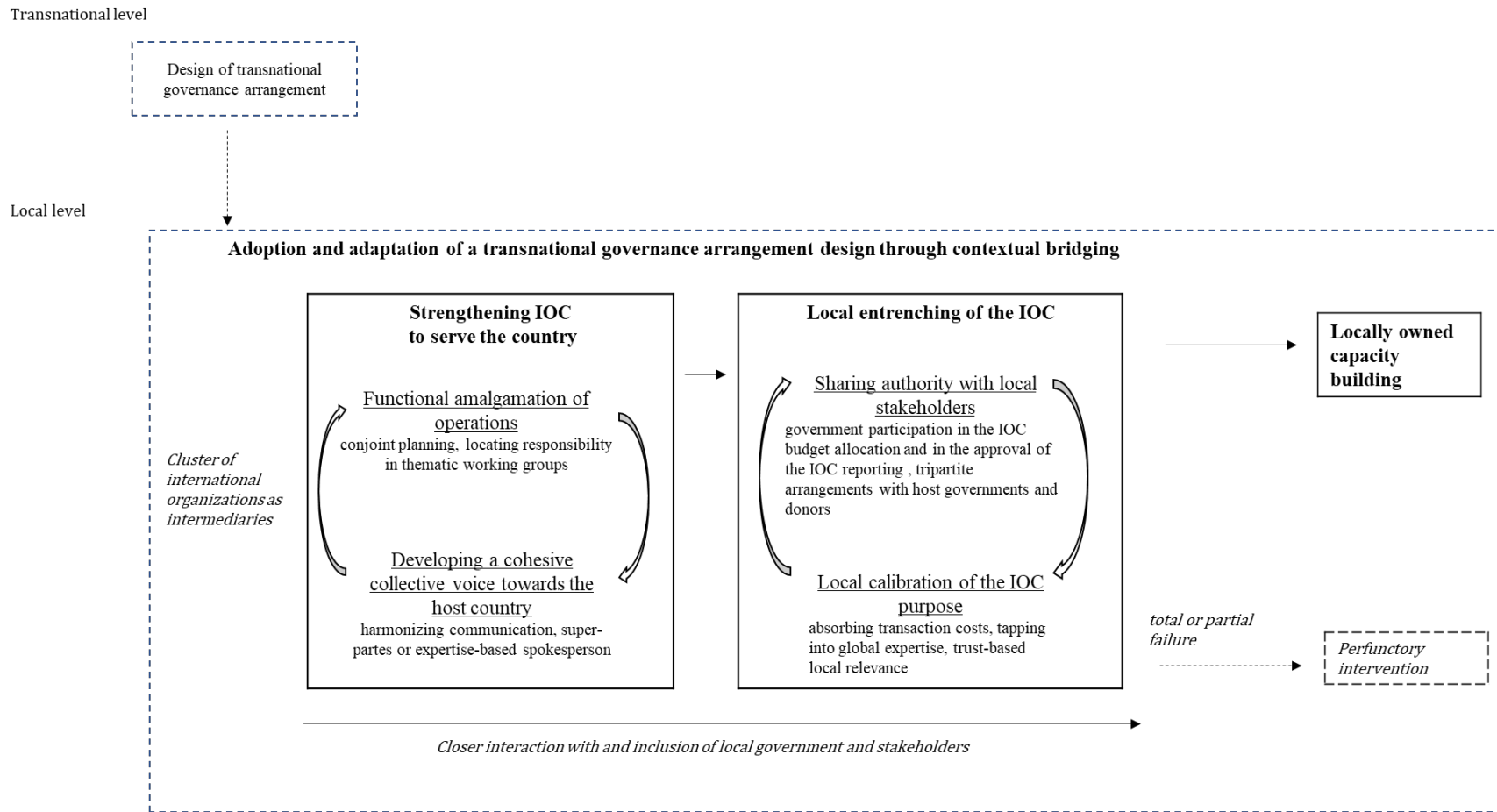
Bio

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