TURUN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Navigating the Effectiveness Agenda in the Aid Sector

Focus on United Nations Field Practitioners

Kaisamaija Välimäki

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“Wanting to do good deeds and getting them done are far cousins,
hardly even relatives.”

Mitsil Mahdan

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ABSTRACT

Despite the scholarly boundaries, ours is not a world of international business or a world of international aid and development but one where sectoral boundaries are increasingly blurred and one where tackling of grand challenges requires collaborative effort. The conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity and a resource-parched environment further exacerbate the challenge, with effectiveness being a persisting condundrum. Adopting a grounded theory method and aided by three sensitising concepts – effectiveness, tensions, and organised hypocrisy – this dissertation examines how mobile professionals navigate the pressures for improved effectiveness within international organisations, with focus on field practitioners in the world's largest international bureaucracy, the United Nations system. As such, this research contributes to an under-studied sphere concerning international and inter-governmental entities within the global ecosystem of international organisations on one hand, while also addressing the research gap related to individual actors on the other.

The nested pressures for effectiveness, anchored to the international aid effectiveness agenda, i.e., the principles of the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, and to the UN internal effectiveness strategies, pose a challenging equation of seemingly counter-acting forces: an increasingly mobile and diverse workforce, operating in an increasingly resource-parched and fragmented aid marketplace, is expected to operate in a more cohesive and collaborative manner. The study presents the grounded theory of savvy bureaucracy, whereby the workers engage in a "bureaucratic hustle" to get work done. This bureaucratic hustle is powered by the want, facilitated by radical acceptance, and enabled by a sense of agency. Doing the bureaucratic hustle entails engaging in organised hypocrisy; managing boundaries; being agile and adapting; and embracing tensions.

The findings emphasise the central role of a worker's mindset in the pursuit of results, including tolerance for uncertainty, willingness to be held to account, and view to self as a professional in general, not as an individual in a specific profession in a specific capacity. The results also suggest that gumption and practical staff competencies trump academic credentials and diversity markers in the pursuit of effective work, as operating in dynamic settings requires capacity to mitigate risk and readiness to make difficult decisions, including ones that may, paradoxically, entail breaking the bureaucratic rules in the name of doing the right thing.

The results show how a professional, pragmatic stance to work eclipses the ideal of an altruistic do-gooder – effectiveness is expected, charitability is optional. There is, from the worker perspective, a broadening of the notion of effectiveness, often seen as a binary in the aid discourse or media, towards a more nuanced notion of mattering and adding value. However, this can be in stark contrast with the way effectiveness is viewed and addressed from the organisational perspective in the UN system. The findings suggest that a worker's motivation, determination, and ability to be effective is not necessarily due to the organisational processes or incentives but rather despite of them. Thus, effectiveness is, on some level, an individual's choice.

Apart from contributing to research on international organisations and providing insights about individual actors, the study contributes to extant literature on entrepreneurial bureaucracy and expands thinking around "hustle" for effectiveness at work. It also suggests strategies for managing a diverse workforce of mobile professionals, including considerations in recruitment, for the benefit of any type of organisation with international operations. The study further suggests that even in the most complex of organisational settings and no matter how daunting the objectives, workers can feel a sense of mattering and can be, to a degree, incentivised and socialised to operate towards the collective goals, under competent leadership. Micro-actions do matter, even in the business of tackling grand challenges.

KEYWORDS: international organisations, individual actor, effectiveness, mindset, United Nations, grounded theory

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Elämme maailmassa, jossa entisaikojen selkeät rajat yhteiskunnallisten ja liiketoimintasektoreiden välillä hämärtyvät yhä enemmän. Suurten haasteiden ratkaiseminen vaatii yhteistä, rajat ylittävää ponnistusta. Jatkuva epävarmuus ja epävakaus, ilmiöiden monimutkaistuminen ja pula resursseista tekevät haasteista entistä vaikeampia ratkaista, edellyttäen myös sekä ratkaisuilta että ratkaisijoilta entistä suurempaa tehokkuutta. Tämän väitöskirjan keskiössä on tehokkuuden tarkastelu yksilön näkökulmasta maailman suurimmassa, rajat ylittävässä byrokrataattisessa organisaatiossa, Yhdistyneissä kansakunnissa (YK). Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetyn Grounded Theory -menetelmän avulla tunnistetaan tehokkuuden rinnalla erilaisia jännitteitä ja järjestäytynyttä näennäistoimintaa (organised hypocrisy) ja tarkastellaan kuinka YK:n kenttätyöntekijät navigoivat erilaisten tehokkuusvaatimusten ristipaineissa.

Tehokkuuspaineet kietoutuvat kansainvälisen avun ja yhteistyön tehokkuusagendaan – erityisesti Busanin sopimukseen – ja YK:n sisäisiin tehokkuusstrategioihin. Ne luovat haastavan yhtälön, jossa on jopa ristiriitaisia vaatimuksia: yhä enemmän ja enemmän kansainvälisesti liikkuvalta ja alati monimuotoisemmalta työvoimalta odotetaan huomattavasti yhtenäisempää, yhteistyöhön perustuvaa toimintaa yhä sirpaloituneemmassa ja resurssiniukemmassa avun ja yhteistyön maailmassa.

Väitöskirjatutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että käytännön taidot ja rohkeus korostuvat tehokkuuden tavoittelussa enemmän kuin työntekijän akateemiset saavutukset tai monimuotoisuusindikaattorit. Dynaamisissa toimintaympäristöissä tehokas toiminta edellyttää riskienhallintakykyä ja valmiutta tehdä vaikeita päätöksiä – joskus myös sääntöjen rikkomista “hyvän” tekemisen nimissä. Työskentelyssä korostuu ammattimainen, pragmaattinen asenne; oletettu kuva idealistisesta hyväntekijästä jää taka-alalle. Tehokkuus YK:n toiminnassa on itsestäänselvä oletusarvo, hyväntekeväisyys on valinnaista.

Työntekijöiden näkökulmasta tehokkuuden käsite laajenee yksinkertaistetusta binäärisestä tulkinnasta (onnistunut/epäonnistunut) kohti vivahteikkaampaa kokemusta merkityksellisyydestä ja arvon tuottamisesta. Tämä voi kuitenkin olla jyrkässä ristiriidassa sen kanssa, miten tehokkuutta tarkastellaan ja käsitellään YK-järjestelmän perspektiivistä. Havainnot viittaavat siihen, että työntekijän motivaatio, päättäväisyys ja kyky toimia tehokkaasti eivät välttämättä johdu YK-organisaation prosesseista tai kannustimista, vaan voivat pikemminkin toteutua niistä huolimatta. Näin ollen tehokkuus näyttäytyy osin myös yksilön valintana.

Tämä tutkimus rikastuttaa kansainvälisten organisaatioiden tutkimusta ja tuo esiin yksittäisten toimijoiden roolia. Lisäksi se tuo uusia näkökulmia yrittäjämäisen byrokratian (entrepreneurial bureauracy) kirjallisuuteen ja laajentaa ajattelua työn "säätämisestä" tehokkuuden näkökulmasta. Tutkimus ehdottaa strategioita liikkuvan ja monimuotoisen työvoiman johtamiseen, rekrytointinäkökohdat mukaan lukien, kaikentyyppisten kansainvälisesti toimivien organisaatioiden hyödyksi. Se osoittaa, että jopa kaikkein monimutkaisimmissakin organisaatioympäristöissä ja suurimpienkin haasteiden edessä, työntekijät voivat kokea työn merkityksellisenä ja vaikuttamisen mahdollisena. Asiantunteva ja osaava johtajuus edesauttaa heidän motivoitumistaan ja kannustamistaan kohti yhteisiä päämääriä. Pienet teot ovat tärkeitä, jopa suurten haasteiden ratkaisemisessa.

AVAINSANAT: kansainväliset organisaatiot, yksilöllinen toimija, tehokkuus, ajattelutapa, Yhdistyneet kansakunnat, grounded theory

Acknowledgements

In Tao Te Ching, we are given advice: “Stop thinking, and end your problems”. For me however, over the past three decades in the busyness of work, not having enough time for slow thinking felt like a problem. The past three years changed that: I have had a permission to indulge in deep thinking, full-time.

It has been a privilege.

While I have congratulated myself for having had the courage, at this later stage of my career, to dip my toe into yet another new type of “industry”, the academic sphere, there are many individuals and entities that have my sincere gratitude for guiding and energising this journey. You have made a difference.

My supervisors, Professor Niina Nummela and Professor Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki: what an academic dynamic duo you are; you have my heartfelt thanks for your thoughtful, valuable, and patient guidance throughout the entire process. I have benefited greatly from your insights and academic talent but also from your skilful and kind approach to mentoring. You genuinely care. That created a safe space for learning, reflection, and critical thinking for a research novice like me; I felt encouraged and enthused to pursue my craft, under thoughtful guidance. Also, I very much appreciate that from the onset, you as my supervisors, saw what I too saw: that my seemingly non-business topic was indeed highly relevant for the international business discipline.

I extend my sincere thanks to my pre-examiners Professor Gyöngyi Kovács, Erkko Professor in Humanitarian Logistics and the Dean of Research at the Hanken School of Economics and Associate Professor, Ismail Gölgeci from Aarhus University: thank you for your valuable time and interest in my research. I was honoured to receive your comments on my work. I very much value your feedback, which is not only encouraging but also very helpful for my future work, as learning never ceases. I warmly welcome Professor Gyöngyi Kovács to Turku as my esteemed opponent during my public defence.

I am very thankful to Turku School of Economics that I was given the opportunity to do my doctoral research here, at my alma mater, and I also appreciate the paid, part-time Doctoral Researcher opportunities afforded to me. The agility of the institution and flexibility to allow for remote participation, including from overseas, especially during COVID, has made all the difference. I have felt welcomed and inspired. I also want to extend my thanks to the other teaching faculty, the IB/TSE team, and give a special recognition to Jenni Gray, Doctoral Education Specialist, whose service-minded, kind and professional guidance has been invaluable. I also thank my doctoral research peers, my "tribe" of the past years – I have learned a lot from you and wish you well. I am also extremely thankful to Turun Yliopistosäätiö and Turun kauppakorkeakoulun tukisäätiö for the grants I received to support my full-time research effort.

Given that I initiated my studies, pre-COVID, at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Professor of International Studies and International Culture, Heather A. Willoughby, for her invaluable support during my transition from the UN System to the academic realm of doctoral studies and research. Your care for students is heartfelt. Also, your early "technical" guidance specifically regarding reference management proved immensely useful and timesaving. I now have a user-friendly reference library of hundreds of sources that can be accessed even offline. The opportunities afforded to me as a guest speaker at EWHA have also been much appreciated; to impart knowledge feels meaningful.

Without the group of research informants and interviewees, I would have little new to offer – my heartfelt thanks to all of you. I am honoured to have been trusted with access to your thoughts, some of you also opening about issues and events that had been, as you pointed out, boxed away in your minds. Your stories and thoughts gave me profound pause, giving cause for even deeper reflection – not only when we conversed in 2023-2024 but even now, still. To think of your shared thoughts as research "data" feels almost like a violation, an act of diminishing experiences, emotions, and insights. And yet, it had to be done to be able to report on them. Therein lies the greatest challenge of this doctoral research: the continuous dance between form and function, to respect both theory and practice, while compromising on neither. I hope I have succeeded in conveying your voices to this work.

Throughout this research process I have been pulled deeper and deeper into the academic well of wisdom; I have discovered the incredible universe of publications, scholars, and rapporteurs of all manner. I am extremely grateful for having access to this wealth of insights and information; it is quite amazing that there are so many interesting things – and so many people who are interested in so many different, amazing things. Often, I found myself thinking "people should know about this". Making research more visible, more accessible to "those out there" in digestible forms is so important.

Support from my friends, home and away, has made all the difference. None of you have questioned the rationale for this multi-year, savings-depleting, neck-stiffening undertaking at this point of my career; I have not needed to explain myself.

Rather, you have shown a keen interest in my work. You have showered me with encouragement and given me space when I needed to withdraw into my chambers, to huddle over my keyboard. You have shown joy for my joy; it has been precious. Thank you for being there, both as the cheerleaders and as a safety net of sorts, as I have been trekking the ups and downs of this journey.

Finally, a big thank you to my family. That learning is a lifelong pursuit stems from the values my parents, both educators, nurtured at home; they led by example. While they are no longer here to witness my joy of completing this work, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my niece – Jussi, Jaana, and Heta – share in my accomplishment; they have been nothing but supportive all along and have my heartfelt thanks.

After finishing high school, back in the 80's, I made a bet with my father that I would receive my PhD before him. And although he beat me to it, three times over, I think today, he would have been proud of me, regardless.

Helsinki, 20.08.2025

Kaisamaija Välimäki

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
BMGF	Bill & Melinda Gates foundation
BOS	United Nations Business Operations Strategy
CPDE	CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness
CSO	Civil society organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DCD	Deputy Country Director
DFID	Department for International Development, United Kingdom
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ETC	Emergency Telecommunications Cluster
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation
HQ	Headquarters
IASC	United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICSC	International Civil Service Commission
ICT	Information and communications technology
MNE	Multinational enterprise
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
R&R	Rest and recuperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNBIG	United Nations Business Innovations Group
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDCO	United Nations Development Coordination Office

UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety and Security
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees
UNSCEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
UNSSC	United Nations System Staff College
UNV	United Nations Volunteer
UNW	UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VUCA	volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity
WBCSD	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

1.1 Situating the Study in the World of Worry and Good Tidings

This study concerns workers' effectiveness challenges in the contested arena of international aid and development. It has been said that one of the great paradoxes of development is that it has "both succeeded spectacularly and failed miserably": on one hand, the world has never been in a better shape, on the other, the institution building required to implement increasingly complex tasks is declining in most developing countries (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017:2-3). Thus, while the condition of the human race has improved dramatically in the past six decades (Carey 2021:64), we live in a "world of worry" (UNDP 2022:29). By 2030, over half of the world's extreme poor will live in settings of fragility[1], conflict, and violence (World Bank Group 2020a). The humanitarian needs are increasing while the United Nations (UN) system is operating in a resource-parched environment (Laurenti 2020:275) and many donor countries are facing fiscal austerity that puts pressure on aid budgets (OECD 2016). Furthermore, climate change affects disproportionately the most vulnerable, with the economic and societal impacts projected across national boundaries through supply-chains, markets, and natural resource flows (IPCC 2022). Therefore, effectiveness of aid work – denoting an achievement of the set objectives (Knox-Clarke 2018) – affects us all, as "the global challenges … will eventually come to everybody's doorstep" (Koch 2024:205). Meanwhile, this work landscape continues to reorganise (Bracho et al. 2021:588): regimes change, stakeholders with divergent interests form new types of partnerships, objectives are more ambitious, and the boundaries of aid programs are increasingly elusive and impact difficult to measure (Raimondo, Bamberger, and Vaessen 2015). This makes aid and development a "messy business" (Koch 2024:16).

[1] Fragile countries: countries with deep governance challenges, institutional weaknesses, and capacity issues; where a UN peacekeeping operation is present; where at least 2,000 persons per 100,000 population flee across borders and are regarded as refugees needing international protection; or countries not already in medium- or high-intensity conflict (World Bank Group 2020a; 2020b).

This messy aid business does not operate in a vacuum from the "other business". While inter-governmental organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have guided the global political and business environment for decades (Moore, Brandl, and Dau 2023), the importance of the private sector in development has been broadly recognised (OECD/UNDP 2019; Benfield and Como 2018; Zoccal Gomes and Esteves 2018; Blampied 2016b; EUP 2016; Lundsgaarde and Keijzer 2016). However, while globalisation was first visible in the economic sphere and remains a business-led process, it is not solely an economic phenomenon but has cultural, political, and social dimensions (Tesner and Kell 2000:xxii). It has been suggested that international business is both a contributor and possible solution for the underlying issues related to mounting geopolitical tensions, climate crisis, deepening global mistrust, and the downsides of digital world (Van Assche and De Marchi 2024) – challenges the UN refers to as the "four horsemen in our midst" (UN 2020a). It has been found, for example, that business environment reform efforts in fragile and conflict-affected areas have in some cases exacerbated drivers of conflict, undermining development (Luiz, Ganson, and Wennmann 2019). On the other hand, it is said that while international organisations can bring countries, policymakers, and civil societies together to address issues requiring cross-border cooperation, multinational enterprises (MNE) can serve as policy advocates to influence policymakers to align with global standards (Moore, Brandl, and Dau 2023). Corporations are uniquely positioned to make a difference: as employers they influence the use of child labour; as investors they can advocate for the respect of fundamental values; as manufacturers they can act responsibly toward global commons of air, sea, and land (Tesner and Kell 2000:xxii). They can also play an important role in the collective efforts towards reducing unmanaged migration (Reade, McKenna, and Oetzel 2019; UN 2018a). Thus, the formulation of effective policies requires an understanding of the complex interactions between international business and public policy challenges (Van Assche and De Marchi 2024).

Both for-profits and not-for-profits are operating in an increasingly shifting and unpredictable environment, with the broader geopolitical, social, and economic trends appearing to point towards a future of more volatility and uncertainty (Devinney et al. 2023). Many issues faced by international corporations are ''wicked[2]'' (Rašković 2022) and the development challenges are "grand[3]", with the

[2] Wicked problems are "large scale social challenges caught in causal webs of interlinking variables spanning national boundaries that complicate both their diagnosis and prognosis" (Reinecke and Ansari 2016:299).

[3] Grand challenges are large, seemingly intractable problems that resist easy fixes, affecting large populations with significant, adverse effects on well-being beyond a single organisation or community (Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman 2015).

latter potentially altering e.g., the MNEs' business models, cross-border operations, and employee management – effective interaction among business, government, and society is essential (Buckley, Doh, and Benischke 2017). That MNEs are involved in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs is vital not only for sustainable development (Sachs and Sachs 2021; van Zanten and van Tulder 2018) but also for MNEs' own strategic position in society (van Tulder et al. 2021). Survival is a shared interest. The global business actors' increased awareness of the international development business actors can benefit this interaction, with one such stakeholder in this non-profit business being the UN system.

The United Nations (UN) system is the largest and most complex international (inter-governmental) organisation in this field (Saner and Yiu 2011:154), comprising six principal organs[4] (i.e., "the United Nations" or "the UN proper") and over 100 entities, including some 30 agencies, funds and programmes, research and training institutions, and related organisations (UN 2023a in Appendix 1), spread across nearly 3000 duty stations in 885 cities or towns (Eckhard and Parizek 2022). As the only recognised worldwide body mandated[5] to address global issues (Schroeder and Wapner 2020:348), the UN system has virtually universal membership and the accompanying international legitimacy (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:244). However, this legitimacy rests on the UN system's ability to reflect its multiple constituencies' inconsistent values and preferences, and thus, it has to uphold contradictory goals and principles and incorporate them into its discourse and entities (Lipson 2007). The UN system faces increasing pressures to be more effective (Weiss and Daws 2020:15) and to change the perceptions of a "bizarre bureaucracy filled with highly (over)paid international civil servants with little else to do with their time but hold conferences in nice cities" (Hanhimäki 2015:6).

It should be mentioned that meaning and the use of the term "UN" can be confusing. For some authors and/or sources, including some originating from the UN system itself, "UN" may refer to the UN proper or to the entire UN system, thus rendering, in some cases, the context unclear. However, when sources are referenced in this study, the authors' terms are used, as a ambiguity does not necessarily lead to misinterpretations with substantial shifts in meaning. For example, whether one

4 General Assembly; Security Council; Secretariat; UN Economic and Social Council; International Court of Justice; and Trusteeship Council (UN 2023a). The Trusteeship Council suspended operations in 1994 (UN 2021a) but has not been terminated: it would require a complex process of changing the UN Charter (Luck 2020:818).

5 The UN peacekeeping operations are mandated by the UN Security Council (UN 2008a), while the UN agencies, funds, and programmes each have their mandates. For example, UNICEF is mandated to advocate for the protection of children's rights (UNICEF 2024a), and UNDP's mandate is to end poverty, build democratic governance, rule of law, and inclusive institutions (UNDP 2024).

states that UN work is complex or work is complex in the UN system is likely to enable the reader to grasp the main point being complexity, not complexity being delimited to the the six principal organs only. Similar lack of clarity may be found with the use of the term "UN agency", as it may denote, collectively, the agencies, funds and programmes not part of UN proper, rather than an actual (specialised) agency, such as the World Bank. As the study shows, ambiguity – a "state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstance or phenomena" (Feldman 1989:5) – can be present not only within the UN system, but permeates many aspects within the aid sector.

1.2 Contextual Touchpoints to Extant Literature

Aid and development work has been described as a patchwork of nested and overlapping fields (Yanguas 2018:183). The aid sector, the UN system inclusive, offers opportunities for a wealth of analytical perspectives within several academic disciplines. This study has touchpoints to international business given the influence of intra-governmental organisations, including the UN system, on the business sector; to international relations and political sciences because the UN system is a global, political organisation; to public sector management and administrative science as the UN system is a bureaucracy expected to perform effectively; to development economics given the specific mandates of the UN system; and to cultural studies and psychology in that societies and individuals are involved.

As this qualitative research applies grounded theory methodology whereby a theory is a result of the inquiry, not its starting point, a firm theoretical framework is not employed. Rather, the so-called sensitising concepts (Figure 1) are used as initial ideas that guide the inquiry (Charmaz 2014:30; Blumer 1986:147).

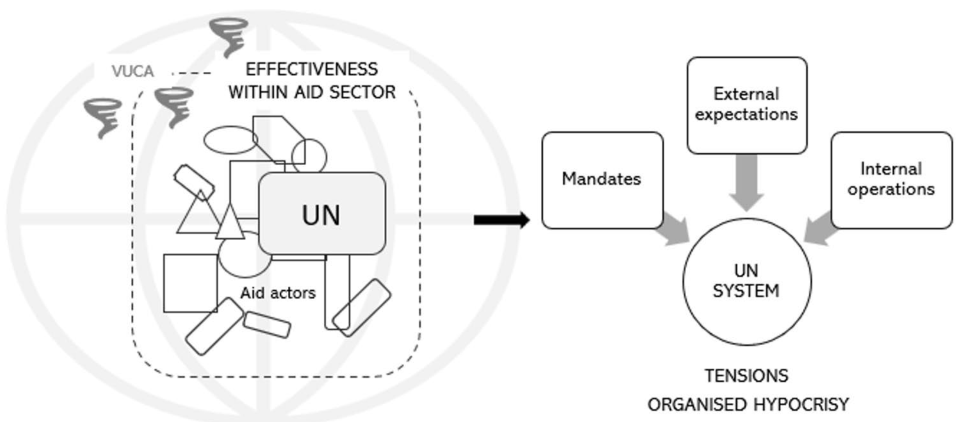

Figure 1. Sensitising concepts for the study

In its broadest sense, this study, concerning the UN system as a key stakeholder within the "aid sector" – term explored later – and within the sphere of supranational and inter-governmental entities, is positioned within the aid and development effectiveness literature. Extant literature is also consulted to better understand the broader context in which the field workers operate. Furthermore, as the UN system operates in a "VUCA world" – one of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – while also faced with the challenge of tensions between fulfilling its mandates, navigating the external expectations, and managing the internal work realities, the notion of tensions is included to the contextual examination in this study. In addition, the literature review lead to the concept of organised hypocrisy, denoting a systematic, inconsistent rhetoric and action that result from conflicting material and normative pressures (Brunsson 1986). These sensitising concepts and the related scholarship are discussed later in the study.

1.3 Object of Interest Within the UN System

As per Figure 2, this study is situated within the realm of international organisations, in the domain of aid and development work. Focusing on the UN system, the study examines its civil servants, also referred to as the "second UN" by some scholars (see e.g., Weiss 2013a:299; Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:32; Inis 1996:290). In this scholarship, the second UN of the civil servants is seen as distinct from the political[6] actors, i.e., the UN member states (referred to as the "first UN") and from the external parties influencing the UN system, the so-called "third UN", including, by way of example, non-governmental organisations (NGO), experts, and academics (Weiss and Daws 2020:18; Weiss, Carayannis, and Jolly 2009:123). The civil service is also distinct from the UN peacekeepers or the "Blue Helmets", which I refer to as the "fourth UN", given that they are military members of the troop-contributing countries seconded to work with the UN but without a direct, formal relationship to the system (UN 2023b; Deen-Racsma´ny 2011). The theatre of operations is "in the field" which, in this study, denotes work outside the headquarters and regional bureaux of the UN organisations. The study does not focus on specific types of operations within the UN system – e.g., those specialising only in humanitarian, development, or peacekeeping activities – given that the lines between them are increasingly blurred and workers move across the various UN entities. For the same reason, country criteria for duty stations is not set.

6 Koskenniemi (1995:336) refers to "soft" UN and "hard" UN, i.e., the economic and social activities through the UN Economic and Social Council vs. the political activities mainly steered through the UN Security Council.

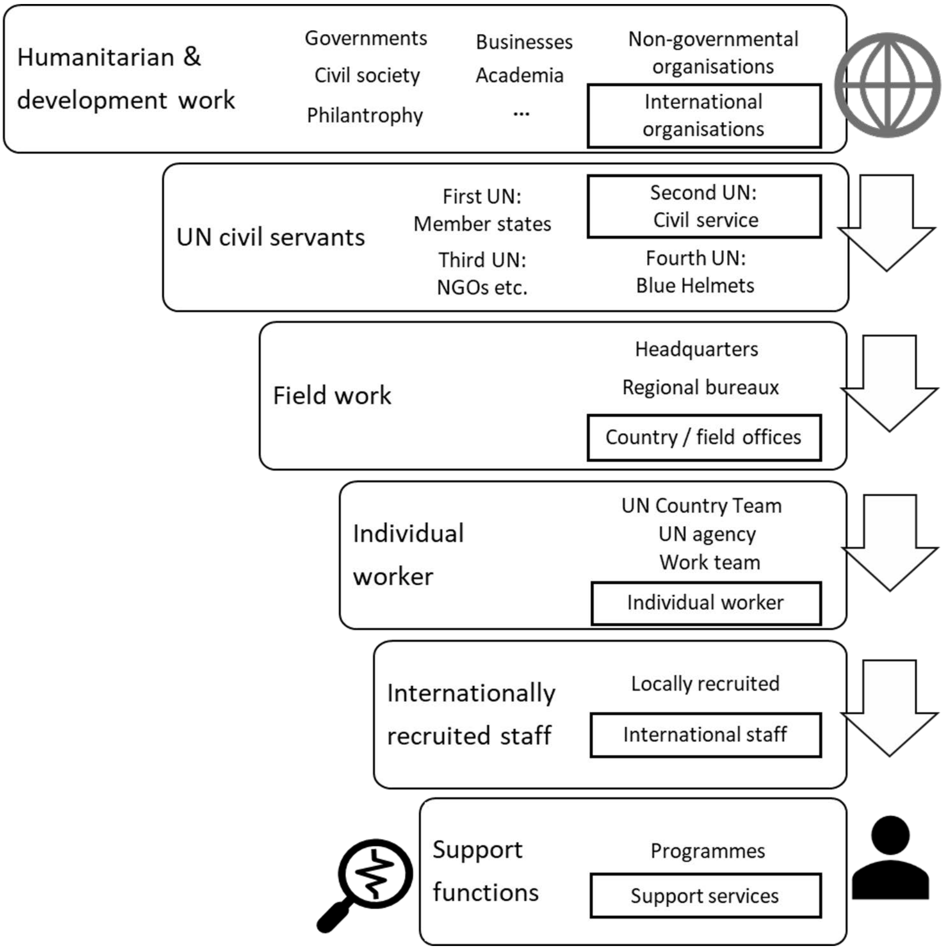

Figure 2. Situating the study

The object of interest is the individual worker. Focus is on internationally recruited civil servants in the Professional and Higher Categories working outside their home country, in "functions concerned with the substantive and managerial activities of the organizations, general administration and language services" (ICSC 2023a). In aid effectiveness literature, international staff or "expatriates" are, explicitly or implicitly, often depicted as western donor countries' citizens relocating to do aid work in poor countries, with references made to colonialism or neocolonialism (see e.g., Fine 2021, Fadejas-García and Mülli 2019, Saner 2010). However, competitively recruited civil servants in the UN system, the "UN expatriates", can emanate from rich or poor countries, be citizens of the former colonies or colonial masters – as of 2021, staff from the African nations alone counted for 21 per cent of the internationally recruited UN workforce (UNSCEB 2022).

The focus is on individuals engaged in non-programmatic roles, i.e. in support functions (collectively "Support Services") such as Finance, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Engineering, Procurement and Supply Chain, Security, Administration, Logistics and Fleet, and Human Resources. This excludes professionals working, for example, as nutrition experts, political policy advisors, or doctors. The reasons for these choices are threefold. First, although it is said that "the impact of UN programmes at the country level is directly related to the effectiveness, efficiency and cost of the operations that support them" (UNBIG 2019:5), such support activities – e.g., recruitment, travel management, salary payments, and the provision of office facilities, vehicles, and computers – are usually considered as overhead costs. Given the pressures in the aid sector to reduce overhead costs for better effectiveness, Support Services is assumed to directly feel this pressure. Second, the UN Business Operations Strategy aiming for enhanced effectiveness, discussed later in the study, predominantly concerns the functions within Support Services. Third, Support Services are predominantly directed for internal users and not performed amongst or for the external beneficiaries. It has been suggested that the relational architecture of work functions, i.e., the structural properties of work that shape employees' opportunities to connect and interact with other people, increases the motivation to make a prosocial difference by connecting employees to the impact they are having on the beneficiaries of their work (Grant 2007). Mindful of the "distance" between the Support Services staff and the ultimate beneficiaries of the work the UN system engages in, it is of interest to explore how the workers with lesser exposure to the beneficiaries feel about their value add, sense of achievement, work motivation, and alike. For the sake of economy, when this study refers to a worker in general, "he" is used to denote "he and/or she and/or they".

1.4 Research Motivation and Objective

1.4.1 Research Gap and Relevance

This study addresses research gaps on two levels. First, the inter-governmental and supranational organisations within international business have been under-studied. Second, there is a notable research gap concerning the role of individual actors.

According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, business cannot succeed in countries that fail (WBCSD 2010). As grand challenges emphasise the embeddedness of MNEs in social systems, they may have important implications for international business theory (Buckley, Doh, and Benischke 2017). An expanded scope has been suggested for international business research to gain insights into the interactions between MNEs and their external environment, making scholarly work within this discipline an integral part of the larger conversation in the social sciences (Buckley, Doh, and Benischke 2017) – the firm-level paradigms that dominate the inquiry are becoming increasingly obsolete (Ntara 2022). International business research has been found to benefit from shifting the debate towards understanding the new realities of sociopolitical and political uncertainty (Devinney et al. 2023), and it has been suggested that international business research be connected to public policy challenges even beyond their global effects, requiring expanding the analytical focus beyond the MNEs' global value chains to the actions by social actors locally such as NGOs and other civil society organisations (Alford, De Marchi, and Krishnan 2023:44). As such, a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics and types of supranational institutions is necessary (Hartmann et al. 2022), with a considerable gap existing also in connecting the discussion of inter-governmental organisations to international business (Moore, Brandl, and Dau 2023). This study is straddling these different but interdependent "businesses" by focusing on the UN system, one in the business of grand challenges. However, the focus is on the individual level actors, given that the outcomes produced even in the UN system depend, to a degree, on effective work behaviours (Stringer 2016) in the same way worker productivity – especially that of knowledge workers – has been found to be critical for success in the corporate sector (Drucker 1999).

To date, the UN system has been subject to a broad scholarly interest outside international business, especially within the study of international relations, international organisations, and international law, with the publications dealing with the constitutional bases, structures, and the parliamentary procedures of the UN system (Gordenker and Jönsson 2020:109; see also Appendix 2). Moreover, the variety of academic studies of peace operations has increased, with the literature having expanded to cover quantitative studies of the effects of the UN deployments on mortality rates to sociological studies of different contingents on operations (Gowan 2020:420). However, literature about the organisational development and behaviour in the UN context is scarce (Barnett and Finnemore 2020:73; Saner and Yiu 2011:152). It has been argued that in analysing behaviours of international organisations, states are assumed to be the determining factor, and therefore, the role of civil servants has been largely excluded (Yi-Chong and Weller 2008). While some studies concerning staff [7] of the second UN can be found – such as a study of conflicts of interest (Mele, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone 2016), how time and

7 As per Anderführen-Biget, Häfliger, and Hug (2013), inquiries on UN staff have mainly concerned recruitment and staff management. However, an examination of the cited studies on recruitment reveals that they concern the selection of top-level UN weapons inspectors to Iraq (Johns 2007) and the appointments of bank presidents or heads of UN entities, which are often subject to representation established through UN resolutions (Cogan 2009). As such, these studies are more relevant in the context of the "first UN".

space are experienced (Kimber and Maertens 2021), and on diversity management (Eckhard and Parizek 2022) – Weiss (2013a:299) finds that the critical contributions of UN staff are typically overlooked, with the national interest politics and the bureaucratic constraints being emphasised. Finding that principal-agent problems, bureaucratic culture, institutional rivalry, specialised expertise, and professional norms strongly shape the UN activities in ways that we are only beginning to understand, it has been suggested that a better understanding of UN staff would help to link internal workings to external behaviour (Barnett and Finnemore 2020:73).

While aid effectiveness has been studied extensively, the focus has been on aid interventions, macroeconomic effects, and organisations, not on individual workers, despite them being the “drivers of the development machine” (Verma 2014:62). “We probably know more about the missionaries and colonial civil servants of the 19th and early 20th centuries than we do about contemporary development workers”, writes Stirrat (2008:407). There is also a perception that aid work is not work at all, but charity or tourism, leisure or amateur pursuit (Hindman and Fechter 2014:4), and it has also been suggested that, as regards humanitarian action, there may be a tendency to keep the workers beyond reproach (Fast 2010). Part of the neglect on the personal dimension, it has been argued, stems also from the kind of academic culture that values objectivity and search for general, not individual, explanations (Chambers 2005:195). However, during the past decade, some studies of individual aid workers have emerged in the fields of anthropology and industrial and organisational psychology, with the latter referred to as humanitarian work psychology, which concerns the “application of industrial and organisational psychology to humanitarian issues, and more broadly the development of a psychology that promotes humanitarianism work” (Carr et al. 2012:4). Social anthropologically-informed ethnography (“aidnography”) studies how aid workers understand their world and work (Apthorpe 2013:199), and the topic of effectiveness emerges, for example, in connection with staff mobility, social behavior, and physical security (Rajak and Stirrat 2013; Eyben 2013b; Roth 2014). Notwithstanding the above, it has been broadly acknowledged that there is a research gap concerning the role of the individual worker within international organisations and the aid sector alike (e.g., Häfliger and Hug 2015; Fechter 2014:132 & 2012b; Hindman and Fechter 2014; Ramalingam 2015:75; Burt 2012:327; Chambers and Pettit 2004:140; Scott-Villiers 2004:200). Similar tendency to focus on the macro level factors is found within the international business discipline (see e.g., Gonçalves, da Silva, and Teixeira 2019; Buckley Doh, and Benischke 2017; Foss 2010; Felin and Foss 2005). However, in the past two decades, the individual-level considerations and micro-foundations have received more attention, whereby collective concepts are unpacked to understand the impact of individual-level factors on organisations (Felin, Foss, and Ployhart 2015).

1.4.2 Research Objective and Questions

Heeding the "call to examine the unexamined" (Hindman and Fechter 2014:3) in the aid sector, this study, exploring the experiences of the UN field practitioners, examines how international professionals navigate pressures for enhanced effectiveness in international organisations in the contexts of internal and external flux, with "effectiveness" denoting the achievement of objectives (Knox-Clarke 2018). This main question is probed with the help of the following guiding questions:

1. How does the aid effectiveness agenda shape the professional operating context of international UN field workers?
2. How do the international field workers in the UN system navigate the operational realities to fulfil the UN mandate?

This study is a contribution to the aid effectiveness conversation, another piece to the growing body of knowledge, with the aim being for a middle-range theory, one "delimited to specific aspects of social phenomena" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2011:155). The study contributes to current scholarship by addressing the research gaps concerning individual level actors on one hand and international and inter-governmental organisations within the global ecosystem of organisations on the other. Combining these two aspects within the international business discipline is fitting, given that we do not, despite the extant scholarly boundaries, live in the world of international business nor in the world of international development but in an international world where development of a country may even hinge on business development. The study vivifies the multiple contexts of the UN system in which the political and the practical must co-exist despite tensions between them. Better awareness of the ways individuals navigate work challenges in settings of flux can help not only the UN system but also other international organisations: it can enable more informed engagement, devised for mutually beneficial, collaborative action geared towards addressing the wicked and grand problems in a manner that is better aligned with the principles of effective development cooperation (OECD/UNDP 2019), as discussed later. Furthermore, introducing micro-level insights to expatriate workers' logics and behaviours can add more ballast to the field practitioners' toolbox while also benefiting any type of international operation seeking to enhance its performance. This study can also serve as a rattling of the cage, as topics that may be sensitive within the political-diplomatic system, such as workforce diversity and the motivations of aid sector actors, are discussed. May this serve as a nudge towards a more open discussion even about the more delicate elements shaping work effectiveness.

1.4.3 Personal Motivations and Positionality

My professional background uniquely combines experience in the manufacturing sector and in the UN system, with my present intrigue for aid effectiveness rooted in my auto industry past. In that sphere of intense competition, success relied on mavericks, technological excellence, and visionary gumption on one hand, and on accountants, discipline, and standardisation on the other. Effectiveness was about rigorous sourcing and seamless supply chains; efficiency about standardisation and optimised ergonomics. In this lean world of logic, measuring was possible and vital; Six Sigma made sense, as shaving off seconds on the assembly line could be monetised, efficiency gains attributed, and their ideators, regardless of the colour of their collars, were awarded. These fundamental premises changed for me in the UN system: I had moved from a complicated system to a mighty complex one.

Shaping my thesis topic in 2019, I was stationed in South Sudan, in one of the largest UN humanitarian operations. I was often puzzled about how we got things done, when forces around us seemed to hinder, not help, our work. If it weren't about the world politics, it was the flash flood or Ebola – or a herd of long-horned cows at the air strip limiting our movement. There was *always* something. Effectiveness became intriguing for a different reason. I begun research on aid effectiveness while on study leave in South Korea, a nation that had graduated from aid recipient to donor in less than five decades (Kim and Lee 2013), and it was also there the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness had been held in 2011 (OECD 2011) – a meeting I discuss later. My research into the aid literature revealed just how controversial a topic aid was, seemingly bringing out "the worst in both left and right" (Collier 2007:99). To Moyo aid was dead (2009), to Yanguas it was not dead "unless we kill it" (2018:11). I was particularly affected by examining a decade-long, heated scholarly sparring, the "Great Aid Debate" (Gulrajani 2011) – or the "Not-so Great Debate" (Engel 2014:1374) – that took place between the two distinguished American economists, Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly. Initiated around 2004, this "aid war" (Pryke 2014) and "foreign aid face-off" (Easterly 2006a; Sachs 2006) based on simple narratives about the right way to address poverty ended a decade later without a resolution, and during this time, a cornucopia of articles and books[8]

[8] E.g. *The End of Poverty* (Sachs 2005), *Africa unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future* (Ayittey 2005), *The White Man's Burden* (Easterly 2007), *The Bottom Billion* (Collier 2007), *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2009), *The Aid Trap* (Hubbard and Duggan 2009), and *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo 2012). The solutions to the aid quandary vary from the "Big Push" in financial support and planning (Sachs) to piecemeal approaches (Easterly), and from breaking the conflict and natural resource traps (Collier) to eliminating aid (Moyo) and investing in market-based solutions and supporting the private sector (Ayittey; Moyo; Hubbard and Duggan).

were published. In this connection, I detected a startling blindness to the human factor in the quest for saving humanity: those on the frontlines were neglected. This was not a research gap but a gaping hole. I had to study this.

This study is also motivated by my fundamental belief that living beings that thrive makes sense. It is not an altruistic view but a practical one: the problems of the planet are increasingly impacting even its happiest nations; there is no escaping it. There is also an obligation to expend the taxpayer funds in the most efficient manner. As such, even the most well-intentioned good-doing does not earn a hall pass from accountability; idealism does not compensate for professionalism. When lives are at stake, there is an obligation to not only do no harm but to do things well.

Sumner and Tribe (2008:4-5) discuss how aid researchers need to consider their positionality or situationality – e.g., race, nationality, and status – influencing our preconceptions and interpretations. They further state that development study is often criticised for imposing its principally western or local elite ideas on 'the Other', that is, the poor and marginalised. I am acutely aware that, as a westerner subscribing to western ideas and ideals, such as the centrality of democracy, free speech, and religious freedom, these values and social and cultural preconceptions are shaping my thinking. There are multiple unearned privileges I am enjoying, for example, related to race, social class, and health. Moreover, that there may be issues related to studying one's own place of work has been brought up (see e.g., Creswell and Poth 2018:153-4). Inevitably, my professional experiences affect what I may pay attention to or fail to take note of. Thus, I am aware of potential unconscious biases and the importance of engaging in reflexivity – scrutiny of my own experience, decisions, and interpretations, including the influence of my interests and assumptions on the inquiry (Bryant and Charmaz 2019; Thornberg 2012). However, while my closeness to the topic may introduce downsides, it also has upsides. My experiences in the UN system, ranging from those in the container offices of the humanitarian agencies to the high-rises of the UN Secretariat, have made me increasingly intrigued about the "many-to-many world of aid" (Ramalingam 2015:5). This facilitates search for information and enables making conceptual linkages between issues, while also assisting with what Pouliot (2007:370) refers to as genuine communication during the interview process, contingent to the informant and the researcher sharing a "similar language and a commonsensical world". Also, exposure to the field reality is especially valuable in grounded theory research which requires "considerable exposure to the empirical context or subject area of research" (Suddaby 2006:640). Having left the UN system in 2022, I am devoid of financial ties, loyalties, and undue external influences on the research agenda and reporting. Had I remained in the UN system, being perceived as an unbiased researcher would have been a likely challenge. Thus, while my UN background strengthens my credibility with those interviewed, my distance to the system has fostered a sense of neutrality.

1.4.4 Delimitations of the Study

Transcending the "development blame game" (Hindman and Fechter 2014:3), this research takes a novel approach to examining effectiveness in aid and development. Antithetical to the aid sector dictate, this study is not, in the traditional meaning of the term, "results-focused" – it does not zero in on outcomes or impact in search for evidence to advocate for or against aid; it does not inspect whether the aid glass is half full or half empty. Instead, observing that there is a glass still, after almost 80 years, this study examines some of those who fill or empty that glass, "out there in the field". Subsequently, apart from the highlights in Chapter 5, examination of the macro-level aspects concerning effectiveness is not within the remit of this study. Furthermore, as indicated earlier, the exploration concerns only one category of civil servants, namely the English-speaking individuals who have been recruited internationally and who have experience in Support Services within the UN system.

As regards the discussion concerning the activities for enhanced effectiveness within the UN system in Chapter 3, the select strategies of interest have been identified from a wider array of initiatives and topics garnering attention in the sector and to accentuate those topics appearing in the UN discourse. This study recognizes that the above does not constitute the full range of measures to enhance UN operations. For example, although the UN system has been subject to reform[9] attempts since its creation (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:244; Geri 2001), the focus is not on these reforms. It has been found that the actual influence of member states agreements on the ground depends on the individual civil servants (Barnett and Finnemore 2020:73) and that performance is highly contingent on individuals rather than systematic reforms (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022). Technology in aid work is not discussed either, although investments have been made, e.g., in ERP-systems with the costs amounting to more than US$1 billion at the UN Secretariat alone (UN 2020b) and although the spread of ICT can accelerate human progress (UN 2015a). Localisation of work is not within the study scope, although it could lead to reduced costs and stronger ownership of decisions (Roth 2015b; Owubah 2024). Similarly, increased professionalisation of the aid workforce (Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner 2016; Ilten 2015; Roth 2014) is not discussed despite their positive effects, and strategies to enhance UN programming practices are also out of scope for this study. This delineation accentuates focus on the individual and on themes deemed to directly concern international Support Services field staff.

[9] See *Reforming the United Nations* (Müller 2021) for an overview. The UN reforms (or proposals) concern, e.g., the Security Council, General Assembly, and ECOSOC (Luck 2020:797); peacekeeping; management practices (UN 2016b; UN 2018d; UN 2012a); mechanisms to protect human rights; or humanitarian coordination (Verlin 2021).

1.5 Research Process and Structure

This monograph adopts a grounded theory method to form an understanding and an interpretation of how the UN workers navigate the challenge of effectiveness at work. As such, the study is heeding the call to "move beyond the conformity to the inductive theory-building" and towards more pluralism within international business research (Welch et al. 2020:207). The structure of the thesis is presented in Figure 3.

The study first sets the scene on global level by discussing the complexities of the aid sector and the internationally agreed effectiveness agenda; then focuses on the UN system and its internal "effectiveness agenda" and related issues, followed by an exploration of how the micro-level actors relate to the challenge of work effectiveness. As a theory is an outcome, not a starting point for the study, the study does not employ a fixed theoretical framework to direct the research process. Rather, it uses sensitising concepts to elucidate the settings in which the field workers operate, with an aim to facilitate sense-making and data interpretation. It is this context-sensitivity and the inductive-abductive nature of the grounded theory method that guide the logic and structure of the thesis and process of the study: on one hand, the understanding of the context for aid work is deepened throughout the chapters as we move from the abstract to concrete and from the macro-level to the level of individual actors; on the other hand, the various data discussed along the curly path of this research journey – one whose direction could not be decided at the onset – culminates in a theory grounded in such data.

Chapter 1 clarifies the aims and the motivations for the study, also situating aid business into the context of "other" business. Chapter 2 applies a wide lens to set the scene by illuminating the macro-level aid sector characteristics and the salient points of the aid effectiveness agenda, while in Chapter 3, the lens is narrowed to the contextual aspects of the UN system. We familiarize ourselves with three interdependent aspects: the UN system characteristics, the challenges these defining features pose for effectiveness, and some of the strategies deployed to try to address these challenges, including issues with the alignment of these strategies. Chapter 4 discusses the philosophical underpinnings for the study, explaining why the ontological assumptions are based on moderate constructivism, why the grounded theory method has been chosen, and what this means for theory construction and the researcher's role in it. This chapter also discusses the inductive-abductive nature of the approach: it begins with inductive inquiry, adopts a comparative logic, invokes abductive reasoning, and emphasizes interaction throughout the research process. How this logic is reflected in this study is clarified by discussing the use of the defining elements of grounded theory method, including data collection, coding, constant comparative method, and memoing. How technology has been harnessed to serve the study and other aspects related to research ethics are also discussed.

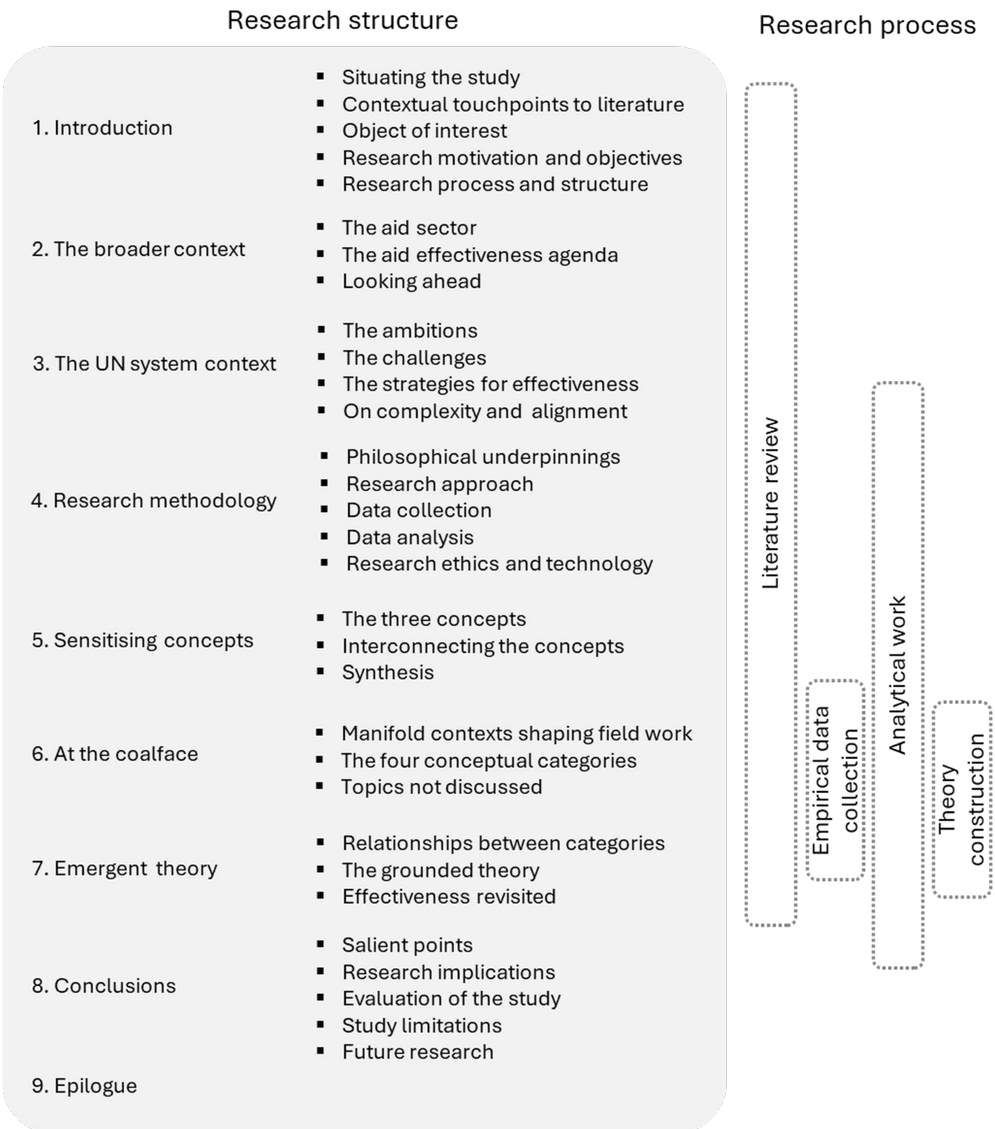

Figure 3. Research structure and process

In Chapter 5, the sensitising concepts adopted in the study – effectiveness, tensions, and organised hypocrisy – and their interrelatedness are discussed in the context of extant literature, to further vivify the backdrop for practitioners' work in the field. This chapter ends with a synthesis of the nested pressures for effectiveness for the UN system field workers, thus preparing us for the empirical phase, for the voices from the field. Forming the bulk of the study, Chapter 6 zooms the lens down the individual level, taking us to the coalface to listen how the field workers deal with the quandary of effectiveness in their everyday life. The chapter structure reflects the analysis of the empirical material, with my interpretations presented as four conceptual categories. The presented reflections on related points in the existing literature highlight the iterative and inductive-abductive nature of the grounded theory method. In Chapter 7, the study articulates the interactions of the four conceptual categories, followed by a presentation and elucidation of the constructed theory. We also revisit the concept of effectiveness, to compare how the workers' thinking about effectiveness aligns with the UN approaches for enhanced effectiveness. Chapter 8 discusses the research implications, quality, and limitations, as well as the recommendations for future study. An epilogue concludes the report.

While the grounded theory method is described in detail in Chapter 4, it can be summarised that, this interpretive process aiming at theory construction involves, in addition to the empirical material collected through interviews, various other types of data. Literature is used iteratively throughout the research process to guide the inquiry and to understand how the findings may provide new insights or extend the extant knowledge. The process of inquiry is not linear and cannot be planned for in detail, given that the emergent data directs the study, including the number of interviews. Thus, remaining open to inquiry is of essence. The empirical data collection and analytical work do not occur sequentially but concurrently and can be seen as forming intertwined elements of the theory construction process, with the resulting theory being an interpretation and depending on the researcher's view (Charmaz 2014:239).

Given the chosen methodolody and the abductive elements embedded in it, it should be underscored that the structure of this thesis is a compromise of sorts – one in which I have had to navigate between fostering flow for a good reader experience and honouring the organic, abductive reasoning process embedded in the meandering grounded theory inquiry. The need to transmute and slice into crisp chapters the discoveries of this organic process – one with multiple interwoven elements that appear and disapper, only to re-emerge in other, surprising ways – has challenged me. Not only has the memoing process forced upon my consciousness the realisation that I ought to get comfortable with accepting that the "lean world of logic" of my automotive years apply not in my reasoning process for this study – but that I even needed to disclose that messiness to the readers, while simultaneously demonstrating academic rigour. Subsequently, the presentation of the findings is a combination of "reporting" and "describing". I hope to have achieved adequacy without overwhelm.

All figures and graphs in this thesis are designed by the researcher. The Microsoft SmartArt and icons as well as the design elements obtained from PresenterMedia used in the development of such figures and graphs are used for non-commercial purposes only and as such, allowed without separate licensing agreements.

2 Examining the Broader Context

The importance of contextual aspects – the "dynamic array of factors, features, processes, or events" (Michailova, 2011:130) – has been increasingly recognised in international business research (e.g., Teagarden, Von Glinow, and Mellahi 2018; Michailova 2011). Similarly, the imperative of avoiding context-blind blueprint solutions has been underscored in aid work (Levine and Pain 2024; Busch et al. 2021; White 2019; UN 2018b; Chambers 2017; Bain, Booth, and Wild 2016; Blampied 2016a; World Bank 2015). In this chapter, we examine the broader context for UN field work, i.e., the aid sector and the international aid effectiveness agenda.

2.1 The Aid Sector

The space for humanitarian, development, and peace operations is referred to in many ways, e.g., as a sector, community, system, business, industry, ecosystem, marketplace, or a sphere – or even as "Aidland", a place without clear coordinates, boundaries, or citizenship (Apthorpe 2013:199). For simplicity, this study mainly uses "aid sector" (and "aid work / worker"), even if that may misleadingly invoke images of clear boundaries. Humanitarian action means "the task of saving lives, alleviating suffering and maintaining human dignity in the face of man-made crises or natural disasters" (Crisp 2020:583-589). "Development", in turn, is a multidimensional[10] undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life, involving economic and social development as well as environmental protection (UN 1997), while peace operations provide political and peacebuilding support to help countries transition from conflict to peace (UN n.d.[11]). Humanitarian action ("emergency relief") is provided in acute needs and has a more short-term character, while

10 "Development" remains a vague term; even in the economic context, it lacks a standard definition (Yanguas 2018:75; Willis 2011; Riddell 2008:17). The more holistic view of development started to be recognized in the 1990s: development was seen as an increase in the economic, political, and civil rights of all people (World Bank 1991). This multidimensionality emerges in the SDGs, whereby the poverty reduction is intertwined with other strategies, e.g., those on health and climate change (UN 2015a).

11 https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping, retrieved May 1, 2024.

development implies longer-term strategies for social and economic change (Roth 2015a). While foreign aid can be a contentious topic, humanitarian aid is viewed more favourably (UN 2016a). That humanitarian aid can deliver visible results faster than development work enables a broader consensus on providing such aid compared to aid for development or peacebuilding purposes (MOFA/NL 2013): it is easier to mobilize resources for crisis response that attracts media attention, as prevention of crises do not typically make the headlines (UN 2016a), with donors tending to favour funding high visibility projects (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:669). However, humanitarian action is not unproblematic; it s a highly competitive marketplace – a “carnival of names and flags and logos” (Loy 2023) – with a multiplicity of actors, each with their own mandate and brand, “rushing to partake of the relief cake” (Crisp, quoting Weiss 2020:597).

The aid sector involves a plethora of stakeholders from the first, the second, the third, and the fourth sectors, and their number is increasing. These public, private, non-profit, and social enterprise actors have a variety of interests and roles, some of them overlapping. These actors include beneficiaries; governments; international organisations; regional development banks and financial institutions; international non-governmental organisations; businesses; academia, think thanks, and policy institutions; citizen donors; media; and civil society, with the latter including various types of local NGOs[12], faith- and community-based organisations, foundations, charities, and eminent persons (Lewis, Kanji, and Demundo 2021:10; Weiss and Daws 2020:7; CDA 2010a; Dichter 2003:100-102). However, just like donors may not act for altruistic reasons, some civil society organisations (CSO) may work to advance their own causes, as the “CSOs reflect the societies they are part of” (Okonjo-Iweala 2018:160). The “uncivil” civil society actors such as belligerents, warlords, and criminals are reportedly proliferating (Weiss and Daws 2020:6).

The number of aid sector actors is difficult to establish. However, the following data illustrate the large numbers involved. It has been estimated that there are up to 630,000 humanitarian workers (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022) but even a network of 80 million people has been referred to (ICRC 2022). In 2018, the number of INGOs was reportedly over 75,000 (Lewis, Kanji, and Themudo 2021:1), and as per the 2009 estimate, there were 3,300,000 NGOs in India alone (World Economic Forum 2013). In 2022, the UN system had over 125,000 staff (UNSCEB n.d.[13]) and there were nearly 100,000 Blue Helmets (UN n.d.[14]).

12 E.g., BINGO (Big international NGO); BONGO (Business-organized NGO); DONGO (Donor-oriented/organized NGO); ENGO (Environmental NGO); and LINGO (Little international NGO) (Lewis, Kanji, and Demundo 2021:10).

13 https://unsceb.org/hr-nationality, retrieved November 3, 2023.

14 https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military, retrieved November 3, 2023.

Adding to the crowding of the sector are the many collaborations between the actors, such as the South-South and triangular cooperation[15] but also the agreements between governments and private partners for the delivery and funding of public services (OECD 2019). The partnerships between the private sector and the UN have strengthened since the mid-1990s (Murphy 2020:358). In 2000, the UN Global Compact was established to mobilise companies in aligning their operations around the universal principles around human rights, labour, the environment, and anti-corruption (UNGC 2021), and the collaboration has deepened to support the SDGs, including for new technologies such as the blockchain and artificial intelligence (Murphy 2020:359) and to address cyber threats (Kello 2020:537). However, the place of private sector in development is also controversial. There are concerns about transparency and the businesses' primary concern being the bottom line, not the common interest (ECOSOC 2018; Elg, Wihlborg, and Örnerheim 2017; Weiss 2016:180-81), with them contributing to unsustainable development, worsening environmental and social outcomes, and widening economic inequality (Sachs and Sachs 2021; Adams and Luchsinger 2015). There are also debates about "greenwashing" – businesses misusing the SDGs through selective reporting about sustainability (Lashitew 2021:185) – and about "bluewashing", whereby corporate pledges may be used to advance corporate interests and influence within the UN (Berliner and Prakash 2015). Concern has been expressed about market power translating into political power, for example, by industry shaping public health policies and strategies that affect their products (WHO 2013).

Stakeholder motivations to engage in the aid sector are varied, and the evidence shows that factors other than the needs of receiving country are important determinants of aid (Qian 2015). Donors' motivations include giving aid for reasons of solidarity or historical ties, or for furthering one's commercial, strategic, or political interests (Riddell 2008:91), and populism has also been found to affect the states' foreign and aid policies (Hammerschmidt, Meyer, and Pintsch 2021). The United States, for example, uses foreign aid as a means to stimulate domestic growth and to advance national security by combating radicalisation (USAID 2019), and the country being a major food aid donor – 61 per cent of the official development

[15] In South-South cooperation "two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how and through … collective actions, including partnerships involving Governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector". In triangular cooperation, programme and project partnerships between developing countries are supported by a developed country(ies)/or multilateral organization(s) (UN 2016b).

assistance, ODA[16] in 2021 (OECD n.d.[17]) – is said to benefit the influential domestic food processors, maritime interests, and the NGO community (Barrett and Maxwell 2005:87). In the case of China, its Belt and Road Initiative – also compared with the Marshall Plan (Lui and Chen 2021) – is of interest: it involves nearly 70 countries while covering 30.9% of global GDP and 61.9% of the world population (Zou et al. 2022), and while it can promote economic transformation through infrastructure connectivity and job creation, it can also increase economic, environmental, and political risks of the host countries (Borodyna, Calabrese, and Nadin 2022). Aid can also be a diplomatic tool (Fee 2012:50). Donor states are found to be more generous towards geographically closer, politically less affine, and oil exporting countries, with strong bias for former colonies (Fink and Redaelli 2011). It is suggested that the more a donor's profile is misaligned with the norms of effective aid, the more likely it is that aid is provided for reputational reasons (Gulrajani and Swiss 2019), with aid used by countries to construct a "good citizen" identity (Brysk 2009:5).

Substantial financial resources flow within the sector, with the following illustrating their magnitude. In 2023, the ODA from the OECD-DAC[18] donors alone was nearly US$224 billion (OECD 2024) and the other official flows (OOF) nearly US$14 billion in 2022 (OECD n.d.[19]). The UN system revenue in 2022 was US$74.3 billion (Conceição et al. 2024) and the annual average contribution of private philanthropy was, between 2016-2019, nearly US$11 billion (OECD 2021b). China's aid in 2020 was nearly US$3 billion (SAIS-CARI 2022). Foundations, high net worth individuals, and social investors play an increasing role as funders (Natsios 2020; Ingram and Lord 2019; ECOSOC 2016; Lundsgaarde and Keijzer 2016). In addition, new multilateral development banks have been created: as of 2017, there were 28 of them (Ray 2021), with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank launched in 2014 by China (Woods 2020:296) and the New Development Bank announced in 2015 by the BRICS countries (NDB 2015) being the most recent ones. However, large funding flows, coupled with increasing global challenges and fragility, do not equate to adequate funding. For example, for humanitarian action alone, the funding gap in 2023 meant that over 30 per cent of people targeted for assistance could not be reached (OCHA 2023a).

[16] ODA: the "flows of official financing administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective, and which are concessional in character with a grant element of at least 25 per cent." (OECD 2008a)

[17] https://data.oecd.org/oda/food-aid.htm, retrieved November 1, 2023.

[18] Members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

[19] OOF: Official transactions not meeting the ODA criteria, e.g., grants for commercial aims, export credits, private sector subsidies, and funds to support private investment. https://data-explorer.oecd.org/, retrieved September 11, 2024.

The aid sector is characterised by blurring of lines, on multiple levels. While lines can be unclear between aid for development and aid as strategic investment, in tandem, lines are fading between development and business sectors, public and private actors, and non-profits and for-profits (Bracho et al. 2021; Dees and Battle Anderson 2017; Sánchez-Hernández et al 2021). The lines are getting increasingly opaque also between the North and the South (Horner 2019), and between the donors and the recipients (Zoccal Gomes and Esteves 2018). Furthermore, it is recognised that it is not always clear what constitutes humanitarian work and development work (Roth 2015a; Riddell 2008:330; Jones and Stoddard 2003) with the two seen as "artificial institutional labels" (UN 2016a:29). Humanitarian actors are also to work on disaster prevention (UN 2016a), and the increasingly protracted[20] nature of many emergencies requires that humanitarian action considers measures that are more comprehensive and developmental in nature (UNHCR 2021a). Furthermore, as sustainable development and peace are intractably intertwined (UN 2015a), the lines are getting blurred even between peace operations and the humanitarian and development activities (Roth 2014; Walker et al. 2010; Jones and Stoddard 2003), the "three sides of the same triangle" (UN 2016c). The softening of these lines is a much-needed coming together of separate and yet interdependent streams (Griffin 2020:837): as the UN Security Council places non-combat tasks and governance and development-related responsibilities on the peacekeepers (Ladsous 2017:xvi), and as peacekeeping aims to help create conditions conducive to peace-building, an integrated approach is necessary (Bellamy 2017:22). The notion of a "humanitarian-development-peace nexus" is about strengthening the coherence and interplay[21] between the humanitarian, development, and the peace efforts (OECD 2023a).

The aid sector is an increasingly complex marketplace (Figure 4), and development has been described as a "series of battles to be fought" that creates "winners and losers" (Yanguas 2018:204). Over the past two decades, the effects of sector bending, aid fragmentation, and donor and aid proliferation have been widely acknowledged; effectiveness is a persisting challenge (Gulrajani and Liam 2019; Ingram and Lord 2019; Willner-Reid 2018; Benfield and Como 2018; EUP 2016; UN 2016a; Lawson 2013; Anderson 2011; Ghosh and Kharas 2011; Kilby 2011).

20 Main types of humanitarian emergencies include public health emergencies, sudden-onset/slow-onset disasters, large scale refugee and migration crises, and complex/protracted crises (UNICEF 2024b). In protracted crises, a significant proportion of population is acutely vulnerable to hunger, disease and disruptions to livelihoods over prolonged periods, with long-standing undernourishment (FAO 2024). In refugee context, a protracted situation involves 25,000+ refugees from the same nationality exiled for at least five consecutive years in a host country (UNHCR 2020).

21 See also SDG 17 *Partnership for the Goals* (UN 2015a).and the *New Way of Working* approach agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 (OCHA 2017).

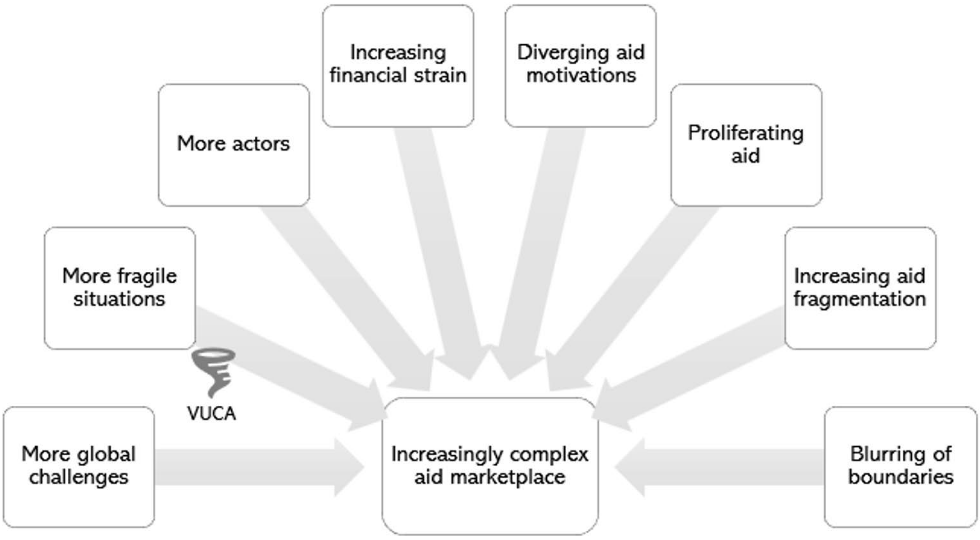

Figure 4. Increasingly complex aid marketplace (own compilation)

The evolving donor landscape has brought about positive effects but also concerns. As the traditional aid practices have been challenged (Glennie and Rogerson 2011) and the developing countries have more access to external finance (Esteves and Klingebiel 2021:186; Prizzon, Greenhill, and Mustapha 2016), the competitive pressures within the aid system have weakened the western donors' bargaining position, also exposing inefficient processes (Woods 2008). Across the global South[22], ODA has continued to lose relevance (Janus, Klingebiel and Paulo 2015), and its changing purposes, e.g., in tackling climate change, are noted (Calleja and Cichocka 2022; Chen 2024). The role of aid in general has reduced, with other financial flows and processes – e.g., trade, remittances[23] and foreign direct investment – increasing in importance (Raimondo, Bamberger, and Vaessen 2015). These changes in the aid architecture[24] have shaped even the "formal" aid effectiveness agenda, discussed next.

22 "Global South" refers to low- or middle-income countries in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean, i.e. those formerly referred to as less developed, developing, underdeveloped, or third world countries (Clarke 2018).

23 In 2022, such remittances amounted to US$626 billion (World Bank 2022).

24 Denotes the structures and systems through which aid is delivered and managed, involving governments, donors, implementing entities, funding mechanisms, monitoring systems, governance structures, etc. (see e.g., Burall et al. 2006).

2.2 The Aid Effectiveness Agenda

2.2.1 Principles for Enhanced Effectiveness

In the aid discourse, up to 1970s, aid effectiveness did not receive much focus; as an additional resource, aid was assumed to necessarily make a positive contribution (Glennie and Sumner 2016:2). However, in the 1970s, the UN, the World Bank, and other multilateral organisations expanded their activities considerably, and there was a reorientation from import support aid and structural adjustment loans towards more poverty focus while the oil crises reversed the economic conditions (Tarp 2006; Hjertholm and White 2000:61). Aid has become a contentious topic and subject to heated debates (Metzger and Günther 2015), including amongst the actors within the international aid architecture, which is found to be “a child of spontaneous disorder” rather than a result of a coherent design (Reisen 2010:4).

The first decade of the new millennium and the launch of the Millenium Development Goals marked the beginning of the “aid effectiveness era” in the aid discourse (Atwood and Manning 2021:359). The effectiveness agenda evolved over two decades in a series of international meetings that built and updated the principles of effectiveness in aid and development as the landscape was changing (Calleja and Cichocka 2022) – Wood et al. (2011) refer to a “blooming aid effectiveness industry” with a large number of initiatives and specialised working groups, meetings and guidelines. The key outcome documents addressing aid effectiveness in international fora include the Rome Declaration on Harmonisation (OECD 2003), the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD 2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (OECD 2008b), and the agreement on Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (OECD 2011). The principles of the Busan Partnership agreement are referred to still today, with the various post-Busan meetings, such as those held in Mexico (GPEDC 2014), Addis Ababa (UN 2015b), Nairobi (GPEDC 2016), New York (GPEDC 2019a), and Geneva (GPEDC 2022) having reaffirmed commitment to these principles.

The evolution of the aid effectiveness principles from 2003 to 2011 is summarised in Table 1. The main themes concerning aid effectiveness include cooperation, ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results focus, and accountability.

Table 1. Aid effectiveness principles over time (compiled from OECD 2003; OECD 2005; OECD 2008b; OECD 2011)

Agreements / Principles	Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation 2011	Accra Agenda for Action 2008	Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness 2005	Rome Declaration on Harmonisation 2003
Ownership	X	X	X	X
Focus on results	X	X	X	
Inclusive partnerships	X	X		
Transparency; accountability	X	X	X	
Alignment			X	
Harmonisation	X1	X2	X	X
1 Term co-operation used; 2 Term co-ordination used in connection with fragmentation				

The Rome Declaration focused on the principles of country ownership and harmonisation, referring to assistance provided in line with partner country priorities and with donors working in a more streamlined manner. In the Paris Declaration, the principles of alignment, managing for results, and mutual accountability were added (OECD 2005), while the Accra Agenda for Action sought to strengthen and deepen the implementation of the Paris Declaration, highlighting the inclusion of civil society in the aid efforts. In 2011, modified principles were agreed in the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, with South Korea representing a success case of foreign aid with an aid recipient becoming a donor in less than five decades (Kim and Lee 2013). In Busan, the term "development cooperation" was adopted to the effectiveness discourse, denoting an "activity that aims to support national or international development priorities, is not driven by profit, discriminates in favour of developing countries, and is based on cooperative relationships that seek to enhance developing country ownership" (Alonso and Glennie 2015:4).

As per Figure 5, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation refers to four principles ("Busan Principles") that aim for sustainable development: ownership of development priorities by developing counties; results and sustainable impact as the drivers for investments and in policy making; partnerships; and transparency and accountability (OECD 2011). While these principles appear similar to those in the Paris agreement, the Busan Principles are said to have marked a fundamental shift from traditional aid to a recognition of the importance of diverse actors in the increasingly complex aid architecture (OECD 2011).

Figure 5. The Busan Principles (adapted from OECD 2011)

The principles of *ownership* and *results* emphasise that development be led by developing countries, not by donors or other partners. The efforts should have a lasting impact on reducing poverty and inequality, on sustainable development, and on enhancing developing countries' capacities, aligned with the priorities set out by the developing countries themselves. The core ideas include the following:

- Supporting developing countries' efforts to strengthen institutions and policies through approaches that aim to manage, rather than avoid, risk.
- Adopting country-led results frameworks and using country systems[25].
- Accelerating opportunities for local procurement, business development, employment, and income generation, and efforts to untie aid.
- Strengthening parliaments' role in oversight of development processes, and support capacity development, including civil society organisations.

The principles of *transparency* and *accountability* include the following core ideas:

- Improving the availability and public accessibility of information on development co-operation and other development resources.
- Focusing on establishing transparent public financial management and aid information management systems, implementing a common, open standard for electronic publication of information on resources provided through development co-operation.
- Making development co-operation more predictable.

[25] Refers to the use of mechanisms and procedures related to budget execution, financial reporting, auditing, and procurement of a public management system (GPEDC 2019c).

Openness, trust, mutual respect, and learning lie at the core of *inclusive partnerships*. The key ideas include the following:

- Developing countries co-ordinate the efforts to manage stakeholder diversity at the country level, while providers of assistance are responsible to reduce fragmentation and to curb the proliferation of aid channels.
- Improving policy coherence of multilateral institutions, global funds, and programmes, and making effective use of existing multilateral channels.
- Accelerating efforts to address insufficient delegation of authority to field staff in the design and implementation of development programmes.

Progress towards alignment with these principles is monitored and facilitated by a multi-stakeholder platform, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), established following the Busan meeting. This monitoring, supported by OECD and staff from the UN system, also provides inputs to monitor the achievement of the SDGs (GPEDC 2023) – development effectiveness is seen to be the cornerstone for sustainable development (GPEDC 2019a).

In Busan, the narrow concept of aid was expanded to a more comprehensive view of development beyond the traditional, official assistance from governments. The broad palette of development cooperation approaches and instruments now include also non-concessional finance, climate finance, cooperation among governments on non-aid policies, cooperation with and among non-governmental actors (e.g., with businesses and civil society), South-South cooperation, and triangular cooperation (GPEDC 2019a). There are agreements specifically concerning effective engagement with the civil society[26], philanthropists[27], and the private sector[28]. Adapting to this evolution, OECD has developed a new international statistical measure, Total Official Support For Sustainable Development, to provide a complete picture of all official resources and private finance mobilised by official interventions in support of sustainable development and the SDGs (Bejraoui et al. 2020). However, while the Busan agenda shifted focus towards a more inclusive approach and comprehensive view to development effectiveness, the Busan Principles are not without challenges and criticisms. These are discussed next.

[26] Siem Reap CSO Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness (CPDE 2018).

[27] Guidelines for Effective Philanthropic Engagement (OECD 2014a).

[28] Kampala Principles for effective private sector engagement through development cooperation (GPEDC 2019b).

2.2.2 Challenges and Criticisms

It appears that the Busan Principles have not succeeded in transforming international cooperation. Nearly ten years after the Busan meeting, the GPEDC reported that the traditional providers' commitment to the principles had decreased, and the emerging donors and new development actors had showed limited adoption of the effectiveness principles (GPEDC 2020b). Alignment of project objectives to partner country priorities and reliance on country-defined monitoring systems had also decreased (GPEDC 2020a). A more recent survey found that this effectiveness agenda has not kept pace with the changing demands of the 2020's (Calleja and Cichocka 2022): poor adoption of the Busan Principles is attributed to the agenda's declining political relevance and to politicians' lack of interest domestically. There appears to be "development effectiveness fatigue" (Benfield and Como 2018:43).

The GPEDC too has been critisised. It is seen to be monitoring progress but without a serious reflection on why the results may be disappointing – it is easier to ignore the deeply political, sensitive issues (Brown 2016). Also, although the GPEDC aimed to give voice to previously under-represented stakeholders, these non-OECD-DAC countries had concerns around GPEDC's legitimacy, with some seeing it as a de-facto OECD DAC-led initiative (Calleja and Cichocka 2022), while many topics on the GPEDC's agenda are not of primary interest of the emerging powers like China (Li 2017). The lack of clarity regarding how the GPEDC connects with the UN Development Cooperation Forum and other platforms (e.g., the G20 Development Working Group) has also been found problematic.

The Busan agreement has been criticised for too many political compromises (Li, Leistner, and Cabral 2018; Kim and Lee 2013). The principles allow room for interpretation and can result in structures and processes that have little practical usefulness, which risks the effectiveness agenda being perceived as box-ticking (Benfield and Como 2018). It is also argued that effectiveness has been interpreted as donors not making life hard for the recipients, distracting from a real understanding of the politics of reform (Yanguas 2018:5). The real understanding of the political context in which development cooperation is embedded is found to be lacking, with the Busan Principles offering only technocratic solutions, while ignoring the various disincentives to follow the principles (Koch et al. 2016).

The discourse around the Busan agreement also reveals that tensions may emerge between some of the principles, such as between partnerships, ownership, and accountability, between harmonisation or coordination and cost efficiency, and between using country systems, transparency, and results focus. One could posit that such tensions are unavoidable, given the stakeholder divergence and the fundamentally complex nature of development. While partnership may be instrumental for efficiency and effectiveness (Brinkerhoff 2002:18), the challenges for coordination are broadly acknowledged (Gulrajani and Swiss 2019), with a wide gulf between rhetoric and reality (Dickmann et al. 2010) – "everybody commends co-ordination but no one accepts to be co-ordinated" (Bizimana 2006:38). It has been said that effective coordination between international organisations is rare (Woods 2020:290). With partnerships emerge the risks for less accountability and ownership.

Enhanced coordination or harmonisation among aid stakeholders is frequently discussed with the expected benefits to be derived from the reduction of transaction costs (e.g., GPEDC 2019a; Bigsten and Tengstam 2015; Cavalcanti 2007; Winckler Andersen and Therkildsen 2007). However, this partnership perspective assumes that, for example, donors and recipients share the same preferences regarding the use of aid; that the incentives for cooperation are sufficient; and that they have adequate information about each other to overcome the principal–agent problems related to, e.g., preference alignment and information asymmetry (Koch et al. 2016; Winckler Andersen and Therkildsen 2007). The aid effectiveness literature shows that working in a more harmonised and coordinated fashion may incur costs, even when such measures are taken to save costs or to do things better. From the donor perspective, for example, many activities incurring transaction costs relate to risk reduction and are necessary, such as donor-recipient dialogue, capacity building, and monitoring (Winckler Andersen and Therkildsen 2007). Aid coordination requires staff time and resources to set up new ways of working and to participate in new mechanisms and common processes (Fee 2012:46; Paul and Vandeninden 2012; Harvey et al. 2010). As such, forging partnerships is perceived to have high administrative costs (Chang 2019; World Bank 2016), with coordination potentially also slowing progress in short term (Chang 2019). Coordination can also mean less inclusion and loss of agency or power for those involved. The efficiency of engaging in the coordination mechanisms may be particularly questioned by local actors who must invest time into such activities while having a relative lack of influence on them (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022), and it is not clear that harmonised aid is less costly to government than project aid (Batley 2005). Other challenges include unrealistic expectations leading to over-optimistic assessments of the real impacts on local ownership and transaction costs, and a failure to consider the changes necessary in one's own behaviour to make partnerships effective (European Commission 2012; Winckler Andersen and Therkildsen 2007; Brinkerhoff 2002:13,16). For example, the vertical behaviour within UNHCR – its "unilateral control model" – was found to have clashed with the mutual learning model underpinning humanitarian reform, thus negatively impacting inter-organisational coordination (Gottwald 2010:15).

The role of effective institutions has been increasingly emphasised in development thinking (see e.g. EUP 2016). However, while the use of systems in the recipient countries, e.g., for public procurement, is deemed to encourage local ownership and strengthen accountability, the evidence for these effects is contested (Hart, Hadley, and Welham 2015). Recalling the reasons for why aid is necessary to begin with, one is faced with the question of the capacity and capability of the recipient country systems. It has been said that there is a limited evidence of the benefits of moving funds into the recipient-government's systems and that the logic behind this intervention is often poorly articulated (Glennie and Sumner 2016:9-10). Furthermore, it has been found that the political economy of fragile states is unlikely to be conducive to the use of country systems, and that donors therefore must make political decisions as to the level of acceptable risk, including about the risk of public resources diverted for private benefit. However, corruption is not limited to fragile situations only. "The history of foreign aid has been inextricably linked with corruption," writes Quibria (2017:10). On the one hand, aid can contribute to improved governance and a reduced corruption, on the other, aid can create perverse incentives for countries not to undertake reforms for addressing corruption. Donors, under pressure to demonstrate that money is well spent, are seeking to better control aid spending, needing to balance this against the calls to build recipient government capacity (Dávid-Barrett et al. 2020). Furthermore, investing in the longer-term endeavour of capacity development and systems strengthening may conflict with the need to demonstrate shorter-term results. Therefore, using country systems as the default approach as per the Busan Principles is not unproblematic.

As can be seen, the challenges and criticisms concerning aid and development cooperation, including the Busan Principles, are multifaceted. "Nowhere is the context for partnership more complex, with myriad of potential partners who have multiple and often divergent motivations, facing the most challenging development circumstances" (Eriksson Baaz 2005:12). The global policy-making landscape is vastly complex at the time when international collective action is most needed, but the narrative of international cooperation holds less popular appeal (Griffin 2020:829). What, then, is the way forward?

2.3 Looking Ahead: Tolerance for Complexity and Ambiguity

The monitoring body, GPEDC, maintains that despite the challenges, the Busan Principles remain relevant still today, contributing to the achievement of the SDGs (GPEDC 2022). GPEDC has reformed its own governance and is focusing on better evidence and monitoring as well as on targeted advocacy and outreach to foster political awareness, behaviour change and uptake (GPEDC 2022). However, it has been said that, promoting the effectiveness principles remains an uphill political battle as aid is increasingly orientated towards national interests (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020). In fact, tension and flux are said to be the natural state of foreign aid systems (Gulrajani 2011). Such tensions are likely to be excaberated in conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity: both for-profits and not-for-profits are operating in an increasingly shifting and unpredictable environment of durable disorder – in a VUCA world where "conditions render useless any efforts to understand the future and to plan responses" (Bennett and Lemoine 2014:311) – with the broader geopolitical, social, and economic trends appearing to point towards a future of more volatility and uncertainty (Devinney et al. 2023). It appears that delivering on the ambitious effectiveness agenda, in the context of the increasingly dynamic and messy aid architecture in which the emerging and established players' values collide (Patrick 2015), and which is, in turn, embedded in the turbulent world, requires not only knowledge, skills, and contextual savvy but also a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

These qualities suggest the kind of quality poet John Keats refers to as "negative capability", a capacity "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats 1958:193). Negative capability is a notion also invoked in connection with management and leadership practices in the continuously changing world (French 2001) and in the "current organizational context of radical uncertainty[29], whereby the ability to lead demands the capacity to tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity (Simpson and French 2006). It has been found that in addition to the positive leadership abilities that allow for decisive action even in the face of uncertainty, there is a need to consider the contribution of the capacity to sustain reflective inaction, i.e., negative capability, which can manifest, for example, as waiting, observing, and listening (Simpson, French, and Harvey 2002). However, it is recognised that in an action-oriented context where the principle of performativity pervades culture at all levels, the dominant conditions militate against restraint and inaction, with the similar imperative no longer demanded only of business enterprises but also of the public sector and the non-profit organisations (Simpson, French, and Harvey 2002).

That the ability to "listen to the context" and the need for adaptation and learning is increasingly present in the aid effectiveness discourse was discussed earlier. It has been said that improving the world in which interactions and outcomes are occurring at multiple levels requires willingness to deal with complexity instead of rejecting it (Ostrom 2010). In discussing how the conventional aid thinking with linear logic – one that simplifies systems, problems, and behaviours, and fails to consider the endogenous forces of a developing country – does not align with reality, Ramalingam (2015) draws on the complex systems thinking, underscoring the need for adaptive behaviours. Complexity theory sees a world that cannot be predicted, with history, context, chance, and choice influencing the future (Boulton 2010). In complexity thinking, the whole is different from the sum of its parts and their

[29] The kind of uncertainty that arises "when the decision-maker does not even know what it is that they are uncertain about" (Buckley and Casson 2019:17).

interactions (Richardson 2004); "multiple subjectivities" are recognised, with our cognition, descriptions, and models being necessarily incomplete (Allen and Varga 2007:20), with the duality of coexisting tensions creating an edge of chaos (Eisenhardt 2000). In the same vein, in his book Aid on the Edge of Chaos, Ramalingam (2015) advocates for not trying to eliminate complexity but to harness it. Embracing this view of aid between order and disorder, at the edge of chaos, requires constant learning and adaptation. "Massive Guidance", prescriptions for replicable actions, do not apply, and "best fit" comes before "best practice", with aid playing a catalytic role in development (Ramalingam 2015:xvii; 361). This is in line with the view that the humanitarian and development problems are not merely technical issues to be resolved, but "adaptive challenges" that require approaches that transcend the conventional, mechanistic ways of operating (Heifetz 2003:70). One must be clear about the goals while being flexible about the ways to get there (Johansen and Euchner 2013); it is not "clockwork" but "artwork", involving context-sensitive influence rather than power (Apthorpe 2012:1547). In the same vein, introducing the concept of "navigation by judgment", Honig (2020:25,152) discusses how important it is that a worker be allowed to navigate by judgment, as opposed to being subject to top-down control, when pursuing less observable and less measurable tasks in unpredictable settings, whereby the worker's initiative, soft information, and flexibility matter greatly.

This kind of ability to be clear but flexible is pressure-tested especially in fragile settings where working effectively is a particular challenge (Brown 2016). The UN system, through the field workers of its various humanitarian, development, and peace operations, implements activities in these very settings. What follows is a discussion about the ambitions and challenges of the UN system, as well as a review of the select strategies and approaches it is deploying for enhanced effectiveness.

3 The UN System and Effectiveness

3.1 Ambitions of the Many-Splendoured Forum

Founded in 1945 to prevent another world war (Von Einsiedel and Malone 2020:140), the UN clarifies its purposes in its Charter: to maintain international peace and security; develop friendly relations among nations; achieve international cooperation in solving international economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems; promote human rights; and be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations to attain these ends (UN 1945). It has been described as "the one body that houses the divided fragments of humanity" and as "an idea, a symbol of an imagined and constructed community of strangers" (Thakur 2017:411-412).

This "bureaucratic arm of the world's transcendental values" (Barnett 2002:175) is one of extremes and polarities. Apart from being extreme in its membership with virtually the whole world in attendance, the UN system is also extreme in that it serves as a podium for the richest nation and the poorest one, although the 193 votes do not translate into 193 equally powerful voices or abilities to exert power. The UN system is also extreme in that it covers all spheres of life, dealing, in one way or another, with virtually every aspect of the human condition and the natural environment (Childers and Urquhart 1994:121). Weiss (2016:77) finds that the expanded use of the UN as a platform to "… discuss anything to which the words 'international' or 'global' can be even tenuously applied, there is nothing that is not on the world body's agenda". Over the decades, as the UN's role has expanded from policy and analytical work to norm- and standard-setting, to advocacy, and then to technical cooperation to support national development efforts, the UN structures became increasingly complex (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:656), with the system now including not only more member states but also a plethora of funds, programmes, and specialised agencies.

The UN system has audacious aims. The UN communicates its aims to "end" and "ensure", incrementalism does not appear to apply to the wicked problems of the world, matters of life and death: eradicate poverty, end hunger, stop malaria, ensure health and equal access to justice for all, reduce all forms of violence, all forms of corruption and bribery – leave no-one behind. The SDGs as the current manifestation of such epic goals – a "stretch" (Clark, H. 2021:vi), "indigestible menu of aspirations" (Weiss 2016:72), or plain "Senseless, Dreamy, and Garbled" (Easterly 2015). According to Thakur (2017:410), the UN is the repository of international idealism, with utopia being fundamental to its identity. The UN mandates – "hopelessly complex, ambitious, and ambiguous" (Gutner Thompson 2010:243) – can go beyond where most governments are prepared to go, or the goals are seen as too visionary (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:210-11). It has been stated that aid must "deal with the world as it is, devoid of the utopianism, naiveté, and unrealistic expectations" (Natsios 2020:117), and that the UN – lacking supranational teeth (Donini 2020) – cannot "fulfil utopian notions of world peace" if operating by consensus (Moore and Pubantz 2017:30). However, it has also been said that utopia is a stimulant for action, and that utopian vision necessary to compensate for our inability to imagine and visualize in advance intermediate outcomes or partial successes (Hirschman 2015:28,30). Discussing a common misconception that ascribes exaggerated powers to the UN, Gordenker and Jönsson (2020:113) point out that while the UN is more than the sum of its member states, it is far less that a world government. As long as governments are responsible for the well-being of their citizens, the UN cannot act independently, remaining a tool of nations (Hanhimäki 2015:147). Hammarskjöld reportedly hoped, ten years after the founding of the UN, that people would understand what the UN was, that "people stop thinking of the UN as a weird Picasso abstraction and see it as a drawing they made themselves" (Time 1955). The multifaceted challenges facing this world forum are discussed next.

3.2 Challenges in the Many-Splintered System

The UN system receives both bouquets and brickbats regarding its value add, described "as indispensable as it is imperfect" (Ahlenius 2010:2). On one hand, the UN is seen as an organisation that has made the world a better place (Hanhimäki 2015:7), being, in Eisenhower's words, "man's best organised hope to substitute the conference table for the battlefield" (Time 1955). The UN system has been central to the creation of the international human rights system (Samarasinghe 2020:543), it has been the custodian of climate change since the 1960s (Ivanova 2020:716), and the UN is charged with the responsibility for coordinating the global emergency response in humanitarian crises (OCHA 2023b). Research also shows that UN peacekeeping matters: although "peacekeepers may be sent where there is no peace to keep, and they may be neither equipped to act nor have a mandate to act" in situations of violence (Clark, H. 2021:viii), the probability of a country in conflict avoiding a relapse to conflict is 50 per cent greater if a peacekeeping operation is deployed (Haq 2017:7). On the other hand, the UN system, a deeply flawed institution in need of constant reform (Hanhimäki 2015:7), like a church that advocates for noble causes, yet operates with limited power and inevitable imperfections (Taalas 2024). The UN system often serves its member states imperfectly, producing ineffective and even counterproductive outcomes (Barnett and Finnemore 2020:73). The many failures to sustain peace have not only damaged to the UN's credibility but have also had heavy consequences in human lives and expenditures (Dransfield 2017:60; UN 2015c). The UN system has been accused of excessive bureaucracy (Saner and Yiu 2011:154) – the former Assistant Secretary-General Banbury (2016) refers to a "maddeningly complex" bureaucracy governed by "a blur of Orwellian admonitions and Carrollian logic". Accusations about corruption and culture of impunity have also been made (Ahlenius 2010; Haynes 2008; Gordon 2007), and the UN has suffered from highly publicised scandals[30].

However, it has been said that when it comes to the performance of the UN system, "praise for success or criticism for failure cannot simply be placed at the door of the organization" (Weiss and Daws 2020:4). It may be impossible to have an aggregate metric of the performance of a body with so many disparate parts and goals; discussion of "the 'UN's' performance" has been said to be "almost nonsensical" (Gutner and Thompson 2010:232). Addressing intractable problems in conflictual institutional environments and producing outputs difficult to measure is typical to political organisations such as the UN (Lipson 2007). The UN that was founded to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" (UN 1945:2) is today functioning in a far more complex world than the one in which it was created (Childers and Urquhart 1994:21). The question of differentiating between the actions of "the UN" and those of its "member states" also emerges. Thakur (2017:409) writes about the failures of the UN really being failures of its member states that find the organisation a convenient scapegoat[31] for their own shortcomings, weaknesses, and lack of political will. The UN's function is largely to reflect its members' conflicting preferences, in a setting characterised by ambiguity in which goals are uncertain, organisational processes not completely understood, participation in decision making is fluid, and rational processes impeded (Lipson 2007, 2012).

[30] E.g., the UN peacekeepers' role in the cholera outbreak in Haiti (UN 2016d) and their sexual abuses in Central African Republic (UN 2021a), the Oil-for-Food program related wrongdoing (Gordon 2007), and the governance failures of the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) leading to closure of its Helsinki office (UNOPS 2023; UNOPS 2022a), and accusations of corruption in WHO Syria office (Cheng 2022).

[31] In the Oil-for-Food program, the United States had large influence in the critical operational decisions and its Fifth Fleet was almost entirely the responsible maritime interdiction force. However, when the scandal began unravelling, it was "the UN" that was blamed for weakness in giving in to Saddam's pressure; "the UN" was corrupt and incompetent (Gordon 2007). Similarly, "the UN" failed to protect the Uyghur Muslims (Akram 2023), when China, elected five times to the UN Human Rights Council had blocked resolutions addressing its own policies (Gorokhovskaia et al. 2023).

The challenges for the effectiveness of the UN system discussed in this section are summarised in Figure 6. These challenges are linked to the defining characteristics of the system, including to its membership, mandates, theatres of operation, size and structural complexity, funding mechanisms, and to its organisational and staffing related issues.

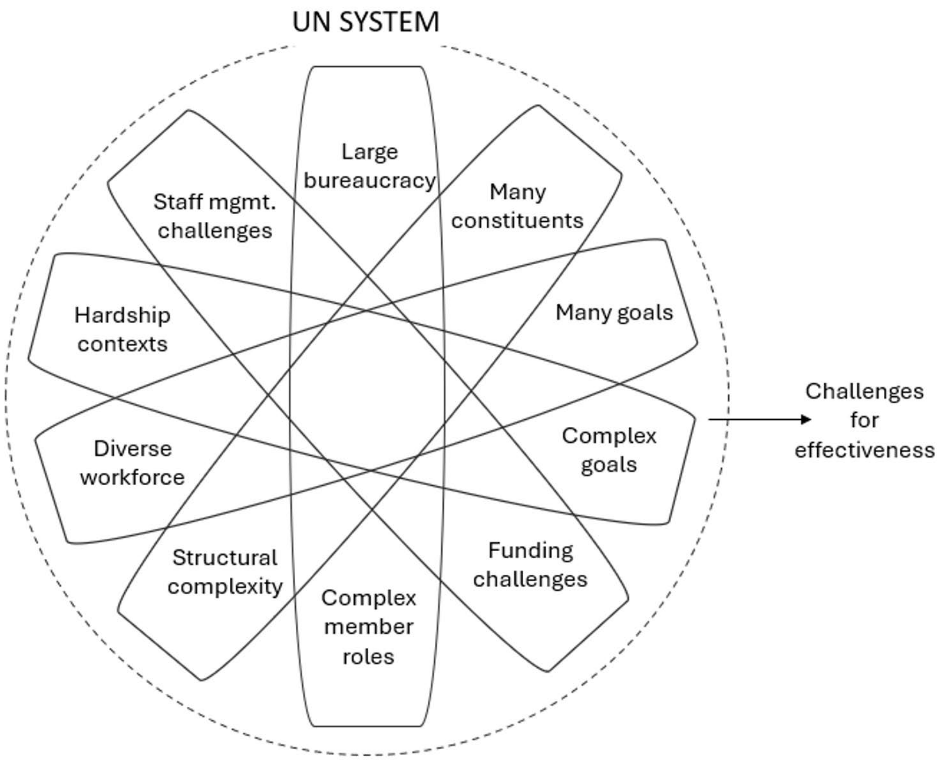

Figure 6. Challenges for effectiveness in the UN system (own compilation)

The triangular relationship between peace, development and human rights continues to be challenging, with the largest UN silos having their origins in these three founding pillars of work (Boutellis and Ó Súilleabháin 2016; UN 2015c). The worlds of development cooperation and humanitarian aid have different mandates, work cultures, principles, values, and languages, as well as different working rhythms and speeds (MOFA/NL 2013), and the different bureaucratic practices may also work against a unified effort (Nyamvumba 2017:45). Moreover, the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, and military objectives may be compromised (Crisp 2020:583; Amos 2013; UN 2003), as the clashing of emergency assistance, human rights protection, and aspects of military and civil in single strategies may not be conducive for the effectiveness of humanitarian work (Apthorpe 2012). While there are examples of security benefits to aid workers of integration arrangements (Metcalfe, Giffen, and Elhawary 2011), it has also been found that association with peacekeeping may make humanitarian or development work more difficult and dangerous for staff (Bellamy 2017:30; Roth 2014). Thus, paradoxically, embracing the "humanitarian-development-peace nexus" while preserving the "humanitarian-development divide" appears to make sense. Wherein lies the sweet spot between the divide and the nexus is difficult to say.

The structural complexity of the UN system is seen as a major cause of costly overlaps leading to inefficiency and ineffectiveness (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:657). The term UN "system" implies more cohesion than how it is in reality: Thakur (2017:331-6) writes about the UN, set up as a "many-splendoured forum", as a "many-splintered organization" of discrete entities, members, and interests, while Weiss (2016:77) finds that the oft-used reference to the UN system as a "family" has the advantage of its vagueness about the extent to which the system is harmonious or dysfunctional, united or divided. It has proven difficult to reconcile autonomy and coherence (Luck 2020:816). In spite of numerous efforts at enhanced coordination, the deep fragmentation of the UN system persists all the way to the operational level (UN 2015c).

The UN system is seen as a setting of organisational incoherence emanating from "cultural contestation" that generates pathological tendencies and "clash of competing perspectives", due to the internal cultures being shaped by divergent ways of making sense of the world, by different experiences of local environments, and by differences in external stimuli experienced by different professions (Barnett and Finnemore 1999:724). There are formal and informal cultures (Ramalingam 2015:121), and differences between the UN entities but also within the agencies, including micro-cultures influenced by work functions (Ramalingam 2015:87). The rigid internal boundaries make teamwork and inter-departmental collaboration difficult (Saner and Yiu 2004). The "work culture of rivalries" within UN entities, caused by competition for resources (Arapakos and Craft 2020:7), leads to poor information sharing and a "culture of secrecy"[32] (UN 2021b:12).

Harnessing this plurality for cohesive country-level approaches in line with the UN's Delivering as One approach, with One Programme and One Leader and which Operates as One and Communicates as One (UNDG 2014) is quite challenging: the UN Resident Coordinators[33], the highest-ranking representatives of the UN

32 In the UN system, gaps between management levels, coupled with gaps between work units, can create "operational islands" reluctant to share information, as it may strengthen "opponents" and reduce one's own power base (Saner and Yiu 2004:246).

33 130 Resident Coordinators in 162 countries and territories, as of 2023 (UNDCO 2023).

Development System[34] at the country level and who lead the UN Country Team, coordinating UN support to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNSDG 2023a), continue to face inadequate levels of cooperation (UN 2021c). The UN entities are reportedly still trying to find the right balance between visibility, attribution, and collective results (UN 2021c). Moreover, the incentives or enforcement mechanisms are lacking and dual accountability arrangements create tensions: while many Resident Coordinators struggle to secure the engagement of some UN entities, some UN entities feel that the space they need to conduct their work on the ground is not always available (UN 2021c). It has also been found that with the UN agencies being hierarchically responsible to their own HQs, the inter-agency coordination is based primarily on persuasion and moral authority, not on the authority of the locally based UN coordinator (Willner-Reid 2018). However, it has been found that the diversity in mandates and knowledge of the UN entities can also constitute a strength of the UN system (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:674): a decentralised structure can mean that at any one moment, "at least some of the entities working on a problem may be effective and competent" (Weiss 2016:79).

The UN funding modalities are complex. The UN system is funded[35] through the member states' assessed contributions, through voluntary contributions, and through revenue from other activities. Some of the UN entities, such as the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), are financed entirely or nearly entirely through voluntary contributions and donations (WFP 2022; UNICEF 2023; UNHCR 2023a). Unpredictability of funding creates a cashflow problem, inhibiting long term planning and hampering operational abilities (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:669; Hanhimäki 2015:49; Yussuf, Larrabure, and Terzi 2007). Furthermore, earmarking of funds – donors directing funds for specific purposes – has increased over the past two decades, with UNDP and UNICEF being examples of agencies with low discretion in how the received funds can be used (Schmid, Reitzenstein, and Hall 2021). Earmarking can gear the UN entities to prioritise short-term projects at the expense of long-term objectives. In the UN International Organization for Migration, for example, earmarked funding was found to contribute to the agency's central functions being under-resourced (MOPAN 2023).

[34] The *UN development system* refers to the UN entities that carry out normative, specialised and operational activities for development to support countries in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNSDG 2021).

[35] See Conceição et al. 2024 for data. For an overview of UN budgeting through the lens of a principal-agent model, see Patz and Goetz 2019.

Funding is not only intertwined with the type of work the UN entities engage in but also who does the work – or if it is done at all. Several staffing-related issues emerge. According to Weiss (2016:119), "recruitment, composition, rewards, retention, performance of international civil servants are a substantial part of what ails the world organization", including the politics and government interference in recruitment (Thakur 2017:354; Weiss 2016:130; Hanhimäki 2015:47; Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:211). Furthermore, the same way the peace operations face a challenge of finding the right kinds of troop capabilities as opposed to enough troops (Bellamy 2017:18), there are issues with the capabilities and suitability of the civil servants. In writing about staff in the UN system, Banbury (2016) laments how "far too many lack the professional abilities and moral aptitude to serve". While staff retention and matching jobs and candidates are recognised as challenges (e.g., Ahlenius 2010; UN 2018b; UN 2015c; UN 2008b), sometimes posts are kept vacant for long periods to alleviate budgetary constraints (Posta and Biraud 2007). Unpredictable funding causes UN agencies to rely on short-term contracts or volunteers. A review of the UN Volunteer website in November 2023 revealed as many as 70 officer level vacancies for which degree qualified individuals were sought for zero pay, with 89 per cent of these positions being at least for 12 months (UNV 2023), i.e., not to fill a short-term gap. That recruitment adapts to financial insecurities and political environment may have "long-term impact on administrative professionalism and organizational performance" (Ege and Bauer 2017:76), and it has been found to foster dependency and a culture of compliance not conducive for reforms (Ahlenius 2010). In some UN peace operations, inadequate staffing has meant that the responsibility for data and information management, a sensitive area associated with risks for internal and external stakeholders, has fallen to unpaid UN volunteers who lack the seniority and permanence (Oksamytna 2023). Other staff management challenges include lack of accountability or a "culture of mediocrity and sometimes even laziness" (UN 2021b:10), weak succession planning and knowledge transfer affecting institutional memory and business continuity (Posta and Biraud 2007), and the diversity of management styles and work ethics (Hanhimäki 2015:40; World Bank 2015) – issues we return to later in the study.

The operational environment in the field in particular poses challenges. The UN entities are exposed to a myriad of risks, ranging from fraud and corruption, reputational risks and cybercrime to risks of political nature, to mismanagement and natural and human-made disasters (Kamioka and Cronin 2020). The work setting has become progressively complex with asymmetric warfare and the prevailing counter-insurgency environment increasingly testing the inviolability and effectiveness of the UN system, also increasing the costs (Powles, Partow, Nelson 2017:1; Haq 2017:10). For the past two decades, especially since the bombing of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad in 2003, the state of high alert has limited the ability of the personnel to operate freely, with the UN troops devoting more resources to protecting UN personnel and property (Haq 2017:9). The attacks[36] against UN personnel reflect a systemic disregard for international humanitarian and human rights laws (UN 2021d), with the Israel-Palestine crisis being a recent example of this: over 100 UNRWA staff were killed in just a month (UN 2023c). In parallel, the UN peacekeepers continue to suffer from chronic shortages of helicopters and other logistics capacities, communications, intelligence gathering and analysis, and medical capabilities (Bellamy 2017:18). Furthermore, disinformation campaigns present an emerging threat, when promoting anti-UN and anti-humanitarian sentiments (UN 2021d). UN staff have been found to experience higher levels of common mental health conditions than would be expected in the general population for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and hazardous drinking (UN 2018c). A review of three UN agencies found that an average of 26 sick days[37] per person per year is taken (UN 2018c). The UN System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy is seeking to address these issues (UN 2024a). What follows is an overview of actions taken in the UN system to address some of the above-mentioned challenges, to improve effectiveness.

3.3 UN Strategies for Enhanced Effectiveness

In this section attention is directed to select strategies and approaches (collectively referred to as "strategies") adopted within the UN system to improve its effectiveness – I refer to this as the "UN-internal effectiveness agenda", although they do not necessarily form a cohesive whole. These strategies include results-based management as an example of work practices adopted from the private sector, the UN strategies for workforce diversity, gender parity, and staff mobility, as well as the changes implemented to improve the business operations (Figure 7). While I have found no evidence to suggest that any of the elements of this UN-internal effectiveness agenda would be a result of the Busan agreement, the core ideas embedded in the Busan principles can be seen to align with these five UN strategies for enhanced effectiveness, as elucidated in Appendix 3.

36 In 2020, 1458 staff were affected by safety and security incidents: 58 per cent were crime-related (e.g., robberies, residence break-ins, and aggravated/sexual assaults), 17 staff were abducted, and 7 died from violent acts. There were 32 direct attacks and 129 intrusions into UN premises and 110 attacks on UN vehicles (UN 2021d).

37 A total of 550,033 sick days taken by 5,328 staff in a four-year period.

Figure 7. Strategies for effectiveness in the UN system (own compilation)

The above strategies concern individual actors and are relevant for international Support Services field staff. Following a brief discussion around the select strategies, the study discusses the challenges related to their collective alignment.

3.3.1 Results-based Management

It has been said that "to survive, today's NGO has been forced to be more corporation-like and less church-like" (Dichter 1999:54). Aid actors have long focused on standardization, best practices, and universal solutions to development challenges, and sought to emulate corporate practices (Honig and Gulrajani 2018), also adopting more business-like rhetoric (Dart 2004). Concepts and approaches influenced by New Public Management and the private sector have been adopted also by the UN system whose vocabulary includes terms such as results-based management, value for money, SMART indicators, return on investment, business case, theory of change, logical framework, and risk register (e.g., Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012; Dees and Anderson 2017; Eyben 2013a; Lipson 2012; Hulme 2007). Here, the focus is on results-based management – "a management strategy focusing on performance and achievement of outputs, outcomes and impacts" (OECD 2023b:34) – given that the Secretary-General Guterres has emphasised management reform and his vision of a "United Nations 2.0" is results-oriented (UN 2023d:19; UN 2016c), and as this approach is seen as "one of the most powerful resources at the disposal of the UN development system … to address deeply interrelated and interdependent development challenges" (UNSSC 2022:1).

Results-based management has been increasingly applied by the UN Secretariat since 1998 (Clarke 2013), and in 2006, it was approved as a concept applicable to the UN Secretariat and recommended for the wider UN system (Inomata 2009:140). However, the results-based approach has been fraught with technical and political challenges and is being questioned by both practitioners and researchers alike (OECD 2014b; Vähämäki, Schmidt, and Molander 2011). The aspirational results have been found to be used to justify budget approvals, while the actual results are of little consequence to resource allocation or other decision-making, and as such, there may be a risk that results-based management "… will continue to be an administrative chore of no real utility" (UN 2008d). According to a recent UN report, "all efforts aimed at the implementation of results-based management in the Secretariat continue to be rooted in the United Nations programme, planning and budgeting documents" (UN 2021e:5).

Results-based management has proven to have challenges even beyond the Secretariat, as illustrated by examples of UNDP and UNICEF. At UNDP, the approach has been used since 1999 (UNDP 2017). Shortly after its introduction as an organisation-wide framework, its demonstrable, positive effects were observed on performance in programmes evaluated during the 1999-2000 compared with those in 1992-1998 (UNDP 2001). However, nearly two decades later, an evaluation found that at UNDP, results-based management continues to be associated more with compliance-driven practices to meet reporting requirements, with a limited focus on learning from evidence to enhance knowledge management for decision-making and improved performance. In addition, staff members, managers in particular, needed further training (UNDP 2017). At UNICEF, results-based management has been applied since the early 2000's (ITF 2019). However, twenty years later, a review found that at UNICEF, the approach appeared to have been misinterpreted, with a "results at any cost" approach having allowed an authoritative culture to take root (ITF 2019:6). According to the report, this had created an environment of un-reported, un-investigated, or unpunished offenses, as long as programmatic results were achieved, enabling discrimination, harassment, and abuse of authority to thrive.

A report issued in 2004 found that in the UN system, implementation of results-based management was, in some instances, mainly about a shift in vision and format without effective change or improvement in work methods or administrative, financial and information systems support – for example, 16 years after the World Intellectual Property Organization had adopted the results-based approach, the baseline indicators and targets were still mostly lacking (Fontaine Ortiz et al. 2004). Another report found that the actual practice was viewed more as an act of compliance rather than as a management tool for understanding what has worked well and why (UN 2008c). While the emphasis in the implementation has been on developing the results-based management documentation such as plans and results matrices, the "'managing' for results aspect of results-based management in the form of using information for programme improvement is less prominent" (Bester 2012). It is suggested that building a results culture may be the most difficult aspect of results-based management in light of the disincentives in the UN system; some suggest that vague outcomes are a way to avoid being held accountable (Bester 2012). Similar findings were reflected in a UN report issued in 2020, whereby a review of 18 evaluation reports of various UN entities found results-orientation inadequate, including focus on compliance or outputs rather than results and weak performance indicators (Arapakos and Craft 2020). It has been said that in the fragmented and decentralised UN system, the governing bodies would need to adopt common objectives applicable throughout the UN system so that results-based management could ensure system-wide strategic planning and resource management (Inomata 2009:159).

3.3.2 Workforce Strategies

In the UN system, an enhanced focus on workforce geographical diversity, gender parity, and staff mobility are elements of the internal effectiveness agenda. Strategies have been devised to enhance the geographic representation, to achieve gender parity in the workforce, and to increase staff rotation between duty stations.

3.3.2.1 Enhanced Geographic Representation

In a broad sense, workforce diversity concerns similarities and differences among employees in age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, physical abilities and disabilities, sexual orientation, education, marital status, work experience, and recreational habits (Saxena 2016; Gardenswartz and Rowe 2009:35). In the UN context, the cultural dimension is often linked with nationality, i.e., geographic representation. The civil servants in the UN system are expected to be of "the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity" and they are to be recruited "on as wide a geographical basis as possible" (UN 1945:18). Geographical workforce diversity is linked to performance and good outcomes. According to Secretary-General Guterres, "the effectiveness of the United Nations and the success of our efforts depend on reaping the gains in efficiency and productivity that come from diversity and gender parity" (UN 2019a:4). The Geographical Diversity Strategy of the UN proper states that the "diversity and complexity of the global UN presence and mandates must be matched by a diverse, geographically balanced, gender-balanced, international and multitalented workforce that visibly demonstrates its core values, has a modelling impact on the communities it serves, and reaps the gains in efficiency, productivity and innovation from the diverse peoples of the world" (UN

2020b:5). Geographical diversity of the international workforce is also underscored in the strategies of other UN entities, such as UNOPS (2022b) and WFP (2020).

The UN Charter does not address what constitutes “a wide geographical basis” (see e.g., Meron 1976:661). A UN report issued in 1975, thirty years after the founding of the UN, stated that recruiting international staff on a wide geographical basis had been a continuous challenge (UN 1976), and a report issued another thirty years later, in 2006, found that progress still had been inadequate (UN 2006). By 2021, only six UN entities had established criteria for the equitable representation of the member states through quotas and “desirable ranges”[38], albeit with differing base figures, factors, and weighting (UN 2021f). The constraints to achieving geographical diversity include the low number of suitable applicants from unrepresented[39] and under-represented countries, overcoming racial bias in hiring, diminishing workforce due to downsizing, fewer applications from women in developing countries, and language requirements (UN 2021f). A recent study of professional staff in 34 UN entities found that the workforce representation patterns were explained by the availability of candidates of a country with relevant working and regional experience (Eckhard and Steinebach 2021). Also, countries with greater economic resources, larger and more educated populations, and with more hosting responsibilities of the UN’s operational activities had larger staff representation (Parizek and Stephen 2021). Debates about the unequal geographic representation[40] are ongoing still (UN 2022), and the suggestions to ensure geographical diversity include, e.g., reviewing the language requirements, freezing the recruitment from over-represented regional groups, and holding individual hiring managers or offices accountable in case of failure to achieve diversity (UN 2021f).

3.3.2.2 Aiming for Gender Parity

The UN was established in a male-dominated world[41], and male dominance in decision-making bodies and among professional staff is common still with all UN entities (Skard 2009). Bias has been found to be inherent in the UN policies and

38 See Assessment of the System of Desirable Ranges A/73/372/Add.3 (UN 2018e).

39 E.g., in the UN Secretariat, Monaco, Cabo Verde, and Libya are unrepresented; Surinam, USA, San Marino, and Japan are under-represented; while Uganda, United Kingdom, Chile, and Finland are over-represented (UN 2020b).

40 In 2022, the ten most represented nationalities were from the United States, France, Kenya, Italy, Ethiopia, DRC, United Kingdom, India, South Sudan, and Sudan (UNSCEB n.d., https://unsceb.org/hr-nationality, retrieved September 9, 2024).

41 In 1950 staff rules, staff member meant one who has a wife (UN 1950).

practices as well as the organisational culture[42], whereby it is assumed that the recruitment and promotion of women would lessen standards, and that the current UN processes are geared towards securing and promoting the most talented staff in an unbiased manner (UNW 2019). As of 2015, women accounted for 42.8 per cent of the professional and director level workforce (UN 2017), however, there was an inverse relationship between seniority and women's representation: the higher the grade, the larger the gap in gender parity, with the starkest gaps in peace operations. Conversely, there is over-representation of women in some entities (e.g., in UN Women and International Court of Justice), especially on junior levels. According to UN Women (UNW 2021), achieving gender parity is not only a basic human right, but also essential to the UN's efficiency, impact, and credibility: as the principal international standard-setting institution, the UN must lead by example. The UN's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity launched in 2017 contains the goal for the UN system to attain gender parity by 2028, with gender parity being "not simply about achieving quantitative goals, but about fostering an inclusive workplace", that also includes transforming the institutional culture (UNW 2019:8).

That gender parity in the UN system has not yet been achieved despite numerous efforts[43], is attributed not only to absence of enabling conditions for real reform, but also to a lack of sustained political will and resistance from key stakeholders (UN 2017). A recent report also found "professionalisation and dissemination of anti-rights narratives" and "norm-spoiling tactics" that seek to undermine the legitimacy of gender equality and women's rights norms within the UN system (Holmes 2024:12). That the challenge has no simple fixes is also reflected in the comments of the Special Coordinator on Improving United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Christian Saunders, who finds patriarchy to be a major underlying cause for gender inequality and how equality, and other values need to be inculcated into us already as children. "It is all about respect and dignity; we need to be teaching our children from a very young age about respect and dignity, but we seem to be going the opposite way". He emphasises the need to institutionalise safeguarding across the UN system, mainstreaming it into the ways of working rather than treating it as a separate project. However, this also requires courage to talk about these issues more openly (C. Saunders, personal communication, December 3, 2023).

42 Defined as "the behaviours and underlying beliefs, assumptions and values that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization and affect how people think, act and interact with each other, with clients, and with stakeholders" (Arapakos and Craft 2020:1-2).

43 See Skard (2009) for an overview of approaches to gender equality in the UN system.

3.3.2.3 Increased Workforce Mobility

A workforce that is dynamic, adaptable, and mobile is required to deliver on the UN mandates (UN 2013). In this study, mobility refers to the rotation of internationally recruited workforce between duty stations. Geographical mobility is part of the life of UN professionals (Nowicka and Kaweh 2009), and many UN entities have adopted formal rotation policies, requiring or encouraging staff to move between work locations (Jansson 2016). The benefits of mobility include increased skills, broadened experience, greater knowledge transfer, and managerial culture based on a more holistic understanding of the UN system. Mobility can also enhance career development, motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (UN 2013). Mandatory rotation policy also generates a sense of equity (Weiss 2016:213).

The mobility regimes within the UN system have evolved over time, although not without the member states' resistance. The refined managed mobility framework for the UN Secretariat during the tenure of Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon, aiming towards a fairer sharing of the burden of work in hardship[44] duty stations (UN 2014), took seven years to adopt, and even then with some reluctance (Crossette 2016). Staff mobility is also part of Secretary-General Guterres' vision for an effective, accountable, and efficient UN Secretariat (UN 2018f). In 2020, the "new approach" to staff mobility in the UN Secretariat viewed mobility as "a way for staff to benefit from the diversity and richness of the organizational mandates and duty stations in order to acquire and continuously develop the skills they need to deliver on the evolving mandates of the Organization through on-the-job learning and skills development" (UN 2020c:4). UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, and WFP are examples of agencies with mandatory mobility and staff rotation policies. In UNHCR, where the workforce has been rotated since the 1950s, mobility is an inherent part of the career of a Professional-level staff who are expected to serve from 18 months to five years in a duty station (Nijman 2023), while UNICEF staff are expected to rotate between various settings including in emergencies, with the term in HQ location typically being five years and two years in a hardship duty station (UNICEF n.d.[45]). At UNDP, the assignments vary from two to six years (UNDP 2023a).

44 UN duty stations have six categories (ICSC 2023b): "H" denotes HQ and similarly designated locations without UN programmes, or offices in the EU. A to E duty stations are rated based on the difficulty of working and living conditions (A being the least, E the most difficult) related to safety and security, health care, housing, climate, isolation, and amenities / conveniences of life. As of June 2023, 31 countries and 202 duty stations were E-classified, including Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. (ICSC 2023b).

45 https://www.unicef.org/careers/requirements-international-professional-staff-category, retrieved April 16, 2024.

3.3.3 Strategies for Business Operations

The aid actors aim to keep the portion of funds not directly attributable to programming as low as possible – costs referred to as overhead, administrative, support, indirect, or transaction costs (Burkart, Wakolbinger, and Toyasaki 2018; Anderson 2011), and the UN entities too are subject to these pressures: although the UN has not essentially changed in structure, authority, or powers (Thakur 2017:356), there are increasing pressures from the member states to identify savings and realise efficiencies (Weiss and Daws 2020:13). Therefore, the UN system has developed strategies to improve its "business operations", as duplication between the various UN entities has reduced efficiency and increased the administrative costs (Hanhimäki 2015:142). Measures are taken to reduce overlapping back-office functions by consolidating Support Services at the country level, comprising the support functions of procurement, ICT, human resources management, finance, logistics, and administration, including facilities (UNBIG 2019). Leveraging the different UN entities' presence, infrastructure, and comparative advantages, and shifting from mechanical rules compliance towards a more flexible, risk-based approach is deemed necessary to ensure alignment with local needs and dynamics and seen as central to the programme implementation effectiveness (UNSDG 2016). The key enablers underpinning these interventions include standardised client satisfaction principles, pricing and costing standards, and the concept of mutual recognition, which allows one UN entity to obtain services from another (UNSDG 2023b). These strategies include the following:

1. Business Operations Strategy to facilitate the strategic planning, management, monitoring, and reporting of the UN Country Teams' joint support to programme delivery through common business operations.
2. Common Back Office to avoid duplication of Support Services functions at the country level. The creation of dedicated capacity focused on specific support functions is expected to improve service quality and reduce the pressure on support staff, enabling them to focus on strategic, mandate-related operational support. The goal for establishing Common Back Office for all UN Country Teams by 2022 has not been met (UN 2020d).
3. Common Premises for a more unified and cost-effective country presence entails the co-location of UN entities in a country, with a potential for 1,681 single premises in 184 countries to be consolidated (UN 2020d).

4. Shared Service Centres[46] to create an internal market for the UN agencies.
5. Integration of UN Information Centres into the Resident Coordinators' Offices to leverage existing resource.
6. Re-invigorated Resident Coordinator system to move to a demand-driven, context specific model of country presence. (UNSDG 2023b)

Efficiency gains are measured in cost avoidance and time savings, and it was estimated that $US64 million worth of efficiencies could be generated in 2019 and $US100 million in 2020 (UN 2021c). Centralising back-office functions are also expected to reduce risk exposure (e.g., by reducing the number of civilians in hazardous locations), enhance mission focus, and improve service (Kramer 2016).

However, the shift to shared services has brought about challenges, including loss of institutional knowledge, higher staff turnover rates, and increased training needs (Kramer 2016). As regards the integration of the UN Information Centers into the Resident Coordinators' Offices, a review of 44 locations revealed that the merger did not produce a significant change in communications and that the dual reporting lines created constraints amid increased workload and competing demands (UN 2021c). The Resident Coordinator system and Delivering as One approach has, in some countries, resulted in lower transaction costs and less competition among UN agencies (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:673). However, the Resident Coordinator system absorbs funds: in 2021, its budget was US$281 million (UNSDG 2023c). The strategy has led to the creation of the Business Operations Team in the UN Development Operations Coordination Office, placement of regionally based specialists, recruitment of independent consultants trained in the UN Business Operations Strategy, and the establishment of an expert roster of trained staff and consultants (UNDG 2016). Furthermore, becoming a service provider to another UN entity requires updating of processes and investment in systems and staff. In some cases, the upfront investment, e.g., in ICT, may be high, however, "worth considering in light of longer-term savings" (UNDG 2016:11). It has also been found that practical management issues and different organisational interests continue to place obstacles to a fuller integration of country level activities, with staff of the UN system reluctant to spend time on working issues not directly related to their own organisation's priorities (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:673-4). For branding and fundraising purposes, organisational autonomy is essential (Weiss 2016).

[46] E.g., the UN Global Service Centre from Valencia, Spain, and Brindisi, Italy (https://www.ungsc.org, retrieved June 9, 2024) and by UNDP's Global Shared Services Centre from Copenhagen, Denmark (UNDP 2023b). Service centres for supporting the agencies' own operations are found in Hungary (UNHCR 2023b) and Thailand (UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/gssc retrieved June 9, 2024).

3.4 On Complexity and Alignment

The discussed challenges and strategies for enhanced effectiveness in UN system are summarised in Figure 8. The major factors contributing to complexity and thus, to the effectiveness challenge, include those related to its size, structure, constituents, aims, ambitions, mandates, and theatres of operation, as well as the aspects concerning funding and staff matters. The internal effectiveness agenda includes the adoption of work practices from the private sector, policies and strategies for enhanced geographical workforce diversity, measures towards gender parity and increased workforce mobility, as well as changes implemented to improve the business operations as regards the Support Services.

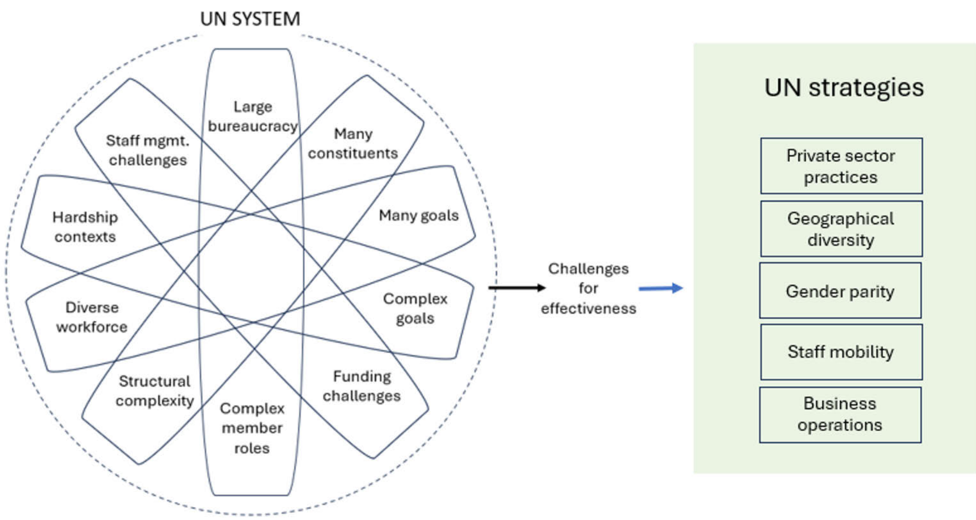

Figure 8. Challenges and strategies for UN effectiveness (own compilation)

However, although discussions on staff geographical diversity and gender within the UN system are increasingly interconnected, and efforts toward harmonization across UN entities—particularly on gender—are underway, existing data still provides no comprehensive picture of how these various strategies operate, or ought to operate, in tandem. On one hand, this void may be understandable given that focus on and understandings of effectiveness would have evolved over time and space in the siloed and fragmented UN system. On the other hand, it is somewhat perplexing, given the prevalence of the notions of coordination and effectiveness in the UN discourse and activities. The effects of these strategies are bound to collide, in some ways, on the worker level in the field. Therefore, it is prudent to expand the lens to their collective examination.

3.4.1 Tensions Between Good Intentions

This study suggests that, the strategies devised to address the effectiveness challenges within the UN system may present a new conundrum – tensions between good intentions – are presented in Figure 9. On one hand, tensions may emerge between these strategies, with the effects of one strategy potentially counter-acting or weakening the desired effects of the other. On the other hand, each strategy is inherently complex on its own: while a strategy may achieve some intended effects, it may also give rise to adverse effects on effectiveness.

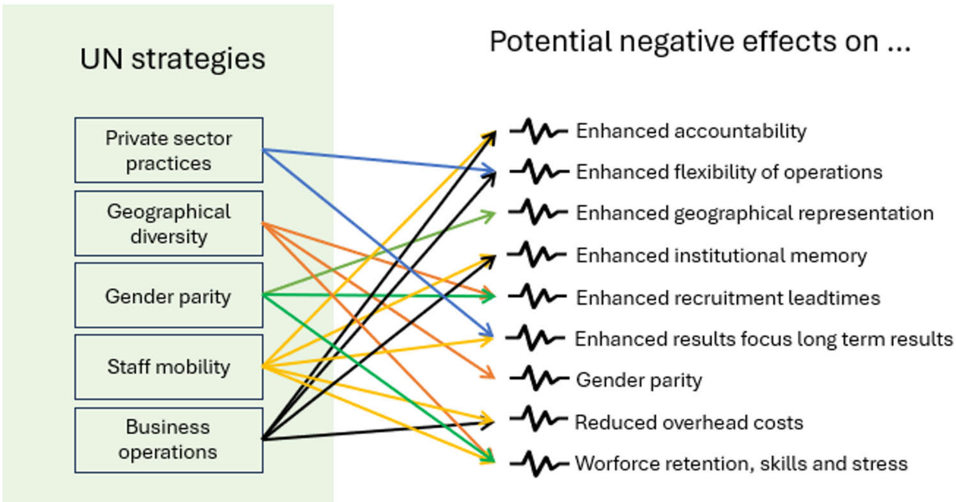

Figure 9. Tensions between good intentions (own compilation)

These alignment challenges, for which literature offers scattered references, are discussed next, followed by a look at workforce mobility and diversity, as examples of strategy areas that exhibit inherent complexity in their own right. Diversity and mobility are also recognized as integral features of the UN system, and as such, they are not seen as "decisions" or "strategies" per se, the same way as, for example, the adoption of results-based management, streamlining back-office functions, or measures aimed at gender parity.

Concerning the results-based management approach as an example of external practices adopted within the UN system, it has been said that, its mechanistic application may lead to potential inflexibility in programming (Clarke 2013), especially in environments that require reflection and adaptability, rather than prescriptive "Massive Guidance" approaches (Ramalingam 2015:xvii; 361). Furthermore, the "results at any cost" approach touched upon earlier may not serve longer term organisational aims for effectiveness – it has been found that, simplifying highly complex dynamics into numeric indicators may not result in reality being captured in an unbiased and meaningful manner, potentially shifting the power dynamics and courses of action in "insidious ways" (Gulrajani 2011:207). As regards the strategies for enhancing geographical representation and working towards gender parity, they appear to be intertwined, while also linked with talent acquisition and retention. It has been found that focus on geographical representation may prolong leadtimes for recuitment[47] and that political correctness may translate into "an uncalled-for emphasis for satisfying national quotas over actual skills" (Hanhimäki 2015:47-48). Geographical quotas reportedly partly contribute to the challenge of retaining qualified UN staff (Weiss 2016:114). Also, while promotion in the UN system is said to often depended more on nationality than ability, gender has gradually come to be a consideration (Haack, Karns, and Murray 2020; see also Taalas 2024). However, it has been found that, the principle of equitable geographical representation may actually work against women in cases where a vacancy needs to be filled with a candidate from an under-represented country (Jain 2005:150-151). A recent survey of UN peacekeeping mission staff found tensions between simultaneously upholding diversity and merit-based recruitment, whereby perceptions about gender parity strategy discriminating against males were causing resentment especially among male middle managers, while female managers did not always feel accepted by their subordinates, as their selection was perceived to be based on their gender, not on competence (UN 2021b).

The Strategy on Gender Parity appears somewhat confusing about its stance to merit. On one hand, this UN strategy highlights the need to strengthen the merit-based nature of senior appointments in particular and that attention should be paid to eliminating potential gender or geographical bias. On the other hand, it appears to find benefits in certain bias, underscoring how affirmative action to reach gender parity has been successful, and how the strategy implementation should also "further geographic diversity, particularly from underrepresented groups" (UN2017:8). Similar ambiguity can be found in the Resident Coordinator recruitment. On one hand, it was recently reported by the UN (2021c:54) that the effective functioning of UN Country Teams "places a premium on the performance … with regard to leadership and capacity" and that the capacities of Resident Coordinators are "not universally at the point where they need to be" UN (ibid.,6). However, the UN will reportedly focus on Resident Coordinators' diversity, by having "considerable focus … on consolidating gender equality … improving geographic balance and

47 As part of special measures aiming for gender parity, vacancies are not filled unless a minimum of 20 per cent of the candidates are qualified females (UNW 2016).

diversifying the nationalities represented" (UN 2021c:14). The diversity related aspects are elucidated in more detail later on this this chapter.

While results-based management emphasises results-focus, increased staff mobility, although associated with greater flexibilty, may lead to tension between short and long term results. This dilemma emerges from the need for aid actors to focus on longer term results while they deploy on relatively short staff assignments[48], also affecting sense of accountability. The negative effects of staff turn-over and short contracts and assignments on the effectiveness of aid work has been widely recognised (see e.g., Knox-Clarke 2018; Roth 2015a; Egeland, Harmer, and Stoddard 2011; Bollettino and Bruderlein 2008; Salama 2003). The length of time staff commit to work in an area (and for agencies) is found to be an important factor for sustainability and consistency of programming, with international staff being criticised for not staying long enough to appreciate the intricacies of the local context or to consistently focus on operations (CDA 2010b; see also Woods 2020:289). Staff turnover is disruptive to stakeholder relationships (DFID 2008), and inclusiveness is fractured by reorganisations and by decisions to transfer staff – people need to stay and work together for a "substantial number of years" (Chambers and Pettit 2004:154). Although it has been said that, normally, it takes at least two years for a practitioner to begin to understand the complexities of issues in a given context (Verma 2014), the 2014 UN resolution has set the minimum post occupancy duration for the most challenging duty stations (D-E) at one year and at two years for all others (UN 2014). This could counter-act the other provision of the UN resolution, namely the need to ensure fulfilment of the UN mandates. Mobility also increases the overhead costs, impacts institutional memory, and has potential negative effects on the individual, as is discussed in the next sub-section.

Finally, as discussed earlier, measures taken to enhance the business operations within the UN system incur costs, not only savings, and may also negatively impact operational flexibility of the individual UN entities due to the obligation to coordinate work with others. Meanwhile, the sense of accountability in a multistakeholder setting may be weakened – if many are accountable, nobody may be responsible for failure, while all take credit for success (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan 2015:206). The shift to shared services has also been found to lead to loss of institutional knowledge and higher staff turnover rates (Kramer 2016). A study about the UN Delivering as One approach found that maintaining motivation for inter-agency work was a challenge as incentives for it in performance appraisal were lacking (UN 2012b). These approaches and interventions further introduce new types of provider-user interfaces and relationships between the staff of the various

48 For example, UNICEF's mobility policy reduced the tour of duty to enhance diversity and to cater for staff "with specific necessities", e.g. young children (UNW 2016:9).

UN entities that do not have uniform practices and cultures and which are, with their "egos and logos", "fiercely independent" (Dodds 2023).

In conclusion, I infer that elements of "wickedness", causal webs of interlinking variables that complicate both their diagnosis and prognosis, can be observed within the effectiveness dilemma that contains multiple causes, solutions, and effects. While recognising the rationales for and the potential positive effects the strategies deployed to enhance effectiveness within the UN system, one could hypothsise that, some of their adverse effects might be felt not where such policies and decisions originate from, but in the operational settings in the field, resulting in, for example, vacancies unfilled and staff assigned to duties for which they may be ill-suited. Therefore, one could infer that, what might appear as enhanced effectiveness from the perspective of the first UN (e.g., formulating a policy; meeting diversity quotas), might not necessarily translate into effectiveness for the second UN in fulfilling the UN mandates. This is, perhaps, a manifestation of how, in the UN system context, the political and practical cannot be decoupled but must co-exist, even if imperfectly. Furthermore, this also brings us back to the earlier point about the various perspectives from which "effectiveness" can be evaluated, including mindfulness about whose effectiveness and the effectiveness of what may be in focus.

3.4.2 Closer Look on Workforce Mobility

Managing the rotation of international staff within the UN system – the "organisation-wide game of musical chairs" (Nijman 2023) – is not without challenges. Increased mobility means increased staff turnover, and in some cases, staff retention is already a problem. Discussing mobility, former UN Under-Secretary-General Ahlenius (2010) found that the real problem was the high staff turnover and insufficient incentives[49] to retain staff in the field, not the lack of mobility – and that the problem was, in fact, excessive mobility, manifesting in the persistent high field vacancy rates. For example, the retention of civilian personnel in peace operations has been a challenge, with a 20-30 per cent vacancy rate (Process Excellence Network 2011). At WFP, 14 per cent of the reassignment moves in 2019 occurred before the staff had completed even half of their assignment, negatively affecting the operations (WFP 2021a). Similarly, the rapid turnover of UN emergency relief coordinators has affected leadership and effectiveness (Weiss 2016:86). The expected or actual continuity in the post affects motivation, behaviour, and learning, thus impacting the organisational knowledge flows (Chambers

[49] A survey found that 43 per cent of UN Secretariat staff experienced unacceptable levels of job stress, and that 39 per cent would leave or were undecided about leaving the UN if offered another position with comparable pay and benefits (Gartner 2018).

2005:18), with high staff turnover resulting in loss of expertise and weakened ability to capitalise on learning and to institutionalise lessons (Spencer 2019; Hindman 2014; Bollettino and Bruderlein 2008; UN 2006). Furthermore, while effective work calls for contextual knowledge, being mobile means limiting local attachments, assuring a degree of ignorance about the operational settings (Redfield 2012). In connection with the UN peacebuilding efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, the rapid turnover of international UN staff was found to compound the lack of in-depth understanding of the conflict (Autesserre 2012).

Matching roles with competent individuals can be problematic systemwide. Attracting staff with the necessary skills and experience to difficult duty stations such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Syria has been found to be an issue (UN 2008b). Matching people with positions is a challenge also at the UN Secretariat, exacerbated by a limited number of posts and downsizing[50] of missions (UN 2018b). A report focusing on peacekeeping mission personnel found that "all too frequently, the calibre of UN staff deployed seems well below that needed … aloof, isolated, and sometimes even disinterested in the populations they are supposed to be assisting" (UN 2015c:34). At WFP, far more reassignment positions are advertised yearly than there are staff due for reassignment, with an average of 44 per cent deficit having been found in staff numbers between 2017 and 2019 (WFP 2021a).

The potential adverse effects of mobility on the individual can be multifaceted, as mobility shapes the worker's life course, with concerns about family life and emotions being central to the overall effect of aid work (Hindman and Fechter 2014:11-13). For UNHCR staff, for example, the rotation requirement and disruptions to home life are the second largest source of stress, after programmatic implementation problems (Spencer 2019). In the UN system, mobility is difficult to combine with family life, especially if there is to be equality between the partners – the everyday sacrifices stand in sharp contrast to the mythologised view of the archetype of global status and prestige (Jansson 2016). Conflict can also exist between the relative job security and the sense of insecurity about career prospects (Saner and Yiu 2004). Open-ended field assignments that carry no guarantees of job security have been found to pose a challenge for the workforce of the UN Secretariat (UN 2018b). The anxiety about the need to look for new jobs may overshadow lives months before the current contract is due to end (Fechter 2014:143). For example, according to UNDP's mobility policy, a staff member subject to rotation requirement needs to secure a new position by the completion of the ongoing tour of duty – otherwise they become unassigned and could be separated (UNDP 2023a). Also, in connection with the UN Resident Coordinator system reform that delinked the role

[50] In 2023, the peacekeeping missions in the DRC and in Mali were downsized, with Mali mission alone involving a separation of 1,786 civilian staff (UN 2023f; UN 2023e).

from employment with UNDP, new uncertainties regarding job security have reportedly reduced the appeal of the role, posing a considerable risk to the success of the Resident Coordinator system (UN 2021c).

Mobility incurs costs related to recruiting, training, and staff deployment (Spencer 2019). At the UN Secretariat, the direct cost of mobility for 2,600 staff moving duty stations is expected to double between 2022 and 2030 to nearly US$77 million (UN 2020c). At WFP, where most international staff are rotational, the average relocation cost through reassignment is estimated to be US$50,000, with the total cost of 520 staff amounting to 26 million in 2019, while another US$6 million incurred as payments for staff not matched with suitable positions but who collected salary and entitlements, without in most cases performing any work (WFP 2021a).

When the refined mobility framework for the UN Secretariat was adopted in 2014, the Secretary-General was requested to ensure that the implementation of the mandate would not be negatively affected by managed mobility (UN 2014). Figure 10 summarises the upsides and the downsides of mobility discussed in this chapter.

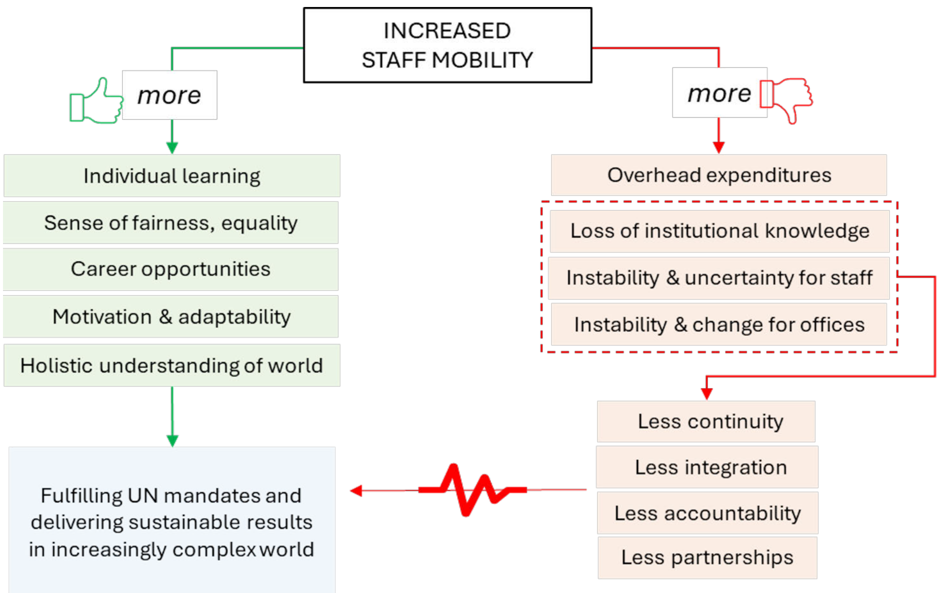

Figure 10. Upsides and downsides of staff mobility (own compilation)

Whether the upsides of mobility outweigh the downsides is an open question – perhaps even a question of lesser relevance – given that workforce movement is an inherent characteristic of a global organisation with a highly diverse workforce. This diversity, in its broader sense beyond geographical representation, is discussed next.

3.4.3 Closer Look on Workforce Diversity

Nowhere else is the diversity of staff as extreme as in the UN system (Haynes 2008); intercultural tension is part of the daily life of its workforce (see e.g., Hanhimäki 2015:41). According to research, national culture influences innovation (Kostis 2021), learning (Kim and McLean 2014), risk appetite, and tolerance of uncertainty (Kreiser et al. 2010). Moreover, religion or spirituality can have an impact on worker performance, creativity, motivation, and commitment (Fanggidae, Kurniawati, and Bahweres 2020). While multicultural organisations may be more adaptable and better suited to serve a diverse customer base (Coote Martin 2014), research shows that diversity can have either positive or negative contributions to the organisation, depending on how diversity is managed (Inegbedion et al. 2020; Coote Martin 2014; Mazur 2010; Gardenswartz and Rowe 2009:35-36). Some scholars (see Haynes 2008; Davies 2002:10) have cautioned against underestimating the difficulty of harmonizing the work of a diverse workforce. The notion of diversity bringing benefits into a workplace does not, according to research, reflect in practice as strongly as in theory (Al-Jenaibi, 2011; Lauring and Ross 2004). In daily work, the cultural and national management styles, work ethics, and cultural preferences of UN staff may leave them susceptible to bias and create severe interpersonal conflict that can hurt work effectiveness (Hanhimäki 2015:40-41; World Bank 2015). Unresolved conflicts, in turn, are associated with poor mental health (UNW 2019). Other negative effects of diversity can include risk aversion (Davies 2002:10), miscommunication, creation of barriers, and dysfunctional adaptation behaviours (UNW 2019; Coote Martin 2014). In virtual work, the geographical and temporal distance of a diverse workforce has also been found to be a challenge for effectiveness (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020).

Diversity management seeks to promote respect for the uniqueness of individuals (Inegbedion et al. 2020). However, the “proper role of differences in culture and identity” require clarifying which differences matter, in what ways, and to whom (Ferdman 2017:238). Diversity and inclusion “does not mean the absence of limits, that ‘anything goes’” or that everything can be questioned (Ferdman 2017:254). There are attempts to sensitise staff about working within a diverse workforce – the guidance issued by UN Women, for example, refers to an online course on workplace diversity and cultural competency (UNW 2019). However, a recent staff survey of 113 nationalities working in 22 UN entities in 100 countries found that there should be more emphasis on diversity management for better performance (Eckhard and Parizek 2022). For example, dealing with different forms of racism– e.g., linked to colonialism or national rivalries – requires different treatments (Deen 2020).

Cultural diversity also entails an ethical challenge, as national culture influences moral perceptions and judgments (Mele and Sanchez-Runde 2013), although international relations analyses are more likely to assume international staff are uniformly rational and respond uniformly to formal rules or informal norms (Finnemore 2021). While the various UN entities' codes of conduct reflect their respective mandates and are not identical, they share the same core[51] and do, in essence, expect its diverse staff to behave in a uniform manner, with a zero tolerance stance to, for example, sexual exploitation and abuse or corruption. The primacy of organisational ethics over one's own is reflected also, e.g., in UNDP's policy: "Culture is not an excuse for poor behavioral choices or actions that violate UNDP policy" (UNDP 2023c). However, Sampath (2015) asks, in writing about the UN international civil servants as "works of ethics-in-action", what happens when the UN staff enter the messy and complex world of reality, where the ethical qualities may not be so strong, and decisions need to be made between right and wrong.

Cultural training of aid workers should be considered central to aid (Hindman and Fechter 2014:3). How effectively the UN can ensure that "all staff members have a basic understanding of United Nations culture such as requirements on ethical and integrity, information security and fraud prevention" (UN 2020d:76) and steer the conduct of its highly diverse, multilingual civil service is an interesting question. It was reported that, by the end of 2020, only 54 per cent of UN Secretariat staff had completed two of the nine mandatory training courses, and four months later, all courses had been completed only by 50 per cent of the staff (UN 2020d). Another report showed that only 50 per cent of civilian peacekeeping staff had completed the mandatory course on ethics and integrity and 63 per cent had not completed the course on preventing fraud and corruption (UN 2021b). Yet another survey found that nearly half of 15,000 UN Secretariat staff doubt that people are held accountable for ethical behaviour (Gartner 2018). Thus, the surprise may not be in that breaches of ethics occur, but that we don't hear about them more often.

Some recent UN documentation makes reference to "sensitive issues", denoting issues related to e.g., race and religion (see e.g., UN 2021b:15). It has been said that while the less obvious dimensions such as culture, religion, and politics only show up with the passage of time, these deeply buried qualities actually are the essence of diversity (Coote Martin 2014). How local customs and national and religious holidays including prayer and fasting may come into conflict with competing temporal demands (e.g., deadlines) and how spatial exceptions such as staff dress codes may be at odds with local customs are discussed e.g. by Smirl (2008) and Hanhimäki (2015:40-41), while a UN report found that pressure can be exerted by national authorities on the UN to recruit staff along ethnic or religious lines (UN 2021b). Research has also found fatalistic beliefs to be associated with unsafe

[51] The UN Charter, the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations, and the Standards of Conduct for International Civil Service (see e.g., UNHCR 2023c; WFP 2021b; UNICEF https://www.unicef.org/ethics/ retrieved April 16, 2024).

behaviours and low levels of perceived risk (Ngueutsaa and Kouabenan 2017), and fatalism is deemed to hamper, for example, messaging aimed at improving road safety and preventing crashes (Kayani, King, and Fleiter 2011) – a finding relevant for the UN context: road crashes are a focus area in the UN Road Safety Strategy, as they are a leading cause of death and serious injury to UN staff (UNDSS 2019).

For the UN system, diversity management appears to involve seemingly contradictory facets coexisting in paradoxical tension, that is, how to ensure cohesion while cherishing diversity, productively. Applying Kahneman's (2021:27) concepts of wanted diversity versus unwanted variability ("noise") in managing a diverse workforce in the UN system context, I posit that it is a quest for minimising the unwanted variability (e.g., different ethical standards) and maximising the wanted diversity (e.g., broad range of ideas and contextual knowledge), and striking a balance between the two, while meeting the normative aims of the first UN and fulfilling the mandates of the UN entities, effectively and efficiently (Figure 11).

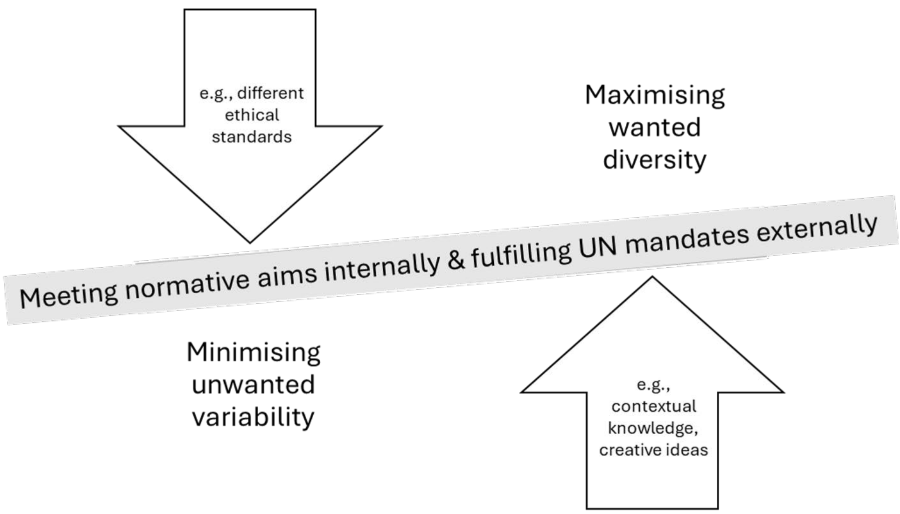

Figure 11. Managing diverse workforce in the UN system (own compilation)

This may prove a growing challenge with increasing pressures for better performance, exacerbated by the increasingly competitive environment and calls for more transparency and accountability. Literature tells us little about how such a dilemma should or could be resolved. However, the empirical material of this study may provide insights about how field workers navigate this dilemma, in the realities they inhabit. How we arrive at these findings is discussed next, as the philosophical underpinnings, the approach, and the method for the inquiry are presented.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

Ontologically this study aligns with the constructivist view of the world, whereby realities are “multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent from their form and content on the persons who hold them” (Guba 1990:27). In David Bohm’s words (quoted in Ricard and Thun 2001:121) “Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions.” Thus, reality is not Newtonian, factive, made of isolated parts that can be explained, but intentionally created by processes at different levels of meaning structures, with wholes and parts being ambiguous and continuously interpreted (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009:54). That ambiguity is found to be prevalent in the public sector (Oppi, Campanale, and Cinquini 2022) further supports the constructivist stance in this study.

Homo economicus, with his stable preferences and consistency between ideas and actions (Brunsson 1993b), would be a stranger to this world where “emotion, fear, whim, and ideology are stronger drivers … than logic, reason, or evidence” (Griffin 2020:830). It is a world of complex situations, in which “the assumptions of perfect rationality … do not even remotely describe the processes that human beings use for making decisions” (Simon 1979:510). Epistemologically, in constructivism, there is a dialectic relationship between human beings that generate reality and the reality that is generated: knowledge is a human construction; it does not exist independently but is dependent on individuals and how they perceive, interpret, and act (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009:75; Olssen 1995) – they are two sides of the same coin (Pouliot 2007). In the same vein, this perspective means that researchers too acknowledge that their interpretations of the phenomena they examine are themselves constructions (Charmaz 2006/2014:342) – as such, the theory resulting from such study is dependent on the view of the researcher and “does not and cannot stand outside of it" (ibid., 239).

Aligned with this ontological position that acknowledges the world of multiple realities (Charmaz 2017b), this study expects variation in the empirical data, welcoming it as a source for a richer understanding of the studied phenomenon, not as an impediment for it. Accordingly, the researcher does not force data during the course of the inquiry.

However, it is the view of the moderate, not radical constructivism that is adopted: "ideas and interpretations … at least partly reflect some external reality" as opposed to no meaning existing beyond the conversational situation (Höijer 2008:278). Thus, while this study both expects and welcomes variation in the data grounded in the realities of a diverse group of individuals whose cognitive structures, language, and culture, for example, can introduce bias or variation in how reality is understood, the referenced authors, informants, and other creators of data are assumed to acknowledge some form of external reality. For example, in the case of the informants in the empirical phase, this external reality can be related to the UN system, its rules and regulations, and alike. Regardless of how these individuals might dislike or disagree with such aspects, as international civil servants working on the Professional level in the UN system bureaucracy, they are nevertheless assumed to acknowledge the existence of such rules and regulations.

While the moderate constructivist perspective reflects my view of the world, it is also adept for the sector subject to this study. As the subjects of analysis are, from the constructivist perspective, "meaning creating creatures" (Fierke 2004:38), the study seeks a degree of subjectivity-awareness and control rather than absolute objectivity, which is, according to Sumner and Tribe (2008:76), typical for development studies. The sphere of aid work is viewed as a complex system in which the actors' values play an important role, also in seeking knowledge. In this context, "complexity" denotes what Buckley and Casson (2009:94) refer to as organic complexity that arises from numerous interdependencies and feedback loops within a system in which everything depends on everything else in a way that makes it difficult to disentangle causes and effects. The values of the actors, shaped by their experiences, influence their perspectives, aims, and goals, and direct action which, in turn, accumulates the experiences, while the actors' values also shape the kind of knowledge they pursue to achieve their goals (Allen and Varga 2007).

Given that the objects of interest comprise a culturally and otherwise diverse group of professionals of the international civil service, as Höijer (2008) points out, from an ontological point of view, question arises about who or what the study represents. Who am I conversing with? In this study, do they represent the UN institution, their nationality, other social group (e.g., civil servants, specific professions), or just simply themselves as individuals and personalities? This is a question I could not answer at the onset of the inquiry and one I kept reflecting over the course of the entire study. In fact, paradoxically, the more I learned about the informants, the less I seemed to be able to answer the question, as elucidated in the memo in Vignette 1.

What or who do the informants represent?

While it was clear to all informants that they are invited to the conversation because they are current or former UN field workers, they all understood that they speak in their personal capacity, anonymously, and not as named UN representatives. However, my starting point of “talking to UN civil servants” soon got blurred, as most of the informants had worked in business and kept making references to how that background was colouring their mindset or work at the UN. A myriad of questions occupied my mind.

Were my informants really civil servants … or business people?

As the conversations progressed, it just got more convoluted: am I now listening to a former police officer, ex-peacekeeper or military officer, auditor-turned-humanitarian, government employee, engineer in administrator’s clothing, or craftsman-at-heart earning a living at war zones?

Is this an Asian or African or European person speaking or a female perspective influenced by two decades of mobility?

Is that a voice of a father or a manager or a consultant? Is this an accomplished professional whose children have flown out of the nest and no more in need of education grants, or a straight-shooting personality calling a spade a spade?

If I had spoken with these individuals a year, two, five earlier, how would they be, and where would they be, physically and mentally? What might they say differently – and what might I hear and interpret differently?

There were, for sure, some elements seeping through that reflected the informants’ country of origin, religion, nationality, and identifying with the work role, e.g., engineer or security officer or accountant also came across, to some degree. However, as many had changed not only locations but roles too, the job identities were, to a degree, fluid. What did become increasingly clear was, however, the “how” of the identity – whether being professional, accountable, ethical, needing to feel useful etc. This puzzlement about the informant identity and representation was entirely with me; the informants themselves did not seem to have any qualms about what or who or how they were.

Vignette 1. Memo on identities and representation

While I remained uncertain “whom” I had conversed with even after the interviews, I also critically reflected over the importance of knowing the answer.

Why did I need to know?

Did the informants themselves even know “who” they were, be it during the interviews or in general?

Also, can it be known?

I concluded, with a degree of humility, that while it would be interesting to know, it was equally interesting to realise how complex a question the one of identity and representation is, not the least in the context of aid work. Given that my study concerns largely unexamined actors and is, as such, about "finding out what we need to understand in order to begin to understand" (Baggini 2019:xix), it can serve a useful purpose even when not delivering conclusions to be generalised over populations or contexts. Had this study sought to offer generalisations, the question of representation would become more problematic (Höijer 2008).

Finally, as this study adopts the grounded theory method, it should be mentioned that the epistemological stance of grounded theory has been said to be "essentially one of resistance to pre-existing knowledge" (Nolas 2011:18). However, as Charmaz (2008:135) points out, "believing that researchers can remain uncontaminated by prior theories and research literatures is epistemologically naïve and rather silly". Accordingly, as elucidated later in section 4.3, literature has been used throughout the inquiry, for different purposes.

4.2 Research Approach

4.2.1 Why Grounded Theory?

This qualitative inquiry with an interest in the "how", not in the "how much" or "how many" is not seeking to prove or modify an existing theory but to generate one, adopting a grounded theory approach[52]. While ethnography, narrative research, phenomenology, and the use of case studies were considered, the grounded theory method was found suitable as a recommended methodology for building a theory on dynamic social processes, such as those encountered within the international business discipline (Gligor, Esmark, and Gölgeci 2016). It is also appropriate if the aim is to make knowledge claims about reality that is interpreted by individuals (Suddaby 2006), as it makes visible the "tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of practical work" by probing "how exactly they [people] are going about the 'doing'" (Nolas 2011:39).

This study aims to develop an understanding and interpretation of aspects related to work effectiveness grounded in the views of a mixed group of informants who do not form an intact culture-sharing group and whose patterns could be examined, nor are they assumed to form an epistemic community as would be the case for ethnography. Furthermore, given the lack of research on individuals' behaviours, I

52 Grounded theory is both method and methodology: it offers specific research tools and provides the underlying rationale of a particular approach to inquiry (Charmaz 2017b).

deemed it prudent to form a first impression that is not meant to serve as a basis for generalisations. The study explores how aid workers think and act rather than how their thinking and acting may have changed over time, or how their life stories may have evolved, as could be the case with a narrative method or case study approach. Furthermore, I deemed it premature to assume this mixed group would have common experiences that lend themselves to a phenomenological approach: while “working in the field, as an international recruit in the UN system” is a common denominator, this does not adequately define a distinct phenomenon. While grounded theory approach has similarities with phenomenological assumptions and techniques, instead of deep diving into individuals’ subjective experiences, grounded theory study directs attention to how these experiences can be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations (Suddaby 2006).

Developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, the grounded theory approach proposed that a systematic qualitative analysis had its own logic and could generate theory (Charmaz 2014:5-7). The emphasis on the generation and emergence of concepts and theoretical codes makes the grounded theory method different from other qualitative methods that involve received concepts and frameworks imposed on data (Glaser and Holton 2004). Variations of the grounded theory method have emerged, including Strauss and Corbin’s version with objectivist underpinnings, Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory, Clarke’s situational analysis approach, and grounded theory methods aligned with a critical realist perspective, all of which share common characteristics (Timonen, Foley, and Conlon 2018). According to Charmaz (2014:15, 342, 345), these commonalities include

- Emphasising theory construction, not application of current theories.
- Collecting and analysing data simultaneously in an iterative process.
- Analysing processes and actions, not structures or themes.
- Searching for variation.
- Using comparative methods to generate abstract concepts and theories.
- Drawing on data to develop new conceptual categories and developing inductive categories through systematic analysis and searching for variation in the studied categories or process.
- Engaging in theoretical sampling, whereby the properties of categories are developed until no new properties emerge, instead of sampling a randomly selected population or representative distributions of a population.

This study follows Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory method. Also, as mentioned earlier, the approach taken is aligned with moderate constructivism (Hildenbrand 2007), i.e., radical subjectivism is disavowed (Charmaz 2008). This method adopts elements of interpretivism, whereby the aim is to understand meanings and actions and how they are constructed by individuals, and in which subjectivity of the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of the data is acknowledged (Charmaz 2014:13;231). This contemporary version of the grounded theory is aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of the study and resonates with my own world view, while for example Glaser's presupposition of a neutral researcher with an unobtrusive impact on data (Kenny and Fourie 2015) does not. Moreover, the chosen method highlights its flexibility, not its mechanical application (Charmaz 2014:13). For example, although adherence to a rigorous coding framework (such as Strauss and Corbin's) may make it easier to demonstrate methodological compliance in study evaluation, I find that compliance with a coding framework in a study requiring open-mindedness and involving examination of feelings, reflections, and behaviours could potentially cloud the analysis, with form taking precedence over function.

Alignment with constructivist thinking has in particular influenced the design of the empirical data collection process and my expectations of the interviews, including the related analytical challenges. I expected complexity, driven by variation in such data: not only was I to be examining subjective experiences and meanings, but they would be those of a culturally and professionally diverse group of individuals. Also, in line with the constructivist stance, as the researcher, I was not an objective observer but a constructor of meaning, thus needing to be mindful of "managing" the manner in which my biases might influence the research process.

4.2.2 Abductive Elements in Grounded Theory Approach

The constructivist grounded theory method involves both inductive and abductive elements (Figure 12). The inductive elements are present as theories are built from empirical data through successive comparative analyses (Birks and Mills 2015:11) and patterns are extrapolated from a range of individual cases to form conceptual categories (Charmaz 2014:343). The abductive elements become apparent when inferences are made and checked through further empirical data (Charmaz 2014:343), with logical inferencing involving "mental leaps" and extending "into the realm of profound insight" (Reichertz 2007:216).

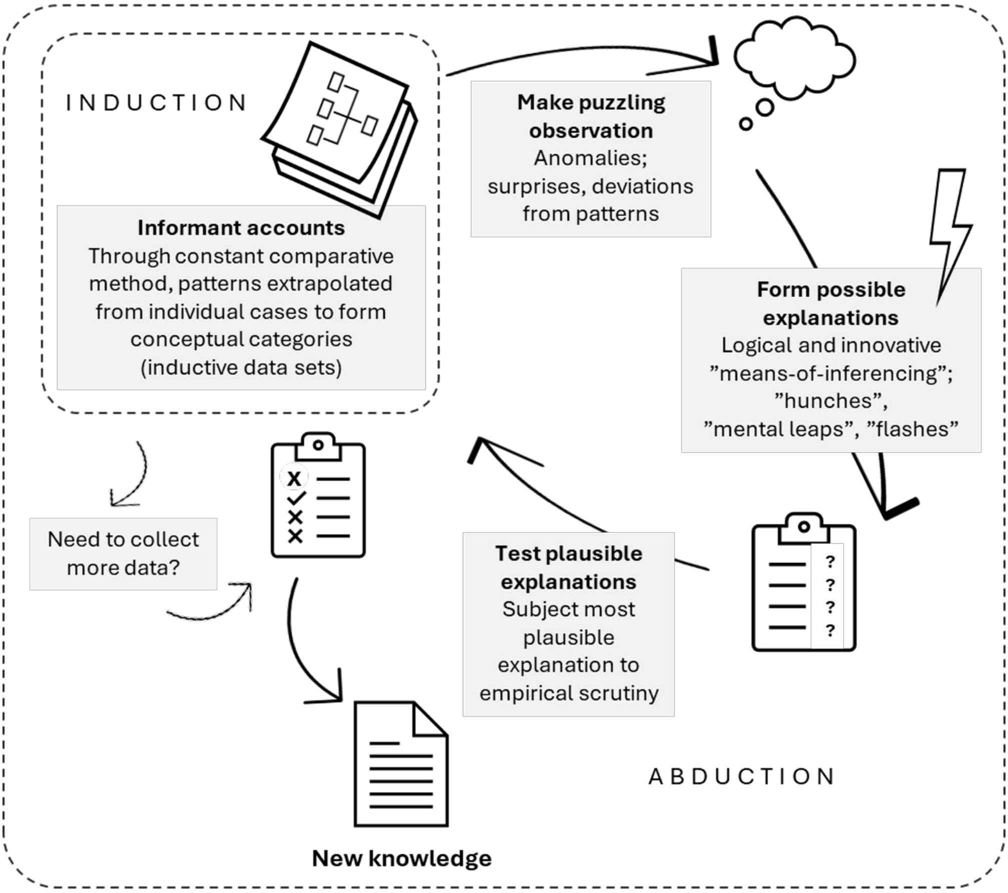

Figure 12. Grounded theory: inductive and abductive elements (adapted from Sætre and Van de Ven 2021; Reichertz 2007; Charmaz 2014; Peirce 1974)

Sætre and Van de Ven (2021:686-687) describe abduction as four systematic “moves” – observation and confirmation of anomalies and developing and evaluating “hunches[53]” – that may occur in “highly dynamic, and reflexive ways”. The process is triggered by an anomaly, a surprising observation that does not fit a pattern or existing knowledge. The researcher makes theoretical conjectures, “mental leaps”, to explain the finding; then returns to collected data to test the most plausible explanations. Peirce (1974:113), the creator of the concept of abduction, refers to abductive insights as “flashes”. More data may be needed to progress the

53 While Peirce and Charmaz use the term “hypothesis”, “hunch” may be more fitting. However, I do not agree with Sætre and Van de Ven’s idea about generating or developing hunches. In my view, they cannot be willed. Rather, they emerge.

reasoning process to arrive at the outcome: the most plausible explanation (Charmaz 2014:201), which "merely suggests that something may be" (Peirce 1974:106).

The abductive reasoning processes are inherently messy and they can take place over a longer period of time. In discussing abductive reasoning and the researcher as an active reasoner and interpreter, Ketokivi (2024) underscores the importance of making the abductions as transparent as possible, given that new ideas originate in our minds, not in the data. In the same vein, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) encourage a stronger emphasis on the researcher's reflexivity in dealing with the empirical material, rather than merely reporting on the procedures and techniques for its collection and analys. As mentioned in the Introduction, in this study, balance has been sought between describing and reporting, that is, between revealing the abductive reasoning process embedded in the grounded theory inquiry and the flow for a good reader experience. In the empirical part of the findings, this has been executed by seeking to succinctly present the main findings at the beginning of the chapter or section and complementing them, in some instances, with vignettes that elucidate the abductive elements related to the discussed topic. With this approach, the reader hopefully avoids being overwhelmed by lengthy discussions of inferential cognitive processes before reaching the outcomes. Rather, he is presented with more clarity, while the necessary transparency of the process is also achieved. Text boxes are also used in other parts of this report, with some of them being memos drafted during the inquiry, while others are summaries of notations made to the methodological journal.

While the grounded theory approach starts with data collection and concludes with a report, it is not a linear process (Figure 13). The essential elements of a grounded theory method include concurrent data collection and analysis, iterative coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical integration, with the analytic focus emerging during the research process (Charmaz 2014).

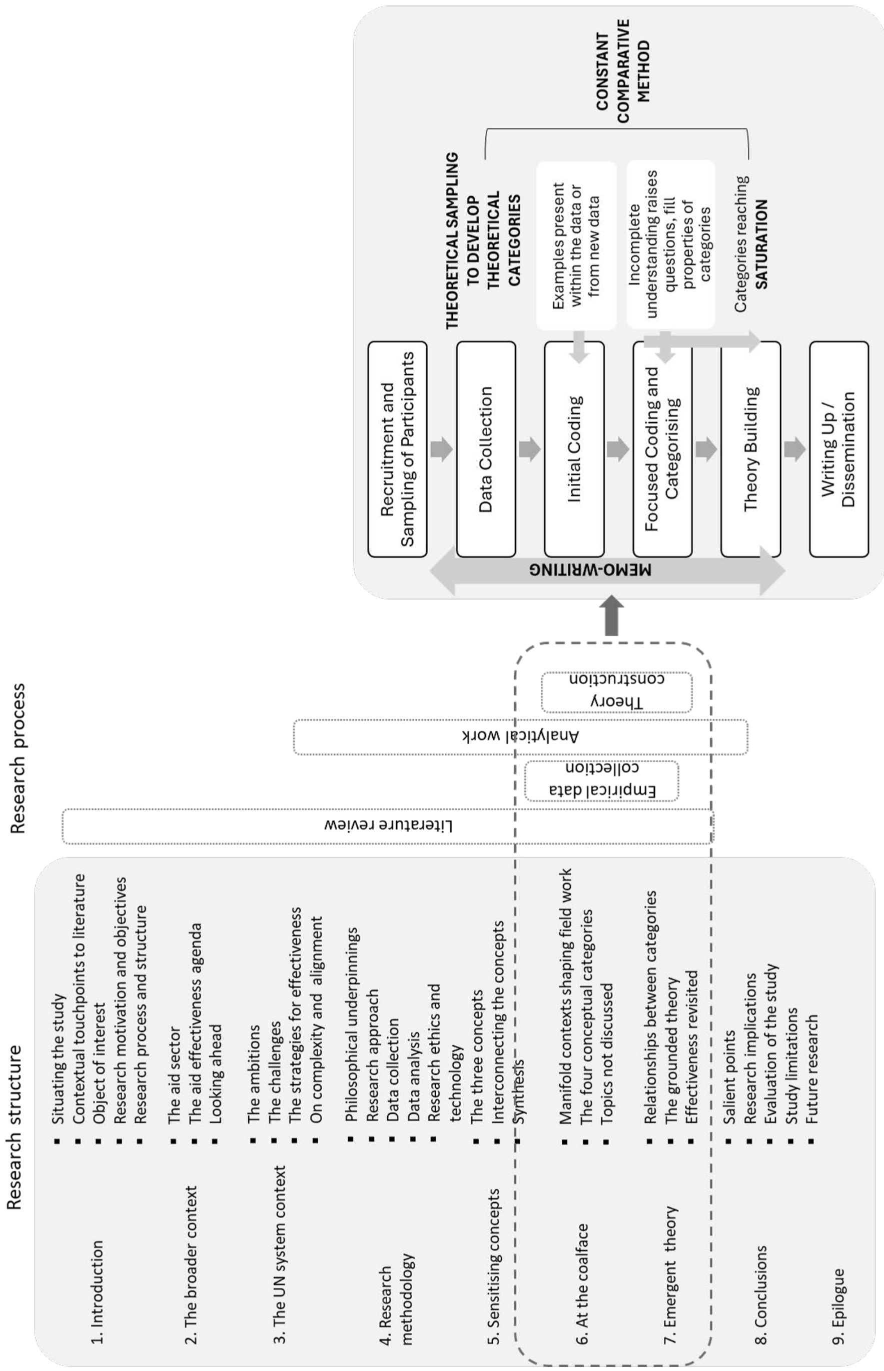

Figure 13. Grounded theory method (Charmaz 2014:18)

What follows is an overview of the processes applied in this study for data collection and analysis, whereby the above essential elements are elucidated. The chapter concludes with the salient points regarding the use of technology in the research process and matters related to research ethics. The evaluation of the study, aligned with Charmaz' (2014) criteria for the quality of a grounded theory – which also largely align with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria – is addressed at the end of the report.

4.3 Data Collection as Part of Theory Construction

4.3.1 Data Sources

In grounded theory methodology "all is data" (Glaser and Holton 2004:12). In this study, data triangulation – using several forms of data to approach an issue from different angles and viewpoints to enhance the overall understanding of the research topic (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:293) – has is adopted to corroborate e.g. the interview findings but also to unfold the diversity in the data, i.e., to extend knowledge (see e.g., Flick 2019). Apart from interviews, scholarly literature, UN official sources, newspaper and magazine articles, trade and professional literature authored by aid and development industry insiders, memoirs and autobiographies authored by UN system staff, and audiovisual materials have been used. In light of the relative lack of scholarly works on individual level actors, especially in the aid sector and in the UN system context, and as the group of interest concerns practitioners whose subjective worlds are explored, the inclusion of grey literature, opinion pieces, essays, and alike to this inquiry is deemed appropriate.

While Table 2 presents a self-explanatory description and purposes of the various data sources and the phase during which such data has been used, it is prudent to illuminate how extant literature has been used in this inquiry, given that the place of literature review in grounded theory research has been subject to scholarly dispute. On one hand, it has been claimed that literature review at the onset of the research may cloud the researcher's ability to remain open to the inquiry (Glaser and Strauss 2006:37; Glaser and Holton 2004). On the other hand, it has been said that the awareness of the extant literature makes the grounded theory process even more productive (e.g., Timonen, Foley, and Conlon 2018; Suddaby 2006). In line with the constructivist approach, literature has been used in an iterative manner throughout the inquiry, for different purposes.

Table 2. Data sources

Data Source	Description	Purpose	Time period
Scholarly literature	Literature related to aid and development sector & aid effectiveness; UN system.	To review extant studies relevant for the topic; to review topic-related theories. Used before empirical data collection to establish research gap, and post-interviews to review findings in the context of extant scholarship.	Throughout the research process.
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews with former / current UN staff with field experience. Interviews with senior UN leaders and other subject matter experts.	The primary means of capturing field worker perspectives on effectiveness in the setting of nested pressures and tensions, and to understand how they navigate such tensions in their daily operations. To check for the latest thinking in the UN system on effectiveness or other related topics.	31.05.2023 – 23.01.2024 14.06.2023 – 05.12.2023
UN official data sources: ▪ UN Official Document System ▪ UN Digital Library; UNdata ▪ UN Regulatory Framework Policy Portal ▪ UN News Centre ▪ The United Nations iLibrary ▪ Websites of UN entities	General Assembly resolutions; policy and strategy documents; handbooks; rules; instructions; guidance; surveys; reports; audits; statistics; plans; announcements; speeches.	To understand the policies, strategies, and plans; to retrieve statistics.	Throughout the research process.
Newspaper and magazine articles; audiovisual materials	Interviews, webinar recordings, and speeches of UN civil servants, scholars, and other sector stakeholders.	To provide other data sources fully delinked from the interview process. Triangulation of multiple data sources is used as a validation strategy to strengthen the study quality and credibility.	Throughout the research process.
Trade and professional literature by aid and development industry insiders; autobiographies and memoirs authored by UN staff	"Development blockbusters" authored by current or former officials in the aid and development industry; commercially published personal narratives by UN workers.	To provide other sources of UN staff accounts that are fully delinked from the interview process and whose construction cannot be affected by the researcher. Triangulation of multiple data sources is used as a validation strategy to strengthen the quality and credibility of the study.	Throughout the research process.

As shown in Figure 14, in the initial study design phase, extant literature and official data sources have been consulted to become familiar with the relevant topics (such as grounded theory method, aid effectiveness research, and UN strategies) and to guide in the establishment of the research gap and the data collection strategy.

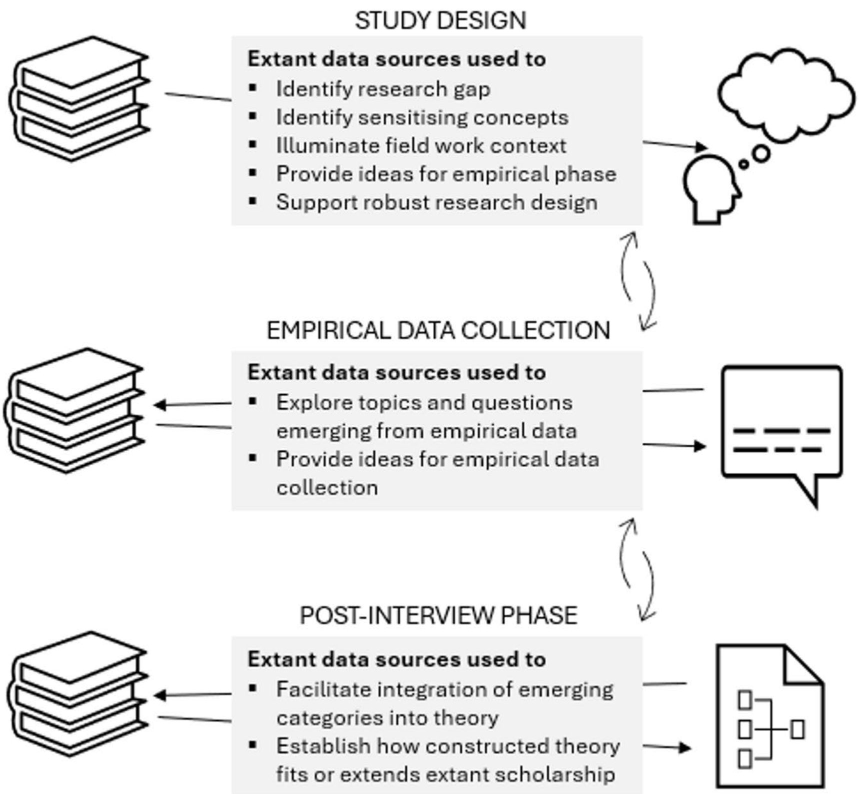

Figure 14. Use of extant data sources in study phases.

These sources have also helped to illuminate the context for practitioners' work in the field, thus facilitating the shaping of the broad themes in the initial interview guide. Extant theories and ideas have also been explored to guide in the identification of appropriate sensitising concepts. However, such sensitising concepts have not been treated as elements to be validated or to be refuted; there is no firm theoretical framework set at the onset of the study, given that openness to inquiry is of the essence – something that has been referred to as "an approach of wilful suspension of belief concerning previous theorizing" (Gehman et al. 2018:291). During the empirical data collection process, literature has been used to study interesting or puzzling points emerging from the interviews. In the post-interview phase, literature has been leveraged as a source of inspiration to facilitate the process of integrating the emerging conceptual categories into a theory grounded in data, as well as to establish how the constructed grounded theory fits or extends the extant scholarship. Thus, extant scholarship, rich and distinguished in many aspects, plays an important role in this study. However, it does not overshadow what we learn from the field workers or mute their voices, nor does it steer the manner in which the theory, grounded in such new data, is constructed. Rather, this new data complements the extant knowledge. The aim is an informed grounded theory, a term coined by Thornberg (2012:249), whereby both the research process and its product are "thoroughly grounded in data … while being informed by existing research literature and theoretical frameworks".

I was first exposed to aid effectiveness scholarship through a structured process in an academic setting as part of my International Studies at Ewha University in Seoul. The courses in Development Cooperation Theory and Practice, Special Topics in Development, and Advanced Topics in Development Cooperation covered contemporary issues in this field, including readings and examination of related theories and approaches. For the initial identification of relevant journals, the Ewha university library ranking table of development journals was used, complemented by Google Scholar searches during the course of the study. Furthermore, research by think tanks and institutions in the field of aid and development – such as Overseas Development Institute (now ODI Global), Center for Global Development, and European Association of Development Research and Training Institution – have been regularly reviewed for relevance. As for academic literature on the UN system, apart from consulting the authoritative *Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* written by distinguished scholars, analysts, and practitioners, being a member in the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) has facilitated the identification of other relevant scholarly sources. For example, all articles published in *Global Governance*, the journal issued by ACUNS, have been reviewed for relevance, for volumes issued after year 2000. As for the identification of the UN official documentation, while the UN website has been used as the main portal to the various databases, given the variety of different document categories, the list of databases has been cross-checked through New York University's guides to United Nations and International Documents Collections databases for UN research. When using sources for topics featuring within other disciplines, such as those concerning international business or research methods, attempts have been made to use well-recognised journals and/or authors recognised as experts in their fields.

4.3.2 Conducting Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 14 informants between May 2023 and January 2024, resulting in 26 hours of recordings. As all the informants were overseas, the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or WhatsApp and recorded for transcribing purposes. Who is invited to participate in a grounded theory study is crucial for attaining excellent empirical data and for the ultimate quality of the grounded theory (Morse and Clark 2019:147). To initiate the empirical data collection process, purposeful sampling – selecting participants who have knowledge or experience of the phenomena subject to exploration by the researcher (Sandelowski 1995) – was used in recruiting the first five informants from the professional network of the researcher. The rest of the informants were identified using the snowball method, whereby recommendations were solicited from the informants. The criteria for the informant selection included:

- Service, past or present, at a UN duty station in offices other than headquarters or regional bureaux.
- Holding a status of an internationally recruited person.
- Experience in Support Services.
- Willingness and ability to discuss concepts and practice in English.

The notion of theoretical sampling progressively guided and shaped empirical data collection. In theoretical sampling – not to be mistaken for representative population sampling in quantitative research – the researcher collects, codes, and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where, to develop the theory (Glaser and Strauss 2006:45). The researcher seeks to saturate categories and concepts, not data, and according to Charmaz (2014:106), "you are unlikely to know what you need to find out until you grapple with analyzing your data". Therefore, how many interviews or informants would be required to achieve theoretical saturation – the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory (Charmaz (2014:345) – could not be fixed at the initial design stage. Such a pre-planned routine could, according to Glaser and Strauss (2006:47), "force the analyst into irrelevant directions and harmful pitfalls". Thus, flexibility, creativity and reflexivity was called for in the interview process (Foley et al 2021).

By recruiting informants without setting boundaries for work experiences, I sought heterogeneity of perspectives. Moreover, not discriminating between genders or work experience in family or non-family duty stations introduced more randomness to the process. The informants, hailing from South and North America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, represent a diverse group in many aspects. Their collective experiences cover a variety of work roles in 21 UN operations in 34 field locations

(Appendix 5). In addition, the interviewees have held various types of contracts, including for volunteers, consultants, short term personnel, and fixed term staff. Four of them have begun their UN career as locally recruited staff and two had also served within UN police and military roles prior to their entry to civil service. The informants have held roles within the public, corporate, and the non-profit sectors, and in entrepreneurial ventures as self-employed individuals. They have worked for the UN development (D) agencies, UN humanitarian (H) entities, and for the UN Secretariat (S) as civilian personnel within the peace operations (Table 3). The length of informants' UN experience varies, as does the duration of field deployment. The earliest experiences relate to the 80's, the most recent to 2024. Collectively, they have worked in the UN system for 258 years of which 176 years in the field. The informants have been assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms at random; they do not reflect the informant s' gender, nationalities, home countries, or duty stations.

Table 3. Informants' UN experience: types of entities and years of service

Informant pseudonym	Type of UN operation*	Years in field / UN
Amari	H	2 / 2
Emerson	S	20 / 20
Finley	DHS	18 / 20
Hao	HS	14 / 17
Kai	S	21 / 21
Makoto	DH	1 / 19
Morgan	S	15 / 17
Nuru	DS	15 / 28
Omid	HS	8 / 8
Skylar	S	2 / 3
Soohee	S	17 / 21
Xavi	DHS	8 / 34
Zasha	DH	23 / 24
Zene	DHS	12 / 24

*Development (D) agency; humanitarian (H) entity; peace operations (S)

The empirical data is presented in this manner to honour the commitment to protect the informants' anonymity. However, even with pseudonyms, informants' accounts, linked with UN entities, duty stations, and work functions can in some cases enable traceability to the individual. For this reason, in some cases, even the assigned pseudonyms are omitted from the report or a quoted account has been shrouded into a veil of opaqueness. However, all effort has been taken to bring forth the essence of the informants' accounts.

In the constructivist grounded theory method, interviewing is concerned about a mutual exploration of the informant's experiences and perspectives, rather than about the efforts to mirror reality, and therefore, the interviewer's approach to asking questions, listening, and following up what the informant is telling are crucial in the co-construction and quality of such data (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021). To avoid fixation on preconceived categories or forcing the interview data, the semi-structured interviews were not based on a fixed set of questions but followed an interview guide (Appendix 5) prepared to facilitate an open-ended, emergent discussion. The guide included questions e.g., about UN practices (e.g., staff geographical representation and international mobility), effectiveness paradigms (e.g., results focus), and day-to-day work activities (e.g., inter-agency collaboration).

The interview was opened with a broad question "When I say 'working effectively in the field' what comes to your mind?" This allowed the informant to initially pitch the level of discussion (e.g., concepts vs. actions) and open the dialogue. Thereafter, the informant's statements and key words (e.g., "coordination"; "competent") served as prompts for transitioning to other topics and questions contained in the interview guide. The plan included the possibility of holding more than one session per informant. Seidman (2006:17) cautions against "one-shot meetings" with informants whom the interviewer has never met so as not to "tread on thin contextual ice". In this study, I made the decision to, literally, play it by ear: if the informant appeared uninterested or seemed to hold back, e.g., by using clichés, opaque, or "diplomatic" language, I would attempt to explore the matter further, however, without exerting pressure. "The grounded theory researcher listens to participants venting issues rather than encouraging them to talk about a subject of little interest," write Glaser and Holton (2004:57). Additional sessions were organised when the allotted time proved insufficient or when it was necessary to clarify responses verbally after the initial analysis to fill the gaps in the collected data. Written queries were also sent to select informants to clarify statements. No informant declined the additional discussions or otherwise withdrew from the interaction once it had begun.

Foley et al. (2021:4) discuss the "push" and the "pull" of theoretical sampling in grounded theory interviewing. While the "push" refers to a more active interviewing style to follow a potentially illuminating line of inquiry, the "pull" refers to becoming attuned to a line of inquiry that can arise spontaneously upon discovering the data is veering in novel directions. Heeding this call in the empirical data collection phase, I took utmost care to allow the emergent ideas to direct the process, while still ensuring that we stayed on topic. Consequently, the interview guide evolved as the inquiry deepened – as is expected in the grounded theory method (Foley et al 2021) – and certain questions, e.g., those related to Busan Principles, weather, technology, or a typical day, became seemingly uninteresting and were subsequently left out, while others were added, such as those related to the role of luck and trust. As appropriate, language was also aligned with the terminology used by the informants, as the informants did not in all aspects share a common "UN language" either.

While the internet connectivity was excellent during most calls, in some instances, the network failures and bandwidth issues in the informants' locations caused significant latency or static, or for the calls to be cut off. What at first felt as an inconvenience slowing down *my* empirical data collection process served as a sobering reminder of *their* work reality – the very crux of the study: the potential inconveniences of the field, such as uninterrupted connectivity; things one takes for granted but perhaps should not. Similarly, even the transcription process triggered reflections about the realities of effective work in the international context, be it in the field or elsewhere. Language barrier has been found to be one of the main obstacles for effective cross-cultural communication (Lifintsev and Wellbrock 2019). The automated AI transcription reminded me how one can be grossly misheard or misunderstood. The informant group represented a wide variety of English dialects and speaking styles, and it took an intense effort to correct the AI transcripts to align with the audio-recorded accounts. Equipped with a recording, a transcript, time, and with nobody's life at stake, for me it was a mere matter of elbow grease to "get the story straight" for my thesis; no harm done. However, in aid work, omitting a "not" or missing a prefix (such as un- or mis-) can have far-reaching effects: mishearing that the priority is to "stop Russian" rather than "stop rushing", to look for the "pirots"' not "pilots", or to address the problem of "eagles in the roof" not "egos in the room", as the AI did, is bound to cause confusion; "syncing" and "sinking" people have different affects on work effectiveness.

I acknowledge Charmaz's (2014:78-79) points about the nature of interview results: they are (re)constructions of reality, and what an informants say, what he does, has done, or will do may not be in alignment. I acknowledge the presence of potential biases such as diplomatic and professional bias (Chambers 2017:31), possibly manifesting as a reluctance to broach sensitive subjects and as a tendency to notice that which concerns one's own profession. Furthermore, recency bias may cause the informants to put more weight on recent experiences, while sensory adaptation and habituation may cause informants to ignore in their accounts the elements that are familiar and common place in their environments even if they might play a significant role in helping or hindering work (Van Hecke 2007:74-75). Similarly, biases might affect me. In line with the constructivist paradigm, the researcher is not separate from the process of research; there is a need for a researcher to have “methodological self-consciousness” (Charmaz 2017a:36). As “empirical material never exists outside perspectives and interpretative repertoires” (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007:1266), what the collected, new data means is my interpretation – “we cannot know what goes on in the people’s heads, but we can offer our interpretations of what they say and do” (Charmaz 2014:285). In grounded theory, researchers must account for their positions in the research process and engage in self-reflection to ensure they take personal biases, world-views, and assumptions into account while collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data” (Suddaby 2006). Engaging in self-reflection, I was mindful of how my experiences from similar contexts to those of the informants might affect my interacting with them and interpreting the empirical data, shaping what I hear, observe, or ignore. However, it was also because of my UN past that I already knew my view of the world being just that, my view: having encountered highly divergent UN field worker mindsets, logics, and behaviours reminded me that pre-empting where the empirical data would ultimately take me was impossible – if there ever was a pre-undestanding of field worker perspectives, it was one for expecting the unexpected. I approached the interviews as if they were black boxes.

The interviews puzzled and perplexed me. While the process did not wildly go “just anywhere” as had been my initial concern, it took me to surprising places, warranting a recalibration of the lens to what I was exploring, as elucidated further in the study. I took that as proof of being able to remain open to inquiry. I also became acutely aware how differently the interviewing process might have unfolded, had I not had the benefit of the robust familiarity with the UN terminology and some of the UN internal dynamics. Moreover, I realised how my prior experience in the private sector facilitated the flow and sensemaking of certain aspects of the conversations; during the discussions it was unveiled that ten informants had worked in the business sector, a factor also reflected in their perspectives as elucidated further in the study. In general, despite the many differences between me and the informants, the aspects we had in common facilitated a sense of ease and openness. That the informants did not “provide answers” but rather retrieved memories and reflected on their thoughts was notable across the discussions; these were not topics they routinely think about or discuss with others. Three informants specifically clarified that they had intentionally avoided reflection on some of the difficult topics.

I have privileged thick data over big data, depth over breadth. Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation depend upon pursuing the iterative process and thoroughly checking the constructed categories against data (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021). As Charmaz (2014:105) points out, the “right” or adequate number of grounded theory interviews remains a contested issue. For example, Creswell and Poth (2018:87) write that saturation may involve 20 to 60 interviews, while Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) cite that 12 may suffice. According to Charmaz (2014:108), increasing the number of interviews could be in order, for example, when the study concerns a controversial topic, contains provocative findings, and relies on the interviews as the only source of data. The aspirations of the researcher and the purpose of the research matter, and I have balanced my objective of being able to immerse myself in the informant data with the aims of the study and its practical considerations.

4.4 Data Analysis as Part of Theory Construction

4.4.1 Approach to Coding

In a grounded theory study, the analysis of empirical data begins with the very first interview. In line with the constructivist grounded theory approach, the analysis started manually with initial coding of the transcripts. Coding generates "the bones of your analysis" (Charmaz 2014:113), with a code capturing a datum's primary content and attributes interpreted meaning to it, so that patterns can be detected and categories formed later in the process (Saldaña 2013:4). Charmaz (2014:116) recommends gerund-based coding; they reflect action. Having conducted tests using both nouns and verbs to determine whether the utilisation of gerunds makes a difference, I opted for the gerund-based approach. Applying initial codes line-by-line (at times per segment) and staying close to the data, I named action (doing; feeling) rather than identified themes or topics. In addition to the transcripts, I paid attention to the audio – the pauses, swift or hesitant responses, repetitions, changes in the tone of voice, and eagerness to stay on or deflect a topic. I also observed the visual clues – the eager nodding, head shaking, facepalm, pounding fists, rolling eyes, etc. – when the discussion was conducted over a video link. The initial codes were provisional. In some instances, after "listening to the data" with more care – having applied the constant comparative method and compared data with data – I modified the codes to better fit the data, as the example below in Table 4 illustrates.

Table 4. Example of revising initial codes

Segment of informant account	*First initial coding*	*Revised coding*
"I think the word 'want' … we are thinking about it in different ways when I say there has to be 'the want'. You are using it as in 'I want to be there'. I use it in a way that we want to succeed. I don't want to be there, in hardship. But I want to succeed in the mission."	Explaining 'the want' Wanting to succeed in mission. Not wanting to be in the hardship location.	Being successful may mean tolerating hardship. Wanting to accomplish mission matters more than hardship.

The grounded theory coding can include more than the initial and focused coding, especially if the initial line-by-line codes remain at a mundane level (Charmaz 2014:127). Since the initial coding resulted thousands of codes, some of which not conducive to fresh ideas, I proceeded with coding of the codes, which I refer to as intermediate codes. At this point, after the initial, line-by-line coding, I transferred the empirical data into NVIVO (version 12). This qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate the data management and analysis process, not to direct it – in a grounded theory study adopting an interpretive process and not a logico-deductive one, qualitative software programs cannot substitute for the interpretation of data (Suddaby 2006). Proceeding with intermediate coding – or "noding" in line with NVIVO terminology – I looked for patterns and to facilitate more insightful analysis, comparing codes with each other and with data, and further elaborating and grouping them together (as NVIVO "nodes") based on similarities and differences. For example, the initial codes "thinking UN is a humanitarian organisation (before joining)", "learning about UN (after joining)", and "changing understanding of UN purpose" were assigned an intermediate code of "Reflecting on UN role". Similarly, starting from the intermediate coding phase, I paid attention also to the negative cases – data that is in contrast with the major pattern that accounts for most of the data (Charmaz 2014:198), using them as prompts for sense-checking codes. For example, I modified the category "Adjusting expectations of the UN" to "Reflecting on expectations of the UN", given that in some cases no adjustment was necessary. The process led to fewer but more focused and comprehensive codes that allowed for more variation. The first memo in Appendix 6 illustrates how a negative case was used as a catalyst towards alternative lines of thinking.

Focused codes account for more data than the initial codes, raise the analytic level of the study, and help generate tentative analytic categories to be pursued (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021). In focused coding, I reviewed the most significant and / or frequent intermediate codes, making decisions about the ones that appeared to be most useful from the analytical point of view to categorise the data. Table 5 below illustrates how a focused code has been assigned to the earlier example.

Table 5. Example of focused coding

Segment of informant account	*First initial coding*	*Revised coding*	*Focused coding*
"I think the word 'want' … we are thinking about it in different ways when I say there has to be 'the want'. You are using it as in "i want to be there'. For me, I use it in a way that we want to succeed. I don't want to be there, in hardship. But I want to succeed in the mission."	Explaining 'the want' Wanting to succeed in mission. Not wanting to be in the hardship location.	Being successful in mission may mean tolerating hardship you would rather not be at. Wanting to accomplish the mission matters more than the hardship.	Emphasising *mindset* (mind over matter) as key factor for success

In reporting the findings, I do not include coding accounts. It has been found that if the interview protocol evolves over the course of the study and the same questions are not asked of all informants – as has been the case in this study – it may not be appropriate to report coding counts (Deterding and Waters 2021). Furthermore, as one statement may link to several codes, a mechanic counting might give a distorted impression of the number of statements.

4.4.2 Memoing and Constant Comparison

Memo writing is an inherent part of the constant comparative method. Writing these analytical notes to self that may relate to codes, analytic and methodological questions, or comparisons between interview data fragments (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021) formed a valuable activity during the interviews and the coding process, to record my thoughts, insights, and connections to inform the research process. The memos were complemented by a methodological journal, to which I captured my reflections and decisions related to, by way of example, the study scope, methodology, and theoretical aspects. Memo writing was a necessity – I did not take my responsibility lightly as the constructor of an "interpretive rendering" (Charmaz 2014:339) of what I study. Moreover, documenting choices and justifications into memos was necessary not only to establish a (self)audit trail, but also to cope with the universe of ambiguities inherent in the grounded theory process. The very act of articulating and penning down the questions yet to be explored elevated the status of these queries in my awareness from the "back-burner" to the "frontal lobe", for more neural connections and a better reasoning. Although time-consuming, the memoing process was not only useful for transmuting thoughts into a written form, but the very process served as a catalyst for more thoughts, also revealing gaps in my thinking process. Over time, the memos became more definitive, relating to categories in more concrete terms. The second memo in Appendix 6 illustrates how the memo-writing process can lead to unexpected realisations.

Multiple encounters with the informants' accounts – from the interviews to listening to the recordings and editing the transcripts to initial, intermediate, and focused coding, as well as constant comparison and memoing – ensured I was steeped in this data. While this familiarity formed the solid core for the analytical work and theorising, NVIVO enabled efficient organising and searching. It also served as a means for managing ideas – documented in memos, notes, annotations, research journal entries, and other data sources – that could be linked to the nodes (codes; categories) used in the study. NVIVO provided a convenient repository for these documents that could also be linked to examples in the informants' accounts, thus facilitating the constant comparison process. The code-memo linkages also enhance the credibility and rigour associated with the presented substantive theory. Intimate familiarity of the data and ability to retrieve, query, and search data, in turn, facilitated theoretical sensitivity, an essential feature in the grounded theory approach, denoting the researcher's ability to be "sensitive to the underlying meaning of the data" (Thistoll, Hooper, and Pauleen 2016:621), i.e., to understand and define phenomena in abstract terms and to demonstrate their inter-relationships.

The analytical work that started with the first interview continued throughout the study, the report writing phase included. Building sentences generated thoughts and challenged them, leading to adjustments to some of the category labels and clarified their interactions. As such, like memoing, the drafting of the theory served as another means to refine the analytical work on a more comprehensive and theoretical level. It has been said that while it is not necessary for a phenomenon to apply to the entire sample to be analytically important, a systematic treatment of alternative explanations and negative cases – informant data that is in contrast with the major pattern that accounts for most of the data (Charmaz 2014:198) – is an important part of contextualizing findings and creating a convincing theory (Deterding and Waters 2021). Differences in informant data, "far from presenting a problem to the analyst, are treated as opportunities to extend the analysis in order to account for the role that such differences play in the phenomena under investigation" (Nolan 2011:19). In this study, negative cases have been used to examine and refine the developing theory: might the deviating cases trigger alternative explanations; might they lead to additional variables or expand the menu of conditions under which behavior varies? Thus negative cases are not treated as unwelcome outliers to be reported on for the sake of transparency but rather as causes for pause and opportunities for discovery. Negative cases and outliers are viewed as potential catalysts for new lines of reflection and as thinking aids to help understand new dimensions of the issues under study or new ways in how they interact. The first memo in Appendix 6, mentioned earlier, illustrates how a negative case can pull one deeper into the empirical data, to see beyond the words to their meaning, thus facilitating refining theory construction.

Vignette 2 provides an example of my sensemaking process; it illuminates how I investigated an apparent contradiction appearing in several informants' accounts about job security and job insecurity.

In studying the interviews, two seemingly contradicting notions emerged related to job (in)security; several informants expressed seemingly contradicting views: that it is very difficult to be dismissed from the UN job even if one performed poorly, while it could also be risky to not comply with the processes, even if they were ineffective. What was this insecurity about? I had noticed this pattern half-way through the interviews, so I paid increasing attention to it as the interviews progressed. I asked myself: What or who is insecure? What causes it? Where and when? Is there a cost? How is this manifesting? Is insecurity the right word?

Having scrutinised the accounts and having asked enhanced questions in the remaining interviews, a clearer, more nuanced picture emerged: insecurity (or fear) better characterised scenarios in which the informant speculated why others might not want to (or dare) make decisions or take action for which clear rules do not exist. For example, a staff member may fear failure if he does not have the ability to defend oneself by articulating a justification for deviating from a process even if a good reason might exist. Or a staff member without other job alternatives may refrain from actions that he perceives might risk his steady income.

When the informants discussed their own circumstances, the issue was more about unpredictability and uncertainty at work. This could relate to work rotation, job continuity (especially in peace operations with finite mandates, or for consultants), advancement prospects, fair treatment in recruitment (e.g. gender-bias), one's supervisor, consequences of power held by staff unions, the extent to which one should assert himself in the local context, and the manner in which challenges related to cultural diversity should or could be addressed.

I also consulted literature, finding a source addressing this situation. Saner and Yiu (2004:246), in writing about UN organisation, state that "Many UN agencies have neither a functioning performance appraisal system nor career plans or merit system. Depending on power shifts, managers are reassigned to posts without necessarily possessing the required professional expertise. On the other hand, UN agencies cannot easily dismiss their staff. Hence, a *strong conflict exists between relative job security and a sense of insecurity based on persistent uncertainty regarding job posting and career prospects*." [emphasis added] When the job security-insecurity dichotomy is viewed in light of these explanations, it is understood that what at first appeared illogical may not be that after all.

Vignette 2. Example of sensemaking process

My sensemaking process typically began by delving deeper into the empirical data, comparing codes and statements both within and across informants' accounts. I employed a combination of root-cause analysis, problem analysis, and situation appraisal techniques to deconstruct and elucidate the puzzling issues. When necessary and practicable, I sought clarifications from the informants and / or consulted the extant literature. Through the interplay between coconstructing rich data, constant comparison, coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling, a set of conceptual categories – grounded in informant data – was developed, moving the work towards the construction of the grounded theory.

In presenting the empirical material, I report on the findings while also weaving in explanations through hypothesizing, a process also referred to as theoretical coding in grounded theory (Birks and Mills 2015:120-121 quoting Ralph). This study then culminates in a substantive grounded theory on how the UN international field workers navigate the internal challenges and external demands for enhanced effectiveness in the context of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

4.5 Use of Technology and Other Aspects of Research Ethics

Research ethics refers to "the application of moral standards to decision made in planning, conducting, and reporting the results of research studies" (McNabb 2015:24). According to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, good research practice hinges on four principles: reliability in ensuring research quality, honesty during the inquiry, respect for the concerned stakeholders and environment, and accountability for the output (ALLEA 2023). In public administration research specifically, the ethical principles of truthfulness, thoroughness, objectivity, and relevance have been called for (McNabb 2015, quoting Mitchell). While these elements are discussed later as part of study evaluation, I highlight here aspects related to the use of technology and the empirical element.

Both conventional and newer technologies have been harnessed to serve this study. This research process has involved the use of conventional tools such as search engines (e.g., Google Scholar and Google); electronic library databases; spell check / auto-correct functionalities in MS Word; SmartArt in MS PowerPoint; and NVIVO software. However, I have also leveraged artificial intelligence (AI) such as Chat GPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Grammarly to assist in text editing to enhance language and readability of content I have created. Furthermore, AI has been leveraged as a tool to support search for information. However, AI results and responses have been used with due care and caution; my stance to the use of AI has been one of cautious scepticism. In the course of this study, the experience of interaction with Chat GPT and Microsoft Copilot has proven that despite the wealth of information on the worldwide web, by way of example, about the matters of aid work, AI still has a lot to learn. Therefore, I have consistently treated the sources, ideas, and paths of inquiry suggested by AI as mental nudges or prompts only, cross-checking and verifying them for appropriateness and correctness. The decisions to include or exclude content are mine, as are the ideas and formulated interpretations, with AI being a servant only. For example, several of the authors suggested by the AI proved irrelevant for a deeper understanding of UN staff, as their work focused on member state ambassadors and related actors, not on UN system personnel. Thus, I confirm that when AI has been used, it has been done with necessary care and caution; I take responsibility for the content of the work.

One of the aims of this qualitative study is to bring forth aid worker voices from the field, with this empirical dataset obtained through semi-structured interviews. As discussed earlier, I sought to avoid forcing data, instead allowing authentic informant voices to emerge. At the same time, this commitment had to be balanced against the assurances of anonymity given to the informants when the study's purpose was explained and their consent to record interviews was obtained. The protection of the identity was reiterated in the interviews, and it was stated that the recordings, to which only the researcher had access, would be destroyed after the publication of the dissertation. For data protection reasons, I also decided against using third-party transcription services. This study reflects engagement with the applicable data management protocols as per Appendix 7.

Given that the informants participated in the study with the explicit understanding of them remaining anonymous, it has been essential to find the appropriate balance between revealing and masking contextual information, such as the informants' professional roles or titles, their duties, and work locations. I sought to honour the commitment about their anonymity without diluting the impact, and these considerations have shaped the manner in which the empirical findings are presented. Although the informants had been assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms, in some instances, I deemed it prudent to avoid even these pseudonyms to ensure that the unique situation or context referenced in the findings could not enable identification of the individuals. Therefore, in some cases, the protection of the informants' identity has meant shrouding the examples into a veil of opaqueness. However, every effort has been made to capture the essence of the informants' accounts. In reporting the findings, I have strived to remain neutral, avoiding bias toward the informants or passing judgment on them – after all, this study does not engage is observable factd but rather in theoretical abductions. As such, I do not seek to establish one objective "truth" or explain specific events. Rather, in the spirit of constructivist thinking, this study presents several informants' accounts of their realities, the way they experience and choose to present them, and which I, in turn, have interpreted to offer insights about worker behaviours more generally.

5 Sensitising Concepts

This chapter discusses the sensitising concepts for the study, namely effectiveness, tensions, and organised hypocrisy. Other concepts and theories were also explored, including finite provinces of meaning (Schutz 1945); performance paradox; principal-agent relationships; collective action problems; and organised anarchy. However, the selected three were deemed particularly well-suited to illuminate the context for fieldwork.

5.1 Effectiveness

5.1.1 Extant Scholarly Lenses

Whether aid is effective in reducing poverty or in promoting economic growth and social development has been a long-contested question (Bracho et al. 2021; Jia and Williamson 2019; Mekasha and Tarp 2019; Koch et al. 2016). In the aid discourse, there is not even a universally agreed definition for effectiveness, and it may even be used interchangeably with efficiency[54]. However, the literature on aid effectiveness is abundant. A recent review[55] of academic journals found that the number of papers on the topic increased from an average of four per year between 1964 and 1999, to 32 per year from 2000 to 2010, and further to 82 per year from 2011 to 2020 (Asatullaeva et al. 2021). The main lenses to aid effectiveness research (Figure 15) – or communities of researchers and policymakers – include micro- or macro-level study of either activities or outcomes, with principles, effects, organisations, or interventions as areas of interest (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020). See Appendix 8 for examples of studies for these four categories.

54 "Efficiency" denoting a "capability of producing desired results with little or no waste" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficient, retrieved March 28, 2022). For example, for OECD effectiveness is about the achievement of objectives and results, but it can also be an aggregate measure of the extent to which such aims are achieved efficiently and coherently (OECD 2021a).

55 Systematic literature review on aid impact, effectiveness and economic development using Scopus data: 1109 articles in 363 journals (1964-2018) by 1521 scholars.

The first research lens is for comparing aid effects across countries, although recently, subnational data has also been employed to identify more precise effects (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020). Since the 1970s and up to 2015[56], the economic growth literature had accumulated more than 2000 estimates[57] of aid effectiveness (Doucouliagos and Paldam 2015:325). It has been said that, asking for a "proof of the effectiveness of aid is like asking for a proof of the effectiveness of taxation" (Bracho et al. 2021:582, citing an OECD report). The narrow focus on economic growth appears outdated (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020). "We simply do not know; we are just speculating on a grand scale" (Banerjee and Duflo 2012:4, 267).

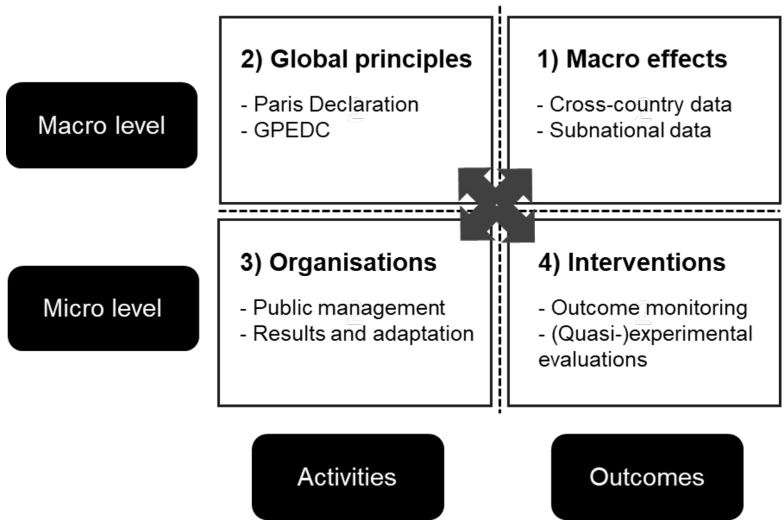

Figure 15. Aid effectiveness research perspectives (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020)

The second lens to aid effectiveness is used by researchers who focus on development effectiveness and the global principles in line with the effectiveness agenda presented earlier. A recent content review of journal articles found that the use of the term "aid effectiveness" has reduced since 2015 (Asatullaeva et al. 2021:731). The introduction of the term "development effectiveness" into the aid discourse in Busan in 2011 and the launch of the SDGs in 2015 are likely to have contributed to this shift – we are now in the beyond aid (Janus, Klingebiel, and Paulo 2015) or post-aid (Keijzer and Black 2020) world.

56 For an overview of macro-level aid effectiveness research, see e.g., Quibria (2014).

57 Meta-analysis of data from 141 aid effectiveness related papers with 1777 estimates of aid effect on growth, from 1970 to 2011. However, as the authors also cover working papers, most of the papers found in journals in 2012–2013 are also stated to be included. More recent meta-reviews of aid effectiveness literature could not be found.

The third and fourth research lenses are applied by researchers exploring alternative, micro-level approaches, as the macro-level debate appears to be "empirically irresolvable and practically irrelevant" (Quibria 2014; Miller 2011). As of October 2023, the repository of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) contains 1051 records of systematic project reviews (3ie 2023). As regards humanitarian action, this has been systematically addressed only from the mid-1990s (Riddell 2008:331). The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP), for example, regularly reports on the humanitarian system, which includes an estimated 5,000 entities (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022).

While organisational self-evaluations exist and evaluations are conducted by networks such as ALNAP, scholarship about effectiveness on this level is less common. "Organizational lines of inquiry have long been seen as rather superficial and irrelevant, and less important than the plethora of other factors – technical expertise, policies, politics, funding, needs, and so on – that supposedly determine development effectiveness" (Ramalingam 2015:75, citing Maxwell). However, policymakers are beginning to focus on the organisational features of aid delivery as key determinants of aid success and failure (Honig and Gulrajani 2018). The current debate within this third community is said to be about finding an appropriate balance across direction, accountability, learning, and communication (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler (2020). The literature also reveals a prevalent concern for overhead costs (e.g., IASC 2022; Byrd and Cote 2017; Caviola et al. 2014).

The fourth research community focuses on interventions. It has been said that the aid industry has been built around mechanisms to deliver projects, not development results (Kharas 2009) – a point that the Paris Declaration and the Busan agreement alike accentuate through calls for more results-focus (OECD 2005; GPEDC 2023). There is a shift towards more rigorous impact evaluation methods and efforts to aggregate evidence through systematic reviews (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020), to facilitate communication to policymakers and practitioners (Waddington, Masset, and Jimenez 2018). Furthermore, evaluation of aid projects, programs, and policies using randomised control trials (RCT) has gained popularity over the past two decades (de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019). However, while RCTs can overcome some of the methodological shortcomings of the macro-level literature, they have downsides, including cost and context specificity (Kumar 2019; Chambers 2017:71) and the risk of evaluating only what can be measured (de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019).

It has been suggested that there is a need to synthesize across studies of micro-level and macro-level outcomes to understand the full impacts of aid (Bermeo 2021). Furthermore, there is a "huge disjunction between research and practice", with the aid researchers and the community of practice inhabiting "two separate universes" (Quibria 2014:83). Academia's interests in generalisable learning and a high threshold of rigour may not be aligned with the needs of those who seek solutions for decision making in practice (Chang 2019:175), with the polarisation between observers, researchers, and practitioners limiting the possibilities for collective engagement (Gulrajani 2011). An integrated perspective is needed for better coordination with other policy fields relevant to sustainable development (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020).

Notwithstanding the distance between theory and practice, the recognition of complexity and sharpened focus on micro-level is welcomed, even if "micro" may still evoke ideas of organisations, not individuals. Macro impacts are intricately linked to micro actions – to projects, programmes, or other activities implemented by individual actors. Having explored the more theoretical realm of aid effectiveness, we now examine factors contributing to aid (in)effectiveness in practice.

5.1.2 Many Contributing Factors

It has been said that aid has failed because it can simply not work. "This is so because of human nature, the complexity of the development world's problems, and … the inevitable structural distortions and contradictions within the development assistance industry" (Dichter 2003:288). Aid programmes are subject to powerful influences and interferences, such as recession, financial, fuel, or other crises that override the aims, interests, and resources of aid programmes (Wood et al 2011). Also, rather than promoting development that is sustained, aid is said to create a dependency of external assistance (e.g., Kabonga 2016; Fee 2012; Moyo 2009:49; Riddell 2008:38).

The literature review of existing aid effectiveness scholarship, undertaken at the onset of the inquiry, highlights a range of factors influencing effectiveness. Figure 16, a simplified rendering of reality, is constructed around "the six Ws and one H" (what? who? why? where? when? at what cost? how?) to illustrate the multitude of these factors. The factors influencing effectiveness concern the approaches taken, the stakeholders themselves, financial considerations, as well as temporal and spatial aspects of aid work. This categorisation, while not a norm in aid effectiveness scholarship, has been constructed purposefully to make the complexity of the literature more navigable for the reader. As the extant literature mostly neglects the individual actors' day-to-day experiences (Hindman and Fechter 2014:2;6), individual-level factors do not feature in this summary.

5.1.2.1 Approaches and Measurement Challenges

It was discussed earlier that as per the Busan Principles, the alignment with recipient country objectives, effective partnerships, and transparency coupled with accountability promote positive outcomes (OECD 2011). As regards channeling aid funds, poor outcomes may be linked, e.g., to donor reluctance to provide direct budget support to the recipient country's national treasury (Benfield and Como 2018) and to aid funding being tied (Meeks 2017; EUP 2016; Clay, Geddes, and Natali 2009; Kharas 2009). In tied aid the procurement element of the grant or loan is limited to the donor country (OECD 2022) and said to be more costly (Meeks 2017).

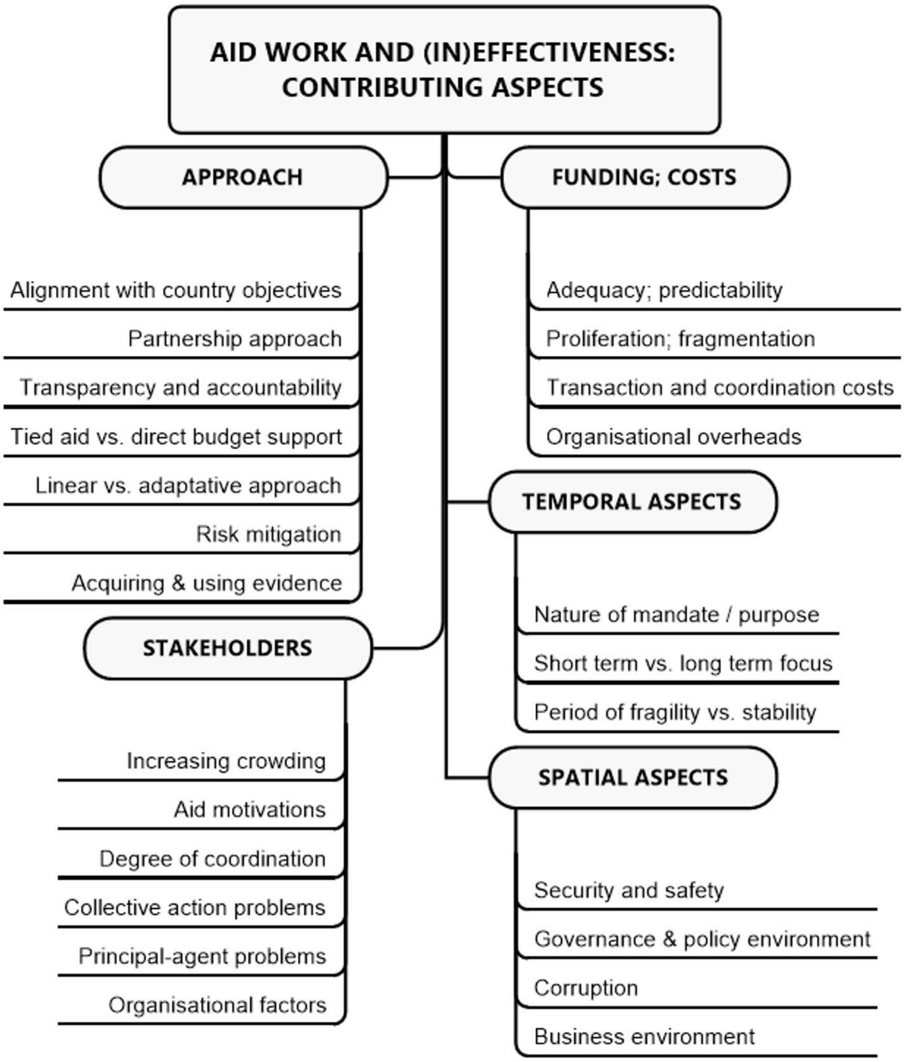

Figure 16. Illustrating factors contributing to aid (in)effectiveness (own compilation)

That an essential portion of development has to do with learning is also widely supported, with aid work involving experimental approaches, iterative learning, and adaptation rather than linear planning (Teskey 2018; Benfield and Como 2018;

Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017; Green 2015). These approaches that consider incentives and the political, social, and economic dynamics include the so-called Adaptive Development, Thinking and Working Politically, Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation, and Doing Development Differently (ODI 2023). Related to learning is the notion of failure, and related to failure, the notion of risk, including for one's career (Chambers and Pettit 2004:152). Fear for failure can direct efforts to lower risk projects (Lindkvist and Dixon 2014; Collier 2007:118): continuing support depends on international organisations demonstrating good performance and effectiveness that influence their legitimacy (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017; Tallberg et al. 2016), and failure may result in media headlines that jeopardize funding (Chang 2019:22; Bigsten and Tengstam 2015; Lindkvist and Dixon 2014).

Although aid industry has been said to be "perhaps the only industry in the world where results do not determine whether or not it will survive" (Warah 2008:9), it is widely agreed that reliable evidence is necessary for good choices in development (Waddington, Masset, and Jimenez 2018). However, many measurement challenges prevail in the aid landscape, in the "complex conditions of wicked mess and gridlock" (Chambers 2017:109).

The causality chains[58] between activities, outcomes, and impacts are complex (Sjöstedt 2013) and different conceptions of development lead to different ways of measuring and using proxies or indicators (Willis 2011). There is a problem of comparability (Willis 2011) and of establishing the counterfactual, as one would need to compare the value of an indicator both with and without aid (Tarp 2006). Other challenges include assigning attribution (e.g., Honig 2020; Lawson 2013; Gulrajani 2011; Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007) and weak human capacities and data systems in poor countries to produce good quality data (Jolly 2020:762; Morra Imas and Rist 2009:xv). While there can be a shortage of evidence of aid impact (Langer et al. 2015), the uptake challenge may also hinder effective use of data and research findings (Levine and Pain 2024; Ramalingam et al. 2009). Evidence transmission may also be a challenge (Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020) and training or incentives for using the evidence may be lacking (Langer et al. 2015). Issues with the credibility or legitimacy of the evidence have also been raised (Khagram et al. 2009). As aid effectiveness is an area of strong beliefs, it is suggested that researchers may be reluctant to publish negative results (Doucouliagos and Paldam 2009), and that the struggle for resources or the need to defend reputation may cause positive evaluation bias (Clements, Chianca, and Sasaki 2008). In *Can We Know Better?* Chambers (2017:27-8; see also Levine and Pain 2024) discusses strategic ignorance and blind spots, cautioning us not assume that people "want to

[58] A study on Kenyan farmers cites over 30,000 strategies to dismantle the system of deprivation, and over 50,000 if female farmers were included (Chambers 2017:113).

know realities", although in aid discourse, actors are typically assumed to want to know. Political correctness may lead to accentuation of the positive or to avoidance of painting too negative an image of an aid recipient (see e.g., Ayittey 2015; 2005:7). Despite the many measurement challenges, the problem of disappointing aid performance is deemed to be often due power and politics, not because of a lack of knowledge or understanding (White 2019).

5.1.2.2 Funding and Costs

Inadequacy and unpredictability of aid funding may impact effectiveness and achievement of results (UN 2023d; Blampied 2016a; Adams and Luchsinger 2015; Mahn 2012), however, to what extent more money is part of the solution is subject to debate (Bean 2010; Easterly 2006b; Sachs 2005). Aid proliferation and fragmentation and the related increases in transaction costs have been found to have a negative impact on aid effectiveness (Benfield and Como 2018; EUP 2016; Anderson 2011; Arimoto and Kono, 2009; Acharya, Fuzzo de Lima, and Moore 2006). High organisational overhead costs (Easterly and Pfutze 2008) and poor coordination (Woods 2020) are also found to reduce effectiveness. However, the opposite notions have also been highlighted, such as inadequate fragmentation in form of aid monopolies (Frot and Santiso 2010) and the costs of coordination (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022; Bigsten and Tengstam 2015). Reducing overhead costs may also negatively impact effectiveness (IASC 2022; Chang 2019; Byrd and Cote 2017; Harold 2013), as increased efficiency should not be pursued at the expense of reduced capacity and increased organisational vulnerability (Lecy and Searing 2014). Underinvesting in staff, administrative support, and training (Byrd and Cote 2017; Gregory and Howard 2009; Chambers 2005:44) may create negative outcomes which undermine the operational effectiveness (Tinkelman and Donabedian 2007; Harold 2013). Furthermore, organisations may find it difficult to offer competitive salaries and compete for skilled labour (Meer 2017), especially as the trend towards increased professionalisation means an increased investment and overhead expenditure (Gregory and Howard 2009). Moreover, working in insecure countries carry increased costs, and in extreme conditions, security and overhead costs can be higher than project costs (DFID 2008).

5.1.2.3 Stakeholder Challenges

Aid literature highlights collective action problems and the related disincentives in the increasingly crowded arena (Obrecht, Swithern, and Doherty 2022; Thakur 2020; Willner-Reid 2018; Yanguas 2018:113; Weiss 2016:92; Booth 2012; Barder 2009; Cavalcanti 2007), including within the UN system (Passmore and Shannon 2022:34;

Thakur 2017:411) and amongst the donors (Koch et al. 2016). Some of these challenges related to coordination were also discussed in the earlier Chapter. Furthermore, poor aid performance is linked to the principal–agent problems between donors and aid recipients, with the views typically diverging over how aid is used and development objectives achieved (Koch et al. 2016; Barder 2009; Clements, Chianca, and Sasaki 2008; Easterly 2007:169). Related to the principal-agent problem is the issue of weak feedback loops between the decision-makers and beneficiaries (Honig 2020:162; Williamson 2010; Barder 2009; Easterly and Pfutze 2008; Easterly 2007:206). That leadership, staffing, skills, culture and other organisational factors affect effectiveness is also widely recognised (see e.g., Taalas 2024; Knox-Clarke 2018; Teskey 2018; Tallberg et al. 2016; Harvey et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2010; Clay, Geddes, and Natali 2009; Jobin 2008; Swords 2007). It has been even suggested that, for aid organisations, the imperative to survive weighs more than the objective of effectiveness (Dichter 2003:182).

5.1.2.4 Temporal and Spatial Aspects

Depending on the purpose and motivations for engaging in aid work, there can be differences in temporalities between the aid actors: some have short-term horizons (e.g., humanitarian work) while others have long-term goals (e.g., development) (Verlin 2021). In addition, organisational policies may influence workforce rotation cycles, thus affecting the kind of work that may be prioritised: it has been found that staff in high workforce turnover contexts are likely to focus on tasks more likely to be rewarded on short term (Ramalingam 2015:212; Chambers 2005). Lasting, positive aid outcomes are reportedly linked with aid actors understanding the local context, being present, and developing personal relationships of trust on the local level – especially in the area of policy advice (Baumann 2022) – which requires a time investment (Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012:144). In the context of fragility, effectiveness of aid work can also be dependent on the duration of the fragile situation, given that conventional aid instruments and principles of aid effectiveness are difficult to apply (Mcloughlin and Idris 2016; OECD 2014b).

The operating environment influences effectiveness. For example, work in volatile and fragile settings requires not only security measures that incur costs (Haq 2017:11), but movement and access to certain areas may also be limited (Bollettino and Bruderlein 2008). In addition, a weak local governance and policy environment, including prevalence of corruption[59] in the operational setting, are oft-cited aspects affecting development and aid effectiveness (see Jia and Williamson. 2019; Bean

[59] For an overview of anti-corruption approaches and related literature, see Disch, Vigeland, and Sundet (2009).

2010; Court 2006; EUP 2006), especially in fragile contexts where institutions lack legitimacy (Blampied 2016a) and the limited absorptive capacity may affect the local ability to manage aid (Baranyi and Desrosiers 2012). How conducive the environment is for businesses is also of the essence: private sector can advance innovation, create wealth, income, jobs, and mobilise domestic resources, thus contributing to poverty reduction (OECD/UNDP 2014). However, while reforms to this effect may support development, it has also been found that, in fragile and conflict-affected settings, such efforts have in some cases exacerbated drivers of conflict and undermined development (Luiz, Ganson, and Wennmann 2019).

This overview highlights the multitude of challenges around aid effectiveness. The literature further shows that rhetoric should not be confused with intent or intent with action, nor should action be conflated with positive results or positive results with sustainable impact benefiting the poor. What is wanted and for whom, and how aid is or can be used as a vehicle to achieve those aims are key considerations when effectiveness is debated. Thus, exploring effectiveness of aid work is likely to mean exploration of tensions on multiple levels. These are discussed next.

5.2 Tensions

5.2.1 Natural State of Aid Systems

"Tension" denotes "process of drawing tight; constriction; spasm; to extend outward; stretch"[60]. Tensions emerge from duality – from opposing elements, forces ideas, alternatives – and they emerge from and within multiple levels in individual interactions, group dynamics, organisational strategies, and the broader institutional context (Johnston and Selsky 2006; Smith and Lewis 2011; Smith et al 2019:1), and management research views tensions as inherent to organisational life (Schad 2019:37). On an individual level, tension can be seen as a cognitive-emotional construct reflecting an individual's felt or experienced level of difficulty in pursuing contradictory demands (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah 2019:301). Tensions can be competing demands or either/or -dilemmas subject to choices and trade-offs (Schad 2019:27) as viewed by the early management scholars of contingency theory. However, tensions can also be more complex dualities, paradoxes, whereby contradictory yet interrelated elements exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis 2011). When considered in isolation, such elements seem logical but when juxtaposed, they seem irrational, inconsistent, even absurd (Lewis 2000). Framing a tension as a paradox can be used to examine seemingly absurd aspects of

60 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tension retrieved May 4, 2024.

organisational life (Lewis 2000), and it has been said that environmental conditions of plurality, increasing technological change, global competition, and workforce diversity reveal and intensify paradox (Schad et al. 2017; Lewis 2000). Tensions are not inherently negative or positive elements e.g. for effectiveness; tensions can have positive or negative consequences: tensions may lead to action (Klineberg 1949:12) or drive change (Schad et al. 2017, citing Hegel) but they can also lead to paralysis (Lüscher and Lewis 2008) and trigger defense mechanisms (Lewis 2000).

Tensions are integral to complex systems (Smith and Lewis 2011), and inherently present in the aid sector, including on the organisational level (Lewis 2014a; Mele and Sanchez-Runde 2013). Examples of tensions, including paradoxes, in studies concerning the aid sector and UN system context are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Examples of studies featuring tensions in aid sector or UN system context

Topic	Author(s)
Aid allocation paradox: aid share of a country whose governance has improved will be reduced, while aid reaching the poor will have risen.	Bourguignon and Platteau 2021
Tension between the quality of aid and quantity of aid.	Hynes and Scott 2021
Tension between imposing a universal standard of human rights and respect for cultural traditions.	Kertcher and Turin 2023
The paradox of aid projects: projects delivered to time, cost, and quality targets are later viewed as failures, or projects not meeting the targets are viewed successful.	Ika, Diallo, and Thuillier 2010
Integration vs. isolation: the expansion of aid industry in challenging environments, coupled with increased security measures, creates a separation between international staff and the societies in which they work.	Roth 2014; Duffield 2012
Tension between the UN charter requirement of member states not influencing the civil service staff and the calls for geographical distribution of the staff.	Saner and Yiu 2011
Tension between the state-centered UN character and the UN's aspiration to represent 'we the people'. The triumph and erosion of state sovereignty: the UN Charter emphasizes self-determination of nations, while state sovereignty is routinely violated.	Schroeder and Wapner 2020; Weiss and Daws 2020:8-9
Tensions between competing UN principles and interests. The paradox of humanitarianism: containing war may demand the use of force.	Thakur 2017:6; Thakur 2020:462
Theory vs. practice in emergency response: UN's governance mechanism and a collision between on-the-ground temporalities and planning instruments.	Verlin 2021

At a global scale, tensions are intrinsically tied to efforts to maintain peace, and tensions often emerge around public communications and unrealistic expectations about aid effectiveness (Yanguas and Hulme 2015) – it has been said that tension and flux are the natural state of foreign aid system in general (Gulrajani 2011). The following sub-section examines tensions emerging in the UN system context.

5.2.2 UN System: Entanglement of Tensions

The UN is a setting of tensions that emerge between competing principles and interests, including realpolitik and idealism, force and diplomacy, power and justice, efficiency and legitimacy, and enforcement mandate and humanitarian agenda (Thakur 2017:6). It is faced with a dilemma involving the needs of the people, the normative and operational mandates, and the political realities of the member states coupled with the availability of human, financial, and material resources (Thakur 2020:409). In addition, tensions emerge on various levels between the actors in the UN system (Figure 17). Gleaned from the literature, tensions between and amongst the member states, blocs, the UN entities, or individuals can relate to the actual or perceived differences in their cultural, political, or ideological views, or to differences in their purposes, roles, priorities, or resources, including power. While tensions emerge also between the UN system and the external parties, such as banks, businesses, or civil society, they are not part of this review.

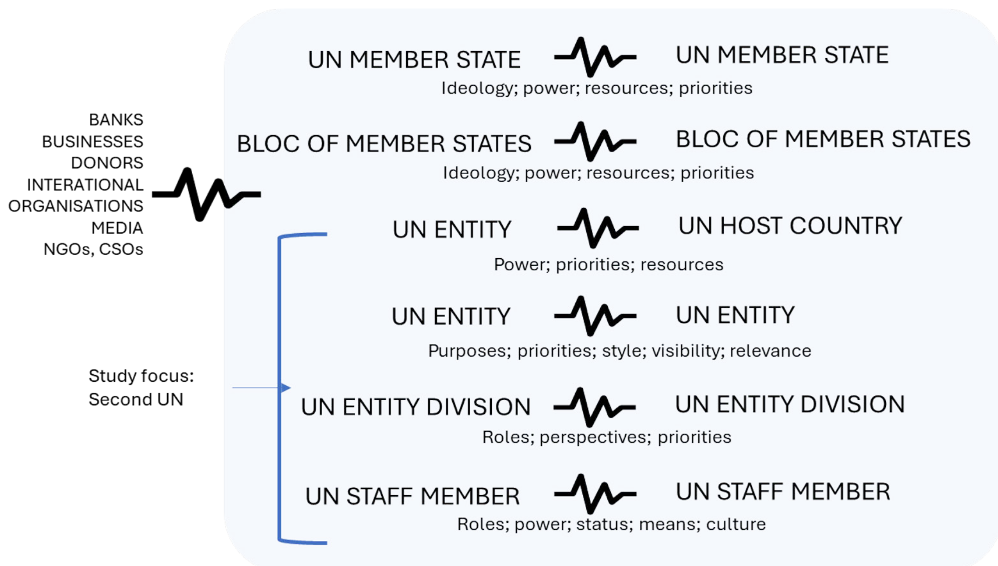

Figure 17. Tensions between actors in the UN system (own compilation)

Tensions between member states and blocs are part and parcel of the political and diplomatic work of the first UN; international organisations largely reflect the power dynamics, changing power configurations, and conflicts within the broader international system (Newman 2020:246). Although the East-West division of the Cold War era is in the past, there are regionally defined ideological and economic divisions, especially along the North-South axis and also issue-driven sub-groupings of countries, such as radical or moderate, Islamic or non-Islamic, and maritime or landlocked nations (Weiss 2016:53-76). There are also tensions between western governments, which see the UN as bloated and inefficient, and developing countries, which regard it as undemocratic and dominated by the rich (McGreal 2015). The countries that feel excluded from any real say in the UN affairs can assert their influence by withholding support from decisions for which consensus is required and causing clashes with those countries that feel entitled to a decisive say on such issues because of their financial contributions (UN 2006).

Tensions between UN organisations and the government hosting UN operations may pose a challenge for the operational effectiveness. For example, essential supplies required for sustaining operations may be held by the authorities, as was the case in South Sudan, where government blocked UN fuel trucks at the border, causing cutbacks in UN peacekeeping patrols, reduced support for the electoral processes, and suspended humanitarian activities (Francis 2024). The movement of the UN system worforce may also be constrained: a recent report found that UN peacekeeping missions continue to be constrained, in some contexts, by host-government pushback, e.g., on the UN's freedom of movement and on the human rights activities (Gregory and Sharland 2023). Host countries also hold power in either granting or blocking entry for UN system staff to the duty station. One recent example is Israel's refusal to issue or renew visas for UN Human Rights staff in the occupied Palestinian territory (OHCHR 2022).

Apart from involving member states or host governments, tensions may form between the different UN entities, internally within the UN organisations, between different offices and divisions, and between individual workers, as discussed in more detail in the upcoming sub-sections. Moreover, as presented in Chapter 2 (Figure 9), there are also potential conflicts between some of the approaches adopted to enhance effectiveness, whereby the effects of one may counter-act the desired effects oth the other. Collectively, I refer to the tensions between actors and between the various strategies within the UN system as the *entanglement of tensions*, a web of fluctuating charges and pressures that the UN system actors both affect and are affected by (Figure 18). The tensions can vary, e.g., in the extent to which they are overt or covert, conscious or subconscious, static or dynamic, helping or hindering effectiveness and progress. Some of these tensions are issues to be solved while others are dynamics to be managed.

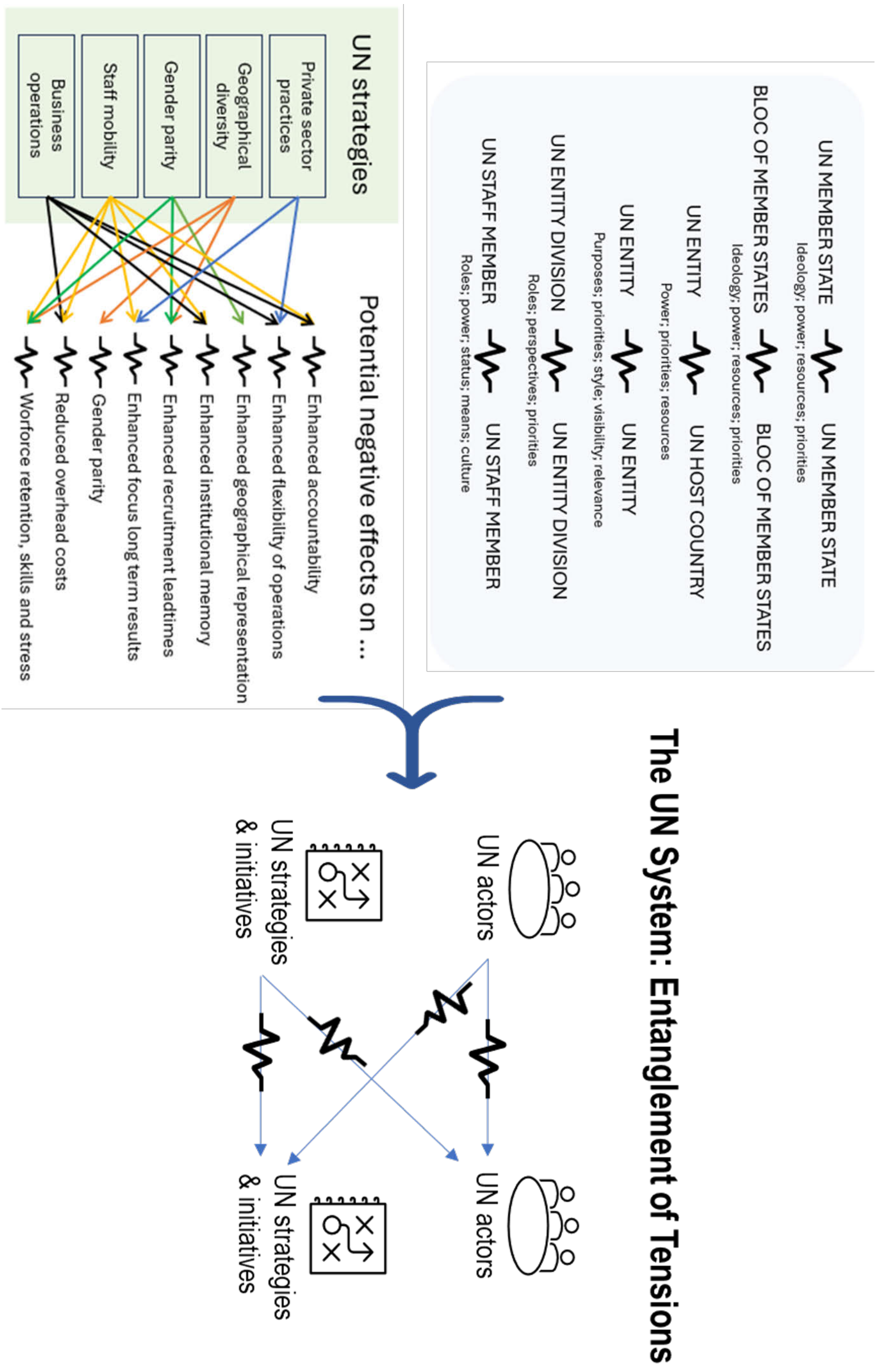

Figure 18. The UN system as an entanglement of tensions (own compilation)

It has been found that managing such tensions – or doing so poorly – can be costly: a study on UNHCR concluded that ineffective conflict management processes alone cause UNHCR to suffer a loss of around US$30 Million per year (Gottwald 2010 quoting Buss 2009). In this study, this entanglement is viewed as a kind of skeleton for the functioning of the UN system – a state by which the UN system is, somewhat paradoxically, unified. This entanglement of tensions can function as a girdle inhibiting change or generate pressure forcing it.

What follows is a brief overview of tensions concerning the actors of the second UN. Thereafter, an examination is presented of tensions between the strategies aiming for better effectiveness specifically in relation to staff mobility and diversity. This is to vivify the context in which the field worker operates.

5.2.3 Tensions on Organisational and Individual Level

Literature suggests that tensions emerging between the UN agencies reflect overlapping missions, competition for limited resources and the desire to keep abreast with what is "popular" with donors (Weiss 2016:77). In this aspect the UN entities are not unlike other institutions or bureaucracies in that they may seek to exclude rivals or cooperate with them or put the organisational interests before those of the overall UN system (Fomerand and Dijkzeul 2020:674; Weiss 2016:77; UN 2015c; Fee 2012:45). Furthermore, in the large system, each sub-division and professional field can hold its own pace, whereby UN workers can experience multiple, potentially colliding temporalities (Kimber and Maertens 2021).

Tensions can also emerge within an agency, between the corporate and country level activities and actors. For example, in accordance with the Busan Principles, the decentralised, UN country-level programming must align to national priorities, while also simultaneously adhering to the corporate priorities (Bester 2012). Tensions between the HQ and the field[61] can also emerge from the information asymmetries and incentive misalignment problems (Eftekhar and Van Wassenhove 2016).

Individual level tensions can emerge e.g., between the international and locally recruited staff, amongst international staff, amongst locally recruited staff, between paid workers and volunteers, between workers from different functions, and between workers on different levels of hierarchy. Tensions can also emerge between staff backed up by powerful governments and those recruited on professional merits only (Lynch 2023). Furthermore, while the UN's business operations interventions for enhanced effectiveness may streamline diverging practices and the Common Premises are expected to help staff build stronger relationships (UNSDG 2023b),

61 Soussan (2008:97) writes about UN staff venting their frustrations in the field "while people at the UN HQ rolled their thumbs and messed up their initiatives with red tape".

they may also bring to surface the divergent practices, generating tensions. For example, staff working and/or living in shared premises may make the differences in contractual terms and conditions (e.g., job grade) or practices and privileges (e.g., rotation policies) more obvious. It has been found that these differences may "create divisions and breed resentment" (UN 2006:16) and perception of unfairness amongst staff (UN 2021b). Furthermore, working collectively requires adjusting one's approach to planning and working in general, to cater for the multiple stakeholders with different mandates, budgets, and agency cultures (see e.g., Kimber and Maertens 2021; Barnett and Finnemore 1999). The staff workload may increase, decrease, or change in nature, requiring staff to adopt to a "mindset of togetherness".

Tensions may arise due to different categories of international staff. The UN system is suggested to have a dual workforce: one with full rights and entitlements and another with no or limited entitlements, working in the same organisation and even performing, in some cases, similar staff and managerial functions on longer term (Terzi and Fall 2014). For example, an audit of WFP found that between 2012-2016, the number of consultants in WFP more than doubled, with the proportion of international consultants rising and the proportion of international staff decreasing[62] attributed, in part, to the UN member states' reluctance to increase the number of international staff and consultants being less costly (WFP 2017). Despite the contract modalities and entitlements being harmonised, the conditions of non-staff personnel are reportedly inconsistent and fragmented across the system, including right to evacuation, rest and recuperation[63] (R&R), pension, and leave. Also, the dual pay structure for local hires and internationally recruited workforce, prevalent also in other sectors with international and local workers (Carr et al. 2012:16), can be a source of tensions, creating teamwork problems[64] (Carr et al. 2010) and a sense of workplace injustice (Harry and Dodd 2016). Dual salaries are linked to double de-motivation: it is unfair and demotivating for the locals and a source of guilt and unease for the expatriates; it is seen as "economic apartheid" (Carr et al. 2012:16). A recent analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the UN's locally and internationally recruited staff found that there may be tensions and potentially a large

[62] The nature of WFP's short term emergency operations did not justify extensive use of consultants, given that they had been assigned even to senior management roles.

[63] The purpose of R&R is to protect the health and well-being of international staff who work under hazardous, stressful, and isolated working and living conditions, so as to ensure optimal work performance when they resume work (ICSC 2023c).

[64] In aid organisations where wealth and equity are salient, individuals may tend to categorise themselves (and be categorised by others) in terms of salary levels, with such labels carrying an implicit power meaning – e.g., volunteers may be perceived as an "extra pair of hands" rather than having expertise to offer (McWha 2011).

divide among these staff groups[65], which can impede the UN's policy implementation (Eckhard and Parizek 2022). The relationships between international and locally hired staff may also be complicated by cultural differences and compounded by power differentials[66], language and communication barriers, with both international and, in some cases, locally recruited staff being affected by other relational stressors such as separation from family (McFarlane 2004). It has further been found that a form of south–south racism or prejudice can emerge also between local staff of lower-income countries and their supervisors, who are from other lower-income countries but on international status and pay scale, due to doubts about the competency of such non-western experts (Saner 2010).

As seen above, dissonance and tensions can emerge on multiple levels in the UN system – an international organisation operating in complex settings while having to meet the needs of various constituents. How this may necessitate engaging in organised hypocrisy is discussed next.

5.3 Organised Hypocrisy

5.3.1 Intentional Inconsistencies

Compared to the notions of effectiveness and tensions, the concept of organised hypocrisy may evoke fewer concrete ideas about its meaning. Organised hypocrisy, a concept popularised by organisation theorist Nils Brunsson (1986) refers to organisations systematically creating inconsistencies between talk, decisions, and products: they can talk in consistence with one set of norms, decide according to another, and produce according to a third; there is the assumption that an organisation operates in an environment that imposes conflicting restrictions on them, requiring them to be responsive to the external demands while also satisfying internal institutional mandates and norms (Sommer et al. 2019). It is not hypocrisy in the ordinary sense of the word, but organised in that it is a product of formal organisations and results from systematic contradictions, whereby norms are responded to with symbolic action while simultaneously being violated through instrumental behaviour (Lipson 2007). Brunsson (1993b) posits that the main reasons for things being said but not done are associated with limitations in

65 The coalition of UN staff unions has called for an overhaul of the International Civil Service Commission to address the differences in danger pay between international staff and those recruited locally (PSI 2018).

66 For example, in a WHO Health Emergencies Programme, the issue of power imbalance reportedly manifested through the misconduct of senior-level male leaders with the victims being female interns, volunteers, and staff on lower grades (WHO 2023).

knowledge, resources, and opportunities for control. The image projected to the outside world does not agree with the inner life of the organisation; the world of ideas is very different from the world of action as conflicting demands and norms are awkward to handle and combine with action: what can be talked about cannot always be translated into action, and what can be done cannot always be talked about (Brunsson 1993a; 1993b). Thus, the notion of organised hypocrisy has, as understood here, different nuances compared to the concept of business or corporate hypocrisy that concerns misleading, deceitful practices (Wagner, Korschun, and Troebs 2020) such as "Dieselgate[67]", and which may be researched, e.g., in the context of corporate social responsibility activities (see e.g., Chen et al. 2020).

Brunsson (1993a) posits that when institutional norms disagree with the conditions for efficient action, organisations to whom efficiency is important can be expected to have two sets of structures, processes, and ideologies: one for coordinating action and the other for displaying to the outside world, and these two should not interfere with each other. This may involve handling contradictory demands by talking, making decisions, and acting in accordance with different norms, or the organisation may use come processes for external purposes and others internally, including producing rituals and double standards. For example, employees may be consulted before important decisions are made while the decisions might not be affected by the consultation or investment calculations may be made without any effect on the actual decisions.

Organised hypocrisy has similarities to the notion of organisational façades (see e.g., Cho et al 2015). When faced with pressures toward conformity with the institutional environment, strategic organisational behaviors may include concealment tactics, disguising nonconformity behind a facade of acquiescence (Oliver 1991). Abrahamson and Baumard (2008:439) discuss three types of facades, given that stakeholders – e.g., investors, leaders, employees, and competitors – "make decisions about organizations based primarily on organizations' façades and less so on what lies behind these façades". A rational façade pertains to the strategic deployment of organisational practices intended to convey adherence to perceived rational methodologies deemed significant by stakeholders, while a progressive façade signifies an alignment with prevailing paradigms of advancement. A reputation façade, in turn, refers to deliberate use of accounting and rhetorical symbols that appeal to stakeholders (Abrahamson and Baumard 2008:445-447). The concepts of organised hypocrisy and organisational façades has been applied e.g., in studying how the EU uses talk, decisions, and actions to construct different façades under pressures in connection with climate diplomacy (Çelik 2022).

[67] In test conditions, Volkswagen cars appeared to meet environmental standards, but in real driving situations, they emitted pollutants exceeding legal limits (Moratis 2020).

Hypocrisy is rarely the result of intentional planning on the part of any one person – it arises despite management striving for control, promoting survival and growth (Brunsson 1993a). Just like façades can serve as "levers of organizational improvement" (Abrahamson and Baumard 2008:450), short-term instrumental hypocrisy may also lead to the development of actions that can have beneficial effects transcending their short-term motivations (Badham 2019:283).

"It is unrealistic to regard the actions and products of the organizations as the only essential factors when it comes to winning external support", posits Brunsson (1993a:2), further asserting that good intentions and goals often seem to be appreciated as much or even more than good deeds, and that there is little evidence of feasible ideas being particularly likely to gain the widest support, finding that the best ideas must express "the good, the just, and the beautiful rather than the realistic, pragmatic, and feasible" (Brunsson 1993b:491). Consistencies between talk, decisions, and products on highly controversial issues may endanger external support, while inconsistencies may secure it and may even be a major promotor of success (Brunsson 1986; 1993a).

5.3.2 Organised Hypocrisy and International Organisations

> "I was struck by the connection between lying and persevering the peace." (Soussan 2008:136)

Organised hypocrisy is generally recognised in international, political organisations that face conflicting institutional and technical environments (Lipson 2007; Brunsson 1993a). The organised hypocrisy theory views organisational processes, structures, and ideologies as important instruments for gaining external support, causing organisations to follow those in fashion – like the results-based management approach discussed earlier – and that for organisations that cannot arouse support through their tangible products they are the only instruments to do so (Brunsson 1993a). Lipson (2007) finds that organised hypocrisy can hold important functional value to an international organisation and be essential to their survival and ability to facilitate cooperation, and to face conflicting pressures – a situation where "neither acquiescence not defiance is a viable option" as multiple masters must be placated to secure material resources and conferred legitimacy (Weaver 2008:27). Organised hypocrisy – or "lip service employed as a strategic tool" (Weaver 2008:6) – makes progress possible within the context of division, provides for greater capability for an international organisation to operate and allows for dissent and conflict without incapacitating the whole organisation (Zähringer and Brosig 2020). However, the degrees of hypocrisy matter: systematic, institutionalised inconsistencies between an organisation's mandate and its operational achievements can result in a credibility crisis and cause stakeholders to reduce or withdraw support (Zähringer and Brosig 2020), and "disincentives for clarity and rigorous thought" can serve as obstacles for effective development (Dichter 2003:293). This could make the organisation dysfunctional, and on long term, even pose a risk for its survival. Examples of scholars applying the concept of organised hypocrisy in studies related to development and social issues are listed in Table 7.

Table 7. Examples of studies in development and social issues featuring organised hypocrisy

Topic	Author(s)
Cyber-Surveillance and Human Rights: Competing Norms and Organized Hypocrisy of EU Export Controls.	Bromley 2022
Persisting mismatch between UN talk and action regarding private military and security companies as a challenge to UN's credibility as a norm entrepreneur	Bures and Cusumano 2021
States' migration policies, whereby a gap exists between humanitarian rhetoric and operational conduct.	Cusumano 2018
Governments' human rights practices and governments ratifying human rights treaties as a matter of window dressing, while decoupling policy from practice.	Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005
Corporations' discursive commitments to Corporate Social Responsibility without subsequent action.	Kim and Tsutsui 2012
International indigenous rights regime in Sweden: reforms in Sámi politics are justified by reference to international law, while the actual effects of are minimal.	Mörkenstam 2018
Arms sales: states' value-based arms controls policy is symbolic, so that national interests are not sacrificed to protect the rights of citizens of other countries.	Perkins and Neumayer 2010
The World Bank structural adjustment lending in the forestry sector is associated with increased forest loss.	Shandra, Rademacher, Coburn 2016
Effects of lending by African Development Bank on maternal mortality: structural adjustment lending is associated with increased mortality, and reproductive health lending is associated with decreased mortality.	Sommer et al 2019
"Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) approach as a contested norm in the African Union: division between legal and verbal commitment to R2P and the practical use of R2P.	Zähringer and Brosig 2020

The perspective of organised hypocrisy has been used also in connection with study about the UN system. Examples include UN peacekeeping and reform (Hirschmann 2012; Lipson 2007) and UNICEF (Hagn 2018). The UN entities are subject to persisting external and internal pressures and power plays of these multiple constituencies (Saner and Yiu 2011:155). Because its legitimacy rests on the ability to reflect the diverse preferences of its constituencies, the UN is frequently expected to simultaneously uphold contradictory goals (Cusumano 2018). Moreover, in the fragmented and decentralised UN system, the inconsistencies between different, relatively independent departments within an organisation also lead to organised hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986). However, Thakur (2017:410) points out a double standard in the UN system: while the UN member states can justify pragmatic compromises with principles labelling it "realism", the same instinct for survival by the UN is labelled "hypocrisy".

According to Lipson (2007) despite the UN values such as national self-determination, human rights, development, and peace not being in full alignment, and despite the member states also interpreting them differently, the UN's legitimacy rests largely on its ability to reflect these constituencies' inconsistent values and preferences. Thus, the UN has to uphold contradictory goals and principles, and incorporate these contradictions into its internal discourse, organs, and agencies. He points out that although a political organisation, the UN must also produce action, and to maintain its legitimacy and obtain resources (e.g., member state dues), the UN must both enact the inconsistent values of international society and produce effective coordinated action, but in doing so, it faces conflicting logics of consequences and appropriateness. In the absence of organised hypocrisy, tight coupling of contradictory pressures for politics and action might be very disruptive to the UN peacekeeping: when norms and institutional pressures conflict with the requirements for operational effectiveness, hypocrisy may make it possible for the UN to take actions inconsistent with norms that may promote peace and relieve suffering.

The notion of organised hypocrisy has a place as a sensitizing concept for this study for three reasons. First, organised hypocrisy profoundly acknowledges the persistent tensions present in the very DNA of the complex UN system – the tug and pull between rhetoric and action, the political and the practical, and the needs of the upstream constituents and those on downstream levels. According to Brunsson (1993a), if organisations are exposed to conflicting demands and norms, and society expects a response to them, then one must also expect hypocrisy. Second, organised hypocrisy is a fit-for-purpose concept in the context of effectiveness discourse which, in the UN system context, tends to involve reform to respond to external normative pressures. These reforms also concern the quest for better cohesion between various UN entities, which calls for collective efforts on the operational level, thus shaping the way individuals are expected to work also in the field. Third, the notion that an organisation serving multiple constituents, as is the case with the UN, might need to behave as an organised hypocrisy to be effective is thought-provoking especially when juxtaposed with the principles of results focus and transparency, two of the four Busan Principles for effectiveness in development cooperation (OECD 2011), and ones also advocated for by the UN. How organisational behaviour (and survival?) grounded in misaligned rhetoric and action is balanced with the advocacy and commitment to enhanced results focus and transparency is an interesting puzzle, albeit not in the scope of this study.

In international organisations, performance reflects the behaviour of two sets of actors – the member states and the staff – with influences on performance emanating from within the organisation and from external sources (Gutner and Thompson 2010). Examining the concept of organised hypocrisy in the UN context has also reminded me of that "performance" encompasses not only, as per Merriam-Webster (n.d.[68]), "the execution of an action" or "the fulfillment of a claim, promise, or request" such as project performance or effectiveness of an individual, but also "the action of representing a character in a play", i.e. being part of a world of make-believe. Gleaning from both primary and secondary data in this study, one could posit that in the case of the UN system, performances on both levels and in two types of theatres is taking place – in the theatre of operations and in the political theatre, with the former necessary to deliver on the UN mandates and the latter as a critical enabler for the former to continue.

5.3.3 Organised Hypocrisy and Transparency

That transparency is one of the Busan Principles for effectiveness in aid (or development cooperation) context was discussed earlier. Given that even an "organised" form of hypocrisy, whose aim is essentially to sustain an ability of international organisations to operate effectively, could appear to suggest an intentional lack of transparency to some extent, it is prudent to briefly touch on the complex notion of transparency in aid context and in the context of organised hypocrisy. It has been said that in the aid context, transparency presents a double-edged sword: while enhanced access to information may serve as a tool for accountability, transparency also "threatens to lift the veil on internal processes that might disrupt … relationships … introduce onerous reporting burdens, and invite further interrogation from parties disaffected by aid programs" (Honig and Weaver 2019:140). For example, it has been found that, reporting on exploitation, abuse, and harassment by the UN agencies, while important, may also result in "transparency

68 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performance, retrieved April 20, 2023.

penalties" for the agencies that do so (IASC 2023:11). Another example related to transparency concerns reporting of the overhead costs. Research shows that the program-overhead ratio is vulnerable to manipulation, such as misreporting, misallocating costs, or making operating decisions that improve the ratio in the short run while undermining institutional development (IASC 2022; Byrd and Cote 2017; Garven, Hofmann, and McSwain 2016; Gregory and Howard 2009). A study of the UN system found that these costs were inadequately charged to donors, and that the competition for donor funding was becoming "a race to the bottom" as regards overhead costs, while they obviously had to be funded somehow (Mahn 2012:4). While the average administrative costs in ODA financing is roughly 17 per cent (Williamson 2010), WFP, for example, communicates on its website a reduction of its overhead rate "down to just 6.1 per cent" of the overall costs (WFP 2021c), and UNHCR does not apply at all its usual 6.5 per cent indirect support cost on unearmarked contributions, hoping to reverse the trend of increasingly earmarked donor funds (UNHCR 2021b). How much information should be shared, and at what point does selective sharing turn from cleverness to deceit?

While these are rhetorical questions for which literature does not offer answers, it has been found that withholding information, intentionally, may enable better effectiveness. For example, it has been found that charities may increase their revenue by limiting the sharing of certain information so as not to disillusion donors who derive "warm glow" from perceived outcomes while rationally avoiding feedback on the actual impact (Niehaus 2020:1). It has been also found that although e.g., donor agencies' measures to strengthen transparency have had positive effects on corruption, such measures are designed more to protect the donors' reputation than to achieve development results and often work at cross-purposes with aid effectiveness (Quibria 2017). Thus, while actors may take intentional efforts to align with effectiveness principles such as transparency, such an "effectiveness agenda" may not necessarily privilege aid results but other objectives, e.g., strengthening positive public perception, required to enable continuing work that is, we hope, geared towards achieving results for the actual beneficiaries. Recalling the absence of an agreed definition for effectiveness in the aid context as well as the divergence of stakeholder motivations to operate in the aid sector to begin with, mindfulness of whose effectiveness or the effectiveness of what is being addressed is paramount.

The earlier discussion about results-based management within the UN system is a poignant example of how effectiveness, results, transparency, and organised hypocrisy can be intertwined and how the relationship between these elements is anything but linear. As discussed, results-based management was deemed to be one of the most powerful resources to enhance results-focus in the UN system. However, despite the reported failings and documented doubts about the utility of such methods in the operations over the years, they continue to be used, serving a symbolic purpose: they demonstrate conformity with known standards, satisfying bureaucratic and political demands (Lipson 2010). This demonstrates how meeting normative requirements may trump achieving actual results – even in the case of a strategy specifically adopted to enhance focus on achieving results. However, considering the dependency of the operational second UN on the political first UN, if one were to attempt to establish whether results-based management has been effective, perhaps the answer is "yes and no", depending on whose effectiveness and the effectiveness of what is in focus.

5.4 Interconnecting the Sensitizing Concepts

The three sensitizing concepts were included to the inquiry to help vivify the institutional level context and the UN system-dependent factors that may impact work even in the field, given that frontline activities do not occur in isolation of the broader context. In the early phase of the study, there was an assumption that these concepts might be connected in some way, however, without a pre-understanding about how they might be interrelated. Furthermore, while it was assumed that effectiveness would feature, somehow, in the field worker perspectives, given that they had been informed about the study topic being about effectiveness and given that the UN entities do expect its staff to assess one's own and/or the supervisees' performance, there was a degree of uncertainty about if and how tensions would be discussed by the informants. There was even more uncertainty, if not even doubt, about the relevance of organised hypocrisy for work carried out in the field. However, in line with the grounded theory approach, such concerns and uncertainties were not allowed to direct the inquiry – the field voices would direct it.

As the inquiry progressed, increasingly strong interlinkages began to emerge: to examine aid work or worker effectiveness is, essentially, about examining tensions and how they are or can be managed, which necessitates, in the context of international organisations, placating a group of diverse and divergent stakeholders and may therefore, also involve organised hypocrisy. The UN system in particular is faced with the challenge of managing tensions to fulfil its mandate, to navigate the external expectations, and to manage the internal work realities. Thus, building on Figure 1 presented at the beginning of this thesis, the interconnected concepts are now presented in Figure 19. It shows how the need to navigate and balance the divergent needs of various constituents simultaneously poses a challenge for the effectiveness of the UN system, whereby the norms which an organisation is subject to may conflict not only with the demands of efficiency but also with one another, resulting in tensions, some of which paradoxical. These challenges compel the system to engage in organised hypocrisy on hand and in devising various internal strategies aimed at improving effectiveness, on the other. Organised hypocrisy can therefore be seen as an approach to manage tensions and to navigate paradoxes. In business, it has been found that corporations that follow a paradox approach are more likely to be successful in preserving their legitimacy (Pinto 2019).

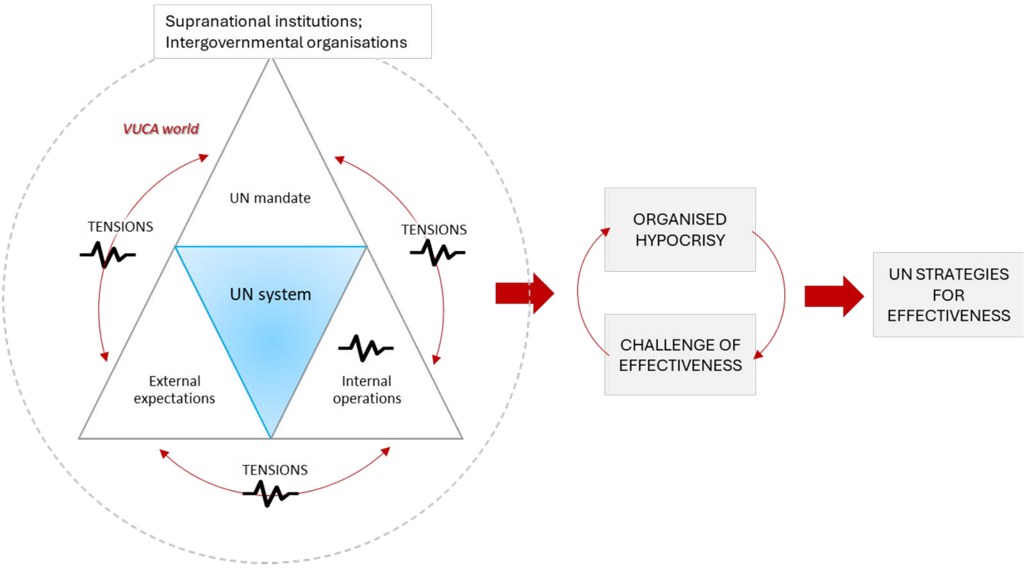

Figure 19. Interconnectedness of the sensitising concepts

What place, if any, do these sensitising concepts then have in the field workers' operational reality? The extent to which this triad of concepts emerge in the informant perspectives or how they may be otherwise relevant in this connection is clarified with the upcoming presentation of the empirical findings. However, as the constructivist grounded theory method encourages contextualizing the research (Charmaz 2017b), before proceeding to these discoveries, it is prudent to summarise the nested pressures for effectiveness discussed thus far, as they serve as the backdrop for work in the UN system and which give rise to tensions which may, in turn, necessitate organised hypocrisy.

5.5 Synthesising the Nested Pressures for Effectiveness

We have thus far established that, the humanitarian and development problems are increasingly transboundary in nature and as such, increasingly complex to tackle, with the proliferation of aid sector actors having introduced a new dynamic with its advantages and disadvantages, felt also on the local level. To what extent the Busan Principles can facilitate enhanced effectiveness in this sector in flux is an open question. It has also been established that the functioning of the UN system – a political bureaucracy established to prevent another world war, not to manage projects – is inherently complex, and that tensions can emerge between actors but also between the strategies aiming for enhanced effectiveness. It is in this complex matrix of nested pressures for effectiveness (condensed in Figure 20), across 162 of the 193 UN member countries, the field staff work, while expected to adhere to the values of the UN system and of the employing UN entity, regardless of their personal value systems and standards. For example, they are to abide by the principles of integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity (Fall and Zhang 2012); be collaborative, committed, and inclusive (WFP 2020); care, trust, and be accountable (UNICEF n.d.[69]); and respect the fundamental human rights, social justice and human dignity, as well as the equal rights of men and women (UNHCR 2004).

For the second UN, the strategies for enhanced effectiveness within the UN system entail both prospects and challenges. For example, job rotation may expand career options and opportunities for learning, however, rotation may also introduce unwanted disruption and expectations of adjustment, including to working in fragile settings. A sharper focus on gender party and geographical representation may mean better career opportunities for some while weakening chances for others. Furthermore, when coupled with the already known challenges related to workforce diversity, these strategies may exacerbate the managerial challenge of harnessing diversity to meaningfully serve the day-to-day operations. The business operations reform may generate internal efficiencies but it also requires investment of time and other resources in developing work processes, systems, and reporting mechanisms, as well as investment in training. Existing job roles may disappear and new roles may be created. This also necessitates staff to learn and adapt to new ways of working, as new types of UN internal provider-user interfaces are formed, in a setting that is already challenged by the complexities of inter-agency collaboration. The new ways of working may enable staff to expand their professional networks and learn new skills through closer collaboration with other UN entities' staff. On the other hand, this closer interaction can also make more transparent differences, e.g., in work conditions and contractual terms, potentially creating a sense of unfairness or inequality, which may serve as a source of frustration for some staff.

69 https://www.unicef.org/careers/equity-inclusion-and-diversity-unicef, retrieved March 12, 2024.

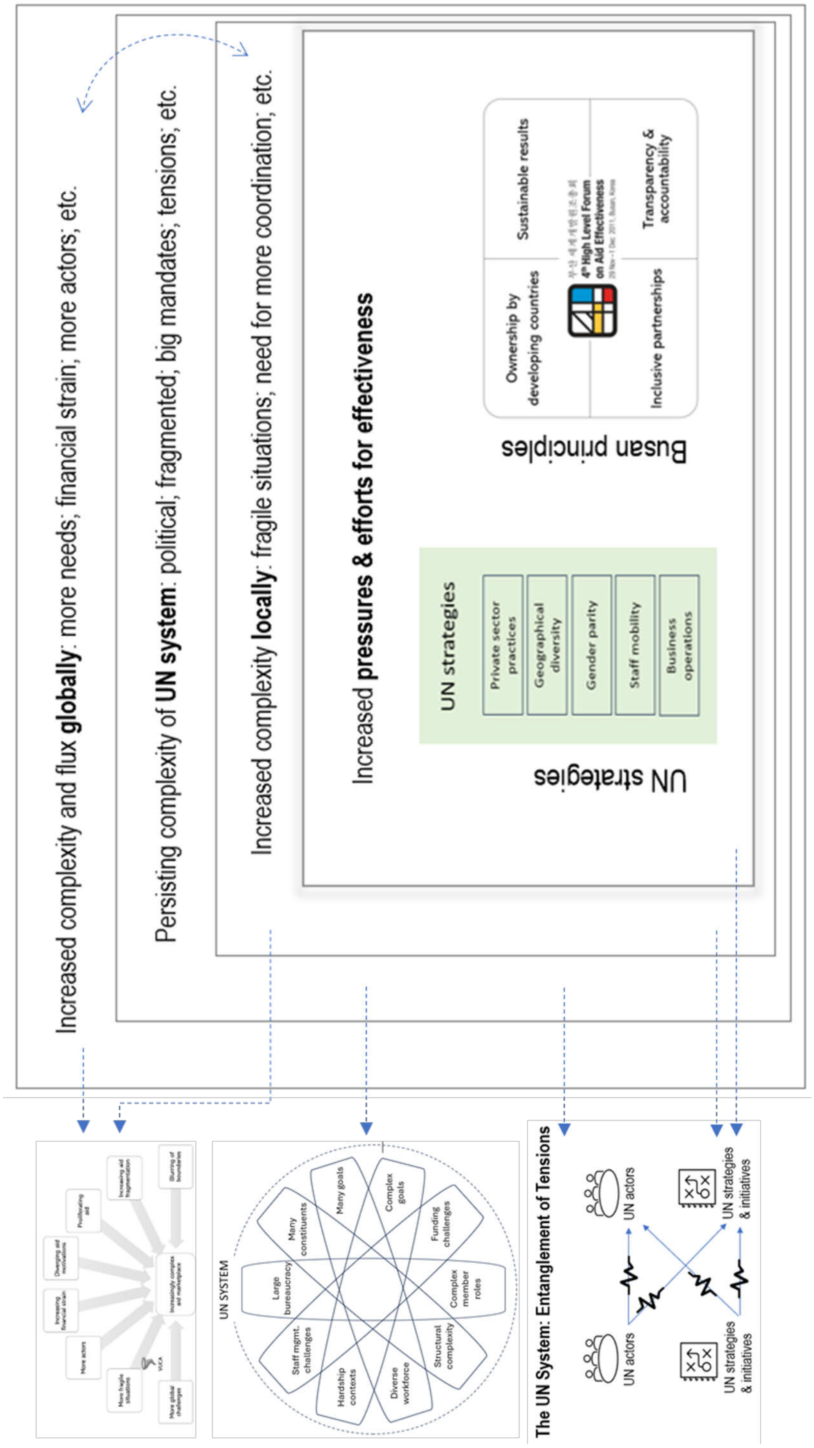

Figure 20. Nested pressures (own compilation)

Considering the tug and pull that may emerge between the many good intentions, it could be hypothesised that, on a worker level, a challenging equation of seemingly counter-acting forces forms, whereby an increasingly mobile and diverse workforce, operating in an increasingly resource-parched and fragmented aid marketplace, is expected to, somehow, operate in a more cohesive and collaborative manner. This would appear to be not only a challenge of logistics and geographical distance, but also one on the mental plane – a kind of conundrum that even the latest technologies and learning tools might not easily solve. Moreover, one could posit that, as strategies devised for enhanced effectiveness to address some groups or activities may have opposite effects, including for other groups and activities, the effectiveness agenda may be shifting the problem or changing its nature rather than solving it. This might be a particularly pertinent point in an organisational setting like the UN system, one characterised by flux and which is, in a sense, always unorganised – or "modestly organized confusion" (Weiss 2016:78) – thus posing a "Sisyphean" (Saner and Yiu 2011:158) task for change management to implement new strategies, on top of the challenge of the earlier-mentioned workforce diversity management. It could also be inferred that, considering the primacy of micro-level actors (the second UN) in producing outputs and outcomes in the field, if the "problem-shifting" leads to adverse effects felt on the worker level (e.g., more stress or frustration; longer recruitment lead times), their flow-on effects may be particularly serious for the fulfilment of the UN mandates. The following chapters seek to provide a better understanding of how field workers in the UN system relate to these types of challenges.

6 At the Coalface, Boots Dirty

It has been said that, the capability for implementation is the real determinant of aid performance (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017). In aid work, last mile issues – similar to those in business logistics – frequently surface (see e.g., Chang 2019; Eftekhar and Van Wassenhove 2016; Battini et al. 2014), with the final stage of aid or service delivery chain to the beneficiaries is typically challenged by the limitations related to transportation resources, weak infrastructure, and lack of stakeholder coordination (Balcik, Beamon, and Smilowitz 2008). In the context of this study, the last mile concept, reimagined, can also be situated into the realm of operationalizing UN policies, whereby the downstream actors (the field workers) have the last mile challenge of "delivering", i.e., turning the upstream rhetoric into downstream reality, whether concerning the effectiveness principles such as inclusion and accountability, or the effectiveness strategies for common back office, while also operationalising agency specific policies and implementing projects. Field staff of international development organisations can be seen as the coalface of organisational sensemaking (Honig 2020:162).

Thus far the study has explored extant data to form an understanding of how the dynamics in the aid sector and within the UN system, coupled with the aid effectiveness agendas and related tensions may shape the operating context of international field workers in the UN system. In this chapter, we enrich that understanding by listening to the voices from the field, as I present my observations and interpretations of the data generated through the interviews conducted with those at the coalface. First, I present an overview of the multiple contextual spheres field workers can be simultaneously affected by. Thereafter, I discuss the four conceptual categories grounded in the empirical data: the way of feeling, the way of viewing the world, the way of experiencing self in the world, and the way of working. I also report on topics that were seemingly, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, of little interest to the informants. Incorporated to the analysis is data also from other sources, including related academic literature, to demonstrate how the analysis fits, extends, or challenges extant ideas related to the topic (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021).

6.1 Manifold Contexts Shaping Work in the Field

It has been said that international civil servants, straddling global responsibilities and national constraints, "can only muddle along, performing in an imperfect way according to admittedly imperfect criteria of accomplishment" (Newman 2020:231). The interviews reveal a configuration of multiple contexts – or "cultures" or "forces" – that concurrently influence the worker, facilitating or constraining his performance. The UN field worker can be simultaneously affected, to varying degrees, by seven different contextual spheres (Figure 21).

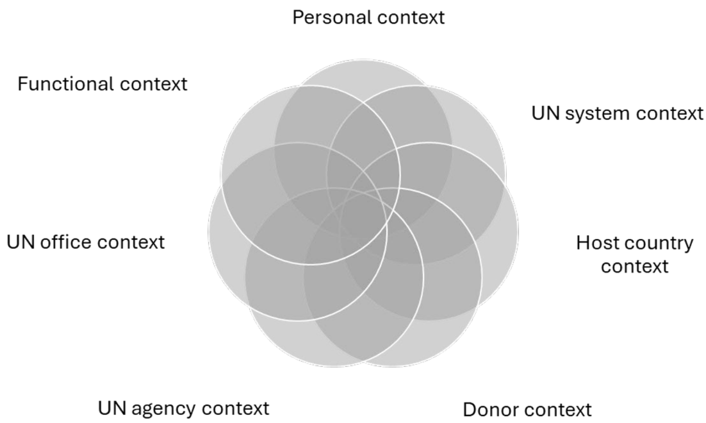

Figure 21. The manifold contexts of UN field worker (compilation based on interviews)

A field worker is influenced by *the UN system context* – e.g., by the funding mechanisms and the obligations for civil servants – but more specifically by the *context of the employing UN entity* whose practices and culture guide work, while in parallel, the *host country context* shapes the practical work and life conditions. These three contexts are impacted, directly or indirectly, by the *donor context.* For example, in voluntarily funded entities, employment contracts may depend on donor priorities. The work takes place in a particular *office or mission context*, for example, in prefabricated structures within a compound that ultimately forms the setting for the various *job functions* in a specific duty station that may be, for example, subject to curfews. The worker's actions are grounded in and informed by his *personal context*, such as his life circumstances, family obligations, health, values, national culture, and work experience, with either positive or negative effects on his performance.

Although the spheres are illustrated as circles of equal size in the idealised picture, their relative size and the degree to which they overlap is situational, varying from case to case, as circumstances change. In this study, the informants who discuss the importance of the host country context, be it the political situation, culture, or ethics – aspects informant Amari calls "those big things" – emphasise the need to understand and be aware of that context, regardless of its value appeal to the worker. Omid, for example, separates respect for cultural differences and individuals' right to live as they choose from respect for their choices. Soohee, in turn, underscores the role-dependent functional cultures, such as that of procurement, or engineering.

The interviews suggest there are certain basic factors that shape work in the field, relating to the contexts of the host country, the UN system, and the employing UN entity. In some locations or situations these factors are bottlenecks to be worked on, in others they can constitute a hard stop for one's ability to perform work altogether. Synthetised from the accounts, the following host country factors, predominantly beyond the control of individual workers, affect how (or if) work can be carried out, thus constituting an essential contributing element to the effectiveness equation:

- Host country infrastructure related aspects, e.g., weak or non-existent air or ground transport options.
- Conditions related to climate, such as season-dependent access to work sites or supply delivery points; heat and dust; extreme rains or snowfall.
- Local safety and security conditions, as well as health hazards.
- Context-dependent aspects related to cultural diversity: variable staff language skills; attitude towards female supervisors; ethics challenges such as conflicts of interest and corruption; and fatalism rooted in culture and its impact on worker appetite for planning and risk mitigation.
- The extent to which the host country government respects the agreed UN mandate and fulfils its responsibilities[70], such as granting or extending visas; enabling movement of staff and goods; preventing looting, theft, or damage to UN property; preventing harassment by officials (e.g., by police or airport authorities); and sustaining from expelling UN staff (declaring them *persona non grata).*

Several informants cite examples of failures to secure or extend visas, including for shorter missions. One informant reported that investigating corrupt practices in a UN office "got a little bit sensitive", resulting in the informant's visa not being extended, thus necessitating a relocation. That some colleagues have been declared *persona non grata* and ordered to leave the country was also mentioned. The informants described the consequences of visa troubles for themselves but also pointed out their domino-effects in offices, i.e., rework or redirection of resources. Visa issues can

70 Host country has the primary responsibility to protect UN staff and to ensure respect for their privileges and immunities. In 2020, only 95 states were parties to the Convention on the Safety of UN and Associated Personnel of 1994 (UN 2021d).

also extend to family members. This was the case with an informant who reported the persistent spousal visa problems being a key factor in the decision to relocate and change the right-fit, high-impact role in an emergency setting to a more administrative one elsewhere. I suggest that here, on government level, we can see tendencies for organised hypocrisy: that certain UN member states, while calling for UN efficiencies, would not facilitate, for national political reasons, staff visas for work that the UN is mandated to perform in that country.

The above does not support the claim in a recent study (Bozionelos et al. 2023) about the worldwide acceptance and recognition of the UN; "being wanted" is not an overt motivator for those interviewed. That the UN professionals face suspicious or hostile attitudes towards them in some countries is supported by data also in other sources, e.g., by Nowicka and Kaweh (2009) and in accounts by other UN practitioners, such as by Hilde F. Johnson (2018) who served as the Head of the UN Mission in South Sudan. The requests for the UN to withdraw from certain countries, such as Mali, also demonstrate that acceptance of the UN presence is not a given.

As regards the basic factors related to the UN system and the employing UN entity, the interview data suggests that on one hand, common rules and practices can constitute limiting conditions to work, and on the other, they can serve as enablers, e.g., by safeguarding wellbeing through posing limitations to freedom of movement. Like in the case of the host country, these factors too are predominantly beyond the control of individual staff members, affecting how (or if) work can be carried out, thus constituting a contributing element to the effectiveness equation:

- The safety and security related rules set for staff by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS): e.g., curfews, approved transport options and routes, facilities, vehicle use rules, and convoy requirements.
- The administrative rules of respective UN entities, e.g., about location and quality of offices, accommodation, and other facilities; commute arrangements; access to vehicles; policy on driving hours and overtime.
- The R&R regime in hardship duty stations.
- The extent to which the UN recruitment and reassignment processes result in the right person being assigned for the right job.

Despite the potential of these system, host country, and UN entity-specific contexts to shape work conditions in powerful ways, the way the informants tend to discuss them seem par for the course; they appear as normalised givens inherent to the UN reality. That a UN worker was expelled or detained, or that he had to move to country x instead of country y, came across as mundane statements. Instead, as discussed later, the informant data appears to point towards aspects related to a worker's personal context being some of the most critical elements for work (in)effectiveness.

6.2 Way of feeling – "The Want"

6.2.1 Motivating, Guiding, and Enabling Dimensions

In this sub-section, I discuss my interpretations of how the informants feel about their work. The findings predominantly relate to NVIVO nodes labelled "Being motivated; succeeding", "Relating to hardship", "Choosing; making judgment calls", and "Relating to risk and failure". From these nodes, I construct the first of the four core categories emerging from the findings, which I refer to as *the want*.

In this context, "want" refers to a desire or a need for something, i.e., not a lack or failure. "A genuine intention that you want to do good", resonates with the want, an expression by Pamela Steele, a former UN staff member and current CEO of a Nairobi based capacity development firm (P Steele, personal communication, December 28, 2023). The want refers to actions that are well-intentioned from the organisational effectiveness perspective. Thus, the want does not encompass negatively geared wants such as intentionally wanting to deceive, do harm, or avoid work, nor does it refer to efforts to advance personal agendas at the perils of the organisational mandate. That this distinction needs to be explicitly stated will become evident from the informants' accounts. Also, in the context of this study, the want is linked with the notion of competence, i.e., the desire to do by deploying one's capabilities, rather than merely wishing to do something without any ability or readiness in that regard. In this inquiry, competence is defined as "the ability to integrate and apply contextually-appropriate knowledge, skills and psychosocial factors – such as beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations – to consistently perform successfully within a specified domain" (Vitello, Greatorex, and Shaw 2021), and it is also in this meaning the informants use the term, differentiating it from "skill", an "ability to perform motor and / or cognitive acts" (Rychen 2004:321).

In Figure 22, the earlier referenced coding example is used to illustrate the coding logic. The interview segment has been linked to two nodes that are, in turn, connected to the core category. This segment specifically links to the motivating and enabling dimensions of the want, elaborated in more detail later in the text. The full NVIVO coding hierarchy can be found in Appendix 9.

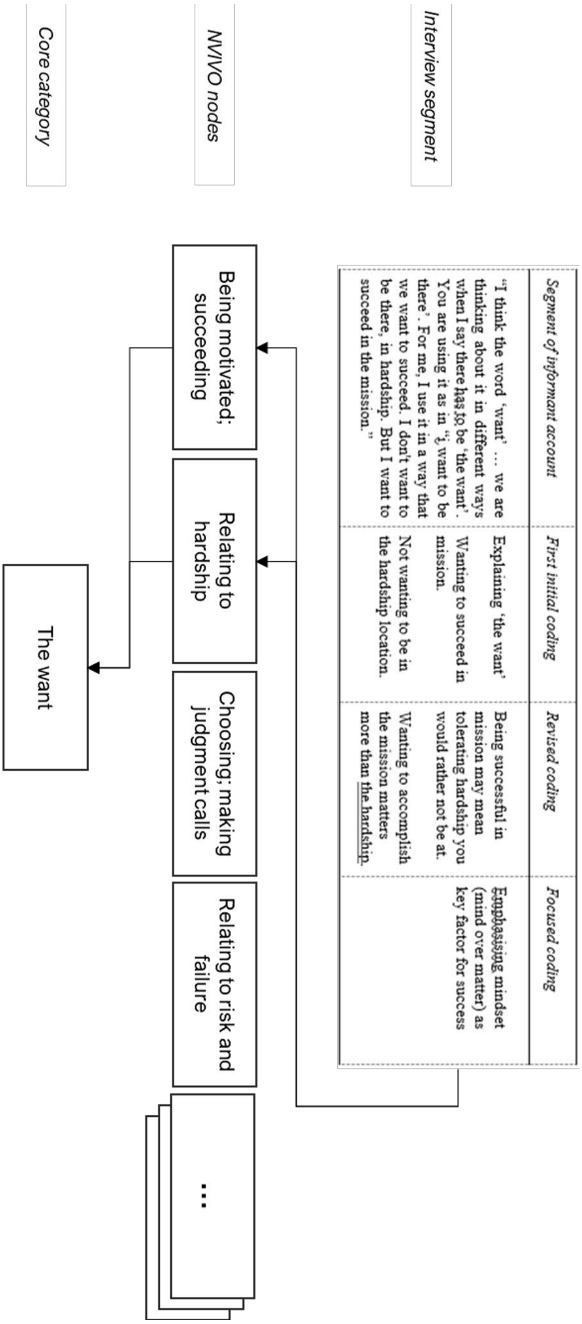

Figure 22. Illustrating the coding logic

The abductive reasoning process that resulted in the naming of this category is illuminated in Vignette 3. These reflections evolved over several months. The analysis of the empirical material was informed by other data sources.

"Navigating" in the thesis title evokes images about "doing" – approaches, strategies, manoeuvres. Although allowing the data to "show the way", I still had an idea of working towards new knowledge about some kind of doing. But as the interviews progressed, it became increasingly obvious that navigating the daily work was not only about the way of doing but very much about the why of doing. There was, in fact, a point during the constant comparison process, whereby not much doing could be seen in the informant data; the "why" appeared more dominating. I went with the flow, into the why. I turned to literature about motivation.

Motivation is essential for performance (Sonnentag and Frese 2002), and aid workers are often assumed to want to help the poor and to act in the interest of the aid recipients (Hindman and Fechter 2014:3; Williamson 2010; Clements et al. 2008). Scholarship on factors attracting individuals to the UN refers to building a better world, benefits, prestige, and cosmopolitanism (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019; Mülli 2017; Jansson 2016), but it is also suggested that one's desire "to reaffirm superiority and self-entitlement and impose respect and admiration" may be a motivator (Gottwald 2010:14). However, it was an understatement to call what I saw in the data as "motivation"; there was more to it. It was not about the why to justify a particular course of action, but rather about why bother act in the first place. I compare code with code, account with account, and keep bumping into "mindset". I turn to literature on mindset.

That mindset and motivation go hand in hand is not a surprise per se. Mindset and competence appear to be linked too: integration of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations with context-appropriate knowledge and skills comprises competence (Vitello, Greatorex, and Shaw 2021). How do the informants talk about competence? It appears to be a mix of skills, experience, and educational merit, with least emphasis on academic prowess. Mindset is a recurring point. The way of seeing things, feeling about them, the attitude as the primus motor became central to the discovery. Mindset serves as the catalyst for choices that facilitate in/effectiveness. That hiring and reassignment should focus on the right fit including mindset is deemed essential for a colleague not to be a burden, the kind of "wounded" person Amari mentions. Amari talks about "the want". It is different from "motivated". "It's just a different mindset. It comes down to the reason, it comes down to the want; those guys have to want to be there .... It's not about agreeing with the situation around you – it could be a terrible, horrible situation – but you want to be there to help your colleagues get through ... to allow the agency to deliver against what's been mandated. When you're surrounded by people with the same want, that's where you get that camaraderie, you get that resilience to continue through these challenging situations." I see evidence of want in the other accounts too.

While the informants cite various work motivations, they tend to have in common the want – the compelling drive to feel useful in their respective professional domains, while doing something they find meaningful. This is also in line with the UN staff survey whereby the *Opportunity to apply skills and competencies* was the first reason for joining a difficult duty station and *Serving a good cause* was the second (UN 2008b). However, the want is not a one-dimensional force. Examining the informant data closer, I detect three dimensions: the want as a *motivating* force, *guiding* force, and an *enabling* force. As a motivating force, the want is the power source and the regulator of push and pull, affecting how the worker levitates towards or away from a situation. As a guiding force, the want acts as a compass, informing the choices and decisions. As an enabling force, the want acts as Kevlar, affecting the worker's risk appetite and ability to persist in a face of adversity. I interpret this as "grit for a cause, not just because". It also acts as ballast, aiding the worker in finding stability in flux.

The want is seen as a spectrum; not all informants display an equally strong burn. At the top end, it resembles a bonfire, at the lower end, a glow of embers. The common denominator is the heat and energy, caring about the work. The inherent characteristics of the want – the notions of vision, change, energy, and passion toward the creation of new ideas – are also characteristic of an entrepreneurial mindset (Kuratko, Fisher, and Audretsch 2021).

Vignette 3. Arriving at "the want" through abductive reasoning

In my interpretation, the want has three dimensions: it can be a motivating power, a guiding force, and an enabler. The essence underpinning all informants' accounts, consistently, is the compelling need to feel useful, to have the space to flex their professional muscles, while doing something that they feel matters, i.e., this is about the *motivating* power of the want. However, none of the informants declared themselves to be altruists, and not even those in humanitarian entities referred to themselves as humanitarians. The informants' motivations to join the UN system were varied. When discussing the reasons to join, continue, or return to work in the UN system, the desire to improve effectiveness of the UN system and contribute to change was brought up. For example, Xavi, having worked in another INGO with the "frustrating UN system" as a counterpart, joined the UN system, believing "very strongly in the need for a world with the UN and its multilateralism … to fix the system from the inside".

> "I thought, you know what – I can continue to throw stones at the UN from the outside, or I can fix it from within." (Xavi)

Skylar, however, was initially motivated by the desire to travel and to "test what I had heard about the rest of the world, especially Africa", while Emerson and Zasha wanted to escape their home country contexts: Emerson was subject to death threats as a national civil servant and Zasha wanted to avoid having to work in the corrupt, domestic private sector – and the UN system presented an option for a safer life. For

Kai, Soohee, Amari, and Nuru, the UN system had been just another opportunity that emerged to do work in their professional domains, not an avenue they had actively pursued. Hao, making reference to the aid worker stereotypes of "mercenaries, missionaries, or misfits" (Stirrat 2008:407; see also Willner-Reid 2018:1016), talks about "probably being a misfit" not suited for "doing nine-to-five … in the regular world". Rather, Hao thrives on opportunities to solve problems.

> *"*I'm trying to find solutions to things that are outside the box. Everything can be solved, that's my whole thing … I am driven by this industry of finding solutions. There is a solution somewhere. The more challenging it is, be it Afghanistan, Somalia ... I really thrived in those countries because it was a challenge.*"* (Hao)

Money too is a motivator. That the UN system pays well is acknowledged[71]. I asked Omid, whose UN experience comprise only fragile field settings, whether money could compensate for the hardship and risk for safety he had encountered during a recent evacuation ordeal to escape civil war. "Yes, it could, absolutely!" Several informants mentioned the need to fulfil, apart from one's career ambitions, other obligations such as those towards family. "The organisation is really giving us a lot, doing a lot for us – and let's be honest, for our families as well – there is no other organisation providing such entitlements to us," says Kai, while Zasha acknowledges that "it is because of the UN I can live life in luxury … I can educate my daughter". "I was no different in that sense … I too needed to make sure that I have the support and enough kitty to survive in my retirement", says Nuru. That leaving the UN system or making job changes had been made easier after the children had been completed their education was mentioned by several informants. While not condemning the "personal profit motive", Skylar believes that money as the sole or primary motivation is unlikely to produce the kind of impact the UN is seeking to accomplish. In the same vein, Omid points out that while UN workers have mixed motivations for working in the UN system, only one thing really matters: "That they're doing a good job is the main thing." Finley echoes the same, pragmatic sentiment: a person is expected to perform, not to have a charitable mindset.

That the "UN, even if it is not gold, glitters a lot" is recognised, but prestige is not cited as a motivating factor for UN work. This does not, of course, necessarily mean

71 The conditions of service of the UN civil servants are regulated and coordinated by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC 2023e). Depending on the duty station classification, in addition to salary and post adjustment, international recruits may be entitled to hardship allowance and danger pay. The hardship allowance – US$17,440-US$20,920 per annum (ICSC 2018) – varies depending on the duty station and the job level, and the danger pay – US$1,600 per month (ICSC 2018) – applies where UN staff or premises are presented with an imminent and constant threat or they are at high risk of becoming collateral damage in a war or active armed conflict (ICSC 2023e).

it might not be a motivating factor. However, informants do express aspects that, in fact, suggest the absence of prestige in UN work and the awareness that one is not always received with unbridled enthusiasm. One manifestation of this was already touched upon in connection with the challenges posed by host country authorities. That UN professionals may face suspicious or hostile attitudes in some host countries is further evidenced through the interviews; that UN system is not positively viewed everywhere is understood, but it is also found that to condemn the UN system is easy. “You feel some hostility towards you, you're not being engaged as friendly … sometimes situations could be very tense with locals,” says Morgan, however, emphasising how the situation varies from country to country. There can also be a sense of “being used”, says Omid, for example, if food aid is weaponised in settings of internal conflict to feed the proponents and starve the opponents.

While being a UN worker does not automatically mean you are welcome in a host country, as internationally recruited staff, you may not be welcomed at a duty station even by your locally recruited co-workers. Hao describes how in a duty station, national staff would “just pretty much wait you out”. In some cases, from the local perspective, deploying international staff is deemed unnecessary, as the same work could be, in their view, carried out by locals. In some locations, staff unions hold power. Emerson speaks about a colleague who had been advised to leave the country to defuse a local wage dispute and related strike action. Finley describes how, due to a cost cutting change initiative affecting local staff, the management comprising internationals were blocked from entering the office for several weeks.

That the want could be satisfied by the mere fact that one is working for the UN system (a.k.a. for a “good cause”) is not the case, suggests the interview data. There is no indication that the want is specifically related or limited to work in the UN system. To the contrary, as mentioned earlier, the UN was not the employer of choice for some; they “ended up” in the system. Furthermore, of the fourteen informants, seven had left the UN system at some point in their career. At the time of the interviews, three of those seven had re-entered the UN system. Soohee’s account demonstrates how deep-seated the burn to accomplish can be: it concerns a product development project Soohee is, as a retiree, working on with a retired UN colleague, 20 years after their innovative initiative was cancelled by the UN before completion:

> “This project is keeping us extremely busy. It goes back to us being in [location]. We wanted to give the intellectual property to the UN but powers that be would not let us do that. We were transferred and shelved it. Twenty years later, when [colleague] retired, he lamented that we never got that done and said that why don’t we do a little exercise to prove it to ourselves that it works. We patented it, so we now own the patent, not the UN. We have built a prototype and are now talking to somebody about possibility of deploying it ... We have finally done it, it is so

satisfying, you have no idea … we have a glimmer of hope to take it to [country at war], and if we can do that, then frankly, we have done it." (Soohee)

The need to be and feel useful is a recurring theme. As I consult the literature further, the concept of "mattering" resonates, that we feel significant in the world (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981:71). Prilleltensky (2020) discusses mattering as having the elements of feeling valued and adding value. Viewing the empirical data through the lens of mattering, it appears to suggest that, in the context of the UN system, experiencing a sense of mattering is more due to personal pursuit than owing to organisational processes – or such processes alone, due to their weaknesses, do not guarantee a sense of mattering. Performance management is an example of such a weak process. Furthermore, looking into the reasons for the informants changing jobs, duty stations, or leaving the UN system, it appears that not-mattering, i.e., not feeling valued and not feeling that one adds enough value, appears as a key reason for these movements. Thus, in the absence of robust organisational processes that facilitate mattering, retaining intrinsic motivation by carving space for mattering, somehow, appears to be crucial for a worker's decision to stay and deliver.

Feeling useful by applying one's professional abilities for something meaningful is a subjective notion, the criteria for which are ultimately established by the worker himself. Such standards and expectations may not be explicitly spelled out in the job descriptions, and some of this effort might not be seen or appreciated by the supervisor – it may even be misaligned with the set criteria or guidelines. Several accounts portray a picture of UN performance standards and expectations being lower than those the informants set for themselves and against which they measure success. I refer to this as the *guiding dimension or power* of the want. It complements the "what" and the "why" (of motivation) with a "how", serving as the personal reference point in navigating the day-to-day reality; it is the proverbial North Star. While motivation and being guided are related concepts, there is a subtle difference between them. Amari's recount of a choice to go beyond one's job description exemplifies the guiding power of the want. Having lead, for months, the preparation of high-value security assets for dispatch to another fragile location, and while Amari's responsibility explicitly ends when the assets leave Amari's line of sight, Amari's wants to accompany the cargo to mitigate last mile problems. This is against the standard practice, requiring exceptional HQ clearances. The mission movement involves physical discomfort (exposure to the elements; sleep deprivation) and exposure to safety and security risks on arrival, as well as being confined to austere conditions at the end user location – where Amari's presence or work accomplished was barely recognised. "Was it worth the effort?" I asked.

"Absolutely. It was the right thing to do by staff, for their safety … There were problems as we offloaded, not so fun. And if we had lost the assets to wrong hands,

> I would have had to start all over again and that would have been frustrating for my team and waste of money for the organisation. Also potentially really bad media story. So yeah, it was the right thing, to mitigate risks. But I don't think this earned me any brownie points with my director … but luckily the other seniors saw the utility of me doing this." (Amari)

If the motivating force propels one to move to a direction, then the guiding force facilitates making choices on the way. Ethical standards may be interwoven with performance standards, with one's own tolerance to nepotism, cronyism, or other manifestations of abuse of power, may be lower than what would be palatable in the system. "One thing I learned," says Kai, "is that if you are taking the correct route, don't look for any supporters, you just go ahead … You keep telling the truth. You keep pushing, you keep speaking out." This notion bears resemblance to UN whistleblower Michael Soussan's (2008:316-317) comment about trying to be "true to oneself" being the key to surviving in an environment characterised by the dichotomy of idealism and realism, typical to international organisations.

Apart from the motivating and guiding dimensions, I interpret the want also having an *enabling dimension or power*. This relates to the ability to withstand something, for example, to tolerate hardship and frustrating circumstances, because the want transcends the effect of such circumstances. It is the Kevlar for the mind. These hardships and frustrations can be related to people, processes, or to location related conditions, like in the previous example. Hao's earlier comment about loving challenges and thriving in challenging settings, be it in Afghanistan or Somalia, is also an example of the enabling power of the want. Similarly, Amari's comment "you still have to do the job" even if disagreeing with the political or ethical standpoints taken by the host country reflects this. "You may not want to work with certain individuals, in certain locations, or follow certain procedures," Amari continues, "but you do it for the bigger picture." I also interpret this enabling dimension to be powering some of the "professionally courageous" choices and decisions, the kinds that are made despite the likely resistance they will face or the potential fallout that might ensue, for example, from whistleblowing or trying to remove a poorly performing supervisee. Some of such choices or decisions may even be counter to the established norms. Thus, the enabling dimension of the want is linked not only with the physical risk aspect but also with the aspect of professional risk. One may be motivated to do a job and have an internal voice guiding where one should go to get that job done, but it is the enabling power of the want that gives the courage to take the leap and do it.

6.2.2 Hardship with a Twist

The discussions with the informants show that "hardship" is a relational concept: the perception and significance of hardship can depend on the context and comparison with other situations, individuals, or times. It was discussed earlier that identifying staff willing to relocate to hardship duty stations was difficult and risk for life was also discussed. The informant vocabulary (e.g., “blood”, “dying”, “saving lives”, “killing”, “gun shots”, having to “send people home in boxes”) gave a flavour of the work. Against this backdrop, I found some informant comments bewildering, including “emergencies are the easy ones”, “I miss hardship although I don’t want to be there”, “I feel safer in emergencies because the risks are higher”, and “I’ve been lucky to have been in the worst places of highest risk”. These statements piqued my interest: while some informants were ready for “adventure”, none expressed or implied having a need to “live on the edge”. Furthermore, since none of them had specifically eluded to the financial benefits of hardship allowance or danger pay, monetary reward was unlikely to explain the seemingly topsy-turvy perspectives either. As I probed into these intriguing statements, I saw an increasingly logical picture, one I call the paradox of hardship.

To understand why emergencies are the “easy ones”, why they make you feel safer, and why one might feel lucky having ended up in “the worst places” rather than in the more stable family duty stations, it may help to recall that humanitarian action can deliver visible results in a shorter time frame than development work, and it is easier to mobilize resources for crisis response than prevention. Although hardship denotes danger, difficulty, and inconvenience, there is, especially in emergencies, on some level, clarity about the purpose. In connection with longer-term development efforts, questions arise about the purpose, timeline, and value add.

> “Do we just go into a place and stay there forever because we have jobs? That seems to be an issue ... you just get into a place and get bogged down. What's the end game? The onset of emergency, earthquake or natural disaster … these are in some ways the easy ones because you have definite in and definite out, you know your hand back to government at some stage, there's an exit plan.” (Omid)

> “Look at the job UNHCR is doing with refugees ... Those works are very visible … bringing the fuel and food and all that. When it comes to that humanitarian work, everybody is appreciative. But when it comes to the restoring peace in the country, then you don't have these answers.” (Emerson)

In hardship contexts, funding appears more readily available. “When I ask for money, I get money,” says Hao. Security arrangements are more pronounced in fragile settings, and there are more hard stops for staff conduct. The more stringent security protocols that must be followed, coupled with the funding available to mitigate security risks, give a sense of agency to staff engaged in security activities: there is power to do one’s own job and subsequently enable others to do theirs.

> “I was lucky because I was in the worst places, the highest risk. Security [staff] actually were the ones who enabled everything to happen. Before you could deliver a program you first had to have security taken care of and that's where they would depend on us for everything, especially in [country] … all missions were led by Security. Normally, if you were in, let's say, Tanzania, Uganda, or someplace like that, it will be led by Programmes. Where I worked, we led all the missions because security was the issue, to get to those vulnerable people. So I found it easier to work in those places ... I never had a problem with it or with money; funding was never an issue. If I needed armoured vehicles in [country], I had armoured vehicles. Same with compounds in [country]: I had [amount] budget just for Security. That's unheard of anywhere else. But of course, we had to have T-walls, armed guards, X-ray machines, everything just so that we could enable our personnel to live and work there.” (Hao)

The calibre of security personnel in hardship duty stations is also mentioned. Zene finds emergency situations less concerning, given that “the security protocols are there, you are drilled on them, and there's usually very competent security personnel”. In a non-emergency duty station, Zene would have concerns should something unexpected happen, as the personnel may be less experienced.

Amari who firmly maintains that “nobody wants to be in hardship” also finds oneself “missing hardship” when working in a more stable location. Amari explains this seemingly absurd statement: although one may have to put in a big effort to make even modest progress in hardship settings, this generates a deep sense of achievement; value comes from the struggle that leads to a positive outcome, even a modest one. Furthermore, taking breaks may be easier. In hardship locations, taking breaks is normalised through the R&R regime; there is clarity about time off. “In an emergency duty station where everybody's coming in and out, everybody's used to everybody coming in and out,” says Zene, finding that the frequent R&R cycles in hardship locations are easier to cope with than taking annual leave in “normal” duty stations. Zene describes how trying to take leave in a non-hardship location was like “a diplomatic incident” and one ended up having to work anyway, while taking R&R is not a negotiation point and one is “allowed” to rest.

While the UN system links the notion of hardship with specific geographical locations, the informants discuss hardship through a wider lens: hardship can be a state of feeling, not necessarily defined by cartographic coordinates, access to comforts, or even presence of physical danger. For Omid, work stress weighs heavier than concern for safety, “particularly if I felt I hadn't done what I should have done. I’ll find it more stressful than the shooting outside the door”. Even family duty stations such as New York, Copenhagen, and Geneva can mean hardship: lack of recognition, perceived or actual unfair treatment, sense of not having an opportunity to deliver to one’s full potential, leadership perceived as incompetent, overload of work – or because one is simply a “field guy”, as Emerson confessed to be. Soohee too described having taken a role in in New York “against my better judgment”, and “lasted in the job for not long”. To cope, Soohee spent only 22 days of the five months in New York, being on duty travel for the rest of the time.

However, viewing hardship somewhat differently from the UN norm does not mean an absence of concern for personal safety. I asked one of the more experiencd informants about this. “Yeah, I have thought about my safety, many times.” I hear about the UN offices being shot at and a sniper killing a person walking just in front of the informant, who was also unduly detained by the police while assisting wounded civilians. And yet, the informant remarks: “But I’m not there [working at the UN] to walk from Grand Central to the UN building in New York, right?”

The presence of hardship in much of aid work compells one to reflect on the field worker profile. What might it look like; what qualities matter? This is discussed next.

6.2.3 Right Fit – Because the Ship is Sailed by the Sailors!

> “Having a wrong person in the job is like having an enemy shoot at you to wound, not to kill.” (Amari)

It was mentioned earlier that competence includes psychosocial factors such as beliefs, attitudes, and values, i.e., the mindset. I asked the informants what makes a right kind of person for work in the field. They predominantly discussed the paring of individuals with the right mindset and competencies with the right jobs, including being solution- and action-oriented, having the ability to see the bigger picture, and being accountable. Right fit is more about skills, experience-based competence, tacit knowledge, and mindset, and less about formal academic qualifications[72].

> “It's the mindset. Just the perseverance and being logical, a person who can put things in order, make sense of things, and is able to implement, take action, and figure out what you have to do for the safest possible outcomes.” (Hao)

> “Mindset is most important … A lot of people that have been in the system a long time and know the processes, but they've got no ability to have strategic, collateral thought. They’ll step through these processes, and if something slightly unusual happens, they can cause all sorts of trouble and delays because they are not able to have lateral thought … or they don't really care.” (Zene)

[72] A recent study found that those in the humanitarian sector prefer experience and soft skills over academic qualifications (Clarke, Perreard, and Connors 2019).

> "You have to be able to think outside the box, you absolutely have to. You have to see the bigger picture. And the other thing you have to do is to make decisions; you can't not take decisions. You have to believe in your judgment. … I would say that [nationality] tend to be doers … you could say they are not primadonnas, they just get on with the job." (Soohee)

> "Just talking business is not going to work … the UN system fails to recruit … the right kind of people to do the job – and that is the big blow to the effectiveness of the UN system. Because a ship is sailed by the sailors. And if you are bringing in the sailors who don't know the sailing, they will sink the boat." (Finley)

Amari talks about mindset being the driver for getting things done in emergencies, one that is different from "office mindset". "Caring" and "bothering" is also brought up. Nuru, for example, finds that it is "very easy to condemn" the UN system, but extremely challenging to work with it in innovative ways, and that few people take up that challenge, finding it waste of time to even try. Zasha, in turn, talks about lack of awareness and dedication by staff who are "just lazy, don't care" and "not serious about the work", which results in failures to expend the donated funds and having to return them to donors. Willingness to make decisions and ability to mitigate risk, also mentioned by the informants, are discussed later in the findings.

While caring is fuel for the want, it can also be a burden; it is a double-edged sword, depending on what or who is the object of attention: not caring is a problem for effectiveness but caring can be an issue for he who cares. "My problem is that I care," state both Finley and Morgan, both initially not realising the paradoxical, if not even disturbing, ring it has. Caring can mean revealing and dealing with the less elegant realities and rocking the boat and more work, more resistance, and even (more) guilt. "Some people sleep very easy at night because they simply just don't care," says Amari, describing the balancing act of putting in the effort needed to tackle challenges in fragile settings while owing it to oneself to stay healthy and recognise when it is time to for the curtain call in that operational theatre.

> "We had people that didn't understand or didn't want to understand or just didn't want to rock the boat. This is the wrong way to be. I feel that is a big thing: the safe option is the good option for these guys … they just don't care. But you have to manage it somehow … or it's gonna consume you. It will absolutely eat you up and consume you. But then you ask yourself 'Why didn't you stick it out? Why didn't you hold out for the bigger picture?'" (Amari)

Soohee's example about a staff member already on paid sick leave coaching another staff member, a poorly performing one, on "how *not* to do her job and how to get out of the evaluations" reflects the notion of not caring about work. The burden of caring is also portrayed in practitioner literature. In her biography about humanitarian work, Alexander (2013) describes the lingering guilt and shame of abandoning the refugee camp in Darfur to take up another assignment, and guilt also features in the memoir by three UN staff members Cain, Postlewait, and Thomson (2004). Similar "problem" of caring also unfolds in Soussan's autographic account of his "Kafkaesque UN experience" (Soussan 2008:182, 302), whereby the author is told that should he "want to last in this business, you have to fly under the radar." Soussan writes: "My problem was, I cared. I wanted us to be proud of what we were doing."

Here, I also want to recall the earlier reference to Chambers' (2017:27-8) points about strategic ignorance and how we should not assume that people in development "want to know realities". "The problem with the development sector is a lot of lies. Most reports are written for the donors ears," says Steele (P Steele, personal communication, December 28, 2023), while Alexander (2013:314) refers to "one big merry-go-around of denial", finding that "too often we hide behind shiny reports that gloss over complexities of certain situations and the trouble we might have navigating them". Similar notion of veiled honesty emerges from a study on UNHCR: staff perceiving pressure to conform "say the truth without saying the truth" to protect their careers, using vague communications as "ideal tools" to nourish the illusion that decisions have been effectively implemented at the front-line, as this may lead to personal rewards, such as promotions and assignments to attractive duty stations (Gottwald 2010:20).

Informant Nuru finds that, "at the end of the day, you'll find there are very few people who are actually working … they are spending their time on parlaying, playing politics, and all that rubbish." To conclude, I share a highly memorable example of staff not caring, featuring actual rubbish:

> "I knew somebody in [office] who literally shredded papers that he didn't want to deal with. The boss would come and say: 'Hey, did you process this or this?' This person would just say 'I never saw it.' This person told me: 'My best friend is the shredder, I just put it in the shredder and I don't deal with it.'" (Skylar)

This scenario evoked in my mind several lines of inquiry outside the remit of this study, such how diffusion of responsibility or moral disengagement might impact results. However, the informant accounts do contain observations that suggest the presence of such influences in the workplace. This is interesting not only because it defies commonly held views of nobody intentionally wanting to do a bad job, but also because this study concerns a system whose very purpose is noble, to enhance the life of others. As such, a scenario such as this, a worker making light of his intentional wrongs, may be difficult to come to terms with.

6.2.4 Reflections on Motivation, Mindset and Competence

A "Cinderella business" staffed by altruistic do-gooders (Fee 2012:19) or a "cartel of professionals" exploiting high salaries (CDA 2010b:6)? An industry run by "mercenaries, missionaries, and misfits" (Stirrat 2008:407)? In the theatre of aid operations, the scene is characterised by typecasting, categories, labels, and presumed traits, and what is said is often interpreted according to preconceptions about the motivations and interests of the members of these categories (Jassey 2004). However, just like the donors' aid motivations vary, so do those of aid workers – and not all of them are in it for the poor. While it is often implicitly assumed that aid workers' motivations are or should be altruistic (De Jong 2014:23; Fechter 2012a; 2014:141), it is also acknowledged that genuine interest in alleviating poverty may not be the motivation for aid work (Martens 2005). Altruistic motives need to be reconciled with career goals and personal circumstances (Hindman and Fechter 2014:3; Fechter 2012a), with the latter including an exploratory worldview or the desire to escape one's own culture and family (Lewis 2014a:187). It has been said that pay is usually not the key motivation for many aid workers, although salary differences may influence perceptions of organisational justice and affect work performance over time (Furnham 2012:52). This study demonstrates that the staff motives for working in the UN system are divergent, ranging from *carpe diem* to *per diem* – from the desire for adventure and the challenge of improving effectiveness of the UN system to reaping the personal, financial benefits it generates. Interestingly, the frank admission by several informants about how much money matters appears less pronounced in the survey of 15,000 UN staff: salary ranked only as the 10th most important factor for joining a difficult UN duty station (UN 2008b).

"Getting the right people … that was the Rosetta Stone of the UN for me," writes McGreal (2015), quoting David Shearer, who has held several UN senior positions, including in the field. "Once I cracked that, it meant I could use the organisation how it was supposed to be used irrespective of the structure, because the structure will always protect the incompetent[73], in a sense." At first glance, this may seem somewhat trait. Is it not common sense that mindset and right fit matter? Common sense, perhaps, but one requiring a qualifier in the context of this study. It is acknowledged that competence is required to make a difference, and that to function productively, we need to know how to perform certain actions that are grounded in knowledge (Prilleltensky 2020). However, the emphasis here is that while the informants highlight the importance of the right kind of competence – one that does not necessarily require advanced (or any) university degrees, but does entail the appropriate mindset – the UN privileges formal qualifications, learned skills, and

[73] "Most people cannot afford to leave the UN system. They have nowhere else to go." (Soussan 20008:283)

diversity markers that may not necessarily be of the essence for the job functions. In WFP, for example, "the right person for the right role is defined … measuring the extent to which candidates … meet the 'skills match' exercise" (WFP 2021a:4).

While job knowledge and skills have been found to positively influence self-efficacy beliefs (Waldman and Spangler 1989), Prilleltensky (2020:4) points out that "to operate effectively, we need more than formal education, we need to know how to manage ourselves and how to manage other people." Similarly, Blumberg and Pringle's (1982) model of work performance includes not only the capacity and opportunity to perform but also the psychological and emotional characteristics, while Miner (2005:365) discusses competence as the kind of intelligence, creativity, and experience that results in a leader being "alert to threats, challenges, and opportunities; possesses diagnostic skills; and is capable of solution generation". This notion of context-sensitivity is in harmony with Ramalingam's earlier presented concept of aid at the "edge of chaos" and Honig's notion of "navigation by judgment". Similarly, it can be gleaned from the informants' accounts that the lack of blueprints for effective work suited across all contexts necessitates the worker's active engagement reflectively in learning and adapting – but that for that to happen, in addition to the adequate technical skills and knowledge, there has to be the mindset and the want, the desire and gumption to do, for the interest of the organisation. And at times, the want is tested and needs to sustain despite the UN, as the presence of a diverse, academically accomplished workforce, the multitude of policies, processes, systems, and controls do not guarantee action, or the right kind of action.

The UN reports that the Secretariat "continues to struggle with the challenge of getting people with the right skills to the right place at the right time" (UN 2018g:2). According to Chandran and von Einsiedel (2016), the scant investment in human resources management in the UN (less than 1% of staff costs is spent on learning and development) coupled with the lack of proper tools and assessment methods for recruitment often result in poor outcomes, with "a crisis of staff morale" being most acute for staff on Professional levels, as managers have little scope to reward high-performers or "to remove deadwood". It has been said that performance evaluations can be problematic especially in smaller UN duty stations where staff that are deeply connected and dependent on each other: "a bad rating creates animosity, but does not lead to the removal of the weakest links, so why bother" (Salomons 2021:183). Valerie Amos, a former UN Senior Official, finds that retaining a merit-based system that prioritises competence is a "huge challenge for the UN":

> "Appointments should be on merit but the truth is that if a particular country, one you need to keep on side for political or financial reasons, wants you to put one of its own in to a particular job, then sometimes you do it if it's not going to mess things up too much. Sometimes that person is very competent. If they're not you

> just end up working around them … there are other people who are very good and they carry the rest." (McGreal 2015)

The paradoxes of competence and challenges of leadership incompetence emerging from the interview data echo other reports on UN leadership. That task-oriented technical experts without leadership capabilities are promoted to UN senior roles has been found problematic (Willis Towers Watson 2019). Earlier, reference was made to the unproductive, authoritative culture in UNICEF (ITF 2019) – a command-and-control culture that leads to frustration and paralysis (Davies 2002:10). Repressive and authoritarian style is also reported in WFP, as leaders with poor managerial skills further their own self-interest, not WFP mission (Willis Towers Watson 2019). A survey of 14 peacekeeping missions found that the HQ was perceived to emphasise political experience over managerial skills in leadership selection (UN 2021b). Given that organisations benefit greatly from having autonomously motivated workers and as managers are instrumental in sustaining such a style (Jungert et al. 2013), the above findings are not encouraging from the organisational effectiveness standpoint. However, given that these aspects pertain to recruitment practices rather than, for example, complex grand challenges, it is not unreasonable to posit that enhancements in managerial and leadership competencies could be realised, should the organisation elect to prioritise them.

6.3 Way of Viewing the World - "Radical Acceptance"

In this section, I discuss findings predominantly related to NVIVO nodes "Situating work and self", "Perceiving UN" (with sub-categories system; staff; processes; One UN; trust & accountability), and "Relating to diversity". From these , I construct the second conceptual category, radical acceptance. Radical acceptance, a term coined within cognitive-behavioural sciences, refers to complete acknowledgement of what is (Jennings and Apsche 2014). I use the term with a degree of interpretative latitude to denote the way several informants appear to view their world of work. Radical acceptance relates to acknowledging the manifold contexts for work carried out in the field and the fragmented, bureaucratic nature of the UN system, which can introduce complexities into operations that are, in turn, embedded in the broader VUCA context. The abductive reasoning process that unfolded over several months and culminated into naming of this category is illuminated in Vignette 4.

The way the informants relate to their employer is, at first, perplexing. They exhibit opposing feelings but it is not a love-hate relationship. The curiosity lies not in this duality but in how they appear to navigate the negative aspects they cannot change. It is not even persistent frustration; it is not obvious from the interview data what it is. “What is the opposite of love?” I ask ChatGPT. AI suggests hate, indifference, or apathy. I go back to informant data; I see little evidence of either. I explore indifference, apathy, and emotional disengagement at work, learning about over-identification and over-disidentification (Vadera & Pratt, 2013), extreme emotional bonds or a lack thereof. Both would be problematic, with under-identification linked with apathy and not caring. The data suggests the informants care deeply. Their loyalty appears tied to the work mission and sense of meaning, not the institution itself, suggesting this is not about over-identification. Respect for the mandate indicates they are not indifferent. I recall works on exhaustion and stress: the worker overwhelmed to the point of wanting to harm others (Cain et al. 2004:193) and the one who nearly threw rocks at children she was to help (Alexander 2013:255). Powerlessness? Resignation? Something in that all-too-hard basket? Doesn’t fit the data either – or rather, the data does not fit the label. And while stress is acknowledged, it doesn’t seem to overwhelm. They acknowledge the system’s flaws without succumbing to helplessness. Apart from Skylar, I get no impression of powerlessness, confusion. Instead, they seem to do work they can, taking pride in that.

Are they proper, politically correct bureaucrats? Is it about grit? Some grit, perhaps – and something political and bureaucratic. But correctness? I get a sense of talking to practical, grounded people who do not appear cautious expressing views. There is emotion, for sure, but it comes with a sense of professionalism for a cause. I do not find cynicism in the data – even disappointments lack that passive-aggressive slant in this ambivalent situation.

I reflect on the literature on aid effectiveness; little is said about individuals. The VUCA literature resonates. I recall the idea of the edge of chaos (Ramalingam 2015) and radical uncertainty, i.e., the unknown unknowns. The spheres of control and influence come to mind, as do Rumi’s words about tending the garden you can reach. I research workplace ambivalence, which can leave the individual torn, as conflicting norms and expectations create a tension (Methot, Melwani, & Rothman 2017). I do not see “torn” in my data. In my interpretation, the limitations of the system are understood without that diminishing the sense of purpose. Is it about picking one’s fights? Saving energy? I see evidence of that. It appears to be a pragmatic thing to do, to see the UN system for what it is: political, diverse, risky. Regardless, one moves on. It is acknowledgment of what is even if you may not like it.

I return to data: what is or is not acknowledged, embraced, recognised, accepted, balanced? Finley brings up yoga and meditation as a coping strategy for “balancing myself.” This account has references to “(not) accept” and “(not) acceptable”, in various contexts. Meditation causes me to think about Zen and the concepts of “as-is” and “to-be” often invoked when discussing change; no matter where you want to go, now you are here, in the “what is”. That also reminded me of the UN ERP project I was engaged in: the vision of “to-be” state could not be realised without first being brutally honest about the "as-is", with all its imperfections. One had to get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Yoga makes me think about Zen tradition and the concept of acceptance: being open to experiences as they are and not engaging in futile, stressful efforts to avoid, ignore, or change them (Bartok and Roemer 2017). I think about the film *Matrix*, about the red and the blue pill: reality or illusion? I recall a marketing email from a CEO about acceptance of the existing conditions as the most radical form of activism – big thoughts from a man selling underwear. He is on to something: he neither likes nor denies there is plastic pollution in the seas but works it into his business plan. I go back to the interview data. "Accept" or other expressions denoting the same or the opposite play some important role. On one hand, there are lines drawn on standards of work or behaviour, on the other, there is an acknowledgement of "how things are". Some things make work harder, like the sensitive issues. But they cannot be wished away. "The reality is, UN is a political organisation," says Emerson. "It's complex", "it is what it is." *There*.

I go back to grey literature. Alexander (2013:373) arrives at "what is", eventually; Soussan talks about young UN idealists becoming old realists (2008:316); and the importance of seeing the limits of your control is also in Cain et al. (2004:293). In "How to survive as an aid worker without losing your soul" I find similar crumbs: "As with many other jobs, some days in the aid world are great, while others plain suck. Especially on those days that suck, you need to be able to acknowledge that it sucks. ... you need to be able to acknowledge these things without it killing your idealism, your desire to make the world better." (J 2015) Similar idea of just getting on with it, despite an initial "sense of sinking defeat" when the demands put you in a seemingly unreasonable situation, is reflected in Nyamayaro's account with UN Women (2022:184; 190).

I try Google Scholar for "radical acceptance": it is a concept within behavioural sciences, found to help people reinterpret negative situations to downregulate their negative impact (Segal et al. 2023). In behavioural therapies, emotional acceptance facilitates cognitive change (Jennings and Apsche 2014). It is radical in its completeness. It does not ask you to like reality, just to acknowledge it. What is is. Drawing a parallel to *Matrix*, radical acceptance would be equivalent to the protagonist Neo taking the red pill, opting for the truth about the "Wonderland", despite the discomfort it may mean, instead of living in ignorance, in the illusion created by the Matrix (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999, 0:29:04).

I go back to the informant accounts to mine for data that could fall under this emerging label to see if it holds. If it doesn't, I back off. Through some iterations and some months of back-and-forth, the result is the Table "Radical acceptance: individual- and system-level". By going back and forth between various data, by making inferences, then testing the hunches by examining the data, I have arrived at what I view the most plausible explanation about the most informants' stance to the negative elements in the UN system: they acknowledge what they cannot change, and work on the workable.

Vignette 4. Arriving at "radical acceptance" through abductive reasoning

As the below quote suggests, even the attempts to coordinate the work of the UN Country Team can, at times, require radical acceptance.

> "In the back of my mind, this is *******[74]. I know that, but I have to be a part of the ********. So I just be a part of the ********. Whatever decision is taken, if [my organisation] is OK with it … I just go with the flow. I just see it as, 'OK, this is a part of my work. Let me just do it'. That's how I take it." (Zasha)

Figure 22 illustrates the variety of conditions or phenomena, concerning either individual- or system-level aspects, that appear to be linked with radical acceptance. Some of these elements have already been touched upon earlier, including hardship, mobility. The informants acknowledge the UN system to be political and disjointed, a world-wide bureaucracy with goals that are noble but daunting, and subsequently, the UN system is messy, complex, and imperfect, and operating in a broader context of uncertainty. There is a need for rules and compliance, although they may also hamper effectiveness, just as is the case with workforce diversity which introduces complexity to the work context in many ways. Competency cannot be taken for granted either. However, radical acceptance of the complexities of working in the global, political UN system does not serve as an excuse for not attempting to drive change. The findings suggest that rather than falling into apathy, radical acceptance of the UN realities helps a worker to target his efforts more wisely. For some this has meant changing tactics in the office, for others changing jobs or duty stations – or even leaving the UN system. One area of consistent non-acceptance relates to incompetence, including that of supervisors and leadership in general: while it is acknowledged that the organisation has deadwood, there is low tolerance for that, on the part of the informants. While the empirical data suggests that an incompetent supervisor may hamper one's ability to be effective, another reason for low tolerance of incompetence specifically in the UN system context may relate to money: when you are paid well, you are expected to deliver. This link between salary and expectations are also discussed, e.g., by Carrier et al. (2014): while assertiveness, ambition, efficiency, and intelligence are needed to become a manager, he could also be seen to have these qualities to justify his hierarchical position and salary.

While some aspects of the informants' accounts may reflect a less elegant reality of the UN workings, turning a blind eye to it and seeing only the "glittering", is neither a solution nor an excuse for complacency. In Nuru's words, "to know how the UN works is essential for success". In other words, outside-the-box thinking can be meaningful only if you know what is inside.

[74] Use of * denotes expletives

Radical acceptance on individual and system level

Individual-level aspects	Hardship conditions
	Security risks
	Mobility
	Need for engagement in organised hypocrisy
	Ambiguity and uncertainty at work
	Failing as an option, linked to learning
	Moving on as an option, linked to mattering
	Circles of control and influence - and luck
	Necessity for complying with the rules
	Necessity for bending the rules to get work done
	Competence as necessity of for effective work
	Self-motivation and -evaluation
	Competence as potential burden
	Individual's power to help or hinder
System-level aspects	Nature of UN system: fragmented, messy, imperfect
	Presence of politics
	Form may trump function
	Complexity of mandates
	Necessity for rules and regulations
	Diversity as a given and as a politically-oriented notion
	Competent workforce or leadership not a given
	Public perception of UN system can be variable
	Divergent worker motivations
	Multiple layers of cultures affecting work

Figure 23. Radical acceptance at individual and system level

These elements of radical acceptance have been combined into thematic groups for closer examination. What follows is a closer look at how the informants view the UN system, how they relate to risk, and how workforce diversity features at work.

6.3.1 View of the UN: No Rose-Tinted Glasses

> “Before I joined, I used to think that UN is well respected in every host country, that they see UN as a saviour. That was not the case.” (Emerson)

Regardless of the informants’ divergent, predominantly pragmatic motives for joining the UN system, their accounts reflect a deep sense of caring about the UN system and the values it upholds; words such as being “fortunate”, “privileged”, and “proud” for working for the UN system are used. The informants trust the UN system on two accounts: to pay their salaries and to take care of staff health matters, e.g., medical evacuations. However, they also reflect criticism of it – criticism that concerns not only the UN practices that affect staff but also staff practices that affect the UN. For the informants, radical acceptance does not translate into shrugging of shoulders; it does not, necessarily, signify approval or liking that which is accepted – the claim here is not that the informants escape feeling frustrated, stressed, or angry, nor does acceptance imply a blanket approval for the UN policies and structures, or condoning inefficiency or wrong-doing. The UN system is not seen as beyond reform. Rather, it is a “slow-moving machine”, “mega structure” with an “astronomical number of staff” some of whom are “deadwood” that should be cut.

The UN reality differs from what the informants expected when they joined the world body. Several of them admitted knowing little about the UN system. “Having a romantic view of the UN”, “being clueless or naïve”, or “wearing rose-tinted glasses” has turned, over time, into the informants becoming “more realistic”, “disillusioned”, or being “ok with the concept of UN being imperfect”. The UN system is acknowledged to be political and disjointed bureaucracy with noble but daunting goals. Subsequently, the UN is messy, complex, and imperfect. Now with an insider’s perspective, the informants voice frustrations about the public’s uninformed expectations of the UN system. The informants also reflect on the extent the UN entities can make, within the red lines of their mandates, a sustainable impact and leave a positive legacy – or even some material benefit.

> “It all comes down to the mandate the Security Council gives the peacekeeping mission … The end of the Mali mission … allowed six months to withdraw ... Because of change in host government, all the efforts that were put in are now not being continued in a constructive manner.” (Morgan)

> “What is it that you can possibly do so that you leave something behind when the mission is closed? You don't leave anything behind; you take away everything. But there is a political aspect to that: whatever assets there are, belong to the UN and its 190+ member states, and therefore, you cannot leave it to that one member state. So that is also a difficult thing to understand and to deal with.” (Nuru)

The informants' care for the image and the interest of the UN system is a recurring theme. That the Blue Helmets' abusive behaviours affect the reputation is brought up, but the accounts also reveal a sense of unease about the civil servants' behaviours and the "UN ways" in general. These include the perceptions of the UN with "all glitz and glam, beautiful vehicles, facilities, and clothes" (Amari), and concern about public perceptions about the living conditions and lifestyle of the UN staff. Skylar conveys a strong sense of discomfort about the cost of accommodation for the UN's seniormost representative in the field duty station and about having to facilitate large payments to a local, wealthy landlord residing abroad. "This is a lot of money … and there are people living in tents around this building." Another informant's concerns about Syria reflect the sustained dilemma for the UN system to balance the humanitarian principles with the need to cooperate with the local government so as to assist the civilian population, also reported in media (Beals 2018): for staff in Damascus, living in the only security cleared hotel meant uneasy awareness of one's presence benefiting the rich, as the hotel owner had ties to the Assad regime[75].

Regarding the behaviours of co-workers, informants cite examples of insensitivity towards local population and staff, with expatriates "flaunting their privileges", "being like kings and taking advantage of locals", or being ill-adjusted to new contexts – not unlike the description of aid workers, with living standards on par with the local elite, having a "superiority complex reminiscent of colonialism" (Pawson 2008:113,116). Kai emphasises the obligation of international staff to "stretch the first hand" to locals and be inclusive. Amari, on a humanitarian mission, describes two situations where the hand is not stretched, also voicing frustrations about emergencies seen at times as opportunities for travel or staff development.

> "These local staff came to me – there had been a debate between them and a couple of nationals-turned-internationals [from another emergency country] assigned to Ukraine. And one of these expats had said 'I'm from [country]. When the bombs were coming into my city, nobody helped me. Why should we be doing things any differently here!'. And I just thought … how can you have that discussion as an international P-staff assigned to do a job. You've just alienated the local staff … What's your mission here anyway – revenge? When you have colleagues who are obviously bitter … you just have to wonder how much damage they can do to the team, the office, the whole UN reputation. Forget improving effectiveness … the question is how do you stop these types with grudges from intentionally causing problems."

[75] In 2014-2022, the UN spent $81.6 million at the Damascus Four Seasons Hotel (The Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2022).

> "It's winter below freezing point, and you bring in people straight out of hot climates. They're dying with the temperature, completely ill-prepared ... sit in the office and do nothing. And then you've got Ukrainians who walk to work in -20-30°C … They're smart, working hard. And then you've got these internationals complaining. Hang on, remember that you're in someone else's country! Even these small things have a negative effect … when we start to talk about how bad it is and how terrible the weather is. No, you're just not prepared! You've come in expecting a level of privilege … that causes animosity."

As regards UN inter-agency collaboration, apart from security coordination and certain practical elements (e.g., sharing supply contracts or training events), it is predominantly not seen to add value. "They're talking about the local shared service centres, but if you talk to people actually at the country level where they're supposed to be implementing this, people don't understand how it would work", says Zene, pointing out the disconnect between HQ and the field. Internal competition is also brought up. The UN system "is not a family", the various entities are in "outright competition"[76], and the One UN is "a theory difficult to implement in practice". "The UN does not exist as an organisation," says Makoto, "it is units, divisions, and country offices". There are also tensions between the "black and blue UN", which refers, perhaps counter-intuitively, to the colour of decals on UN vehicles: black for peacekeeping operations ("blue helmets") and blue for humanitarian agencies.

> "On the One UN LTAs [long-term agreements] … it is probably value for the small agencies because they don't have to do anything... For the BOS [Business Operations Strategy], at the end of every year, you do the cost benefit analysis, and I'm never convinced on the premise of those. For instance, in the last duty station, we did the One UN LTA for security services ... the amount of time and effort that we had to invest in that because we had to bring everybody else along was probably far less efficient for us but beneficial for everybody else." (Zene)

Finley vents about the UN Country Team activity, lamenting the "hours just waisted …with no tangible … outcomes of all those efforts". Xavi, in turn, questions the need for 35 procurement units across the UN system but points out the politics involved, and also mentions the need for one mobility policy, as "people need to be treated the same or very similarly, and they need to be treated fairly". For Zasha, nearly two decades of inter-agency work introduces expletives to the narrative.

76 A study of a UN agency found that hoarding information for "bilateral monopolistic exchanges" can serve as a tool of power in the hierarchical set-up (Gottwald 2010:20).

"They call it CBO [Common Back Office] now – it started as One UN. I call it ****** … this one has lady told me, 'no, don't say ******, say Bravo Sierra, that's a better word.' No, ****** ... this working together is a failure in the UN. We don't work with each other at all ... I'm just giving an example: the Country Director of [agency] and [agency] are very good friends – then that project works. But go to another country where these two agencies didn't see eye to eye …The success stories you will have heard is only when the heads are ok – otherwise you will never see a success story between the UN agencies. We don't work with each other because the heads will never want to give away their power."

Workers' personal choices in collaboration is also underscored by Zene, who tells about "super collaboration" when individuals[77] want to engage. However, some choose not to and can even "go through their whole careers and not have anything to do with the other agencies". Seeing mutual gains in makes such choices easier:

"We also did more hearts and minds stuff, bought books but gave them to UNICEF, for them to give out. I also allowed WFP to use our aircraft, if space was available … or I would lease a helicopter and charge them only the flying hours … they got a subsidised deal. I saw it in some situations as supporting the mandate: if UNICEF could not go out there to make a bore hole, we would not have access to water and IDPs [internally displaced persons] would not have had water. That would have created a major problem, so I let them use the helicopter free. That was the judgment that had to be taken." (Soohee)

Perhaps the concept of coopetition – entities with value creation intent simultaneously competing and cooperating (Gnyawali and Charleton 2018) – can characterise successful inter-agency collaboration efforts, although one can also ask to what extent such cooperation is voluntary or truly coopetitive in nature. Is it cooperation by edict or is there a need powerful enough to "unify opposing forces to confront a common threat or to gain a collective competitive advantage" (Assens, Bartoli, and Hermel 2017:201), such as the need of the poor, that outweighs the costs of such engagement? Is it symbolic, ritualistic – "aid hygge" that makes one feel better – or an effort to do the right thing? Perhaps all of the above.

[77] The centrality of the personal is also underscored by Weiss (2016:91): "When UN mechanisms work … it is because of good faith and compatible personalities rather than any coherent, centralized structure". That humanitarian outcomes tend to depend more on leaders' capacities and passion than on institutionalised approaches to leadership is also discussed by Ramalingam and Mitchell (2023).

6.3.2 Presence of Risk: on Kevlar and the Donkeys

> "When you join the UN, you have to expect that you might be placed in a situation requiring you to take a certain level of risk that comes with the job." (Xavi)

Aid work has been described as "edgework" (Roth 2015b:139), defined as voluntary risk-taking that involves "a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence" (Lyng 1990:857). The informants' views regarding accepting risk appear in alignment with that of the UN, according to which to deliver on their mandates, UN organisations "have to take risks; there is no risk-free path to achieving objectives", with the challenge being the "identifying, prioritising and addressing the right risks at an optimal level, in the most effective ways" (UN 2019b:1). Based on the informants' accounts, we identify risks for staff security, other operational risks, and professional or career risks.

That UN work is likely to mean presence of *risk for one's safety and security* is acknowledged by the informants. As Amari points out, "Staff should assume that the job does come with a risk of death. Anyone having to wear a helmet and Kevlar vest to work should assume that something might go wrong." The informants' opinions do, however, diverge about the degree to which one should "stay and deliver". While some accept the threshold the UN system has set for staff evacuation to safeguard their wellbeing and adequate living standards, others voice concerns about the UN being overly risk-averse. "I would take the chance that somebody might get killed in order to first meet our mandate," says and informant, while another too questions the threshold for the UN system to withdraw its staff from places of unrest, finding that the "UN is too easy on staff and expecting too little of them". The security protocol receives criticisms also by some of those having worked on a consultancy basis in fragile settings, as there was a sense of inequality, despite these individuals holding senior roles with leadership accountabilities of fixed-term staff. For example, at a border crossing in a hostile territory, Zene had to disembark from the UN armoured vehicle transporting the UN team to a work site and cross the border by foot – a stretch of nearly one kilometre, readily exposed to sniper fire – due to not having a UN passport, while Zene's UN colleagues travelled in air-conditioned safety. In addition, the different treatment of local and international staff is brought up, with the former often being housed in local community while the latter may be, in fragile areas, bunkered in fortified compounds. At the same time, well paid by local standards, local staff working in a UN office may be specific targets for thieves and criminals. Omid talks about a sense of "apartheid thinking" and how, during evacuations, "all the internationals scarper, and the locals are left on their own devices."

The informants' views diverge also about co-workers' security behaviours. Some find staff mostly behaving responsibly, others find them "clueless", "gormless", "stupid", "having bravado", and "without any situational awareness". "It's unfortunately the people who tend to be idiotic in their behaviour which puts the organisation at risk", says Nuru, while Amari describes how, in an area close to "hostilities and thousands of troops, the UN people were running around in high heels, without grab bags, without water reserves". Soohee tells how a colleague's blatant refusal to follow the security protocols caused him to be taken hostage for nearly one year. Below examples vivify our exchange about situational awareness.

> "I was outside the office and this colleague walks out and demands an armoured vehicle [AV] to go to a meeting. She gets an AV because international staff are supposed to use one. An hour later, she comes back, walking. 'Where's the car, why did you walk?' I asked. "It's a nice day so I decided to walk back,' she says. And I go: 'So why did you take an AV to get there?' 'Because I can,' she said. And I'm thinking … this is the mentality of these guys." (Amari)

> "I had a radio. I was there for 15 months and I never turned the radio on, or maybe I turned it on two or three times. When the rebels made it to our city, there was apparently artillery going off, but I didn't notice. It was Friday night, I was driving to a friend's place and there was nobody on the streets, the streets were dark. And I was like … this is really weird; where is everybody? I got to my friend's place and asked if something's going on. 'You haven't heard the artillery going off!' he asked. 'The rebels are in the western part of the city!'" (Skylar)

Hao injects an upbeat perspective to the somewhat sombre discussion about staff conduct. Hao not only acknowledges the presence of staff who lack logic and are "a mess" but also the personal benefit it brings to Hao: "Because of them I have a job!"

Other operational risks denote risks related to resource planning and allocation, reputation, governance, and financials, requiring assessment and mitigation plans on project and programme level. Operational staff are seen as important stakeholders in the implementation of risk appetite adopted by the UN entities (UN 2019b). The informants agree: risks cannot be avoided and must be mitigated, and this mindset appears to be mainstreamed in the informants ways of working. They link risk mitigation to competence in one's functional domain in general and to decision making in particular, and to one's stance to accountability, failure, and luck. However, the bureaucratic tools used in the UN system, such as risk assessment matrices or risk registers, are mostly found unhelpful "academic exercises". Staff may be trained in the mechanics of the tools but not in their meaningful application; the theory and practice clash. These risk mitigation practices liken what Verlin (2021:77) calls a "continuous collision between on-the-ground temporalities and planning instruments" in emergency response. Privileging form over function is also described in a recent study on aid programs, as a trap of designing perfect solutions while ignoring the context (Levine and Pain 2024). Nonetheless, accepting that the use of such planning instruments is a norm in the UN system, the informants apply them in gest, while adopting parallel risk mitigation strategies for practice.

> "If you are not technically sound in your field, how would you know to identify the potential for risk? You don't. Then you rely on some stupid metrics … which really don't make any sense but look very nice to present to the board. I used it to present to the management but never really used it [otherwise] because it didn't make any sense." (Nuru)

The UN system is found to be risk averse. Emerson laments the mindset that causes one to "just end up being yes-men" rather than standing responsible for one's actions. Similarly, scholars have found that, after a decade of UN management reform, by 2017, performance management related weaknesses have created a culture of excessive risk aversion impeding effectiveness (Jonah and Scott Hill 2020:221), when an environment in which UN staff feel comfortable experimenting and learning would have been needed (Chandran 2016). "In the private sector", says Amari, "a system like the UN would be bankrupt in no time"; "in the private sector", says Kai, "many of the UN leaders would be fired the day after they are hired – if hired at all".

Making judgment calls and decisions is seen as an inherent part of risk mitigation and work in general. Zene finds that "there is so much talking, too much talking" that does not add value – and that "in private sector, this would not happen. You make decisions." Having confidence in making decisions does not necessarily mean being confident the decisions will always be right. Regardless, they have to be made.

> "How do we build on the good decisions? What can we learn from the bad decisions? But more importantly, who's making no decisions … because that is the worst type of decision. Bad we can learn from and good we can build on – but zero? What do you do with that? The biggest problem is that there are too many no-decisions." (Amari)

Xavi points out that while rules cover almost every scenario "the areas which are left grey …are left that way a lot of the time on purpose to give you the flexibility to be responsive". However, when "making rules work for us" is not enough, they may need to be bent, even broken: while being compliant may be viewed as appropriate performance, that performance may not be effective, result in desired outcomes, or e.g., safety for staff. This links to accountability, standing by one's decisions.

> "There are rules, there are regulations … but there is also doing what's right, doing the right thing. You can say, 'this is what the regulation or the rule says, and I'm going to do it like that ... but frankly, if I do it like that, there's gonna be a big negative side' – and you are then going to do the right thing. Some people are just

> not prepared to do that because you are opening yourself up. For example, you should not be flying combatants on your helicopter. But when you go out on location and someone is shot at, dying, I put those into a helicopter and flew them back. Am I going to leave that person there to die?” (Soohee)

> “We have to follow the rules and processes but sometimes also not follow them but … just to get the job moving, take the chance … take responsibility. Once, I was on the tarmac in [location], with the helicopter arriving to take a generator to field, and [a colleague] said ‘we just checked the generator; there's a part that is not working properly’. I said ‘I know but I think it's still OK to go. The generator is still working fine’. And he said ‘oh … management won't be happy … you can't send it’. But I said, ‘the helicopter is on the way, they have no electricity – I’m sending it. I'll take the responsibility’. Sometimes it means that.” (Omid)

> “Perhaps because I'm from private sector, I see things a little bit differently. I'll look at something and we're supposed to be following this process, but in this particular instance, it is not making sense for whatever reason. Then I would make a case: do it XY and Z instead of AB and C and as long as it's justified properly, I think that is reasonable. Whereas sometime people would just do the ABC because that's the easy thing to do. I think it is to do with my risk appetite. I've always put it down to me being from private sector.” (Zene)

As the cited examples show, an individual can opt for “rightly choosing the wrong thing” (Baggini and Fosl 2007:243) to break the rules and save a life or choose compliance that may lead to a death. That following rules and policies set by HQ may be impractical due to information asymmetries and incentive misalignment is found e.g., in a study of fleet management within an international humanitarian organisation (Eftekhar and Van Wassenhove 2016). “Too often, the only way to speed things up is to break the rules,” opines also Banbury (2016), the former UN Assistant Secretary-General for Field Support. A recent UN survey of peacekeeping staff found that nearly 40 per cent of the respondents believed it was sometimes necessary to break the rules to carry out their work (UN 2021b). That doing the right thing by the UN may at times necessitate not adhering to the UN rules is also reflected in Nyamayaro’s (2022:234-235) account of HeForShe, a campaign she initiated while serving at UN Women. Nyamayaro writes how she reminded herself “not worry about UN protocol” and how she needed “to remember the bigger purpose”, when joining the community in one of the HeForShe taverns, not authorised by the UN, as association with alcohol businesses is forbidden. However, it has been found that while good judgment may be crucial in field settings, to exercise that judgment competently, the mission, the situation, and the stakes involved must be understood, and the possible consequences of taking action or refraining from it must be acknowledged (Haynes 2008).

Making decisions that are not explicitly in line with the rules and regulations requires not only competence but also willingness to stand accountable and confidence in one's ability to do so even when the outcomes might not be as initially envisaged. It should be noted here that a recent survey of nearly 15,000 UN Secretariat staff found that one third of staff did not feel comfortable challenging the status quo (Gartner 2018). A lack of performance and ethical accountability at the UN was also noted, and nearly half of UN staff disagreed or were doubtful in their groups' support for applying best practices, and orientation towards improvement (Gartner 2018). Another UN report found the culture of the UN Secretariat inefficient and compliance-oriented with a "check-the-box" mentality: it is "hierarchal, bureaucratic, procedural with a reliance on using rules and valuable time to justify mistakes rather than emphasizing better planning" (UN 2018d:8).

Conversely, risks may be related to worker insisting on adhering to the compliance regime, with potentially negative effects on one's career and how one is perceived. Finley talks about the risks of being vocal and "hitting between the eyes"; Kai discusses a whistleblowing case, "a big fight", which Kai eventually "won", but only after "a few years". As can be seen from the above, mitigating operational risks is intertwined with *potential career risks,* whether related to needing to bend or insist on upholding the rules for effective outcomes. Taking risks is also linked to potential for failure. Several informants cite instances where they see themselves as having failed at work, reflecting the informants' own assessment of the outcome viz one's own standards – which may be contrary to those of the office.

> "I failed in [country] in my [UN agency] job. Nobody briefed me of the job, and I took the private sector approach of getting things done. It did not work at all. After one year I said I wanted to leave; I was not doing any good. If I did it all over again, I would do it differently. For the first year, I would have just had coffee with people, to get to know them instead of pushing work." (Zene)

> "In their standards, they find me exceeding. In my standards, I feel I could have done better, so that means I failed, right? In [duty station], they have given me 'best performer' [appraisals] and wonderful farewells. I feel that what I did there in initial three years I was very successful because I was making a lot of changes … whatever improvement was possible within my capacity and authorities, I had already done. ... But I wanted to do more but I couldn't, because that was not within my authority. … So in my own thinking I have failed. But in their view, what I couldn't achieve, I should not have even thought of achieving." (Finley)

However, as Nuru puts it, "there is no success without failure … to not try at all is to fail". Furthermore, as Amari points out, if you are not competent in your domain, you cannot even detect failure – and to not learn from failure is failing.

> "When you have people that don't have the experience, they don't quite understand what failure looks like. And the UN is not a system that promotes failure – which is ridiculous because that is the route to success .... Whereas with my teams, I say to them that I am all about promoting the right to fail. That means that once we learn from it, we move forward, but we have to control what those failures look like and how we monitor them and make sure that there's no risk to the organisation, risk to life, financial risk, and so on so forth." (Amari)

While the informants emphasise the importance of competence to perform effectively, and notwithstanding the situations in which their competence has been appreciated by coworkers, several of them also point out the burdens of competence. Here, I label them as paradoxes of competence, referring to scenarios whereby competence is needed but not wanted, acquired but not utilised, and paid for but not valued. A competence paradox of a different nature concerns a scenario whereby competence is assumed but not realised and paid for but does not provide value for money, as is the case with the previously mentioned "donkeys" who may meet the UN recruitment criteria and make a lifelong career as international Professionals despite neither being professional nor competent.

Two of the informants, experts in specialised fields, highlight tensions arising from the significant knowledge gap between them and their director-supervisors. This gap is perceived to have engendered a sense of insecurity for the directors, exacerbated by their "big egos". Both informants have extensive international experience, in part also in the private sector, while neither of the directors have worked in business environments. Rather, one of them had only ever worked in one UN entity, and the other one was a political appointee to a department in a technical field she had no familiarity with. The informants describe finding themselves in a paradoxical situation of being competent while also suffering from it. On one hand, the UN system seeks to attract highly competent individuals, adopting time-consuming recruitment processes, then invests increasingly scarce funds in these recruits, rewarding them with a good salaries – a financial investment that only increases over time, especially when staff are mobile and choose to work in hardship duty stations. However, this well-paid competence can be perceived as a threat by others, especially the supervisors, unless they possess, as the informants suggest, professional confidence, managerial competence, and leadership skills. Failing that, expertise can turn into a burden and a threat to one's career. Finding themselves midst such frustrating tensions, both informants persevered, to a point, with awkward and embarrassing work situations, some of which could have had risk implications for the organisation's reputation or operations. This dynamic made one of the informants "far more stressed than having had Taliban point a gun at your back". Both informants eventually left the UN system.

Three other informants explicitly state that their decision or plan to leave the UN system is related to the conduct of the supervisor perceived as incompetent, insecure, or otherwise a poor leader. Thus, radical acceptance can mean accepting that the return for effort has reached its peak, yielding diminishing value – that it is time to exit.

> “I don't want to work under people who don't have leadership skills. I will not leave with frustration – frankly speaking, I will just leave. Enough is enough. I've been someone always who knows where to stop. I have no frustration at all … it's just that it is what it is. I mean, it's just … there is no point of staying.” (Kai)

On the other hand, you may just accept and cope with it, like Soohee did, knowing the tour in the hardship duty station with “a horrible” and “a narcissist” head of office would eventually come to an end, with Soohee’s move to and retirement from a non-hardship duty station was looming in the horizon after “a deal made” with the HQ. “I had a hard time with [head of office] … I really didn’t enjoy it. But such is life.”

It has been said that in bureaucratic organisations, professionals seek to control their work to their own standards while resisting the necessity of taking orders from bureaucratic superiors who assert the aims of them employing organisation (Freidson 1984). Gleaning from the empirical data, in the UN system context, this statement could be modified to read as follows: professionals seek to pursue work to achieve the employing organisation’s aims and measure their work achievements in light of their own, higher standards, while resisting the necessity of taking orders from the kinds of superiors who rely on their positional power and who, by doing so, are not necessarily serving the aims of the employing organisation. Weiss (2013a:308) finds that “the intellectual firepower of [UN] staff members is essential and will depend on better professionals” and that the “nuts- and-bolts issues of operational alliances and staffing directly affect the quality of policy outputs from across the UN system”.

As evident from the above, much is intertwined with leadership. “Every supervisor has to play a major role in understanding the issues of their people … making a very genuine effort in that direction,” says Emerson. It has been found that, for example in the humanitarian sector, leadership is one of the most important factors underpinning performance and effectiveness (Ramalingam and Mitchell 2023), and that in international organisations, managers of international staff should favour mentoring over directing – leading by example, not by diktat – while being inclusive in handling different opinions and experiences (Davies 2002:10). Describing their own management and leadership philosophies, several informants mention building teams where staff competencies complement each other rather than validate one’s own skills. “If I have somebody who's more talented than me … who has better ideas, I feel so lucky”, says Zasha “because at the end of the day … as a head of the unit, I'm going to get the credit … but of course I'll also give you credit”.

Managing upwards is also recognised as a necessary skill. Zene describes a director who was “clueless of supply chain but also of management in general” but who, having realised Zene would not “buckle down like others”, agreed for Zene to deal directly with the next level in the hierarchy. However, being savvy (or assertive) in influencing upwards does not always bear fruit. As Finley points out, making reference to witless supervisors behaving irrationally out of fear of being exposed as such: “there is nobody in the UN system who has not met the donkeys”.

Whether managing upwards or downwards, sensitivities are present, not the least when it comes to issues of workforce diversity. These are discussed next.

6.3.3 Diversity: Tabling Taboos

Plurality has its virtues and vices (Inis 1996). References to national culture, nationality, and gender emerge prominently across the majority of informants’ narratives, some articulated directly and others implied. These diversity topics relate to recruitment, work planning, taking initiative, making decisions, taking risks, solving problems, and communicating. That the UN system is a workplace with a culturally diverse workforce is a given to the informants; it is not explicitly celebrated nor is it specifically lamented – what is is, in line with the notion of radical acceptance. While the UN system views diversity as a solution to the effectiveness conundrum, from the empirical dataset it emerges as a cause: the UN diversity rhetoric focuses on the upsides of diversity and management of diversity statistics, but the informants discuss the downsides of managing a diverse workforce. Thus, the idea about the universality of rational administration, a view to international civil servants’ workplace being a logical, rational, and rule-bound performance in which even the “conduct of a meeting follows an administrative logic that knows no cultural differences” (McLaren 1997:61) is not supported. Rather, it is acknowledged that a diverse workforce would not view issues through a shared lens; there is no one, shared UN culture. “Whatever the culture is, obviously it reflects itself onto the culture in the office,” says Zene. “As you get down there, people bring their own cultural values,” says Omid.

> “In every group there is groupism. The whites are on one side, the blacks are on one side, the yellow skins on one side, the brown skins on the other side. That is the reality of life, you cannot escape that reality. Coupled with that reality, there's also the issue of who pays how much, as in UN contribution. So a country which contributes more may say that the UN must be more diverse. But are you diverse in your own environment? Look what's happening in your own country! Why are you trying to put in such ways of working in this organisation when you are not able to manage it in your own country? … diversity and inclusion is just a name. It's actually ********, you know, complete ********. It’s eyewash.” (Nuru)

Relating to *gender, seniority, and hierarchy* are aspects brought up by informants of both genders. One reports how in an office in Southeast Asia, a female supervisor was seen as a "zoo animal they have seen on TV" and "something to wait out to leave". Accounting for a situation in a country setting characterised by patriarchy, whereby another informant had pointed out the curious absence of men in the UN advocacy materials concerning families and childcare, it was recounted how UN colleagues "looked at me like I was a Martian". "Hard working female they all appreciate," says yet another informant, "but what about a leading female? They are challenged [by the idea of] a leading female." An informant, having been subject to gender and nationality-based discrimination, describes the feeling of being "handicapped" and having to "walk on eggshells … when you hear a senior boss say that there are too many people who look like me and come from where I come from" – a dynamic that is not found to be conducive to productivity. One informant attributes the strong sense of compliance to the disempowering hierarchies established within the UN system, including on the team level, but also underscores the differences found between duty stations and host country cultures.

The informants discuss how *religion*, directly or indirectly, affects work, but also about the sensitivities around talking about it. Religion is "under the surface all the time", says Soohee who tries to "tread carefully not to just bulldoze my way into something". This appears to align with the notion of a "faith-literate approach" whereby, for the sake of effectiveness, aspects related to religion need to be integrated into development work (Ahmad and Watt 2024) and into humanitarian[78] action that traditionally tends to separate people's physical needs (e.g., for food and shelter) from their spiritual needs, causing harm (Welsh 2020). Most of the duty stations the informants have worked in have Muslim populations and the daily prayer times and Ramadan, for example, are brought up, as factors requiring adjustments. "Managers need to have ability to understand the cultural sensitivity", says Finley, who points out that meetings could be scheduled around the prayer times, when possible. For Omid, Ramadan can be "a big chunk when things slow down and government offices don't work". Under pressure to deliver on staff safety and security related project, Soohee had no choice but to "run roughshod over the culture", firing those who would show up to work but only to sleep. "I had riots on my hands, all up in arms", says Soohee, "but we actually managed to make it work". While praising some "very productive Ramadans with staff who were fasting … because they wanted to be productive", Amari too has felt the downsides:

78 As per the Sphere Handbook, a widely used set of standards for humanitarian action, "a people-centred approach requires humanitarian workers to be aware of the faith identity of affected populations" (SPHERE 2018).

> "I have spent more of my life in the Islamic world than in the Christian world. So I can also understand when some guys may be playing the religious card to have an easier ride. But you can never say anything, you're never allowed to do anything. Ramadan is an example, the fasting. You have to calculate that work will slow down by half … by certain individuals. They say 'oh, I'm weak, I can't do it'… but fasting is not an illness. But you have to be so careful, and you just can't say too much. It does affect the output."

Fatalistic mindset – notions such as "this is my lot in life", "providence", "inshallah", and "it's fate" – associated with certain religions and/or cultures appears to be linked to some work activities, as per the informants' accounts. Omid opines that in places of suffering leaving it "to God to sort out" is a factor contributing to why there is suffering to begin with as efforts to make systemic change are stifled by fatalism.

> "Trying to do supply planning in some offices is nearly impossible, or trying to get people to say 'ok, instead of waiting until the last minute, we could actually start it now'. I think it's just not in the culture; people don't plan that far ahead. There is a lot of 'inshallah' in certain cultures – even if they wouldn't actually say 'inshallah'. There is very short-term thinking in a lot of cultures." (Zene)

Cultural diversity, including the related differences on moral perceptions and judgments, are found to entail an *ethical challenge* (Mele and Sanchez-Runde 2013). It has been said that the UN staff regulations have set certain definitions in great detail to ensure that "no staff member can be confused as to the intended meaning or accused of filtering the ethical requirements through his or her own cultural or religious filter" (Haynes 2008:190). However, the informants' accounts suggest that reality is more complex. Hao, Morgan, and Amari discuss corruption in connection with procurement and suppliers, Soohee underscores the negative impact of tribal tensions amongst staff hindering unbiased recruitment, while Omid's example below relates to risks in localising work, i.e., replacing expatriates with local hires.

> "Corruption is a huge issue … you can't pretend it's not there. So if you have everything managed by local staff and … locals can be pressurised. Because they're in that environment, and their families, particularly if you have countries where there's conflict, it is heavily militarised or a heavily policed state ... If you are a senior level person who has access to funds … you can be easily pressurised.

> It is not that you don't trust local people, but they could be put under much more pressure[79] than an international who is flying out next year."

In international bureaucracies, workforce commitment and ethics generally correlate with leadership (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2013:158). In the UN context, this begs the question about the kinds of cultures and styles created when leadership may be not only authoritative and less competent but also rotating from office to office. A study of WFP finds that the office culture changes every four years with changes in the international professional leadership positions (Wills Towers Watson 2019:21). In the same vein, a report about the peace operations context found that the organisational and mission culture was largely influenced by the senior leadership team and the head of the mission, and that the rotation of the leaders resulted in at times challenging "wait-and-see periods" heavily affecting the organisational culture (UN 2021b).

Linked to the above is *recruitment* (or promotion), a recurring theme in the diversity and ethics discussion and one not necessarily facilitating effectiveness, although a UN report finds the UN's image and brand closely linked to its' ability to attract the best global talent (UN 2017). The below statements exemplify "tensions between good intentions" (see Chapter 3): the complexity of trying to meet the goals for gender parity, enhanced recruitment lead times, and right fit for the job.

> "We cannot continue with certain recruitment processes because the candidate that was selected, albeit from the right gender, is from the wrong geographical area or if from the right geographical area, not of the right gender. And it's not that we don't try." (Morgan)

> "They hired this boss who had no experience whatsoever, but who was a female … they wanted a female candidate. So how are you doing justice? You're … actually putting the organisation at risk …n. Gender etcetera is fine … but one also needs to look at it in a more pragmatic manner, not for the sake of just ticking the box ... But what about the job? Who's going to do the job?" (Nuru)

> "You cannot always trust that the recruitment process delivers right person for the right job. You cannot necessarily get the person you need because some boxes need to be ticked … equality or whatever. But if diversity is the first and foremost focus, not the job, then it's a problem ... Sometimes the easy option is taken under

[79] Local staff subject to local pressures emerges in a study about the conflicts of interest of staff in two UN humanitarian agencies (Mele, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone 2016).

> pressure … with regards to diversification or equality; that overtakes the job. It's a struggle." (Amari)

> "The atmosphere now in the organisation … there is a lot of dissatisfaction, people are frustrated: 'I've been stuck here.' The main factor coming in their way is these criteria of geographical or gender – all this is affecting a lot, really affecting the moral of the people. … Nowadays, many [men] don't even apply. No use; a woman candidate will get it." (Emerson)

The informants' accounts reflect support for increasing female talent to the UN workforce, however, not at the cost of introducing delays to the recruitment process or at the cost of right fit for the job, ultimately resulting in ineffectiveness and organisational risk. In citing an example of gender trumping fit-for-job in candidate selection, Nuru finds that when people are "scared" and "not wanting to deal with the fallout … you can pull anything off". Amari too finds that driving change within the UN system is inhibited by sensitivities and "Woke mentality" – a topic also satirised in an aid blog which finds that "one of the rules of being a woke [expatriate aid worker] is to let everyone around you know how woke you are", with such workers having "a moral and ethical obligation to call out examples of non-woke-ness whenever those are encountered" (J 2021). Zene describes affirmative action in one of the larger UN entities whereby recruitment of international professionals for senior level only considered female candidates, with Zene's "clueless" supervisor being a product of this process. "That they would have assigned a person like that to one of the hardest duty stations was remarkable," Zene says, also describing the abrupt exit of the supervisor who never returned to the office from her break. Similar affirmative action has been taken also in the UN Resident Coordinator recruitment: the call for nominations states that affirmative action measures have been adopted with preference given to women and those from the global south, noting that "Any agency that submits two or more nominees must ensure that at least one is a woman and at least one is from the South" (UN 2017:31). "Diversity is a war you are not going to win," says Nuru, meaning that gender parity and geographical distribution are not only practical but also political issues inherent in UN work. One could interpret this as Nuru recognising the need to engage in organised hypocrisy of advocating for gender parity while observing its effects that are not always positive.

The UN recruitment processes are found to have weaknesses in consistently delivering right people for right jobs. The UN requirement of university level credentials for all Professional-level staff is not supported either. "It's worth the piece of paper. That's all it is," says Nuru. I am told that while "a lot of the best Security professionals" did not have to have a Master's degree before, after the UN requirement changed, the pool of potential candidates was significantly limited. While several informants, especially those who have seen change over time, point out that the UN recruitment processes have improved – e.g., from the time when "girls were hired from bars" – their comments reveal that the process should be improved upon, preferably by relying on third party professional screening company for shortlisting. Finley puts "the reliability index of the selection system … at not more than 50 points". "If you see the people that we had to clear [in interviews], you would be crying," cites Soohee a colleague. The informants broadly agree that there are non-performing, lazy individuals in the system, and that it is very difficult to get rid of people who perform poorly. "The problem is not enough people get fired," says Xavi, continuing that there is "so much deadwood in the organisation that if we were brave and we cut the deadwood, we would then have sufficient resources to be able to do things that we need to do right". Zasha would "love it if they could get rid of the deadwood, but they never do," and describes what appears to be a way to turn deadwood into driftwood: "To get rid of that deadwood working for us, we praise it so that other people will take them. So the deadwood goes to the other place and we are happy 'oh, we got rid of that person!'". Waxing equally poetic about timber, Finley takes us to the jungle: "The whole UN system has reached to the level of very rotten wood in the jungle, where a lot of things need to be cut down." Soohee, in turn, talks about the UN evaluation system ("different can of worms") being slanted towards the staff member:

> "It takes years to get rid of somebody. And you don't have the time in a working day to deal with this because these people put in rebuttals and rebuttals[80], and then you go to arbitration and it comes back and they say 'do another performance evaluation and performance plan' … it takes an inordinate amount of time. People are just not prepared to mark someone as underperforming … they are going to create a lot of work for themselves. And these people know it and they get away with … They have to be particularly bad or obstructive before anyone steps in."

Networks are seen necessary for effective work but also perceived to interfere in recruitment: it is not what you know but who you know, says Makoto. Kai, who dislikes nepotism and the "gangs" and "clicks" based on nationality, acknowledges how one's own advancement is dur to networks. Tensions exist between form and function: being transparent, inclusive, and compliant on one hand, and forming teams that work effectively on the other. Some of the informants admit to bending rules to secure talent. Soohee talks about "manipulating" the system to make sure it delivers

80 Chandran and von Einsiedel (2016) write how UN's "dysfunctional internal justice system reinforces a widespread aversion among managers to provide honest feedback to poorly performing staff as this results all too often in years of litigation". Taalas (2024) refers to a battle of attrition ("väsytystaistelu") to phase out underperformers at the World Meteorological Organization, one of UN specialised agencies.

right people, even when the right person may be "not a nice one …quite an abrasive in some ways, but somebody who actually got the job done." Although machinating hiring outcomes can be "very tricky", for Soohee, it is for effectiveness:

> "You have to build a team. Unfortunately, you end up with a kitchen cabinet … you surround yourself with people you trust the most. And between you all you get the work done – which is not always good because you alienate the others."

Amari makes a thought-provoking comment about the UN's focus only being on "the kind of diversity they can see", i.e., skin colour, gender, age, or even a "missing leg". The type of diversity that is not instantly visible is, according to Amari, related to different ways of pursuing goals and divergence of talents and competences. This statement prompted me to consult literature about diversity and specifically about how it is defined. "Perspectival diversity" (Muldoon 2018:808) goes beyond the typical diversity markers of national culture, race, language: it is also linked to, e.g., different professions, ages, and experiences; different staff classifications and functional groupings within the hierarchy; different expectations as specialists or generalists; and different outlooks between career employees and those with short term contracts (McLaren 1997). Ramalingam (2015:87) discusses diversity of micro-cultures influenced by work functions, a former World Bank employee writes about each profession having its own "language" that cannot be ignored (Rele 2024:13), and a former UN chief notes how technical like-mindedness of specialists in specific functions outweighs their cultural differences (Taalas 2024). Given the relative silence on perspectival diversity in the UN diversity discourse and the acknowledgment that the extant organisational culture does not enable staff to contribute to their maximum potential (UN 2015d), expanding the view to diversity, beyond gender and nationality, could be beneficial for the UN system effectiveness. Recalling the concepts of organised hypocrisy and entanglement of tensions, I suggest that the challenging equation of recruiting right-fit candidates and meeting diversity targets, while also pursuing management reforms for increased efficiencies, could qualify as both.

6.3.4 On Situating Work and on the Idea of Acceptance

Abduction is said to be "a state of preparedness for being taken unprepared" (Reichertz 2007:221). Several "what's going on here" questions arose as I studied the empirical data under "Situating work" category, comprising attributes or markers that elucidate how the informants talk about their work. The common, pronounced element throughout the interviews was the manner in which one's work was consistently and convincingly seen in ("situated") a broader context, beyond self, beyond one's job role. I use "convincingly" to signify the seemingly organic way the informants linked one's work to the other contextual layers during the discussions; to my ear, such statements did not appear cliché-like or dogmatic. Interestingly, situating work in concrete terms – e.g., in hardship duty station; in country office; in compound; as part of work plan; related to KPIs – was less pronounced, while situating one's effort into a more abstract context was more accentuated. The work is about "delivering on the UN mandate", it is "in the political situation in the country", with work decisions in ambiguous situations being guided by "leaving a positive legacy", doing "the right thing by the beneficiaries" and the "people we serve" – even for those whose job it is to deliver blankets and buckets or "merely" to procure or account for them. Even the single negative case whereby the informant did not find the work meaningful was linked to the bigger picture, although in this case it was about the awareness of that link missing ("I really didn't understand what my work was meant to accomplish"). There are several points of interest.

First, those who do not profess to being altruists but declare interest for the monetary benefits talk about the mission, mandate, and the people they serve, with seeming conviction. This brought to mind Keohane's (1988:380) view on international cooperation which "does not necessarily depend on altruism, idealism, personal honor, common purposes, internalized norms, or a shared belief in a set of values embedded in a culture" but can be understood without reference to them. This begs the question of what and if assigning labels such as "humanitarian", "charitable", or "altruistic" matters – and whom it might matter to – and whether stereotyping might even deter professionals from other sectors from considering careers in the aid sector. *Second,* the persistent references to the abstract context or the higher goals is interesting because these informants represent Support Services, i.e., work that is, to a large degree, concrete and inward-looking. *Third,* the informants appear to oscillate between the concrete and the abstract with ease; they differentiate and integrate. For example, recalling a decision to break the rules whereby combatants may not be transported in UN helicopters, Soohee describes how the wounded man "was no longer a combatant but a human being" (abstract) – and "then we of course had to wash to blood off the helicopter" (concrete). Morgan makes an equally smooth transition from the abstract to concrete, discussing at some length the member state resolutions about UN needing to leave a positive legacy, as a lead into the intricacies of the solid waste site that ensures no contaminated wastewater seeps into the surrounding community. In one and the same breath, Omid talks about the need for UN internal cohesion, given that the answer to hunger, poverty, and education is, ultimately, political; then discusses vehicle parking that can create tensions between the black UN and blue UN, and the tendency for deliberate distance taking. I am not seeking to explain why this oscillation is taking place. I merely note it is happening.

The informants' unabashed narratives reflect an air of pragmatism. The lens of radical acceptance embodies the appraisal of effort versus benefit in a bureaucracy where opportunities to fight windmills can be many. This is not unlike the idea in Lawler's expectancy model, whereby the perceived likelihood of an effort leading to goal accomplishment and subsequent rewards drives behaviour (Lawler and Suttle 1973). The interview data suggests that while the informants appear discerning in investing their entrepreneurial efforts, they are not deflated and paralysed by the challenges. Thus, radical acceptance is distinct from giving up.

Like is the case with the want, radical acceptance too is viewed as a spectrum; not all informants display in their tone or content an equal sense of ease with radical acceptance. At the lower end, in its simplest form, radical acceptance could be seen as the equivalent of opening the eyes and not withdrawing or turning the gaze elsewhere to avoid seeing the reality. In its more advanced form, radical acceptance is about moving closer, peering in, changing the perspective and examining the as-is so as to understand it deeper for more informed decision making.

6.4 Way of Experiencing Self – "Sense of Agency"

> "Let's leave that overall disappointment at one side, let's leave it at the other side – I have felt many times that we made a difference." (Zasha)

In this section, I discuss how the informants appear to experience self and feel about themselves in the sprawling UN system. In this study, the informants tend to display qualities of "internals", people who bring the most motivational energy to their work and believe that events in their lives are largely subject to their own influence; in contrast to "externals" who see themselves as largely at the mercy of fate, luck, and more powerful individuals (Miner 2005:107). These findings are predominantly related to the NVIVO nodes labelled "Sizing one's ability", "Sense of control", and "Boundary management". From these categories I have constructed the third conceptual category, namely *sense of agency*, referring to a "feeling of being in the driving seat when it comes to our actions", that is, when taking action voluntarily, there is a sense of actions not just happening to us (Moore 2016).

6.4.1 The Feeling of Making Something Happen

The sense of agency is "the feeling of making something happen" (Haggard 2017:197), the registration that we are the initiators of our own actions (Synofzik, Vosgerau, and Newen 2008). As the term has also been used with a different meaning to designate a felt capacity to act, i.e., self-efficacy, without reference to motor acts (Haggard 2017), I briefly discuss it. Self-efficacy concerns people's beliefs in their capabilities[81] to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and action to control

[81] See Moore (2016) for and overview of theories on sense of agency and Maddux (1991) for an overview of theories on personal competence, motivation, and effectiveness.

events in their lives, as well as beliefs in their capability to perform a specific behavior or to meet a standard (Abele and Spurk 2009; Wood and Bandura 1989). Efficacy expectations can be influenced by one's prior accomplishments, by observations of others' performance, by verbal persuasion, by physiological states (Bandura 1977), and by imagined experiences (Williams 1995). Self-efficacy is viewed as a key cognitive component associated with entrepreneurship (Chen, Greene, and Crick 1998), and efficacy beliefs have been found central in psychological adjustment, psychological problems, and physical health (Maddux and Kleinman 2015:444). That the belief in one's ability to achieve goals facilitates resilience, i.e., one's ability to cope with stress and vulnerabilities in the face of adversity (Prilleltensky 2020), is of essence particularly for workers in hardship settings, as judgments of self-efficacy determine how much effort one expends and how long to persist in aversive situations. In this study I choose to label this third conceptual category as sense of agency to underscore the dimensions of behavior and action that transcend mere self-belief in one's ability to act. Also, having this "experience of controlling one's own actions, and, through them, events in the outside world" has been found to be important for establishing responsibility (Haggard and Chambon 2012:390), which a recurring theme in the informants' narratives.

The sense of agency is "not an infallible reproduction of objective reality" (Moore 2016:2) and self-efficacy beliefs are not without risks. As discussed earlier, the empirical material suggests that understanding one's level of performance depends not only on the willingness to know but also on the professional competence in that line of work, and that in the system where recruitment is not necessarily merit-based, issues of incompetence emerge. It has also been found that an increase in self-efficacy increases perceptions of opportunity and decreases perceptions of threat, thus impacting risk taking (Krueger and Dickson 1994), and that in the entrepreneurship context, self-efficacy could be even related to more destructive behaviour (Saadaoui 2023). Furthermore, in settings like the UN system with weak performance management systems, relying on one's on assessment – standing very close to the trees in the forest – may involve over-confidence and narrow views. Kahneman (2022), for example, refers to over-confidence in self as the lack of imagination about alternative solutions. In using the informants' thoughts as prompts to develop hypothetical situations in which strong self-efficacy beliefs or an inflated sense of agency could, in fact, contribute to ineffectiveness, one could suggest that acting on one's belief in the value of "rocking the boat" might only result in new problems, e.g., in complaints of bullying or non-compliance that must be dealt with, absorbing resources. Furthermore, as the empirical data shows, those with a strong sense of agency may be perceived by some peers as threats, not assets. Given the high degree of mobility, including out of the UN system, I also reflected the relationship between the sense of agency (or self-efficacy) and loyalty. Very little in the empirical material suggests that the informants would have acquired what Simon (1997:278) calls an "organization personality", or an "attachment or loyalty to the organization that automatically guarantees that his decisions will be consistent with the organization objectives". While the informant data shows that workers' efforts align with the goals of the organisation, this does not appear to translate into loyalty towards one's office, organisation, or even the UN system. One could therefore conclude that while a sense of agency can contribute to UN effectiveness, the same drive and feeling can also contribute to weakened loyalty: in situations where capable and driven individuals don't have opportunities to perform or if such efforts are not recognised, the worker may be driven, instead, to abandon the organisation.

Bandura (1982:144) posits that the layers of bureaucratic structures and mazy organisational mechanisms obscure responsibility and thwart effective action, and that in such bureaucracies, even individuals who are not easily deterred find their efforts blunted and that most of them "grudgingly relinquish control" rather than develop ways for "shaping their future". However, as elucidated next, the empirical material suggests the informants might not fully agree. The findings, discussed next, suggest that "blunted" does not necessarily translate into giving up and that one can feel a sense of agency, even as regards being effective.

6.4.2 Feeling "Oh Yeah!" – Effectiveness in Small Bits

"If one pursues small things, not large … there is a good ending always." (Nuru)

The grand nature of challenges of aid work and the challenges in proving aid effectiveness, coupled with the anti-aid narrative, can give rise to doubts about the meaningfulness of one's own contribution; it could potentially be seen as pointless – as "a drop in the bucket, and the bucket probably leaks" (Banerjee and Duflo 2012:3). However, the interview data does not appear to support this notion: in the messy, complex, and imperfect world-wide bureaucracy with daunting goals, the informants feel a sense of agency. This may seem to contradict the notion of an insidiously complex and messy sector crowded by costly bureaucracies lamenting intractable problems. However, the empirical material suggests that making a difference is not a pipedream and that having personal agency is possible, even in the UN system. It is a matter of definition and perspective.

However, as evident also from the discussions around the want and radical acceptance, the examples also show how having a sense of power can be a double-edged sword: one can add value e.g., through expertise, managerial savvy, and networks, or detract value, e.g., through vindictive attitudes or complacency. Team dynamic can be shattered by culturally ignorant or a bitter team member; an incompetent supervisor may drive a subject-matter expert to leave; a staff member ignorant of security protocols may risk a mission for others; the UN reputation may be damaged by action of a single actor. The worker's personal context matters and he can influence, positively or negatively, not only his own work but also other coworkers in profound ways. This is a finding similar to that of a recent UN study whereby the dominant, even polarizing, personalities of the senior leadership team were perceived to have a fundamental impact on organisational culture (UN 2021b). That even in the sprawling UN system an individual worker can wield power is evident also, in Autesserre's (2010:197-8) account of the failure of the UN Mission in the DRC to draft or implement strategies aimed at local level conflict resolution, which was attributed, in part, to "widespread personal grudges against important members of the unit" who were criticised of being "authoritarian, arrogant, or disrespectful of their colleagues' ideas". This appears in stark contrast with an earlier study about UN staff, whereby it was found that the individual "baggage does not appear to create problems … but instead is put aside that the work … can be undertaken as expeditiously as possible within the framework of an international culture" (McLaren 1997:65). While the above emphasises that even a "small cog in the large machinery" (Skylar) can matter profoundly, it also shows that the universe of rules, policies, compliance mechanisms, and organisational hierarchies are far from adequate enablers for desired action and outcomes – that they may even hinder effectiveness, is shown in the various source of data for this study, including data from the UN system itself. As per the informant who has advanced to the UN Senior Official[82] level, the UN system that "should work on its own" does not, and therefore, "moving things along" and "getting things working right" requires e.g., networks.

Aid workers have been found to experience ambivalence concerning the impact of the aid sector, desiring instead to engage in projects impacting individuals and communities Roth (2015a:150). The findings of this study align with this notion; the informants' care may be for the mandate, but the focus is on their own tasks. In the constant comparison process, I observed linkages and similarities between "Situating work" and "Defining effectiveness" categories. At first, I was puzzled by the variety of meanings (or definitions) for "effective work" – and that in most cases, answering the question "What does being effective in the field mean to you?" was met with a reflective silence, although the informants were aware, upfront, of the central theme of the discussion being effectiveness. Although work plans and KPIs – and performance evaluations reviewing the achievement of those KPIs – are part of their UN work, the informants did not zero in on targets, work plans, budgets, KPIs, or deadlines. Effectiveness could be as abstract as "delivering on the mandate", "leaving a legacy", "saving lives", "finding solutions", or "getting one's job done". Only one informant stated a measurable performance indicator, "keeping staff alive", with zero deaths meaning effectiveness. Considering that ten informants had a background in

[82] Group comprising the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Under-Secretaries-General, Assistant Secretaries-General, and Officers of equivalent rank (UN 2024b).

the private sector, I found the silence on metrics perplexing. However, listening to the empirical data with care revealed that the lack of explicit references to KPIs did not mean they did not feature in the informants' work. For example, Amari's references to reduced absenteeism, shorter lead times, and less quality defects indicates not only presence of but focus on metrics and monitoring, as does Finley's account on verifying compliance of high-cost, low quality relief items to specifications. Soohee refers to asset accounting and timely availability, while both Kai and Zasha refer to budget commitments and deadlines of the financial year. I interpret these indirect references to KPIs to mean that targets are used as means to an end, not as the ends themselves: Amari and Zene discuss "happier teams", Finley's refers to the office failing the beneficiaries, Zasha discusses failure to expend donor funds, while Kai brings up the need to cooperate. Instead of referring to effectiveness, the informants tended to levitate towards the notions of having an impact, making a difference, mattering, solving problems, and being of service. Effectiveness appears to be less about accountancy and more about accountability, and less about grand visibility and more about appreciating progress even on a smaller scale; it has more nuances. Even disillusioned Skylar who is "not entirely thrilled" about being "a very small cog in a very large machine", finds the UN system to be "ultimately doing something beneficial ... compared to say, working for Nike".

> "You can't change the organisation … but you can change the team that you work within, and that's what I've always tried to do … to build a happier, more motivated team. Because usually people, if they're happier, they'll be a lot more flexible, they'll work harder." (Zene)

It has been said that aid workers should "neither oversell the contributions nor wallow in the dysfunction" of the system, and that it is important to know "where you fit into the process of making the world (incrementally) better" (J 2015). Indeed, the effective-ineffective dichotomy often present in aid effectiveness discourse is far less pronounced in the field worker perspectives: effectiveness is not a dilemma but a quandary; there are nuances. Amari discusses how progress does not mean perfection, citing a "compromised" activity that was "not right, but I thought it was better than nothing" to help mitigate safety risks. However, while small acts of progress are underscored, there can also be bigger impacts, concerning life and death.

> "People tend not to look at these [smaller things] … they're looking only at the big picture and forgetting that in order to reach that goal, you need to take small incremental steps. … One shies away from talking about these small things, little realizing that actually they're very big things … or big impact." (Nuru)

> "If we hadn't gone there [to evacuate local population] then they would have been killed by the fighting. So we saved around 20-25 lives. So sometimes the small things make you feel 'oh yeah!'. It is something good, it feels like the UN did something good. You know … this is in small bits. It brought me joy." (Zasha)

> "… in emergency situations, you can have a direct impact … some things can just have an extremely big impact. In the last emergency, I know I was instrumental in making sure that we had certain things delivered very quickly and they've been directly attributed to potentially saving hundreds of thousands of lives." (Zene)

The desire to be useful is present, even when one feels ineffective, as Omid accounts. Here, "effectiveness" could align with the definition suggested for community-engaged research: it is about the ability to do more good than harm in a real-world setting (Schillinger 2010:2). Even actions with fleeting impacts may be useful.

> "I ended up face-to-face with the usual a woman [from local community] … with arms locked around my legs, crying to the extent that my shoes were wet … my shoes wet and her little daughter was hanging on to my trouser, screaming … they had guys holding that door to stop any more people getting through ... As they left, I ended up having to stand … with my foot at the bottom of the door … to stop people bursting through. And what do you feel like after that? You just feel … terrible. But you know, I could do something … I brought loads of water down, I sent water down to people who were waiting outside the hotel. It's not much, but what can you do." (Omid)

Sense of agency and experience of achievement can manifest in various ways, emerging from many different actions, as seen in Table 8. Some of these scenarios may be more self-evident, while others prompt more reflection. For example, in one case, an informant's actions that successfully prevented the looting of a UN warehouse – and for which the informant received a letter of commendation – resulted in a death. "A dead body was lying down near my desk in the pool of blood," says the informant who, despite the scare and the regrettable fatality, felt a sense of achievement.

Table 8. Sense of agency emerging from empirical data

Sense of Agency - Examples
Driving action even when not necessary by organisational standards. E.g., accompanying a shipment of high-value assets all the way to destination to mitigate risk, while exposing oneself to (more) personal hardship and risk.
Driving action even when it does not comply with the norm or tradition. E.g., pushing through a change in the standard terms and conditions for supplier payments (to mitigate project risk); getting buy-in for an adapted recruitment approach for field; pursuing change on the requirement of Master's degree (to broaden applicant pool).
Engaging in work beyond the boundaries of job description, position, or function. E.g., engineering driving procurement and finance related change to mitigate operational risk; officer level staff taking on lower-level duties to save funds; administration taking action to mitigate security risk; bypassing levels in hierarchy (up or down) to overcome roadblocks to implement change.
Pushing for proposals likely to face resistance. E.g., successfully pushing for increased funding (to mitigate risk of stockouts during global supply shortages) when focus should be on savings; escalating issues of misconduct; addressing work discipline issues despite "sensitive issues"; investing time to ensure separation of non-performing staff; mitigating risk by proactively engaging audit.
Relying on soft skills, not hard skills or positional power. E.g., earning respect through interaction and open communication; having cultural sensitivity; being socially engaged; voluntary engagement to support local staff career development.
Compensating for ineffective processes with workarounds. E.g., reliance of self-evaluation to assess performance due to ineffective performance management; devising own ways of assessing risk due to ineffective risk management processes.
Economising effort on activities deemed non-productive. E.g., opting to lead inter-agency work where return is likely to be higher and withdrawing when value-add is deemed low; complying with form only superficially (e.g., risk matrix).
Withdrawing from or marking one's boundaries with activities that are misaligned with one's values or interests. E.g., taking initiative to change jobs to avoid managed mobility assignments; leaving the UN system; whistleblowing.

It has been found that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to perform their duties are likely to help them succeed (Jungert et al. 2013). The interview data shows how most of the informants not only think they can make a difference but that they also know they have done so. However, while developmentally oriented feedback for recognition has been found to enhance worker self-efficacy (Waldman and Spangler 1989), and although it has been said that the sense of accomplishment should consistently reinforced in the UN system employees, especially for those in special missions (Bozionelos et al. 2023), the informants' sense of accomplishment does not appear to be – and it cannot be – contingent on formal validation: the informants relied, for the most part, on themselves to assess their own performance because the institutionalised performance management protocols are found to be weak. This data suggests that the "I can" confidence is based on small pieces of evidence of success, based on informal feedback from subordinates, peers, supervisors, and internal clients. These pieces of evidence also include data-based, measurable evidence (e.g., reduced worker absenteeism, shortened lead times, less quality defects, increased number of applicants); observable qualitative changes (e.g., happier, more relaxed staff); observed predicted outcomes (e.g., actual avoidance of stockouts due to preventative action while other actors face problems); and institutionalising of changes in processes or practices. Few examples of more formal recognition were also mentioned. Good performance could also be validated by a worker being invited to apply for a specific job or by him being approached for advice or support even after one had already left the UN system. I also interpret the informant data to suggest that, paradoxically, the sense of agency can be felt, in a broader sense, even when one may feel there is too little of it in one's work: one has the power to leave. Only in one case did the informant allude to not having options other than the UN, given the poor conditions in one's own home country. Thus, a sense of agency does not appear to be confined to the workplace; it is about having a sense of control over one's life more broadly. Even amongst the informants subject to managed mobility, there were indications of one having the ability to machinate one's movement.

While the quest for improved effectiveness through UN inter-agency work was discussed earlier in relation to radical acceptance, I briefly touch on it even here. By definition, inter-agency work relies on collective efforts and joint efforts were also prominent in the informants' statements. However, they also tended to speak in Bravo Sierra fashion about the meeting-based UN inter-agency efforts, including the strategies for enhanced business operations. This puzzled me. What happened to "team effort", "camaraderie" and "thinking of the interest of the organisation"? Conducting post-interview literature review led me to the notion of collective efficacy that could explain, at least in part, this seeming dissonance. It is found that in bureaucratic settings, people's sense of their ability to solve their problems through joint action (collective efficacy) may be difficult to develop and sustain, as the impacts of group effort are not easily noticeable (Bandura 1982). This could also justify why some of the informants, at some points in time, participate in a form of organised hypocrisy, whereby the "right thing to do" feels wrong, leading to Bravo Sierra sentiments – or as Finley finds, having tens of people "all talking different songs ... it's like orchestra: somebody's beating the drums … and they are all beating in different directions. And they say: 'this is a beautiful music'!" This could be seen as the "cost of doing UN business" and as another act to be performed in the UN political theatre – the "the theatre of the absurd" (Soussan 2008:218) – for the informants to be effective in the operational theatre.

Another point of interest about sense of agency is the way the informants appear to engage in a form of professional cross-dressing; the functional boundaries appear porous, as being or feeling useful matters greatly. It has been found that those with high levels of effort, persistence, and helping behaviour for prosocial causes are likely to construct identities as competent individuals who strive to add value beyond their assigned tasks (Grant 2007). In addition, beyond professionalism and concern for the outcome compelling individuals to transcend the boundaries of their formal roles, there seem to be other areas of importance that energise for action. For Zene, it is staff succession planning, for Omid it is incorporating sustainability considerations to operations, while Hao and Amari are focused on outreach for more female recruits into their male-dominated functions. Finley's interest is in staff incentives, while Kai is concerned about training and Xavi about capacity development of local staff. While focus is on activities the informants can action somewhat autonomously, the work is relational, for the benefit of the organisation.

6.4.3 On the Role of Luck

> "Respect the power of luck and risk and you'll have a better chance of focusing on things you can actually control". (Housel 2020:207)

The empirical data suggests that, although a planning and risk mitigation mindset is widely embedded in the informants' work practices – and despite the sense of agency and their belief in their ability to influence outcomes – several informants specifically highlight the role of luck at work. That luck may lead a worker to certain types of duty stations was already discussed, and luck was mentioned in the earlier examples concerning a fatalistic mindset associated with certain cultures. Luck is also brought up in other contexts. One could be lucky to have talented colleagues or a competent supervisor, lucky in securing approvals to proposals that deviate from the norm, or one could be lucky arriving safely after using a suspect mode of transport or after having missed a car bomb or escaped artillery fire. One could be lucky to even get a job in the UN system. A particularly disconcerting case of luck told by an informant prompted the memo below (Vignette 5), given that what I had read in the press about the event had created a different impression entirely.

Memo: A life-saving case of luck recounted by an informant

That one of the large-scale staff evacuations resulted in zero casualties was attributed, by the informant involved in the evacuation, to luck and not good planning. It appeared that the Security team had, for whatever reason, failed to consider certain critical elements of the evacuation protocol. Recalling how media had reported on the successful event and how another informant referred to it in a similar fashion, I probed more into this.

The case turned out to have several layers and beneficiaries of luck. First, the informant, holding a role unrelated to the Security function, was lucky to have stumbled upon a planning meeting the informant was not even supposed to be part of, accidentally becoming aware of the details of the evacuation plan. The informant noted a critical gap in the plan and queried how it would be addressed. As the meeting stakeholders did not seem attentive to the matter, the informant decided to devise a back-up plan on his own accord to mitigate the risk. Second, the informant was lucky that the resources needed for the back-up plan were readily available. Third, all the evacuees were lucky that this informant had taken independent action given that it did eventually become necessary to implement the informant's back-up plan. Fourth, the evacuees were lucky not to have experienced other risks such as major road incidents (only minor ones occurred) despite disregard for safe driving protocols, a risk the informant had observed enroute and tried to mitigate by taking on driving duties while relinquishing duty drivers for rest. Fifth, the UN system was lucky in that the event, despite the systemic weaknesses, did not result in loss of life and subsequent operational and reputational damage.

Vignette 5. Memo about luck

I interpret the acknowledgement of luck as portrayed by the informants to demonstrate a degree of ability to differentiate between agency and causality, also referred to having "judgement of agency" (Synofzik, Vosgerau, and Newen 2008:4), that arises in situations where we make explicit attributions of agency to the self or other (Moore 2016). The actions in the above memo appear to align with Nuru's thoughts about luck and "maximum effort to do whatever you're required to do":

> "I always say this to people when they say 'it's providence'; 'what's going to happen is going to happen'; 'there's nothing that you and I can do about it': all of that is true – luck, providence. But to just sit back, relax, and say 'hey, let it happen!' is wrong. You need to make the maximum effort to do whatever you're required to do. And that's it. You do your best, you give it your best. You do the maximum effort and then things lie as they do. You're happy if it's gonna happen. If it doesn't happen, you have done the best you can. But you cannot sit back and say, 'hey, I'll wait for it to happen'."

That an individual's leadership style, competence, or personal baggage may have profound effects on shaping operational effectiveness was discussed earlier. However, it gives pause to realise that, as per the informants' accounts, even in the key activities that are seemingly strongly coordinated, if not even prescribed, by the UN system – such as security management, inter-agency collaboration, workforce performance evaluations, and risk mitigation practices – the nature of such engagement and the outcomes largely hinge on the individuals' choice and ability to engage, that is, luck plays a role here too, when viewed from the perspective of the colleagues. In this connection, Housel's (2020:207) comment about luck being a close sibling of risk resonates. On a balance, while the informants mostly demonstrate a strong sense of agency and invest effort into managing work, their comments also reflect a strong awareness of the universe of factors that are beyond the circles of control and influence, luck included.

6.5 Way of Working – "Doing the Bureaucratic Hustle"

6.5.1 Bureaucrat with Entrepreneurial Mindset

> "You are selling, in a way. People don't think of it as selling but we are all doing it." (Soohee)

Powered by the want, facilitated by radical acceptance, and enabled by a sense of agency, we have reached the space where the workers operate, straddling the working worlds of form (bureaucratic norms and structures) and function (operational reality) under conditions of flux. While the triad of the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency appears to serve as an enabler on cognitive and emotive levels, it falls short on explaining what navigating in the cross sea of operational realities entails. The informants whose UN career has been wholly or mostly been in the field (ten out of fourteen informants) tend to demonstrate, to varying degrees, behaviours and qualities similar to entrepreneurs, a kind of drive and "business savvy", while operating in a context of a bureaucracy. I label these workers "entrepreneurial bureaucrats" and their work as "hustling". Through my interpretation of the empirical data, I have constructed a fourth element, a composite comprising cross–cutting, behaviourally linked meta themes emerging from the three aforementioned conceptual categories – one I label "doing the bureaucratic hustle". Vignette 6 elucidates the abductive reasoning process that took place, over time, to arrive at the term "hustle".

During the constant comparison process, it was consistently and persistently difficult to gage what the informants were actually "doing" to work effectively. As I was examining the codes and categories in NVIVO and staring at the visual wall I had built on the key themes emerging from the interview data, I saw no common denominators. The action in the accounts was characterised by randomness. They would "figure things out", "manage it somehow", "just get on with the job", and "move things along". It could be about treading gently or about bulldozing over people, it was about following the hierarchy or skipping levels, it was about utilising the networks to get to the right decision maker or just making decisions when nobody else would. It was about following the process and breaking the rules. "It all depends" is fitting to describe what navigating could be about. I was unsure where to go from here. I had arrived at what appeared to be preconditions for navigation I had not even anticipated from the study, but no data to give insights about the navigation I had anticipated. I was perplexed because the lack of such data was not due to the informants not taking action. They were driven. Also, they were driven in a way a business professional would be, that is, there was an element of entrepreneurship present. So what were they doing? It was not haphazard or arbitrary because there seemed to be planning and sense of direction involved. To characterise that work as erratic or chaotic was not doing it justice either with these professionals.

Had the interviews failed? Did I not have enough material? Did I need to modify the research questions? As I would not to force data, I was leaning towards the latter. However, more thinking in circles was not the solution; I took distance from the material. This was enabled by streaming services, including eight seasons of an old TV series *Hustle*, a drama of con artists pulling off complicated scams. They were opportunistic, skilful individuals on the move, each with their unique strengths, working in teams to achieve their goals, also pulling "good cons". They improvised if faced with hurdles, and they were sometimes caught by the police as part of this risky enterprise. I began to see parallels between the show and the informants' work. The distinct difference was that my informants were employed by a large bureaucracy and tried to follow the rules and processes, thus not hustling to earn a fortune or to deceive others. But they had to hustle nevertheless, when compliance could not get them to effective outcomes and the cause was, for them, worth the risk. This insight lead me to the scholarship about hustling, which led to entrepreneurial hustle and further to entrepreneurial bureaucrats. What at first had appeared as randomness without any patterns had turned into a discovery of randomness as the pattern. My study was a case of hustling within a bureaucracy.

Vignette 6. Arriving at "hustle" through abductive reasoning

Successful aid work requires increased attention to complexity and systems thinking and has been said to involve "many features of being an entrepreneur or maverick – deeply embedded in the real world, spotting opportunities, embracing doubt and ambiguity, taking risks, living on your wits" (Green 2015:16). It has also been found that for the UN to remain relevant, independent individuals with entrepreneurial tendencies are needed (Salomons 2021:157). Entrepreneurial mindset is defined as a cognitive perspective that enables an individual to create value by recognizing and acting on opportunities, making decisions with limited information, and remaining adaptable and resilient in conditions of uncertainty and complexity (Daspit, Fox, and Findley 2023). Scholarship around the broad category of entrepreneurial action and behaviour aiming at overcoming resource constraints in uncertain conditions also mentions bricolage, i.e., “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker and Nelson 2005:353) and a related concept of resourcefulness, denoting “a boundary-breaking behavior of creatively bringing resources to bear and deploying them to generate and capture new or unexpected sources of value” (Williams et al. 2021:4), as well as effectuation processes that “take a set of means as given and focus on selecting between possible effects that can be created with that set of means” (Sarasvathy 2001:245). This notion of effectuation bears some resemblance to the idea of radical acceptance: embedded in both concepts is the sense of working with certain givens.

The notions of institutional entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial bureaucrats can be found in extant scholarship. For example, Forouharfar (2023) discusses the acceptance of the possibility of entrepreneurial orientation within certain bureaucracies, while Ohemeng (2018:1) discusses individuals in public sector organisations who, like other entrepreneurs, engage in “the act of creative discovery by creating or exploiting new opportunities to push forward their ideas”. Battilana (2006) refers to individuals who break with the rules and practices associated with the dominant institutional logic(s) and develop alternative rules and practices as institutional entrepreneurs. According to her, institutional entrepreneurship has been presented as a promising way to account for institutional change endogenously, although there is also controversy around the ability of institutionally embedded actors to distance themselves from institutional pressures and to act strategically. While institutional entrepreneurs are not necessarily successful in institutionalizing new practices, the likelihood for them to act is a function of their willingness to act as institutional entrepreneurs and of their ability to do so (Battilana (2006). Entrepreneurial (and cautiously entrepreneurial) styles, motivated by functional, effectiveness-oriented considerations are also found in a study of the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Well et al. 2020), while “public entrepreneur” is the term applied in a study about the management reforms carried out in the UNAIDS Programme (Nay 2014:3).

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.[83]), to “hustle” can mean, e.g., “to crowd or push roughly”, “to convey forcibly or hurriedly”, “to obtain by energetic activity”

[83] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hustle, retrieved March 2, 2024.

(including underhanded activity), "to sell or promote energetically and aggressively", or "to make strenuous efforts to obtain especially money or business". Entrepreneurial hustle is a term used by Fisher et al. (2020), to describe entrepreneurs' urgent, unorthodox actions intended to be useful to address challenges and opportunities under conditions of uncertainty[84]. While the idea of a hustle appears in the popular press as an important aspect of launching new ventures, until recently, hustle is rarely mentioned in the academic entrepreneurship literature (Kuratko et al. 2023). According to Kuratko et al. (2023), whether an entrepreneur's actions qualify as hustle is "the extent to which the entrepreneur is acting in ways that might be considered urgent and unorthodox". Thieme (2018:7), in turn, applying the conceptual frame of hustle to examine the everyday dealings in precarious urban geographies, defines hustling as "a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity outside formal education, employment, and service provision. It assumes a continuous management of risk associated with living and working beyond formal institutional norms."

Inspired by extant scholarly literature as referenced above, and grounded in the data obtained from interviews, I have formulated the term bureaucratic hustle to denote what appears to be entrepreneurially minded action taken by some UN civil servants (bureaucrats) operating in the conditions of fragility and flux, whereby they seize the moments, take opportunities, and make progress, while engaging in an industrious effort, mostly but not always within the bureaucratic red lines. In my interpretation of bureaucratic hustle, the four elements mentioned by Fisher et al. (2020) – unorthodox action, urgency, aims for useful purposes and specific challenges or opportunities – are viewed somewhat differently, given the institutional context it is transposed to. "Unorthodox" actions do not necessarily mean extraordinarily innovative or creative measures but rather those that could be considered courageous or unusual in the context of the UN system, considering the prevailing orthodoxies, be they explicit standards or procedures, or typical or expected behaviours. Daring to demand effort of staff who are fasting and daring to bypass hierarchy are examples of such actions. "Urgency" and "usefulness" refer to the action to address challenges or avail of opportunities being driven by a sense of urgency, out of concern for the interest of the organisation – i.e., hustle for results – while it may not be feasible for the individual to independently conclude the undertaking rapidly, e.g., due to "the system" with its processes and chains of command not allowing for that. As to the definition by Thieme, while the UN civil servants are part of the formal UN bureaucracy and not part of gig economy, hustling to make a living, there are elements

84 This notion of entrepreneurial hustle is somewhat different from the way Baskaran (2019) uses the term when discussing "gig economy", a secondary, unofficial job market as an opportunity for economic participation.

of informally operating beyond the institutional norms. This is undertaken not only to produce results but also to "survive" professionally in the bureaucracy that was earlier said to be " maddeningly complex" and governed by the "Carrollian logic" (Banbury 2016), requiring a continuous management of risk associated with doing so. Work in the UN system is, according to Nuru "the survival[85] of the fittest". Xavi refers to "fighting the good fight".

Most of the informants appear to engage and invest effort in activities that are not necessary to meet the organisational standards or to "get by" within the UN system – or even to get ahead in the system. While the old wisdom of tending the garden one can reach may apply to them, many also appear to seek ways to find gardens that are not within the immediate reach but need tending to. The effort is taken because the informants choose to take action on something deemed of value beyond self, and for this they are prepared to gather intelligence, push, lobby, advocate, bypass, escalate, assert, "kick down some doors", "run roughshod", "shoot [words] in between the eyes", and "bulldoze" things through – even to the point of subtle and not so subtle threats ("If this does not work out, I will blame all of you sitting in this Committee, you are all responsible"; "Listen, man … do you want the program to collapse?"; "If you don't want to do this, then you are not welcome [= fired]."). However, that I refer to hustle does not suggest the workers would not strive for order or compliance as per organisational norms in furthering the organisational aims. Rather, the informant data suggests it is not an order life in the field. Discussions around working hours in the field, work plans, targets, and a typical workday – topics in my initial interview guide – seemed ill-fitting: there was no "typical" day, no set hours to keep, and plans were dynamic. In Amari's words, the time in the UN was "ever moving, evolving; it was almost 24/7 … you deal with things as they land and that was OK". Literature authored by practitioners evoke similar images, including "chaos" (Alexander 2015) and "every man for himself" (Soussan 2008:307). Furthermore, while compliance might be expected – even deemed as appropriate performance – from the institutional standpoint, compliance may not always create enabling conditions for effective work or lead to outcomes that are desirable. Thus, it appears to be, to an extent, a hustle for results. Hustling may be further necessitated in topsy-turvy circumstances where competence may be a burden and initiative a threat to one's career progression, while risk-aversion, passivity, even incompetence, may enable a path of lower risk to a life-long career.

85 Soussan (2008:146) writes that "if the UN were to have its own reality show, it would be like *Survivor*, except nobody would ever get kicked off the island".

6.5.2 The Elements of Bureaucratic Hustle

The interview data suggests that, in the UN system, doing the bureaucratic hustle by entrepreneurially minded bureaucrats entails embracing tensions; engaging in organised hypocrisy; being agile and adaptable; and managing boundaries.

It was stated earlier how VUCA-like conditions – plurality and change, technological advances, increasing competition, and workforce diversity – intensify tensions and paradox (Schad et al. 2017; Lewis 2000). While recognizing that we are compelled toward certainty and control (Thomas 2019), the empirical data suggests that rather than seeing competing or contradicting demands as problems requiring immediate solutions, the informants appear to work with tensions that emerge or persist on multiple levels, thus demonstrating a "paradox mindset". Paradox mindset denotes individuals that search broadly for solutions, demonstrate increased cognitive complexity, and are open to ambiguity and multiple experiences (Waldman et al. 2019). While the work may involve a lot of problem solving, some issues are not problems but dynamics to be managed – a "virtuous cycle" whereby the awareness of tensions triggers a management strategy of acceptance rather than defensiveness (Smith and Lewis 2011:391); paradoxes force one to scrutinise what seems so obviously right (Baggini and Fosl 2010:262). This is not unlike the negative capability discussed earlier, the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and paradox and to engage in a non-defensive way with change (French 2001), whereby space is created that helps sustain thoughtful reflection under pressure (Simpson, French, and Harvey 2002). The findings suggest that embracing not only complexity, but all VUCA conditions may be critical to meaningful work in the UN system, given that such conditions make it more difficult to plan responses, requiring flexibility. This is in line with literature about sustainable human resources, characterised by workforce with paradoxical thinking competencies: they cope with plurality, complexity, and tensions, including those related to short and long term objectives, as well as multiple bottom lines (Pinto 2019; Ehnert 2014).

Although the concept of organised hypocrisy in managing conflicting stakeholder expectations by discrepancies between talk, decisions, and actions concerns organisations, the empirical data suggests that similar, somewhat systematic engagement in contradicting talk and actions – keeping up appearances or maintaining façades – can be deployed by individuals to manage tensions emerging between form and function within the UN system. "Sometimes we need to do some flower arranging, tick some boxes," says Amari. Support for this type of individual level action can also be found, e.g., in the study by Abrahamson and Baumard (2008:450), whereby it was found that rationality façades may help employees ignore institutionalised practices and select more effective ones. From time to time, an entrepreneurial bureaucrat may find it necessary to participate in organised hypocrisy related to, for example, performance appraisals, inter-agency activities, risk mitigation processes, efficiency gains reporting, or to fulfilling the formative needs for diversity considerations in recruitment. In line with the efficacy expectations referred to earlier, the informants may participate in the expected behaviours while also economizing their actions; they may tactically choose the intensity in which one engages, to minimise the perceived (or actual) non-value-add while maximising the potential benefits. Zene, for example, makes decisions about participating in inter-agency work, distancing oneself from low-utility causes ("don't involve me in it") while volunteering to even lead meetings with potential value.

The interview findings indicate the need for swift responsiveness in unexpected circumstances (agility) and the need to be mindful of the evolving context(s), to assess, learn, and adjust (adaptability). The informants' know-how (competence) and the "know-why" (the want and the purpose) enable progress towards reaching the objectives. This resonates with Apthorpe's (2012:1547) concept of aid work as "artwork" not "clockwork" discussed earlier, whereby the worker does not merely engage in "institutional monocropping" (Levine and Pain 2024:10), implementing bureaucratic blueprint solutions and direct power but exercises context-sensitive influence in the pursuit of tailored solutions. Cognitive flexibility, continuous learning (UN 2020c), facilitative attitudes and behaviours (Chambers 2017), and an ability to "navigate by judgment" when pursuing less observable (measurable) tasks in unpredictable settings (Honig 2020:152) are seen as some of the qualities essential for future aid professional or for new professionalism to support transformation and change.

It has been said that the challenge of boundary management is to promote efficiency and effectiveness without threatening accountability and responsiveness (Kettl 2006). The interview data suggests that the informants' boundary management involves enforcing some and breaking others. One on hand, the informants may set or uphold boundaries, on the other, they may treat some boundaries as porous lines that can be tested, crossed, or disregarded when necessitated by work, however, with the shared element being the awareness of the actual, e.g., rule-based, boundary ("It is against the policy to ..."; "I know it is not my job but …"). I find similarities between this type of boundary management and bricolage in entrepreneurship mentioned earlier: according to Baker and Nelson (2005:342), bricolage typically appeared to involve "a general awareness of existing practices and norms and a conscious willingness to abrogate them" and is seen also as a means of "counteracting the organizational tendency to enact limitations without testing them".

The empirical data suggests that strong boundaries may include those related to ethics and standards of work. References to whistleblowing, "ringing the bell", "wasting resources", and "doing the right thing", and even those reflecting a sense of unease and discomfort – e.g., "working in glass domes and living in Versace hotels" – suggest taking a stance and/or action that is ethically and morally grounded; that this is not right. Similarly, the numerous, at times even forceful, references to (in)competence, right fit, and standards indicate that the line between acceptable and unacceptable ability or fit for a job is of import, an element of profound disquietude. Managing boundaries also means being savvy with mitigating professional risks. “We don’t want to invite problems for us – nowadays there is so much of witch hunting,” says Emerson, who engages in “participative decision making on sensitive issues” to mitigate risks for self. Soohee, Kai, and Emerson have invited or otherwise welcomed internal audit to support their work as a layer of protective oversight. Several informants refer to documenting issues to leave a paper trail, while others also admit they probably should have done more of it.

Porous boundaries include those for hierarchy and those defined in job descriptions and functional roles. It has been said that, within administrative agencies, the most important boundaries have always been vertical and most bureaucratic work hierarchical, linked to authority (Kettl 2006). The hierarchical nature of the UN work is acknowledged. However, several informants also bypass such hierarchy to achieve work goals, when the cost of following the chain of command is deemed too high from results perspective or may, perhaps counter-intuitively, be deemed to lack integrity. In similar fashion, in his autobiographic account, Soussan (2008:126) describes having broken the UN chain of command “for contradictory reasons: related to conscience and out of sense of loyalty”.

> “When you work in a team, putting a project together, you always have one or two negative people in there, constantly finding reasons and saying you cannot do it that way… I had Chief of […] who was extremely negative. I was just sidestepping him and went to the next person.” (Soohee)

> “My boss was handling [a request to HQ for more staff resources]; he couldn't convince them. Few months back, I was in the HQ and I talked to the Director of […] and other persons and succeeded in convincing them, influencing them, and securing their nod to giving me the positions which are most critical. I was very happy. I immediately wrote to my boss … The reply came: ‘This was not coordinated with me ... This should not be pursued further.” (Finley)

There was one negative case of an informant emphasising the need for the supervisors to ensure “they don't allow anybody to bypass them”. However, on closer inspection, the comment was found to be related to the informant treating formal hierarchy as a risk mitigation measure with staff who use personal connections (thus bypassing the supervisor) for personal gain, not for the pursuit of work goals. Whether supervisors can command adherence to chains of command in non-military organisations where staff selection is not necessarily merit based is another issue.

The functional cross-dressing mentioned earlier is about porous boundaries. It has been claimed that job efficiency could be enhanced by reducing role ambiguity and conflicts and that clearly defined employees' roles and expectations would build trust and respect (Oppi, Campanale, and Cinquini 2022). However, the interview data suggests that while the informants take pride in the type of work they do and at times strongly identify with it (e.g., being an engineer or security officer), the imprinting to one's technical area is somewhat flexible – there is a degree of undiscipline within their disciplines – with a value-creating perspective at times compelling the worker to work outside the red lines of the stated responsibilities. Given how vocal the informants have been about competence and prevalence of deadwood, it could be that doubts regarding coworkers' priorities or competence might, to a degree, influence such behaviours. In this connection, the "breaches" are interpreted to be more about doing what is required of a *professional in general* rather than of an individual in *that profession*, and about working professionally, not merely getting paid the salary of a person recruited into a Professional-level position.

One challenging aspect of boundary management appears to be the decision about the exit. Earlier I quoted Amari's dilemma of deciding whether to "stick it out" or to leave. The sense of guilt referred to earlier is related to this. However, according to an aid insider, the "inability to see a toxic situation for what it is and remove themselves from it" is among the most harmful and debilitating aspects in the lives of aid workers (J 2015).

It has been said that in aid bureaucracies, political incentives often work against the professional norms of good performance and the professionals' efforts to achieve results (Easterly 2007:167). Furthermore, it has been said that a bureaucratic organisation limits the freedom typically valued in professional roles and that there is a conflict between bureaucratic administration and professionalism (Freidson 1984). However, the empirical data suggests this is not necessarily the case: most of the informants appear to find ways of pursuing meaningful work instead of succumbing to being fenced in by extant paradigms and practices. Viewed against the backdrop of the challenges related to variable staff competencies and lack of caring referenced in the interviews, the informants' numerous examples of doing things differently or doing work that is out of their scope – even doing work that is not required or not compliant by UN standards – suggest that these actions have less to do with role ambiguity and stakeholder conflicts and more to do with the lack of trust in that those who should do the needful (as per their role) actually take action.

As per Figure 24, the elements of bureaucratic hustle are interpreted to be linked to each other in that agility and adaptation as well as engaging in organised hypocrisy and managing boundaries may be means to managing tensions, while the latter two may also serve as sources of tensions to be managed. The earlier example of Nuru insisting on changes to a supplier contract to ensure project sustainability was a form of disruption of formerly untouchable boundaries, causing tensions between the stakeholders. Kai's whistleblowing is an example of enforcing boundaries to avoid disruption to the operations, as a new supervisor was "breaching every human resources, procurement, and financial rules and regulations …, pushing for his own ideas". Boundary management may be further interacting with engagement in organised hypocrisy in that decisions may need to be made between supporting the form despite its futility for function and going against the form.

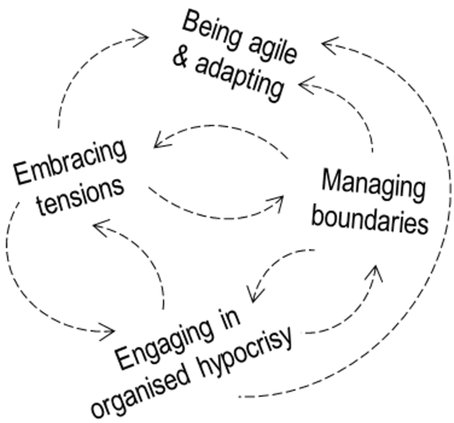

Figure 24. Doing the bureaucratic hustle: interaction between the approaches

As in the other conceptual categories, here too the intensity and appetite to engage vary among the informants. Furthermore, the appetite for challenging the status quo and accepting the risk it may entail also varies with time, depending e.g., on personal circumstances. Emerson, for example, discusses a stage without personal responsibilities when "it was easy for me to take a decision of losing or leaving my job" and Finley refers to mobility being challenging when you have children. Here, Thieme's (2018) point about the need to continuously manage risk in connection with hustle emerges clearly, further supporting my earlier observation about none of the informants appearing to have the desire to "live on the edge". "Being competent", the cross-cutting attribute of applicable to the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency, is embedded even in this fourth category.

6.5.3 Reflections on Hustle

Gleaned from the interview data, it is my interpretation that while one can, even if somewhat reluctantly, "decide" to accept the UN's less glossy as-is reality, i.e., it is a choice, invoking the want and the sense of agency are less contingent on "deciding" and more to do with "feeling" that cannot be simply willed into being. Hustling, in turn, is predominantly a choice. Behaving ethically, standing accountable, or having an entrepreneurial mindset cannot be imposed; they are constructs. Hustling also invokes images of something I find deeply human: improvising, figuring things out, leaning into uncertainty, trying, failing, and trying again. Yanguas (2018:3) writes about the defining characteristic of aid being its intrinsic humanity: fallible, gullible, but also entrepreneurial and subversive – not unlike the images of hustling.

In constructing this fourth category, I have contemplated whether or how the international status of the worker, his role within Support Services, or his background in the commercial sector in particular might affect the hustle. While the empirical data does not answer these questions, I share my reflections in this regard. Some of the differences between the internationally and locally recruited staff concern their familiarity with the local context, the nature of local networks and ties, their mobility, and depending on the duty station and role, the breadth and depth of professional experience as well as their seniority. All of the above might affect the nature of hustle. For example, familiarity of the local context may help or hinder assertiveness of locally recruited staff, e.g., in managing the interface with the local authorities and other key stakeholders, while a degree of detachment from the local context may similarly help or hinder international staff in their efforts who may not have time or desire to build roots to the local context but who may have benefit of the international status (see e.g. Saner 2010 on doubts amongst locally recruited about the competency of non-western experts). Similarly, job changes enabled through (forced) rotation may energise the (expatriate) worker and lead to more readiness to see opportunities and hustle, while work without rotation may lead to habituation, even fatigue, thus diminishing persistence with hustle over time. On the other hand, for "professional aid nomads" whose career is characterised by repetitive mobility cycles, the multiple cycles of adapting to and uprooting oneself from one's work context in a relative short time might also cause fatigue and reduce the incentives for committing and engaging in hustle. As regards comparing the potential hustle by Support Services staff and by those working with Programmes – or even with peace operations – one could assume that activities and tasks performed at a greater "distance" from donors, aid beneficiaries, and implementing partners, i.e., with less oversight from and less direct accountability to these stakeholders, might lend themselves for more opportunities for doing the bureaucratic hustle. While programming activities may require more joint stakeholder planning, adherence to set protocols and agreed reporting mechanisms, the supporting activities, mostly internally focused enabling functions may have more room for manoeuvring, despite the bureaucratic processes. Hustling may even become an acute necessity within Support Services, for example, to enable sudden ground movement for staff, to restore communication facilities or provision of power to work and accommodation facilities, and so on. As for the worker's professional background, one could assume that those with experience from business environments or other settings where performance incentives exist might be more readily predisposed to taking initiative, including engaging in hustle. It has even been opined that, given the privatization of many government functions in the past two decades and as many essential competencies needed for the fulfilment of the UN mandate today relate to finance, economic development, and trade, the UN recruitment framework ought to be geared to facilitate talent from the private sector (Salomons 2021:157).

6.5.4 Keyboard Warriors vs. Gumboot Guys: on Tensions

> "You've got people that can just sit and study policy and process … Book is one thing – but what's the practical element? How do we get the job actually through? Not all of us are sitting in an office thumbing through some pages." (Amari)

At the beginning of the study, it was said that the UN system is faced with the challenge of tensions between fulfilling its mandates, navigating the external expectations, and managing the internal work realities. The above comment from Amari, a self-professed "gumboot guy", reflects a similar dilemma on the level of an individual actor: the bureaucratic hustle of the field worker is taking place in a context characterised by tensions on multiple levels, the empirical data suggests. In this sub-section, I illustrate the variety of tensions the informants discuss; then address the "so what?" question related to tensions.

Tensions are part of life, present in any workplace, with e.g., temporal tensions (short vs. long term; fast vs. slow; past vs. present vs. future, etc.) garnering research attention (Slawinski and Bansal 2019:374). However, as discussed earlier, literature suggests the UN system can be extreme in this regard, including the potential impacts of such tensions. This notion is further supported by the interview data: the UN system and the field context for the international worker in particular is unique in that tensions may emerge in a compounded fashion on so many levels – in line with the seven, partially overlapping contexts – and a worker, an unarmed civil servant, can be in a position to make life-and-death decisions. The below comments reflect the tension between the work taking place behind the desk on the HQ level and by those out in the field.

> "You want to start this One UN togetherness, start it from New York! Start from New York, not at country level; let them become one ..." (Zasha)

> "I was over-speeding. The GPS tracking guy alerted the admin officer who alerted Security, jumping up and down, 'you were over speeding!'. Yes, I was. There were a lot of missile strikes, so that gives you a little bit of a hurry up. The roads were fast – of course the roads were fast, it's a war zone! Speed is your friend in these environments. I am appropriately trained and this was a risk we were prepared to take, breaking the rules to stay safe and to get to [location] to do training for staff who needed to use these roads and weren't trained at all. But yeah, those admin

> guys just sitting in the office, the keyboard warriors … Had I been the guy tracking, my first impulse would have been to ask the driver 'are you guys ok?'" (Amari)

The concept of the UN system as an entanglement of tensions was not shared with the informants. However, the discussions elucidated the multitude of ways conflict, dissonance, and tensions in general can feature in work life. They can manifest in concrete ways (e.g., delaying filling a position due to lack of female candidates) or in the abstract (e.g., cognitive strain). Although not an exhaustive list, Table 9 illustrates the types of tensions the informants' describe or make reference to.

On the individual level, tensions can emerge among international staff, between international and local staff, or between individuals in general. They can relate to the differences in cultural lenses – whether due to national, organisational, or job functional cultures – and to a sense of fairness, e.g., in connection with differences in mobility regimes, career opportunities, contractual terms, and security management practices, as discussed earlier. It has been found that "we seem to be wired for fairness" and as such, we are hypersensitive to fairness transgressions, with the lack of fairness and rejection registering in the brain as physical pain (Prilleltensky 2020:3). Fairness, in turn, has been said to taste "like chocolate" for the brain, given that the same brain regions that are associated with loving physical pleasures – including the taste of chocolate – respond to being treated fairly as well (Lieberman 2013:71). In light of this science, Omid's comment about apartheid-thinking in staff security management, Xavi's view of mobility as a means of fairness, Emerson's appreciation of better transparency, and Amari's wish for more fairness as a way of turning the UN system more effective resonate more deeply.

Individual workers may also experience cognitive tensions (e.g., dissonance; moral qualms) between opposing or misaligned values or choices, such as trying to strike a balance between personal and professional aims or between caring and not caring or fighting or finding peace with working alongside actors whose values clash with one's own. I took note that the informants' reflections tended to be more around these types of internal strains rather than those emerging due to external actors – or rather, the external tensions "just were there" while the internal ones appeared to be subject to continuous internal processing.

These types of tensions are discussed also in aid literature. It is found that the everyday problems of doing aid work exist in tension with the persistent demands for benevolence and altruism that dominate aid rhetoric (Hindman and Fechter 2014:1). For example, the moral dimensions of expatriate aid workers' lifestyles – "doing well out of poverty" – can be felt as problematic by aid workers (Fechter 2012a:1477). That not all aid agencies and their international workers may be perceived to add similar value is described in a study by Eriksson Baaz (2005:82), whereby the notion of "us" and "them" emerges, between workers with closer ties to local communities and whose living conditions are moderate (such as MSF) and the "experts" such as the UN expatriates with "outrageous" standards of living. There is also a constant pressure to "turn the political into the technical" and to represent the messy practice in ordered categories (Mosse 2013:18), and tension may arise when a worker cares deeply about achieving success but feels frustrated by the lack of progress (Scott-Villiers 2004:207). Frustration and anger may also arise from the difficulty of being effective when one's professional goals conflict with those of other actors, such as governments', whereby working towards peace, security, and national dignity can be antithetical to corrupt, factional or dictatorial regimes (McFarlane 2004).

As tensions between the UN entities, misalignment between the UN procedures and operational reality, and strain related to the host countries have already been discussed earlier, they are not revisited here. Rather, we focus on the subjective experiences of tensions. Tensions have both cognitive and emotional aspects, as they activate the processes of thinking and feeling and their interplay (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah 2019:301). How tensions are experienced can have many contributing factors related to the individual, including his moral character, values, beliefs, and national culture, as well as the culture of the profession (Keller, Wen Chen, and Leung 2018; Varcoe et al 2012). For example, Skylar did not recognise any culturally linked aspects generating tension, and this could be due to Skylar's motivation to work in the field (curiosity towards the unknown) and Skylar intentionally engaging with local staff, resulting in seemingly enjoyable interactions even outside work. Omid and Kai, in turn, could not identify with the notion of strain between the local and international staff. In fact, dissonance between individuals tended to relate more to other expatriates. I found this interesting.

Reflecting on this dissonance between expatriates staff, I hypothesised it could be due to an expatriate perhaps not perceiving local staff as "competition" or as a "professional threat", while other international staff might be regarded as such. Some of the interviewees alluded to this. Also, as already discussed, tensions with one's supervisor – typically an expatriate – may be explained, for example, by the power differentials and differences in personal styles, as well as by a potential competency gap, especially if recruitment has not been merit based. Cultural differences might also contribute to dissonance.

Table 9. Tensions referenced by the informants

Examples of references to tensions in the interviews
Cognitive tensions within self • Choosing between caring, "enough caring", and not caring • Dissonance for living in costly premises and working in fragile settings • Inability to "fix" the problem of not meeting a desirable diversity profile • Collaborating with actors whose values are not aligned with one's own • Investing effort into addressing poor staff performance to benefit the organisation on long term vs. compensating for poor staff performance through other means in the interest of short-term results • Being assertive to be productive vs. being cautious and less productive e.g., due to "sensitive issues" • Taking vs. avoiding risks professionally (e.g., compliance vs. non-compliance) • Meeting professional vs. personal needs, e.g., ref. work locations • Deciding between persevering with and leaving the job
Tensions among international staff • Fulfilling mobility requirement: service in "hard" (e.g., Kabul) vs. "easy" non-HQ / field locations (e.g., Amman). • Job security rel. to funding and stable settings (e.g., Secretariat staff settling in NYC on long term vs. job insecurity for field mission staff) • "Keyboard warriors" vs. "gumboot guys" (talk vs. do; doing for form vs. function; rhetoric vs. field reality) • Work dynamic between experts and their non-expert supervisors • Perceiving certain staff appointed on non-merit basis and lacking competence (e.g., ref. to "mafias", "cliques", friendships, gender bias) • Different contract modalities and benefits, affecting sense of equality (e.g. ref. evacuation; leave provisions; rotation policies)
Tensions between international and local staff • Local staff sentiments towards "unnecessary" international staff • International staff and local staff unions in the office • Differences related to remuneration packages • Differences in safety & security provisions • Differences in career prospects • Cultural differences and related practices

Tensions among individuals in general

- Planning & risk mitigation mindset vs. fatalistic thinking
- Stance to hierarchy: taking initiative & challenging vs. waiting for orders.
- Stance to women in supervisory or leadership roles
- Different expectations and standards
- Personal agendas vs. organisational mandates

Tensions between the UN agencies

- Competition for control and relevance between senior level representatives
- Benefits of inter-agency collaboration vs. loss of agencies' visibility
- Misalignment between political and operational agendas, needs, and related cultures (e.g., peacekeeping and humanitarian action); need to collaborate for effectiveness vs. need to keep distance for effectiveness
- Large agencies vs. smaller, "freeriding" entities; inequal burden

Tensions between UN procedures / strategies and operational field reality

- Misalignment between formal processes vs. field reality
- Assisting local population while collaborating with the regimes that are causing hardship for that local population
- Feeling limited in freedoms by UN rules and procedures (e.g., movement) while feeling protected by the same restrictions
- Geographical distribution vs. gender parity in recruitment
- Competence vs. diversity markers in recruitment

Host government or donors and the UN

- Respecting UN mandate vs. undermining UN work in host country
- Granting permits and visas to staff vs. delaying or denying them
- Clearing customs for UN supplies vs. delaying or blocking
- Host country values clashing with UN values[86]
- Donors' expectations vs. practicability in reporting

Do tensions have any practical consequence for the worker? It was earlier mentioned that tensions can lead to paralysis (Lüscher and Lewis 2008), action (Klineberg

[86] It has been found that in conservative societies, the gap between the local value system and that of the UN may be particularly wide (Baumann 2022).

1949:12), trigger defense mechanisms (Lewis 2000), or they can drive change (Schad and Lewis 2017, citing Hegel). In short, in line with the scholarship referred to earlier, the interview data too suggests that tensions can mean dynamics to be managed or problems to be solved. For example, the host country related hurdles that are largely beyond the control of the worker are seen as a dynamic to be managed and can be seen as a form of radical acceptance. However, addressing weaknesses in planning processes to mitigate risks arising from fatalistic thinking is an example of attempting to solve a problem. Tensions with one's supervisor, in turn, can be both a dynamic to be managed or a problem to be solved. Soohee chose to put up with a "horrible" and "narcissist" boss, while Zene chose to solve the problem by relying on the individual next level up in the hierarchy for operational support.

Regardless of how dissonance, conflict, and tensions in general were discussed in the interviews, there was a tendency towards not only acknowledging or accepting that they exist but most of all that, while many of them are frustrating and beyond one's control, one is not left, entirely, at their mercy; there is a sense of agency, still, and the want to engage. Zene, for example, recalling various tensions, points out how a positive outlook "enables us to do this (work), because you can keep moving from place to place and you just take your positive experiences with you". Omid diffuses tensions with a supervisory style that emphasises "blending in" rather than showing off status, e.g., by clothing. Amari too, aware of tensions linked to one's international status, emphasises the need for mindfulness and situational awareness: "You show that you are an equal to the local staff, that you are prepared to get dirty and get on with it, and don't show that you're privileged". Zasha, in turn, deals with frustrations arising from inter-agency activities by engaging in a form of organised hypocrisy to cope with work that costs time but yields little. The interview data suggests that, for effectiveness, workers oscillate between taking action and holding back – i.e., they navigate by judgment – with the latter potentially also requiring coming to terms with lingering cognitive dissonance, in line with the paradox mindset referred to earlier. This type of emotional ambivalence, a state in which they have both negative and positive feelings, is reportedly prevalent with managers especially in coopetitive contexts (Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, and Kock 2014), thus fitting for the UN system context. The interview data necessitates updating the depiction of the UN system as an entanglement of tensions, as per the updated Figure 25.

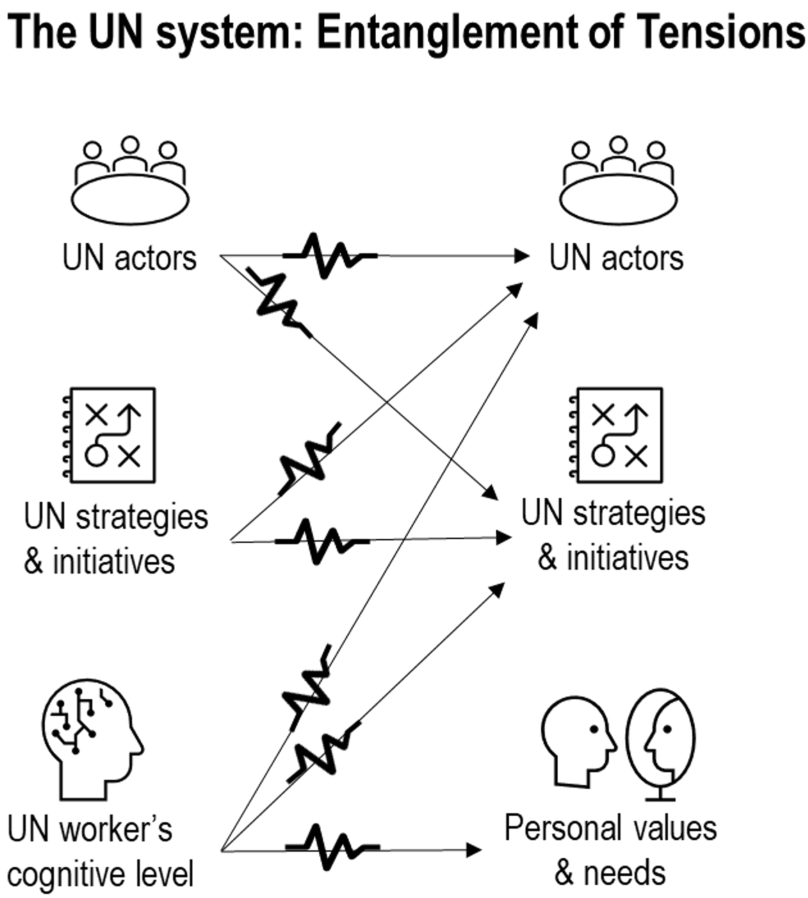

Figure 25. The UN system as an entanglement of tensions 2.0

The figure now includes the individual's cognitive tensions, i.e., tensions within (or "with") self, thus reflecting the tensions that can emerge between actors, between the UN strategies and initiatives, and in the mind of an individual worker. The dissonance experienced internally can concern one's own needs and values and the work one does, and can include, for example, tension felt between living with one's family and pursuing a career in fragile settings while separated from one's family, between staying in a stressful environment and abandoning the mission, or between choosing to act as a whistleblower without knowing the fallout and consequences to self and refraining from doing the right thing.

During the interviews, I made some surprising discoveries about things not mentioned, or issues only touched on in passing. These points of interest are discussed next, including those that emerge when I compare the informants' accounts to literature on one hand, and when I examine emerging patterns or relationships between issues within the accounts, on the other.

6.6 Points of Interest About Seeming Disinterest

In contrast with the sector level and UN narratives about insufficient funding discussed earlier, scarcity of funding is not a prevalent topic raised by the informants as a factor hindering their ability to deliver. Only two informants make brief references to the inadequacy of funding, in connection with discussing hiring or training staff. Funding does, however, emerge as a point of interest from the opposite perspective: the informants' focus is predominantly on what is, not on what isn't, with emphasis on the diligent and/or timely use of the funds one has available. In this connection, references were made to poor use of man hours, waste of resources, failing beneficiaries by delivering poor-quality supplies, meeting the deadlines to expend the funds, and to avoiding embarrassing situations whereby donor funds would have to be returned due to poor planning and implementation.

That lack of funding does not emerge more prominently from the informants' accounts could have several reasons. It could be that more funds are directed to the fragile duty stations where the informants have worked – Hao's earlier comment about having all the necessary funds for the function due to the critical demands in such settings is an example of this. Whether the findings would have been similar in more stable locations or with the informant group consisting of programme staff are interesting questions. Another reason for lack of funds not dominating the empirical material could be that scarcity of funding is a normalised state of operations – potentially another element of radical acceptance – and as such, not deliberated. However, yet another possibility, a profoundly thought-provoking one, is that not only is money not scarce, but there is actually an excess of it.

"In development, money does not equal results," writes Yanguas (2018:4), continuing that even a sizeable budget increase for an ineffective programme does "not miraculously make it effective, it just makes it wasteful". In connection with the earlier discussion, it was mentioned how aid puts pressure on the absorptive and administrative capacity of the recipient countries and that aid is stated to be subject to diminishing returns. Might the same apply for UN entities? The many informant references to unproductive use of time and poor planning and decision-making capabilities suggest that an ineffective use of available funds and not getting (or delivering) value for money appears to be a more pressing concern than having more funds. Even the earlier comment about cutting ineffective staff ("deadwood") after which the UN would be left with sufficient resources reflects the notion of making a better use of what one has, not demanding more. The negative effect of too much funding also emerges from Alexander's (2013:227-230) account of the evaluation of the tsunami response, whereby an influx of actors with an influx of funds, seeking to reassure their respective donors of effectiveness, compete and work as quickly as possible, while to do things right takes time – and "nobody had the time". More money did not mean better results. It appears that the informants agree.

It was earlier mentioned that the informants made only few explicit references to targets, KPIs, and work plans. In the same vein, with the exception of one informant who has predominantly worked in HQ roles, the informants did not mention results-based management, the very approach that was to be "one of the most powerful resources at the disposal of the UN development system" (UNSSC 2022:1). And yet, that there was no lack of drive for results could suggest that in the field roles, function is privileged before form. Furthermore, technology and funding, essential enablers for work carried out in the field, were barely discussed, or if they were discussed, ICT and money were, in my interpretation, implied to be givens. For example, in negotiating access to hostile areas, Hao says how "everything hinges on your little check mark on WhatsApp", implying expectation of mobile technologies and connectivity even in fragile settings, and Amari is at ease on the road "because I have data, I can use maps on my mobile instead of satellite tracking". That high quality ICT solutions are to be available is in line with the UN Field Technology Framework whereby ICT services and solutions are directly linked to the UN's ability deliver on its programmes and mandates (UN 2018j). This is also aligned with the strategy of the Global Emergency Telecommunications Cluster that supports interventions in humanitarian crises (ETC 2021). As regards finances, as mentioned earlier, sidelining such concerns might reflect habituation which can create an expectation of funding unpredictability and an expectation of the pursuit of efficiency gains as a normal way of working, or that the informants' experiences concern duty stations without funding concerns.

How the informants relate to mobility and rotation is, in my view, particularly interesting. These individuals who seem to "care" and generally situate their work beyond self, appear to relate to mobility primarily from the perspective of the self. As presented earlier, aid literature (albeit not the UN mobility strategy) discusses the downsides of mobility and short assignments. However, any disruptive impact of one's own or others' rotation on the broader system, even on the team or the office, is brought up only by three informants, and of these, two were only made in passing reference. In fact, in a few cases, the informants' accounts about changing duty stations signalled a different kind of disruption: that staff disrupt their rotation cycles, by choosing to rotate off-cycle by applying for vacancies advertised outside of the rotation regime, to avoid being rotated, thus counter-acting the organisational efforts to plan for and "manage" mobility to minimize disruption. The informant who delved into the rotation challenge opined that effectiveness and efficiency could be increased in staff were not "forced" to rotate, as it takes about one year to get familiar with the local context and programs and as staff relocation absorbs funds.

Similar inward-looking tendency concerns talk about the R&R cycles. One should note that, for staff on a four-week rotation, the R&R practice can mean 10 weeks of R&R absence from duty in a 12-month period, in addition to the six-week annual leave and other leave, such as 10 public holidays annually, sick leave, paternity, maternity, or adoption leave, compassionate leave, or study leave (ICSC 2022). Thus, a worker entitled to a four-week R&R cycle and who avails of his full annual leave entitlement and does not work during public holidays, is paid for 52 weeks' service while available for work 34 weeks (65%). This amounts to 170 working days in a year, equivalent of a three-day work week. The number of actual workdays is reduced further, if the worker avails of other special leave entitlements or falls ill – as mentioned earlier, a study reported an annual average of 26 sick days per person (UN 2018c) – or takes training or travel days during work time. In the context of examining work(er) effectiveness, it may be reasonable to posit that while time spent at work does not necessarily correlate with the impact of that work, being off work probably does.

One explanation to the seeming disinterest in the topic of mobility and rotation, supported by several informants' comments, could be that rotation and R&Rs are simply necessities for one's health, motivation, and subsequently, for the ability to work effectively. In Soohee's words, hardship is "bad for your health, you can become a little bit strange". This notion of detrimental effects of hardship and decreasing performance over time has been reported also in other sources. Alexander (2013:251) writes about beginning to "lose it" and becoming "unhinged", while Cain, Postlewait, and Thomson (2004:193) find that "no matter how good your intentions, eventually you want to kill someone yourself". It has also been found that long-serving personnel in the field may be more prone to complacency and underperformance (UN 2021b). What rotation may or may not do to the team, office, and organisation may be seen as a moot point; it is what it is, an avoidable necessity, another aspect of radical acceptance. Another possible explanation could be habituation, that in a system with a rotating doors policy, workers have grown so used to lack of stability driven by staff changes that it is no longer registered as a concern. Furthermore, as rotation and R&R regimes are part of UN policy and practice, one could assume that the burden of caring and managing any disruptive effects lies with the system, not with the individuals who merely follow the policy.

None of the informants mentioned tensions between Support Services and Programmes. There is no indication or admission that being part of Support Services workforce, likened to backstage (not on-stage) actors, would lead to feeling of less mattering. Although not all informants "got their boots dirty" – some preoccupied themselves with getting boots for others – the work seemed meaningful still. "Doing" did not need to take place in the frontlines; doing could take place also at the desk of a field or country office. Support Services were seen as critical enabling functions with the immediate beneficiaries being often one's own colleagues.

While the UN's effectiveness reportedly depends on "reaping the gains in efficiency and productivity that come from diversity and gender parity" (UN 2019a:4), when discussing diversity – and notwithstanding upholding the UN values including plurality and equality – the informants' focus primarily revolves around the challenges it presents in the context of work effectiveness, including what seems a forceful, at times ill-informed pursuit of gender parity in recruitment. However, the notion that the "often divided loyalties within international civil service create a problem" (Ogwezzy 2016:14-15) did not emerge at all – in fact, the informants tended to not accentuate their nationalities but rather the type of work they were doing or had done. The issue of loyalties was brought up only in connection with local recruits. It could be, of course, that in general, an informant might be reluctant to disclose ethical wrongdoing or avoid discussing aspects that could be construed as weaknesses concerning self. One distinct aspect that might fall into this category is the topic of alcohol consumption and risk behaviours in general in stressful contexts – a topic briefly mentioned only by one informant – although according to the UN, "the longer people work for the United Nations, the more likely they are to experience negative mental health outcomes" that also involves "hazardous drinking" (UN 2024a:10). Risk behaviours, including drinking are broadly acknowledged as common issues in aid work (Strohmeier, Scholte, and Ager 2018; Surya et al. 2017; Jachens, Houdmont, and Thomas 2016; Roth 2015b).

Notably absent from the narratives were idealised statements. Only informant, having shifted from the private sector, mentioned world peace, but even that was to say that world peace was not the reason for joining the system. Also, no references were made to the Busan Principles or the SDGs. However, the notions embedded in these internationally acknowledged principles, such as collaboration, results focus, accountability, sustainability of action, and context-sensitivity, were woven into the discussions, with the emphasis being on operationalising them. In general, while the mandates and interest of the organisation were often mentioned, there was an absence of lofty soundbites and cliches resembling idealism or benevolence. This reflected, perhaps, the down-to-earth nature of work out in the field: success is in "small bits", with professional experiences shaping the effort and tempering idealism – these informants too may have "buried their "youthful illusions" but are still "gonna try to get something right" (Cain, Postlewhite, and Thomson 2004:191, 254).

Finally, that several informants had left or were planning to leave the UN system caused me to reflect the cliché of aid workers needing to work themselves out of a job (e.g., Griffith 2023; Revell 2021; Alexander 2013:138; Dichter 2003:181) while perhaps not wanting to do so. Aid industry has been said to be defined by the imperative to survive (Dichter 2003:182), and the need to survive and protect one's own interests, it has been argued, applies to both organisations and individual workers alike (e.g., Brown 2016; Gutner and Thompson 2010; Martens 2005). The point has been raised about aid workers themselves doing well out of poverty or having become dependent on the aid system, to benefit their careers[87] and livelihoods (Kanbur 2022:212; Fechter 2014; Fee 2012:5; Kazado 2008:100). However, this issue too may benefit from a more nuanced discourse. Writing about UN staff specifically, Kazado (2008:103) points out the that "Third World countries are the first to defend the presence of the United Nations and development workers in their countries", given that the UN workers spend "substantial portions of their hefty salaries" locally, benefiting the economy. "Our goal should not be 'working ourselves out of a job'," writes Kumar (2019:186), as it is "the vision of the miser, not the true altruist." He finds this idea ahistorical, disingenuous, as if global development work could have a fixed end. "We should be laser-focused … and do whatever it takes to get there, including expanding our 'business' and creating more 'jobs', if that's what it takes". Observing that none of the informants talked about even wanting to work oneself out of the job, towards the end of the interview phase, I asked three informants about it. The first one did not even understand what "needing to work oneself out of a job" meant. The second one, while agreeing in principle, questioned what it would mean in practice. "When does it end? When is the work done? I mean, there is work to be done even in developed countries." The response from the third informant echoed the same sentiment: "Whoever is saying that has very little understanding of what's going on in the field; it seems endless."

87 The far-reaching effects of self-interest emerge poignantly in Autesserre's (2010:216) research on the UN Mission in the DRC: the UN internal changes required to implement the policy of micro-level peacebuilding failed to materialise, as it was seen by staff as a threat – it would have required extensive training or for them to admit their expertise was insufficient, and that new hires would eventually replace them.

7 Emergent Grounded Theory

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between the four conceptual categories, followed by the presentation of the constructed grounded theory that elucidates how international professionals navigate the pressures for effectiveness when working within international organisations in the contexts of internal and external flux.

7.1 Relationships Between Conceptual Categories

The four conceptual categories – the want, radical acceptance, sense of agency, and doing the bureaucratic hustle – are interpreted to be interrelated elements forming a dynamic relationship, comprising cognitive and emotive aspects, i.e., ways of feeling and thinking, as well as behavioural aspects, i.e., an outward expression or enactment of cognitive and emotive processes. The cognitive and emotive aspects include the first three conceptual categories, i.e., the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency, while the behavioural aspect concerns the act of bureaucratic hustle. The connections between these conceptual categories are "earned through emergence and not forced upon the data through deductive logic" (Glaser and Holton 2023).

As regards the cognitive and emotive aspects, the interview data show that radical acceptance and sense of agency are intertwined with the want (Figure 26). Radical acceptance requires not only passive acknowledgment but also actively navigating the political, messy global bureaucracy where work may mean risk for life and where one's effort may not be formally recognised. Thus, the worker needs to be adequately motivated to work towards the mandated goals. However, this motivation, the want, is not in endless supply but has to be replenished. This data shows pride and joy of small achievements. Thus, there is a feedback loop between the sense of agency and the want, with good outcomes potentially strengthening the want, including its enabling power. Conversely, failures may either weaken the want or the belief in self or lead to more resolve and facilitate learning. Similarly, a sense of agency and self-efficacy beliefs may mean little without the want as the primus motor propelling one to actually apply one's talents for the service of the organisation. In summary, in the constructed framework, the want functions as the keystone: without the want, radical acceptance is unlikely and the sense of agency unlikely to be harnessed optimally.

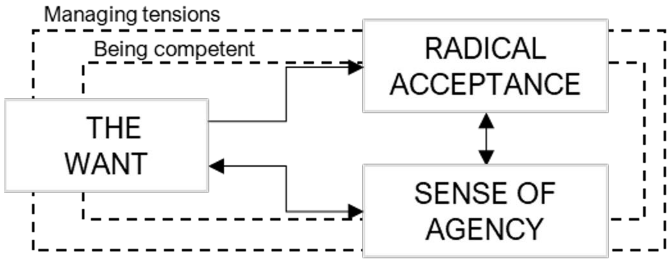

Figure 26. The interrelatedness of the conceptual categories

There is an interaction between radical acceptance and sense of agency as well. Radical acceptance means to sometimes accept the role of a spectator or an observer, not always that of a leader or even an actor. Sense of agency, in turn, means a non-acceptance of making the spectator role a permanent one. Powered by the want, an awareness of what is within and beyond the circles of control and influence enables directing energies towards actions deemed value adding, including choosing courses of action that drain least resources. In some instances, this may mean organised hypocrisy. Thus, even in a case of an overwhelming bureaucracy, radical acceptance can be, paradoxically, a means to less overwhelm and more clarity about one's sense of agency. The outcomes of the actions taken can strengthen or weaken the sense of agency but also enable updating one's understanding of the as-is and the circles of control and influence, generating more information for better decision making.

Two cross-cutting attributes, "managing tensions" and "being competent", run through the three conceptual categories. Tensions and radical acceptance are interrelated in that, the worker may need to acknowledge that tensions, even paradoxes, are an inherent part of UN work. The want and sense of agency are interrelated with tensions in that an individual chooses to pursue the work regardless of such tensions because he believes it matters and that he has the ability to work on them or despite of them. Competence is related to the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency in that knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences are involved in the decision-making processes regarding what should and should not be accepted and why, and one must be both motivated and capable to obtain knowledge; then have the ability to do something with it. Such knowledge can be related to e.g., organisational culture, rules, processes, structures, and networks, including an understanding of how the system (or a specific UN entity) operates in practice. The want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency appear to function as antecedents for the fourth conceptual category of doing the bureaucratic hustle. These four elements are interacting as an integrated whole, with the notions of competence and tensions as cross-cutting themes. Without the want, one is unlikely to take action (hustle) or the kind of action that is effective or benefits the organisation. Without acknowledging one's operational realities, fostering self-belief, and possessing the necessary capabilities, the quest for effectiveness is likely to be an elusive one.

In reflecting these categories and the cross-cutting attributes in the broader VUCA context, one could hypothesise that the guiding power of the want may serve as a proverbial anchor for a degree of grounding or stability in an otherwise dynamic context. However, bureaucratic conditions and work architecture that necessitate for the individual worker to be increasingly self-reliant to be effective may not be conducive to advance integration or "shared agendas" such as enhanced harmonisation and collaboration between stakeholders within the aid community or within the UN system. Knowing how the system works may have both benefits and disadvantages for effectiveness: on one hand, knowledge of the system may enable a quicker means of winnowing out "non-starter" ideas or shaping fit-for-purpose tactics; on the other hand, habituation and bureaucratic fatigue may cause one to disregard even ideas that could have a chance to succeed.

7.2 The Grounded Theory of Savvy Bureaucracy

In the constructivist grounded theory approach, the resulting theory is an interpretation and depends on the researcher's view; "it does not and cannot stand outside of it" (Charmaz 2014:239). In this section I present the "interpretive rendering of the world" (Charmaz 2014:339) that I have studied, in the form of the constructed grounded theory of *savvy bureaucracy* (Figure 27). The theory of savvy bureaucracy comprises cognitive and emotive aspects, i.e., ways of feeling and thinking, as well as behavioural aspects, i.e., an outward expression or enactment of cognitive and emotive processes. The cognitive and emotive aspects include the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency; the behavioural aspect concerns the act of bureaucratic hustle. The former three categories function as antecedents, conceivably even preconditions, for the latter, fourth category; the elements are interacting as an integrated whole, with the notions of "being competent" and "managing tensions" emerging as cross-cutting themes.

The theory of savvy bureaucracy can be summarised as follows:

The path to the realm of savvy bureaucracy leads through the gate of radical acceptance and sense of agency, held together by the keystone of the want. In the realm of savvy bureaucracy, entrepreneurially minded bureaucrats hustle to matter and add value. They do so by harnessing their competencies and by embracing and managing tensions. This necessitates them to be agile and adapting, and to reinforce or break boundaries, which may, in turn, necessitate them to participate in organised hypocrisy.

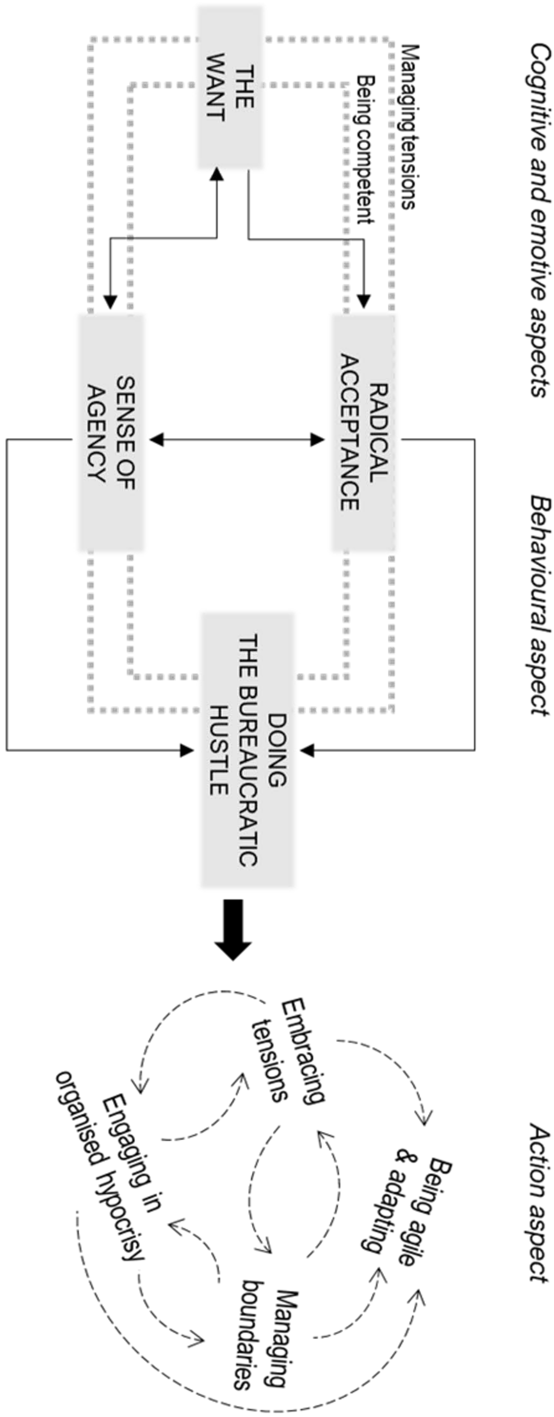

Figure 27. The grounded theory of savvy bureaucracy

In the context of this study, terms such as effectiveness, fit-for-job, hustle, and savviness have been used to denote efforts geared towards supporting the achievement of the organisational mandate. That is, the focus of the presented theory is the organisational interest rather than efforts to advance an individual's personal agenda. However, given the many references in the various data, including the empirical material, to (other staff members') weak performance and self-interest, I am compelled to discuss briefly a cognitive exercise, whereby one views even the latter as a form of savvy bureaucracy. A bureaucrat could be savvy in economising his effort, whereby he could, for example, avoid making decisions and taking initiative, also refraining from rocking the boat or taking career risks in general, all within the red lines of the rules and regulations, while generating income and other benefits (e.g., residency permits, education grants, and diplomatic status). One could also argue that a bureaucrat who is compliant this way while also politically correct in his actions – even when that means compromising one's own standards and values – could potentially be considered, in a political organisation, effective and good fit for the job. One could further suggest that this is the case especially if he is not an ideal fit from the diversity perspective, i.e., he has to compensate with his behaviour for falling short on other desirable criteria. Considering that the bureaucrats in both scenarios, if in the same duty station and on the same level and grade, are remunerated equally – i.e., it is not pay-for-performance regime but rather one of pay-even-for-non-performance – one could ask which bureaucrat is the truly savvy one. The answer depends on whose effectiveness or the effectiveness of what is of interest. Should one wish to, for the sake of an argument, extend the proposed theory of savvy bureaucracy to the dark side of bureaucratic hustle, the preconditions for it could be suggested as follows: instead of the want there is the need; instead of radical acceptance there is radical submission; and instead of sense of agency or self-efficacy there is self-defence.

Also, developing this thinking even further into the underbelly of hustling, one could have the want and the capability to hustle but not to benefit the organisation: the objective could be the advancement of personal agendas or even intentional deceit, harm, or exploitation – in which case "hustling" could be characterised as a kind of cunning or shrewdness, with the sense of agency denoting a belief in one's ability to "pull off the con". The informants' accounts do make references to other staff in the UN system who might, in fact, be engaging in this type of hustle. The cited examples of finding safe spaces to sleep at work, playing the gender or religious card to gain concessions, coaching a colleague in how to get away with poor performance, and tending to work by shredding it could fall into this category.

This study does not suggest that the UN system would be or would aspire to become an entrepreneurially oriented bureaucracy; this is not a theory for a savvy bureaucratic institution or a system. Rather, entrepreneurial or savvy bureaucracy is a realm without coordinates, a way of working effectively, for some individuals, at some points in time. Furthermore, this study does not suggest that all UN field workers (or aid workers in general) operate this way or that they would be doing so all the time; these are not findings generalisable to broader populations. As per grounded theory canon, the constructed theory is "delimited to specific aspects of social phenomena" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2011:155) and a theoretical account of "relatively small segments of reality" with the process attempting "to distil out the essence of these segments, and in doing so creates a theory that is rich in terms of the depth of its content, but not broad" (Miner 2005:15). This study argues that, with certain pre-conditions, as elucidated through the conceptual categories of the want, radical acceptance, and sense of agency, even individuals employed within large, international bureaucratic organisations may, in conditions of flux and uncertainty, engage in savvy bureaucracy and bureaucratic hustle – because they feel and know that their actions, even the small ones, matter.

7.3 Effectiveness Revisited

The through-line of this thesis concerns worker effectiveness. However, as the presented theory of savvy bureaucracy does not explicitly feature the term "effectiveness", it is prudent to address this.

That many informants do more than they need to by UN standards, that they do things the UN system tells them not to do, and that they tend to talk about being useful rather than performing well pointed me to examining closer the notion of performance. Performance is widely accepted to mean the action or behaviour of an individual, rather than the determinants or the outcomes of that behaviour (Campbell and Wiernik 2015), and as such, it is distinct from effectiveness: well-functioning internal processes do not necessarily imply that an entity will fulfil its goals (Gutner and Thomspon 2010). Similarly, while the informants' efforts may have helped some of them advance in their careers, for others it has had the opposite effect. The choice to be made between initiative and passivity within the UN also emerges in Soussan (2008:99) recalling how he "was slowly beginning to understand the stakes involved in deciding whether I should follow my conscience or choose the easier safer route of bureaucratic discipline and inertia".

In the proposed theory, the quest for effectiveness (and for mattering) is the catalyst for the bureaucratic hustle. While Appendix 3 elucidates how the core ideas embedded in the formal effectiveness agenda, i.e., the Busan principles, could be seen to align with the UN's internal effectiveness agenda, i.e., the five strategies for enhanced effectiveness, I now discuss how the informants' thinking around effectiveness at work appears to compare to the approaches adopted by the UN system. The key elements arising in this connection are summarised in Figure 28.

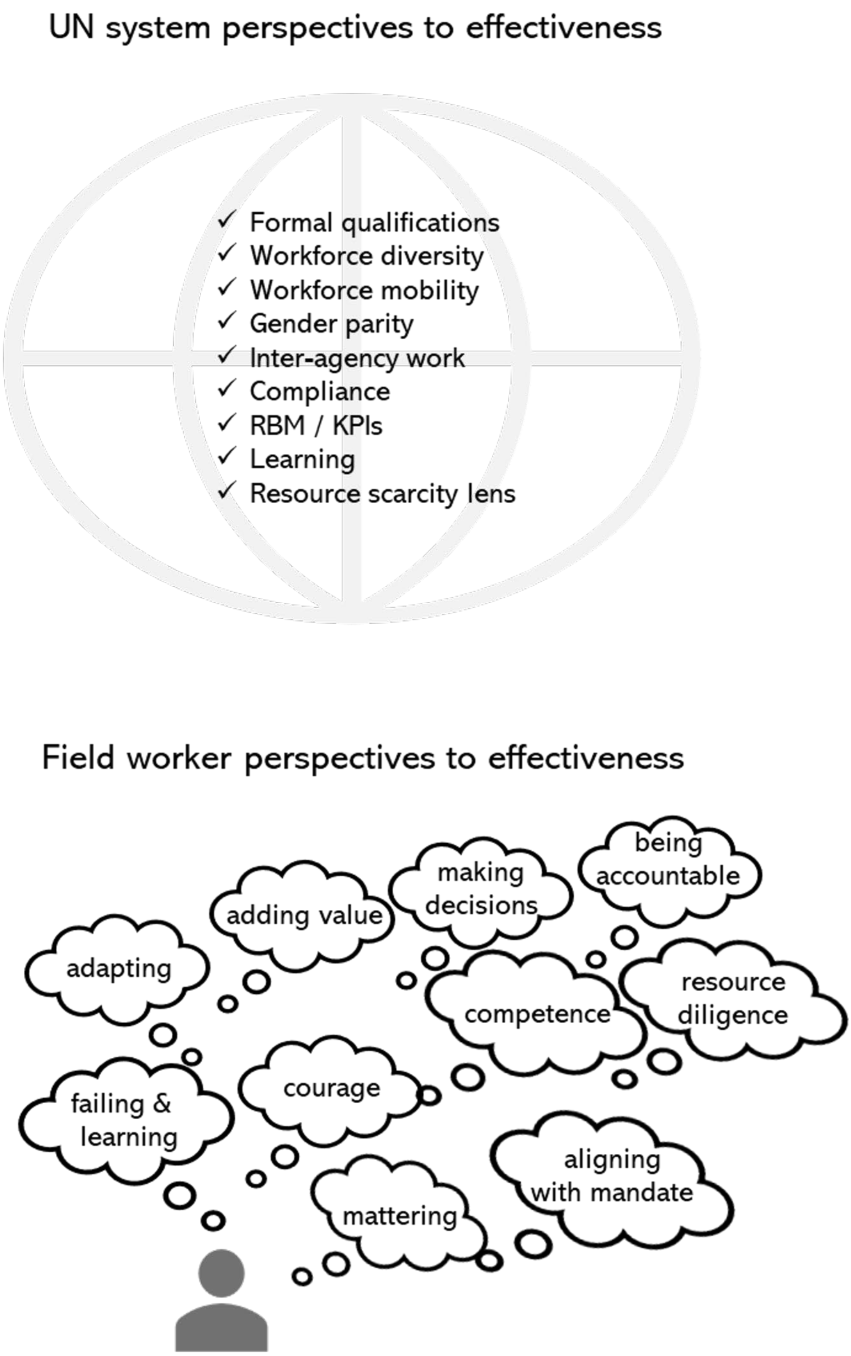

Figure 28. Comparing perspectives to effectiveness: UN system vs. field worker (own compilation)

On the left, the previously discussed strategies deemed essential for enhanced effectiveness from the UN system standpoint are highlighted, on the right, the preoccupations and priorities of the informants are presented. It should be noted that the idealised picture seeks to draw attention to both the similarities and the differences in the emphasis and priorities (or preoccupations), not to claim that the absence of a term on either side would imply a lack of interest in the topic in the effectiveness thinking. While there are some similarities between the UN system approaches and the informants' thinking around effectiveness, such as a mandate-focus, they do differ in many aspects. In terms of right fit for the job, the UN system requires higher level academic qualifications for all Professional-level positions, however, the pivotal role of such qualifications for work effectiveness is downplayed by the field workers, with emphasis being on fit-for-purpose qualifications and role-appropriate competences that may or may not involve academic degrees. Workforce diversity and gender parity, seen as key enablers for effectiveness by the UN system, are discussed by the informants mostly from the practical and fairness perspectives, with the focus being on the challenges, not the benefits, these pose to effective operations. Workforce mobility does not feature in the informants' effectiveness thinking, while an open discussion about failure as an enabler for learning does not feature in the UN discourse[88]. It has been said that failure has long remained a taboo in development (Langer et al. 2015), and that learning, if linked to failure, could be weaponised by aid opponents (Gulrajani 2023). Inter-agency work emphasised for effectiveness by the UN system features in the informants' views not as a panacea, but both as an impediment and an enabler for effectiveness. While the informants understand the importance of compliance with UN rules and regulations – an aspect emphasised in the UN system – the criticality of adaptation, coupled with courage to deviate from the set processes and make decisions, dominate their views. Similarly, the informants' emphasis on adaptation, decision making, mattering, and adding value appear more prominently than do results-based management or KPIs, for example. As regards resources, the scarcity mindset and polemic in the UN system does not feature in the informants' preoccupations – rather, how one can better use the already existing resources does. In terms of accountability, while the UN policies frequently refer to accountability, the understanding here is that this stance is more about compliance with the policies and rules, rather than encouragement for decision making and standing accountable even in situations of uncertainty in which guidance may not exist. The informants, in turn highlight a willingness to be held to account as a critical quality, not the least in ambiguous situations where getting work done necessitates non-compliance and therefore, possibly even professional risk-taking.

88 In discussing UN culture, Clarke (2013) calls for better incentives for embracing lessons of failure.

In writing about aid work, Weiss (2013b) posits that "responding effectively requires a heightened degree of knowledge and professionalism", and that while "responding from the heart" may be a humanitarian trademark, effectiveness requires "an equal dose of well-informed tough-mindedness". The essence underpinning all informants' accounts, consistently, is the compelling need to feel useful and to have the space to flex their professional muscles. The workers are compassionate professionals seeking mattering, not "humanitarians" or "altruists" or "aid workers" saving the world – effectiveness is expected, charitability is optional. This resembles what Ege (2020:586) refers to as "responsible behaviour" within international bureaucracies – as opposed to pathological, obedient, or slacking behaviour – whereby the action taken by the bureaucrat is intrinsically motivated by a sense of professionalism and a public service ethos, conforming to a logic of appropriateness and is intended to advance the collectively agreed-on mandate.

It has been said that "those tolerant of ambiguity do not believe in a black and white image of human affairs" (Pehar 2001:196). There is an absence of rigid dualism in the informants' stance to work effectiveness. As I reflected on the interviewed field workers' "effectiveness agenda" – a construct in my mind only – by probing into their statements reflecting or related to "doing" the work, a picture of a sliding scale of effectiveness began to emerge. Taking cues from the informants' accounts, effectiveness could be depicted as a continuum. Although this continuum is shown, in the idealised Figure 29 as a staircase, it is essentially a dynamic, sliding scale without clear boundaries or criteria.

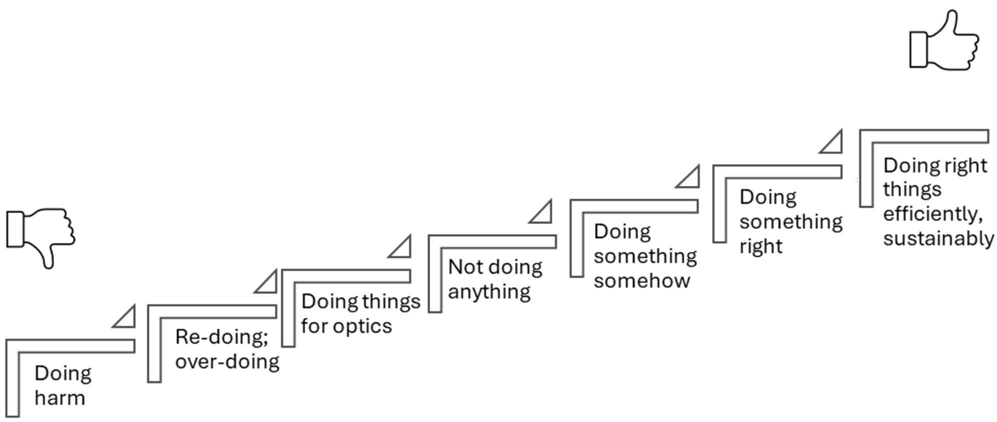

Figure 29. Effectiveness continuum (own compilation)

Effective, efficient and sustainable action is at the upper end of the continuum. Doing harm is at the lower end, with a mechanical application of gender parity policies in recruitment as an example of this. In between these two extremes on this sliding scale, there is “doing the right things” (but not necessarily doing them efficiently or sustainably), “doing something right” (e.g., choosing to lead specific inter-agency activities deemed to add value), “doing something, somehow” (knowingly implementing a compromised solution), “not doing anything” (e.g., avoiding making decisions), “doing things for optics” (e.g., completing staff performance reviews), and “re-doing” or “over-doing” (e.g., filling risk matrices). These modes of action are presented as a hierarchy only for illustrative purposes, as their effects can be situation dependent. For example, not doing anything may at times be less harmful than doing things for optics or doing something, somehow, as inaction requires no resources while doing things for optics consumes resources but may yield no results, constituting waste. In this context, effectiveness is seen as an organisational benefit, not as an individual’s personal benefit. While the former may go in tandem with the latter, it is not necessarily the case. For example, doing things for optics might benefit a worker’s visibility and career advancement but may do little for the organisation. While the achievement of – or ending up with – any of these different effectiveness outcomes can result from ignorance or serendipity (i.e., it is “a happening”) and can be an accumulation of (in)actions of many, the empirical data suggests that the pursuit of effectiveness is also very much a choice of an individual, an issue of volition.

Thinking about effectiveness in this fashion, more conditionally, while embracing complexity and nuance and acknowledging that a variety of factors can alter the outcomes of aid interventions, is a departure from the simpler narratives that reinforce the effectiveness-ineffectiveness binary. The polarised and non-nuanced public policy debate between aid proponents and those who find aid a waste of money is found to be problematic not only to garner support for more traditional aid but also to address the grand problems (Glennie and Sumner 2016:5). However, aid effectiveness research increasingly recognises the complex interplay of a mix of dynamic variables – that “trying to directly relate donor inputs and development outcomes, as through some kind of black box, will most often lead nowhere” (Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007:317) – aid can contribute to development, peace, and human rights but it is not the determinant for their achievement (Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012:4). Recalling the divergent motivations of aid sector actors, the ambiguity of the term effectiveness and the related measurement challenges, as well as the continuously expanding material available on aid and development issues, it is reasonable to believe that unless crafted to function only as populist soundbites, oversimplified narratives about aid effectiveness or impact are less and less persuasive. As regards the informants in this study, it is my interpretation that one’s effectiveness as an aid worker or as a staff member in the UN system hinges not so much on the ambition to strive for the world peace but on finding one’s own peace with and within the complex work that, somehow, contributes to world peace.

8 Conclusions

This Chapter outlines the salient points of this research and presents its theoretical and managerial implications, followed by an evaluation of the study and a presentation of the study limitations. Suggested topics for future research are presented at the end of the Chapter.

8.1 Salient Points

Examining the experiences of the UN field practitioners, this study has explored how international professionals navigate the pressures for enhanced effectiveness in international organisations in the contexts of internal and external flux. This main question was probed with the help of the following guiding questions:

1. How does the aid effectiveness agenda shape the professional operating context of international UN field workers?
2. How do the international field workers in the UN system navigate the operational realities to fulfil the UN mandate?

As a place of work, the UN system appears as both an ordinary one but also unlike any other. On one hand, the empirical data suggests it is no different from work environments where staff and strategies compete, collaborate, succeed, and fail, on the other, the UN system is seen as a "different world" and "not the regular world". From the interviews emerge a picture of a UN system which is, despite its good intentions and efforts, contributing to its own ineffectiveness with its cumbersome processes and fragmented structures, while also serving as a refuge for some highly paid and highly ineffective workers.

The operating context of a UN field worker is characterised by nested pressures for enhanced effectiveness on several levels. On the macro-level, the worker's context is influenced by the aid sector dynamics and the complexities inherent in the UN system. Not only does the UN system operate in a world of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity but it is also faced with the challenge of tensions between fulfilling the UN mandate, navigating the external expectations, and managing the UN internal work realities. This poses a challenge for effectiveness and also necessitates for the UN system to engage in organised hypocrisy, which can, paradoxically, enable it to survive and continue to function but can also lead to more tensions and ineffectiveness. The international commitments and organisational strategies for enhanced effectiveness such as the Busan Principles, the UN strategies for enhanced staff mobility, geographical representation, and gender parity, as well as the UN business operations reform are seeking to enhance effectiveness. On the micro-level, the field worker's immediate operating context is shaped by other, partially overlapping contexts or "cultures", such as that of the host country, the employing UN entity and the office of the duty station, as well as the job function and the worker's personal context. Embedded in these layers are forces that help or hinder work effectiveness, and the omnipresent tensions can mean a dynamic to be managed or a problem to be solved.

Viewing the UN strategies for enhanced effectiveness from the informant perspective, the empirical data suggests that the UN's increased efforts for staff mobility do not greatly appear to affect the field workers as they have either chosen to be mobile, are already part of managed mobility regimes, or they are otherwise used to the notion of rotating staff and the changes it encompasses. However, the push towards more managed collaboration between the UN agencies facilitated e.g., by the Business Operations Strategy and the efforts towards gender parity and enhanced geographical representation appear to be shaping work, with the effect not having been entirely positive. While individual workers are taking initiative to collaborate outside the formalised inter-agency or UN Country Team fora, and while the value of some of this work is recognised, the return on effort derived from the more formalised inter-agency interaction is perceived to be limited. As regards gender parity strategy, while the informants support its aims, the negative experiences in connection with the implementation of the strategy overshadow the positive, especially in recruitment. Regardless of what the strategy may state and intend, gender is often perceived to take precedence over merit and right-fit for a job. This, in turn, has negative flow-on effects on the other workers. As regards enhancing the national-culturally linked diversity through better geographical representation, it is the downsides, not the upsides, of workforce diversity on work effectiveness that tend to dominate the narratives, given that cultural diversity permeates everyday work, manifesting e.g., through divergent stances to planning, hierarchy, risk taking, or ethics, subsequently posing managerial challenges. As such corporate strategies – and related politics – are weaved into the operational field realities regardless and avoidance is not an option, this results, at times, in the systematic appearance of support and engagement without actual commitment. This is an example of the kind of organised hypocrisy that even an individual worker may engage in.

The concept of organised hypocrisy is an element embedded in the theory constructed in this study, i.e., the grounded theory of savvy bureaucracy. It is an element of “hustling by entrepreneurially minded bureaucrats”, denoting what appears to be entrepreneurially minded action taken by UN bureaucrats navigating in the conditions of flux. Apart from engaging in organised hypocrisy, being an entrepreneurially minded bureaucrat entails managing boundaries; being agile and adapting; and embracing tensions. In managing boundaries, the worker may draw or enforce firm boundaries, while treating other boundaries as porous. Agility is the ability to respond swiftly and effectively to unexpected circumstances, while adaptability requires an awareness of the evolving context and the flexibility to adjust accordingly. Embracing tensions is likened with the concept of negative capability, the capacity to live with and to tolerate ambiguity and paradox. Savvy bureaucracy, i.e., doing the bureaucratic hustle, is powered by the want, facilitated by radical acceptance, and enabled by sense of agency – interrelated elements that form a dynamic relationship. The want is about the drive to operate, radical acceptance about acknowledging the realities of the world one operates in, and sense of agency relates to one’s view of self in that world, including beliefs about one’s ability for control and influence.

There is a departure from the typical outcome-impact perspective and from the “yes-no” binary as regards effectiveness. The concept of effectiveness is broadened, with the accounts reflecting a more nuanced notion of mattering and adding value. Micro-actions of an individual appear to matter even in the context of tackling grand problems, making a difference is not just wishful thinking. However, the voices in this study do seem to emanate from a parallel reality to that of policy-making and scholarly work on aid effectiveness. On this practical plane, the notions of SDGs and Busan Principles do not appear in the vernacular of workers firmly rooted in the real, at times seemingly topsy-turvy world, where caring can be an issue, bothering a burden, hardship a relief, and competence a performance problem; a world where results-focus and pressure to demonstrate performance can become the very causes of ineffectiveness. In this world with the loftiest of ideals, one should be extremely grounded; and in the midst of tensions and paradoxes, one should try not to eliminate them but to ease into them. Regardless, in the world and system set up for world politics and diplomacy, even one, operating at the grassroots level, can feel a sense of agency, act on it, and see results; one has the power to wield influence. For that, notwithstanding the organisational ambitions of world peace and zero hunger, no wave-making is required – ripples too will do.

8.2 Research Implications

8.2.1 Theoretical Implications

As discussed in Chapter 1, this study on individual actors working in an international organisation has touchpoints to international relations and political sciences, public sector management and administrative science, development economics, and cultural studies and psychology, as well as international business. While the presented grounded theory is not intended to be generalised over other populations or contexts, the theoretical contributions of this study are multifaceted.

For the literature concerning international relations and political sciences, this study contributes with new knowledge of the internal workings of the UN system. It offers a more multi-dimensional, people-centred rendering of the UN system – one typically presented as a flat, one-page organigram – whose locus of interest has predominantly concerned matters of the high-level political arena or its external activities that garner media attention. Breathing life into the portrait of the 80-year-old world body, this inquiry curates voices from the field, thus illuminating the work conducted by its civil servants in fragile settings – a "shadow workforce" of sorts, hustling behind the scenes to add value. This research is a step, even if a small one, towards unveiling this largely invisible element, the individual worker in the aid space, which is "like the air we breathe, so universal that we rarely notice it" (Chambers 2005:195). The study provides encouraging evidence of individuals' determination and ability to navigate professional challenges and feel a sense of agency and mattering, even in the largest of bureaucracies, in the settings of internal and external flux. It is further suggested that the concept of organised hypocrisy, to date studied only on the level of organisational behaviour, especially in international and political organisations that face conflicting institutional and technical environments (Lipson 2007; Brunsson 1993a), could be applied to individual actors, too, in settings where they have a degree of autonomy to choose actions. This is to say that, rather than merely participating in organised hypocrisy because it is an organisational level tactic, individuals may choose to adopt similar approaches in their day-to-day activities, knowingly, perhaps even systematically, responding to situations with symbolic action. Whether this form of individual level action would qualify as "organised" is, in light of extant definitions for the term, of course, open for discussion.

The introduction and conceptualisation of the UN system as an entanglement of tensions, coupled with the analysis about the UN system strategies for enhanced effectiveness, widens the oft-siloed perspectives to the highly multifaceted challenge of effectiveness the UN system is facing – a conundrum that gives rise to tensions between good intentions as multiple stakeholders are to be placated, and divergent aspirations are to be met. The study also strengthens the extant understanding of tensions being viewed as problems to be solved in some cases and as issues to be managed in others, while also complementing it by linking the notion of negative capability (see e.g., Simpson, French, and Harvey 2002) to this scenario. In light of the above, the study also offers a contribution to the literature about tensions, including paradoxes, in the context of organisational behaviour.

With the introduction of the grounded theory of savvy bureaucracy, the study also expands the understanding of entrepreneurial bureaucrats to date examined e.g., by Forouharfar (2023), Ohemeng (2018), and Battilana (2006), contributing to literature within public sector management and administrative science by suggesting enabling conditions for an individual to be characterised as an entrepreneurial bureaucrat in the context of an international organisation. In addition, the study suggests the types of actions an entrepreneurial bureaucrat may engage in when navigating the day-to-day challenges. The study further expands theorising around "hustle" at work, in this case within an international bureaucracy.

For development economics and the aid effectiveness discourse, the study provides qualitative inputs that underscore the centrality of individuals and the power of their choices – rather than the role of organisational strategies, compliance mechanisms, or systems – in generating results. In this connection, the study offers an alternative perspective to effectiveness, one seen as a continuum, not as a dichotomous effective-ineffective concept. This study supports the notion of individuals mattering "for international secretariats and all human endeavours" (Weiss 2020:18), and that in development thinking, individuals' attitudes, behaviours, and actions play a pivotal role in driving change (Chambers-Pettit 2004:140), that success is not contingent on the organisational culture (DFID 2014), that the aid system is "not so much its entities, but its relationships" and that individuals mediate those relationships, and that good development is intricately linked with personal development (Scott-Villiers 2004:200).

Within international business discipline, this study is responding to a call to expand the analytical focus beyond MNEs to the actions of other societal actors (Alford, De Marchi, and Krishnan 2023:44), illuminating some of ways international organisations in the aid business may cope with "the new realities of sociopolitical and political uncertainty", conditions that Devinney et al. (2023:137) find important to understand even within international business. The study offers a view to the workings of the UN system that is a departure from the extant UN scholarship, thus further enhancing the understanding of the characteristics and types of international institutions, as called for, e.g., by Hartmann et al. (2022). Better awareness of the UN system characteristics and tensions – some of which paradoxical – can serve as an enabler for external parties, such as companies engaged as implementing partners or those intending to grow their business through UN supply contract opportunities, when they interact with the actors within the UN system. Furthermore, as regards issues concerning sustainability (e.g., corporate social responsibility and contributions to progressing the SDGs), better understanding of the UN system complexities and the inter-relatedness of the various actors in the aid sector can serve as an enabler for forging partnerships and shaping more meaningful strategies that transcend "greenwashing" and "bluewashing" (Lashitew 2021:185; Berliner and Prakash 2015).

Apart from illuminating the logics of individuals when it comes to motivation and performance, the study also provides insights to a highly relevant discussion relating to workforce diversity (see e.g., Ferdman 2017), relevant for any type of operation with an international dimension. Hopefully, not in an all-too-distant future, the lenses to aid and development effectiveness research could be reported to also include the individual level actors (Figure 30). After all, interventions are not undertaken or results produced by organisations (conceptual constructs) but individuals in them.

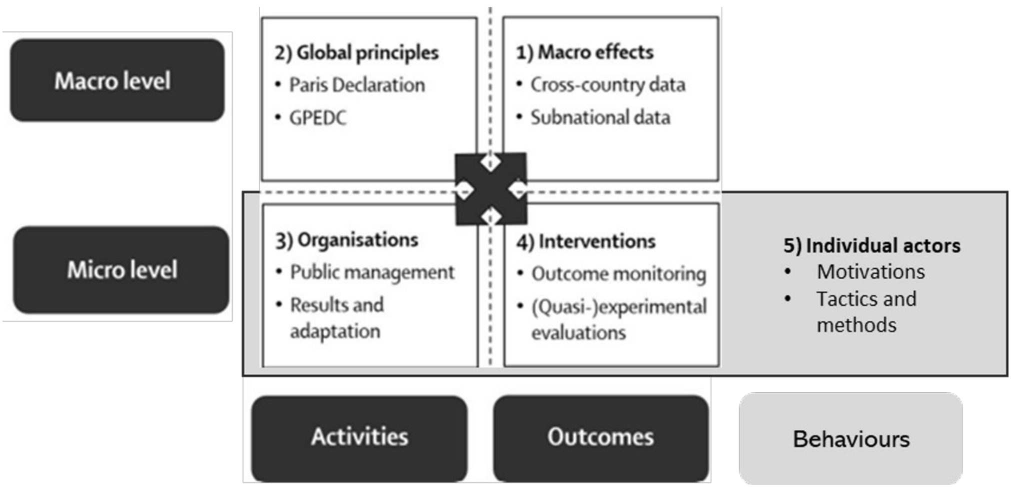

Figure 30. Widened lenses to aid effectiveness research in the near future? (adapted from Janus, Marschall, and Öhler 2020)

By focusing on the largely unexamined individual workers in the UN system and by beginning the journey of "finding out what we need to understand in order to begin to understand" (Baggini 2019:xix), I hope to have encouraged others to follow suit. Great value can be retrieved from such individual level research, as also evident from the managerial implications, discussed next.

8.2.2 Managerial Implications

Although the micro-level actions can collectively impact the macro-level goals, the pragmatic aspects of achieving efficiency and accountability within non-profit sector has received less attention (Burt 2012:327). This study has multiple implications. While these are presented primarily with the UN system in mind, a better understanding of how international expatriate workers perceive their work and environment and how they act under the pressures for effectiveness can be useful for any organisation that strives to better harness the power of individual actors for results. This can be of particular interest for organisations operating in contexts where command and control approach is neither possible nor desirable.

That an individual can feel powerful even in the large, bureaucratic organisations is a positive finding; that there are professionals who choose to hustle their way to results, navigating through the internal and external flux – at times against and despite the UN processes – is a reassuring notion. However, one can also argue that conditions that may necessitate for the individual worker to be increasingly autonomous and self-reliant may not be conducive to sense of inclusion or to advance enhanced alignment, harmonisation, and collaboration between the UN entities. The study also highlights the consequences of weak organisational systems. Systems may have been put in place to facilitate cohesion, compliance, and effectiveness but may, if weak, paradoxically do the opposite, as workers pursue individual workarounds. Thus, for managers, the power of an individual means both an opportunity to be harnessed and a risk to be managed.

The finding that the mindset matters so profoundly in work effectiveness may be viewed both in a positive and negative light. It is positive in that effectiveness may not be hinging solely on more millions to be retrieved from the taxpayers or other financing sources to sustain the operations. It is also positive in that a mindset is not inexorably tethered to a particular type of formal education or work function, nor is it tightly coupled with nationality, personal finances, employing entity, work location, or other similar factors differentiating workers. The disposition of an individual's mindset may be posited to be influenced by such factors; however, it is not under their full dominance. One has agency to shape one's own mindset. Managers could consider how they might leverage the soft power of their team "influencers" who have a mindset conducive for progress.

That the mindset matters so profoundly is a finding with potential negative implications in that more money, whether to the worker himself or to the employing entity, will not serve as the panacea to cure the ineffectiveness pathologies. It may be bad news in that more policies, processes, tools, systems, and training are not silver bullets to shaping the kind of mindset that is fit for purpose in dynamic settings where work takes place. Mindset is not a transferable skill, a process, set of rules, or even static state. You cannot see it, only the results of action tethered to it, and sometimes with significant delay. It may be bad news also from the recruitment perspective: while recruitment should be the ideal and primary point of filtering to eliminate poor fit for the field – in kaizen thinking, one should aspire to eliminate waste as early in the process as possible – the geo-political sensitivities around the fairer geographical distribution, emphasis on gender balance in the workforce, and the practical challenges of UN recruitment in general with applications en masse coupled with need for transparency, makes it a hard nut to crack. And who is to determine how the "right" mindset really looks like in varying contexts, be that context a country, UN agency, a particular UN office, or with a particular supervisor?

The finding that the informants discussed the downsides of diversity including related sensitivities in daily work suggests that while managing a diverse workforce may be at least as difficult as managing diversity statistics, it is critical for operational effectiveness. How that could be achieved in practice, especially in difficult operational settings where recruitment may not necessarily result in best fit and where leadership competencies too may be lacking, is an interesting conundrum. Given the dynamics on multiple levels, including the sensitivities related to diversity, perhaps here too, "hustling" is a part of the answer – including in managing tensions.

While the finding about tensions, even paradoxes, being omnipresent is not new per se, this study offers further insights on tensions experienced by individual level actors, including their effects, manifesting e.g., as sense of unfairness, stress, unease, or even resentment. Given that some of such tensions is inherent in aid work (or any work in similar settings) and cannot be treated as problems to be solved but dynamic to be managed, socialising staff with the notion of tensions and paradoxes at work – including being more open about the sensitive issues – might facilitate coping with such tensions and even turning them into opportunities.

Meanwhile, in order to enhance merit-based, transparent recruitment that meets the demands of the modern world while also pursuing workforce diversity in a constructive manner, in organisations like the UN, hiring managers could consider outsourcing the job posting and candidate shortlisting to professional recruitment organisations, as even suggested by some of the informants. This could ensure wide outreach and utilisation of networks to attract diverse talent and ensure merit-based vetting while reducing inappropriate internal interference.

The study may have implications also for the workforce currently outside the aid sector and those not yet in the workforce contemplating career choices and opportunities for meaningful contribution to society while securing one's financial future. The finding that making a difference in the aid sector or in the UN system does not necessarily require altruistic motives and can be both professionally and financially rewarding may encourage ambitious individuals to explore opportunities e.g., for engagement in innovation and solving grand problems even in the non-profit sphere. Although this perspective may be a departure from the typical recruitment narrative in the aid space, hiring managers could consider how this line of thinking could attract a broader candidate pool. Furthermore, the finding that there is a sharpened focus in diversity in recruitment may encourage more competent female professionals to explore opportunities to contribute in the non-profit sphere, including in typically male-dominated roles. Here too, hiring managers could consider how to incorporate this line of thinking into their recruitment efforts.

8.2.3 Policy Implications

The workers' emphasis on the criticality of competence and right fit for a job rather than formal academic qualifications and diversity markers may have implications for recruitment policy. Nothing in the empirical data suggests that an individual field worker's effectiveness would be linked to diversity markers such as nationality or gender. Furthermore, this data suggests that while appropriate qualifications for the work to be performed are necessary, tertiary education as a qualifying criterion for entry to UN civil service may have little bearing on the work to be performed in the field. This is specifically the case for the recruitment of civil servants and retention of talent in the UN system, which is already found to have challenges in this respect (Weiss 2010): employing staff on permanent contracts has decreased (Ege and Bauer 2017), while the use of non-staff personnel has increased (Terzi and Fall 2014), posing challenges to worker motivation but also to the ability of the UN entities to attract qualified talent on the labour market (Ege and Bauer a 2017). Performing consistently across different contexts is an essential characteristic of competence (Vitello, Greatorex, and Shaw 2021). While the recruitment process incorporates competency-based questions (UN 2015d), it may be challenging for the interview panel to gauge the extent to which candidates' responses are true or accurate reflections of their actual experiences or behaviours, or the extent to which such behaviours may be replicable or fit for work carried out in the field. This approach, coupled with the reported weaknesses in performance management practices (e.g., reluctance to address weak performance) and in staff training may render the UN system vulnerable in several ways: not only may it allow for choosing individuals who may not provide value for money for the operations, but they are also retained in the system while not being upskilled. Meanwhile, the burden on colleagues is increasing, including the sense of unfairness in a system that does not have a pay-for-performance regime. Prolonged and systemic tolerance for non-performance and incompetence, in a setting that is already suffering from loss of talent, can in no way serve the effectiveness agenda. Rather, it sends mixed messages and as such, may be a demotivating for the workforce.

Thus, decision makers may want to reflect on the appropriateness of current recruitment policies and criteria, e.g., as regards academic qualifications for international professionals, also carefully weighing the impact on the organisation's operational effectiveness of privileging other criteria, such as diversity markers, in the selection process. The future aid professional was said to require cognitive flexibility, continuous learning, facilitative behaviours, and informed judgment for effective work in unpredictable settings support transformation and change. Furthermore, it has been found that while the workers' skills for country-focused engagement have been honed over several decades, engaging in global challenges may require different skills, processes, and expertise (Calleja and Cichocka 2022). Localising work, for example, may require capacity development, a complex undertaking for which results-based management and other output-centered approaches may not fit (Brinkerhoff and Morgan 2010), and which, as Steele points out "is only achieved by people with capability to do capacity development – because not all those who go out can do capacity development" (P Steele, personal communications December 28, 2023). Questions have also risen about whether one should focus on regional and sector expertise, or on understanding cross-cutting global challenges and multidisciplinarity, how professionals would be trained, and in what types of organisations they would work (Janus, Klingebiel, and Paulo 2015).

The finding that a push for gender parity may result in a sense of unfairness due to perceived bias in recruitment towards gender and not merit may have implications for the broader equality and equity agenda and related policies across organisations. In the interviews, gender is the most frequently mentioned dimension of diversity, giving rise to several reflections that could be considered when well-meaning policies are drawn and strategies implemented. First, while target setting and making special efforts to appoint more females may enable reaching the kind of gender parity that can be quantified, does that result in a genuine gender equity and inclusion? Second, what might be the consequences of gender parity strategies for genuine respect for females as professionals and leaders? It has been found that female affirmative action hires are assessed as less competent than women not associated with affirmative action (Heilman, Block, and Stathatos 2017). Third, as regards the UN system context, might there be a risk that sharp focus on gender parity changes the "culture of mediocrity and sometimes even laziness" (UN 2021b:10) currently involving more male than female staff into a "culture of mediocrity and sometimes even laziness" consisting of equal numbers of males and females, rather than becoming a culture of excellence? Fourth, what might be the consequences for competent male workers of the UN gender parity strategies as regards career paths, especially for those from the over-represented countries, and subsequently, for the retention of talent? Also, policymakers may want to exercise caution when asserting targets for diversity markers such as gender parity and geographical distribution, especially if they apply, simultaneously, on multiple levels – e.g., for work teams, work functions, individual offices within an organisation, all offices on country and/or regional levels, and for the entire organisation – to avoid the risk of measure fixation, i.e., the pursuit of success as measured, not as intended (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan 2015:188). That well-intended, intense focus on gender parity and inclusion may have unintended effects on the sense of equity, respect, and fairness – and thus, for effectiveness – could be considered when approaches are designed to mainstream these aspects into organisations' operations and narratives.

The finding that financial benefits do, in part, compensate for perceived unfairness, leadership incompetence, and exposure to risks in fragile settings should be kept in mind when policies on staff incentives and benefits are discussed, especially if curtailing them is considered, for example, due to budget constraints. While (more) money does not guarantee results, it may be, for some, a reason to keep persisting with their work efforts. This is especially pertinent if the elements of risk, unfairness, and incompetence within the UN system cannot be effectively addressed through enhanced processes and practices. However, on the other hand, the study shows that relying on financial incentives in exchange for loyalty of competent professionals may not be a sustainable solution: competent individuals with professional ambitions need the space to add value in a setting that appreciates such competence which, as the study shows, can also be seen as a threat by an incompetent supervisor, with potentially deleterious effects on effectiveness and the worker. According to Ariely (2012) "ignoring the performance of people is almost as bad as shredding their efforts in front of their eyes". This may be also particularly pertinent point to reflect on with attracting and retaining young talent. It has been found that with other international organisations and NGOs offering competitive and attractive packages, the recruitment and retention of young professionals continues to be a challenge across the UN system (Posta and Biraud 2007). How managers manage and how performance is managed in general matters; the quest for enhanced UN system performance is inextricably linked to the performance of its workforce.

8.3 Evaluation of the Study

Literature related to aid work has been criticised for lack of rigour and a robust theoretical and methodological basis (Sumner and Tribe 2008:129). While this study has applied a recognised approach to qualitative inquiry to develop a substantive theory, there is no scholarly consensus over what "theory" is, even within grounded theory approach. The Glaserian, Straussian, Clarkeian, and Charmazian schools of grounded theory practice use the term "theory" differently: for Glaser a grounded theory is abstract, for Strauss it captures complexity, for Clarke it is about theorizing comparisons, and for Charmaz theorizing is an argument about the world (Apramian et al. 2017). Here, I offer an evaluation of the trustworthiness of the study that contains one kind of "interpretive rendering" (Charmaz 2014:339) of the world, conducted in line with the constructivist grounded theory paradigm.

Qualitative research should be evaluated in alignment with the philosophical and methodological choices made for the study (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:295) – "no inquirer … ought to go about the business of inquiry without being clear about just what paradigm informs and guides his or her approach" (Guba and Lincoln 1994:116). In constructionist qualitative research like this, the criteria developed to assess its trustworthiness – rather than reliability and validity – could be used, such as Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:296). The criteria of coherence, consistency, plausibility, and usefulness can also be applied in qualitative research, to accommodate for alignment with the relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, referring to the view of a world made of multiple realities and to an understanding of knowledge being created jointly by the researcher and the participant (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:294). Given that this study follows Charmazian constructivist grounded theory approach, for the sake of consistency, Charmaz' (2014) criteria for the quality of a grounded theory study – credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness – are adopted. However, as is evident from the discussion that follows, they substantially overlap with the criteria by Lincon and Guba.

8.3.1 Credibility

According to Charmaz (2014:337), credibility concerns the researcher's familiarity with the study context, data adequacy to support claims made, and the systematic analysis between categories and observations. It should be noted that, while Guba and Lincoln (1985:290; 296) refer to the "truth value" in discussing credibility, in the context of a naturalistic inquiry and in the absence of one objective reality, they too link it with the notion of adequacy, namely adequacy of the representation of such multiple realities. Within the Charmazian understanding of credibility are also embedded, in my interpretation, elements of confirmability and dependability: the need to establish strong links between the interpreted findings and the data so that they can be understood by readers, and that readers can observe the logical nature of the research process. Thus, transparency of the research process is of essence. Credibility can be enhanced through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Lincoln and Guba 1985:301). The study quality can also be inspected in light of the core criteria to which a grounded theory study must always adhere, namely avoidance of hypothesis testing style inquiry and remaining open to new findings; capturing and explaining context-related phenomena and processes and their effect on events, incidents, and behaviours; engaging with data through multiple iterations, including memoing and constant comparison; and application of theoretical sampling technique (Timonen, Foley, and Conlon 2018).

In light of my professional expertise and the preliminary review of relevant literature to establish foundational knowledge preceding the empirical data collection phase, I have developed a thorough comprehension of the study's contextual framework. My past, direct engagement with a culturally and professionally diverse workforce additionally fostered fluent communication with the informants. My choices during the inquiry have also been informed by mindfulness concerning the adequacy of empirical data and transparency of the analysis. As per the grounded theory approach, theoretical sampling progressively guides and shapes data collection, serving the emergent theory. While I was satisfied with the level of category saturation – data adequacy – after twelve informants, being new to grounded theory method, I opted for continuing and was able to identify two additional informants who were available on a relatively short notice, thus not delaying the process. Both interviews offered some additional nuances to the conceptual categories already identified, however, in my view, not to an extent to warrant proceeding with further interviews. While "too small a 'sample' or number of participants" (Clarke 2007:427) is a common criticism of grounded theory research, I have privileged thick data over big data – depth over breadth – balancing my objective of being able to immerse myself in the informant data with the aims of the study and its practical considerations, such as time. The stance to interviewing was guided by the notion of quality, i.e., the value-add of the interviews, before quantity – more interviews or informants does not automatically mean better data. Furthermore, the chosen topic, although little researched, is not controversial nor are the findings highly provocative, necessitating a large group of informants (Charmaz (2014:108). Relying on the snowball method as a means for informant recruitment after the purposeful sampling also proved much more tedious than I had anticipated. Interviews with seven identified candidates did not eventuate, necessitating further recruitment effort. Moreover, in addition to the interviews, this study relies on several other data sources.

I have adhered to the core criteria of a grounded theory study. I have also aimed to for transparency in explaining the analytical processes and the logic I have applied to arrive at my conclusions and interpretations, mindful of the controversy around the grounded theory method – it has even been characterised as "an epistemological fairytale" (Wacquant 2002:1481). For example, as the grounded theory approach has been criticised for its emphasis on identifying codes without explaining their inter-connectedness and their role in the constructed theory (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2011:167-168) – Clarke (2007:427) refers to the greatest problem being "analysis lite" – I have diligently endeavoured to elucidate the conceptual categories and their interrelatedness, as well as how they are situated in the theory and form an integrated whole. Furthermore, by including informants' quotations generously, I have sought to bring to life the voices from the field, while checking with myself, time and time again, that I am making justice to these accounts; by being attentive to negative cases, I have sought to demonstrate diligence with detecting variation in data; and by presenting exemplars of my memos and sharing my reflective insights regarding the data, I have sought to unveil some of the opacity inherent in grounded theory inquiries. I have undertaken this effort to elucidate the cognitive underpinnings of the conclusions I have drawn and interpretations I have made to justify my arguments, thereby affording the reader an opportunity to discern the logic employed throughout the analytical process. Ultimately, all these choices, whether regarding the number of memos to include or the extent to which one's cognitive processes should be explained, is a judgment call – one I hope to have made to the satisfaction of the reader. Furthermore, I have presented the study, in its various stages, in several research seminars, taking note of the comments and suggestions offered both by the faculty and fellow researchers alike.

The conceptual categories bear the characteristics that strengthen the explanatory power of the grounded theory: they occur frequently, become a stable pattern, and increasingly relate to the other variables, thus indicating that they account for a large portion of the variation in a pattern of behaviour. The categories have a "grabbing implication" and a considerable carry-through, with the connections between the categories being meaningful and not forced (Glaser and Holton 2023). In light of the above, I deem the criteria of credibility to have been met.

8.3.2 Originality

Originality refers to the extent the constructed theory has novelty value and is of theoretical and social significance, as well as to the way it may extend or refine extant research (Charmaz 2014:337). As has been established, this study addresses research gaps concerning individual-level actors and inter-governmental organisations in the sphere of international organisations, and as such it offers contributions of novelty value. Also, as the theoretical and managerial implications demonstrate, the contributions of this inquiry are multifaceted.

This study within the international business discipline is novel also in that it does not focus on international business in the traditional sense, thus addressing the weakness within international business research whereby firm-level paradigms dominate (Ntara 2022). It hopes to socialise the reader with the idea of international business encompassing many different types of "business" operations and "entrepreneurs" – and that ultimately, the boundaries between the various sectors are imagined only, as is evident from the real-life interactions between the actors of the four sectors. Also, the concept of effectiveness is approached in a manner that is less results-focused that one could expect of a study into effectiveness, with the inquiry further highlighting that effectiveness, a term with typically positive connotations, can have effects that may not be positive for all or in all circumstances.

Furthermore, this study adopts a method not commonly applied in business research. It has been said that the adoption of simplistic methodologies prevalent in the international business inquiry is a weakness within the discipline (Ntara 2022). While my choices regarding the topic and the grounded theory method meant knowingly entering the realm of added complexity and leaning into more uncertainty, opting for a different path for the sake of ease and certainty – and to expose oneself to lesser risk, perhaps – was not appealing. In light of the above, I believe to have successfully established originality.

8.3.3 Resonance

Resonance concerns the researcher's ability to draw new meanings and interpretations and the degree to which the categories reflect the fullness of the studied phenomenon (Charmaz 2014:337). Resonance also demonstrates that the researcher has constructed concepts that not only represent the informants' experiences, but also provide insight to others. To gain resonance, the data-gathering strategies must illuminate the participants' experience (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021) rather than force predetermined ideas and may necessitate pivoting during the process. In this study, this sensitivity, adaptation, and search for "fit" was demonstrated, e.g., through the various iterations made to the interview guide. Perhaps the most profound aha-moment – and evidence of sensitivity to the interview data – was the reported realisation about navigating work reality being about both the way of doing and the why of doing, with the latter influencing the nature of the former. In fact, there was a point in the inquiry whereby the possible outcome appeared to offer little knowledge regarding "doing" itself, given the messiness of the interview data. However, I was determined not to force data. The notion of hustle eventually arose from a laborious sense-making process, whereby the universe of "doing" did not appear to reveal much cohesion between the informants or even within one informant's account, when such cohesion or patterns were examined e.g., through the lens of effectiveness principles. "Doing work" seemed to be scattered – and yet, based on the same empirical data, I knew it really wasn't. That "random", "ad hoc", "unpredictable", "one-off", and "individualistic" could characterise, to some extent, the efforts by workers who sought, in earnest, to comply and act professionally in teams, eventually made sense; there was "method in the madness" of the hustling bureaucrats. Data triangulation facilitated this sensemaking process.

It should be mentioned that while a member check, advocated by e.g., Lincoln and Guba (1985), was considered to test the resonance of the proposed grounded theory, an examination of the method literature resulted in a decision to refrain from it. Given that a constructivist method acknowledges both the relativity of the data and the subjectivities that enter the data collection as well as the analysis, from an epistemological point of view, problems arise e.g., around knowledge creation, the use of terminology and concerning the notions of meanings – especially in the highly diverse informant group of this study – and in establishing the possible "truth" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:293). Requesting the informants to review interpretations made across interview data also raises questions of interpretive authority (Motulsky 2021). Member checking would have also lead to a breach of ethics as regards confidentiality, as others' data might have had to be shared to facilitate an understanding of the interpretations made and conclusions drawn. However, recognising that it might not meet the criteria of a member check, I am compelled to share an anecdote, a comment from an informant. In connection with clarifications, towards the end of the study, I asked what the informant thought about the idea of the work being "a bit of a bureaucrat's hustle". The informant smiled; then said: "Yeah, you've gotta do what you've gotta do – and it all depends."

I view Guba and Lincoln's criteria of transferability, "a direct function of similarity between the two contexts" or "fittingness" (1985:124) – or what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:294) refer to as a degree of similarity found between the study and other research rather than a need for replicability – to be present within the Charmazian concept of resonance concerning "links between larger collectives or institutions" (Charmaz 2014:338). Thus, apart from providing clarity of the research process, understanding of the research context is of essence. Accordingly, throughout this inquiry, there is a heightened focus on elucidating the contextual aspects. While the somewhat unique work environment subject for this inquiry, coupled with the grounded theory method, may hinder some "transferability", the previously presented contributions clearly demonstrate that linkages to extant literature within several disciplines. Considering the above, I believe to have successfully established resonance.

8.3.4 Usefulness

Usefulness points to the applicability of the constructed theory in practice, how it contributes to knowledge, and to its usefulness for future research. According to Charmaz (2011:338), "a strong combination of originality and credibility increases resonance, usefulness, and the subsequent value of the contribution". The many managerial contributions of this study and the possible applications of findings for practice have been explicated above. While some of them may be more relevant within the UN system context or within international organisations and bureaucracies, others can be considered within any type of organisation with international operations. The study also presents several suggestions for future research, related to the topic.

Charmaz (2011:338) also draws attention to the importance of the compelling narrative, the aesthetics of writing. Having familiarised myself with several grounded theory studies during the past years, Charmaz' point about the narrative resonate deeply. Thus, especially considering that a 300-page monograph about a potentially unfamiliar topic can be a gargantuan effort for the reader, I have sought to write and organise the text in a manner that facilitates flow, an overall positive reading experience, and draws the reader in, while also meeting the standards for academic study of this nature. At times, this straddling between the two has been challenging, and as evident, I have made some editorial choices that may deviate from what is customary in studies within the international business discipline. I hope that they do not detract from the perceived academic value of this work, and that meeting the criteria of usefulness has been successfully established.

In conclusion, in light of the above evaluations addressing the four criteria, I suggest that the study meets the criteria for trustworthiness, also overcoming concerns of "worrisome accuracy of qualitative data description" said to preoccupy qualitative researchers and their audiences (Glaser and Holton 2004:2).

8.4 Limitations of the Study

While the proposed theory offers valuable insights into the work of international civil servants in field duty stations, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and recognize that it does not fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Instead, it offers one approach towards a better understanding of certain aspects of navigating the complex realities within international organisations, and further research is needed to refine this understanding. The informant group can also be considered relatively small and I have therefore not even attempted to make claims of causation or correlation, e.g., related to job functions, organisations and alike.

The other limitations include the actors subject to the study representing only one layer of the aid sector workforce. By focusing on the UN system, I have excluded other international organisations, and by directing attention to international civil servants, I have excluded those recruited locally. I speak only of those whom I have been able to speak with, i.e. those who speak English. Furthermore, I have excluded those engaged in the programming side of aid work by privileging the Support Services actors. The first element of the sampling strategy, purposeful sampling, may also be seen as an exclusionary approach which, according to Nolas (2011:27), "marginalises less articulate experiences and less expert experiences that nonetheless form part of the fabric of the field of action". For this study, for practical reasons, I have chosen not to use interpreters to discuss with international staff in the other UN official languages (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and French), nor have I chosen to embed myself into the realities of locally recruited professionals and general service staff, e.g., through field observation, to gain a better appreciation of how they view work. Given that I found it impractical to limit the study to specific UN entities or locations only, I had to limit the scope through other means. Inclusion of (or changing focus to) these other groups could be considered in future research.

I am also aware of the challenges related to interviewing in qualitative research in general, whereby the questions of image consciousness and "performance" arises, with informants potentially offering "inaccurate, embellished, minimalist or deceptive accounts" (Charmaz 2014:89). Do the informants know what they think and how they feel? What is the value of retrospective sensemaking by potentially image-conscious informant? Furthermore, the grounded theory approach creates the problem of reproduction of the study in other situations whose conditions exactly match this study, as it is difficult to "recreate all of the original conditions and control all of the extraneous variables that may impinge upon the phenomenon under investigation" (Corbin and Strauss 1990:424).

The sampling strategy, coupled with the topic of worker effectiveness, may have resulted in an informant group that is "skewed" towards assertiveness and getting work done, with individuals with different motivations – e.g., those who shred work or sleep on duty – possibly opting out. In fact, as I listened to the informants' stories about UN workers who actively work against the UN system or exploit it for personal gain, I did ponder how one might be able to attract such individuals, that deadwood and those donkeys – and the workers like my UN colleague who pleaded guilty to corruption charges or the other two who suddenly disappeared from the office to avoid public repercussions from wrongdoing – to take part in a research study about effective work. I was compelled to return to this reflection over the course of reviewing the data from the other sources. For example, one former international UN practitioner writes about staff complaining to such an extent that he thought a staff rebellion was about to take place, only to realise this was normal, with critical stance to the UN system being "like a skill you needed to acquire in order to be part of any discussion" (Soussan 2008:40-412). Another UN staff member writes about persevering with a "fat and stupid and evil" boss whose abusive behaviour caused her to stop making "any extra effort" – rather she was "going to be a bad employee … going to relish being one of those workers who lingers at the watercooler and disappears just when you need them" (Cain, Postlewait, and Thomson 2004:51-52). Despite the initial reactions to such brow-raising statements perhaps being those of disapproval and moral judgment, I do believe that there could be a great deal to be learned by listening to the voices of those who, at a first glance, appear to be savvy at working against the organisational mandates. Something caused them to behave that way – but what? Perhaps in those insights could lie a large piece to the puzzle of aid effectiveness.

8.5 For Future Research

As future research, in addition to examining the worlds of work of the groups excluded in this study, another area of interest could concern the role of technology in improving effectiveness of aid work or international work in general. While it has been said that technology enables greater inclusion (UNDP 2021), and that interconnectivity and interactivity can contribute to the normalization of cultural diversity and foster a more mature and lasting acceptance of differences (Köchler 2012), technological progress has been found to lead to an acceleration, increasing abstractness, flexibilization, and individualization in processes and of results (Traum et al. 2017). There are also questions about how generative AI may impact aid work, including people in conflict areas. Furthermore, it has been found that virtual team collaboration poses challenges for motivation, awareness, and building trust (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020) and may be lacking as a tool for persuasion (Lifintsev and Wellbrock 2019). How technology may both help and hinder accountability, enhanced understanding of local context, or facilitate instilling trust and forging of genuine partnerships for effective collaboration outcomes might be of interest. In this connection, it may also be interesting to explore how the generation of workers about to enter the workforce – a generation grown up using technology – views work of addressing shared global problems.

Another potential area for future research concerns the role of stakeholder transparency and visibility on effectiveness. Can there be too much of a good thing? Earlier, references were made to “transparency penalties” in connection with enhanced reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse and on reporting of overhead expenditure. In *Bottom Billion*, Collier (2007) discusses various “traps” that hinder development and growth in poor countries, including conflict trap, natural resource trap, and trap of bad governance. During my research, Collier’s ideas about traps evoked ideas about potential “visibility traps” and “success traps” for organisations whose purpose is built around emergencies and humanitarian crises – human tragedies turned into organisational success stories enabled by media exposure. In these contexts, funding and collaborative effort are of essence for success while branding and visibility is essential to ensure funding. However, in the climate of scarce financial means, that quest for visibility may lead to competition and focus on short term results, not collaboration and sustainable development. Thus, what would compel organisations to break this pattern and how might this affect the individual workers?

In closing, while flux on the global and national levels are givens, organisational change expected, and coping with uncertainty often an unwelcome necessity, at least one element in this equation is both certain and constant: the ongoing reliance on the commitment of individual workers to deliver results. While the global and national level dynamics are largely beyond the international organisations' control, the individual workers are not: no matter how diverse and dispersed the workforce, I posit workers can, to a degree, be guided, incentivised, and socialised to operate towards the desired, collective goals, under competent, compassionate leadership. Micro-level actions taken by individual actors do matter, even in the business of world peace – after all, impact can come in those "small bits".

9 Epilogue

The aid space has experienced unprecedented turmoil after this report was finalised. The abrupt dissolution of USAID and its absorption to the State Department, and the sudden loss of US funding to a host of aid actors has been felt also within the UN system, through reported layoffs, hiring freezes, and other savings measures (UN 2025a; Keaten 2025). The post-election shifts in the US foreign policy have also led to increases in defense budgets e.g. in Europe, affecting the aid budgets of some of these countries. Meanwhile, the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza continues, as do the dangers it presents also to the UN workforce: the number of UN workers killed in Gaza alone since October 2023 is at least 280 (UN 2025b).

I have reflected on how these events might have affected this dissertation had I still been shaping it in 2025. For example, where would the interviewees lead the conversation, if we were to have the interviews now? Perhaps money would be a more prioritised topic for the interviewees, or their reflections about funding adequacy could be somewhat different – and money would also be on my radar differently. The perspectives could also differ between those working in voluntarily funded agencies and those employed by agencies funded from the member states' contributions to the UN budget. I would probably learn from the informants about the UN entities' new cost cutting measures, and it would be interesting to examine how these would be aligned with the formal effectiveness strategies of the UN system. Or, perhaps (some of) the funding void might be filling with other donors stepping in, as is the case with Bloomberg Philanthrophies pledging to fund the UN climate body (Volocovici 2025).

On the other hand, developments in the first half of 2025 highlight, in compelling ways, the central argument of this study concerning the complexity of the aid sector and the unpredictable and ever-shifting nature of aid work. These shifts underscore that international aid and perceptions of its effectiveness are far from uniform – varying not only across nations but also within them as regimes change. Yet, questions of effectiveness remain consistently salient, regardless of how effectiveness is defined or understood. One might argue, however, that whatever the perspective or definition of effectiveness, cases such as food for humanitarian purposes being at risk of spoilage because a donor blocks its distribution, as reported (Karas and Mersie 2025), cannot be considered effective by any standard.

The recent events also demonstrate, powerfully, how aid is indeed tied with politics, even with specific individual actors. During the first quarter of 2025, I was at first perplexed as to why US eventually agreed to lift a pause on food donations to WFP (Nichols and Pamuk 2025) – a UN entity whose ability to be a "faithful and principled" partner the US had seemingly questioned after WFP had allowed "industrial level" theft of food to take place in Tigray, Ethiopia (Paravicini and Stecklow 2024). I was also aware that WFP was led by an American with a publicly reported poor relationship with the current US President. However, I soon recalled what I had reported earlier about the US being a major food aid donor and about the links between aid and US domestic food processors and maritime interests – and the rescinded pause did indeed concern food from the US farmers, as reported in the media (Nichols and Pamuk 2025).

I also reflected on the topic of diversity, as the UN system sees it as one of the key elements promoting effectiveness. Diversity was also a theme prominently raised in the interviews but underscored the negative consequences for effectiveness of forcibly promoting this agenda that may deprioritise merit. As such, the informants' perspective is not entirely misaligned with the current US Administration's approach, and it will be interesting to see how the UN entities react, when funding is at stake. For example, the U.S. statement to the WFP Executive Board already made it clear that there are "items in WFP's work that we will need to see adjusted to align U.S. funding with this policy", referring to a "harmful gender ideology" and "wasteful" diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, while focus should be on merit instead (USUN Rome 2025).

What occupied my thoughts most was this critical moment of opportunity for the aid agencies. Aid actors, including the UN system, have an opportunity to undertake a fundamental re-examination of their strategies and purposes. Business as usual is not an option, and business done slightly differently may not be adequate either. Incremental change may not suffice; rather, the situation presents a compelling case for a more comprehensive overhaul of operational models and approaches. I can only imagine the challenge ahead. However, the findings of this study give a reason to believe that, in the UN system, there might be individuals who would gladly take on that challenge.

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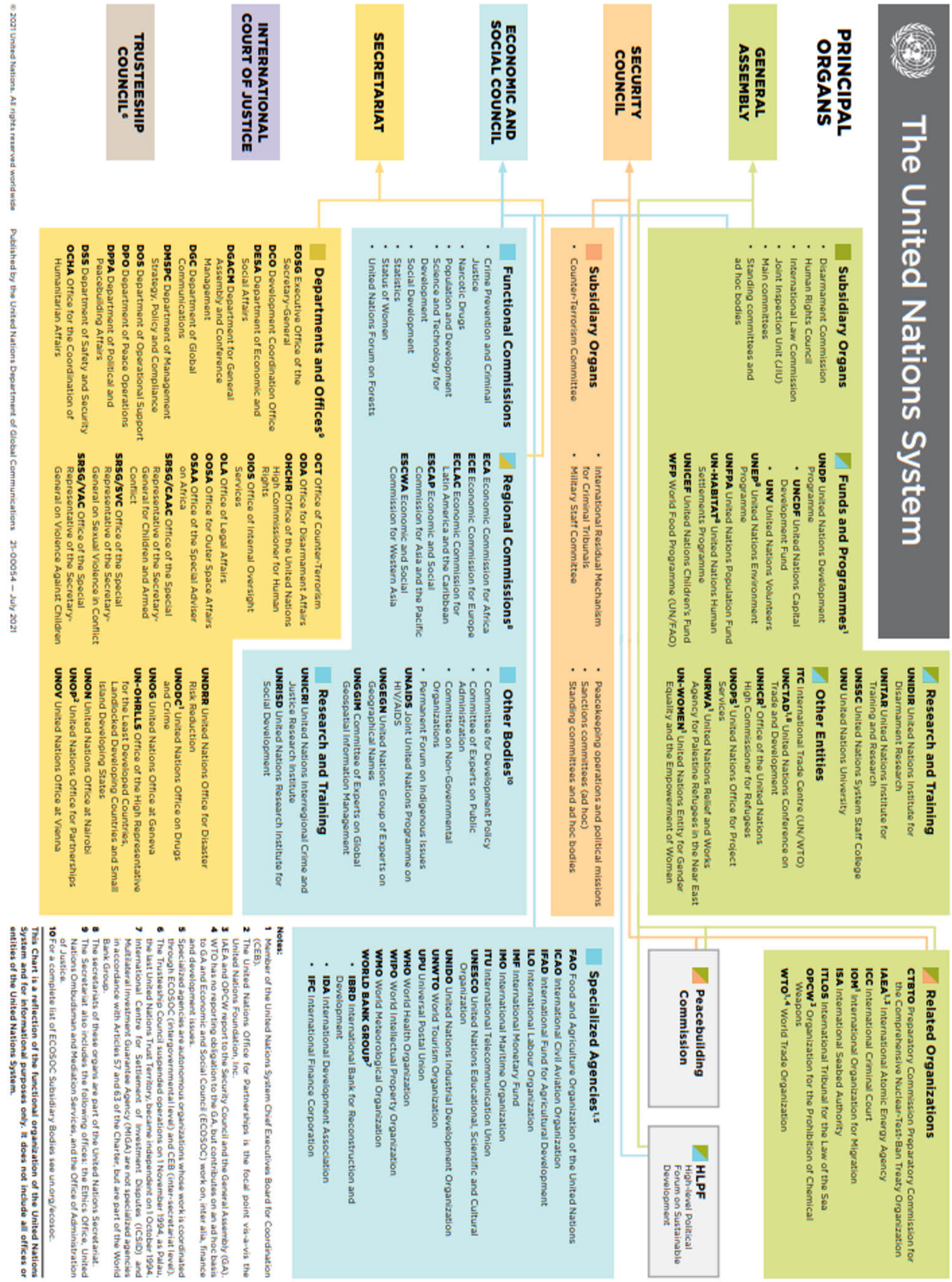
Appendices

Appendix 1. The United Nations System (UN 2023a)

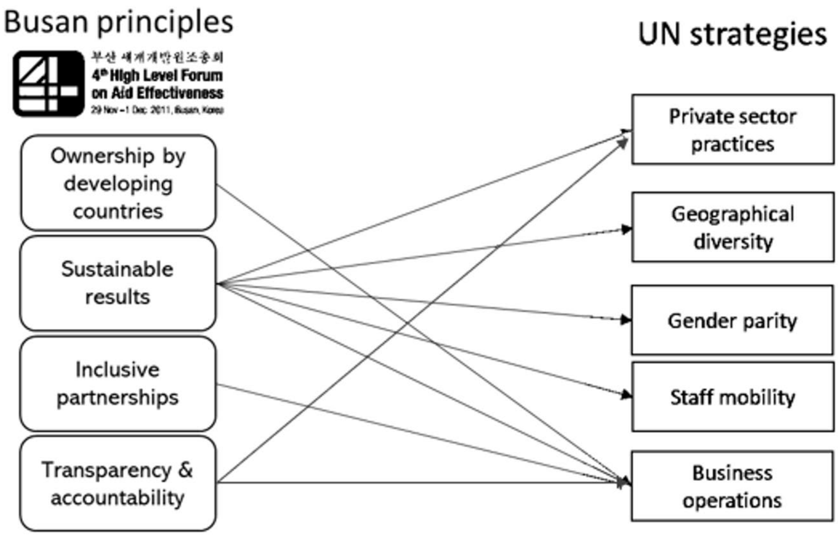


Appendix 2. Examples of scholarship on the UN system

Alvarez 2020:79-103	The UN as Lawmaker.
Amrith and Sluga 2008	Histories of the UN.
Barnett and Finnemore 2020:61-78	The UN as a Tool of Great Powers. The UN as Facilitator of Interstate Cooperation. The UN as Governor of the Society of States. The UN as a Constructor of the Social World. The UN as a Structure of Legitimation.
Gordenker and Jönsson 2020:104-115	The UN as Knowledge Producer.
Oksamytna and Karlsrud 2020:1-30	Main themes in the UN peacekeeping literature. Methods and data in the study of UN peacekeeping.
Orzes, Moretto, Ebrahimpour, Sartor, Moro, and Rossi 2018	Systematic literature review of the UN corporate social responsibility initiative, Global Compact.
Voeten 2013:54-66	Scholarship about UN Voting Patterns.
Weiss and Thakur 2010	Global governance and the UN.
White 2013:43-59	UN Peacekeeping and International Law.
Winther 2020	Review of the academic debate about UN Security Council reform.

Appendix 3. Busan Principles and the UN-internal effectiveness agenda

The principles of ownership, results focus, and partnerships have been core elements of good programming practices within the UN system under the Human Rights Based Approach to Development Programming already since the early 2000s (UNSDG 2003). However, while the Busan Principles are global level aspirations concerning the approaches to more effective development cooperation, no evidence can be found to suggest that the "UN-internal effectiveness agenda" was established as a direct result of the Busan agreement. However, the core ideas embedded in the Busan Principles could be seen to align with the five UN strategies for enhanced effectiveness, as follows:



The Busan principle related to country ownership could be viewed to have linkages to the re-invigorated Resident Coordinator system, an element in the UN business operations strategy, to move to a demand-driven, context specific model of country presence, and to provide more efficient and higher quality support for SDG implementation. Results-focus could be linked to all five strategies discussed in this study, given that all of them, one way or the other, aim for enhanced effectiveness in terms of results in fulfilling the mandate. The principle of partnerships could be seen to be present in the business operations strategy that concerns integration, e.g., in form of shared services and common premises. Transparency and accountability emerge within results-based management and in the business operations strategy, with the latter relying on standardized client satisfaction principles, pricing and costing standards, and the concept of mutual recognition.

Appendix 4. Informants' UN experience: locations, entities, and work functions

Duty location outside HQ/RB*

Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Burundi; Central African Republic; Chad; DR Congo; East Timor; Ecuador; Gaza and West Bank; Haiti; India; Indonesia; Kosovo; Laos; Lebanon; Liberia; Malawi; Myanmar; North Korea; Nepal; Pakistan; Panama; Russia; Rwanda; Sierra Leone; Somalia; South Sudan; Sudan; Syria; Tanzania; Thailand; Ukraine; fomer Yugoslavia.

*Informants' other UN work locations: Denmark; Israel; Italy; Kenya; Spain; the United Arab Emirates; the United States.

UN system entity

MINUCRAT; MINUSCA; MINUSTAH; MONUC; UNAMSIL; UNDOF; UNDP; UNFICYP; UNFPA; UNHCR; UNICEF; UNMIK; UNMIL; UNMIS; UNMISS; UNOPS; UNPROFOR; UNSOS; UNRWA; WB; WFP .

Work function

Administration; Asset management; Audit; Business intelligence; Engineering; Facilities; Finance; Fleet & transportation management; Fuel management; HR; ICT; Leadership (ASG; USG; Director); Procurement; Rations management; Security; Supply chain / logistics.

Appendix 5. The initial interview guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

PART I	**Presenting the research project**

a. Research aim and focus; affiliation
b. Why this interviewee has been chosen
c. Interview process
d. Confidentiality

PART II	**Verifying informant information**

a. Professional background in the UN system
b. Professional background outside the UN system, if any
c. Current work context & role

PART III	**Discussion prompts & questions**

Opening of discussion with broad theme: **When I say 'working effectively in the field' what comes to mind, based on your observations and experience? What does a good workday look like to you? What does effectiveness mean to you?**

Prompting discussion topics as needed:

PEOPLE

1. Tell me about the **people** factors that you think make good work in the field – this can mean you, colleagues, management, external partners, etc.
    - What types of skills, knowledge, abilities matter?
    - What personal qualities, characteristics, motivations, and attitudes matter?
    - How do you see the importance of academic qualifications, certifications, sector/UN/agency experience, networks, etc.?
    - Onboarding / mission preparation?
2. What is the field reality like as regards these aspects?

PHYSICAL CONTEXT

3. Tell me about **location** related factors that might matter for work effectiveness - this could be in the setting of your office, agency, work country / town. Consider e.g.,
    - mobility & access
    - safety & security
    - electricity, water, heating / cooling

- health care & leisure
- remote working vs on-site

RULES; PROCESSES

4. What role do you see **policies, rules, and processes** playing in work effectiveness?
    - Centralized vs decentralized approach; autonomy vs control?
    - Work plans; project plans; KPIs?
    - Monitoring; reporting?

MONEY

5. What are your thoughts about the role of money in the effectiveness of work?

USE OF TIME

6. What does a typical day look like? Working hours? If you could change, eliminate, or add one element in your workday to make (even) better use of your time, what would that be and why?

TECHNOLOGY

7. What is your experience of using **technology** for effective field work? E.g. social media, email, mobile apps, tele-conferencing / -working, in work with partners.
    - Speed of getting things done
    - Quality of work
    - Transparency
    - Accessing data / using information
    - Connectivity, skills etc.

INTER-AGENCY

8. What is your perception / experience of **inter-agency** work?
    - Value add; effort vs. outcomes?
    - Accountabilities?
    - Networking; politics?
    - UN Country Team (UNCT)?
    - UN Business Operations Strategy (BOS)?
        - Common premises; common back office?
        - Shared services?
        - BOS affect on workload / effectiveness?

MISC.

9. What are your thoughts about **failure** at work in the field context? What does **success** at work look like to you?
10. What are your thoughts about **accountability** at work in the UN field context?

11. What are your thoughts about **ethics** and effectiveness? What does ethics mean to you, in work context?
12. How do you feel about **staff rotation**?
    - What are your own experiences from personal & professional perspective?
    - How do you think it has affected effectiveness in general?
    - How do you think UN is managing this aspect?
    -
13. How do you feel about **risk-taking / management** in the field context?
    - Work perspective (compliance, decision making, use of judgment)
    - Personal perspective (health, safety, family, career etc.)
    - How do you feel that aligns with UN's view to risk or that of colleagues?
14. Do "**Busan** principles of effective development cooperation" ring a bell?
15. (How) do **SDGs** feature in your work?

PART IV	**Concluding remarks**

a. Is there anything you would like to add on this topic of effectiveness and working in the field, or something you wish to comment on?
b. Permission to approach again for follow-up. Thank you.

Appendix 6. Sample memos

Memo on negative case as a catalyst for reflection shaping theory construction

Skylar cannot, in contrast to all others, find the UN work role meaningful. What is that about? From the account it is clear that Skylar is not lazy, and this does not seem to be a case of a big ego either that requires big titles, visibility, and accolades to generate that sense of meaning. The data says this: this person, with that experience, finds that role, in that UN entity, in that location, at that age and point in time not meaningful. And yet, it is obvious from Skylar's examples that such tasks needed doing; somebody has to execute that work. I then reflect on the timing: that opinion reflects what the informant had experienced some years ago … and that experience is still strong. I then pay more attention to what Skylar says about work done with other employers. To me it seems Skylar has taken somewhat extreme measures (left well-paid employment and moved to another country) for answers about where to find meaningful work. "I left and went to […] because I wanted to know who is doing work that they feel good about. That's what I really wanted to know." Skylar demonstrates such a strong want, just differently than most other informants. Then, comparing the data in the other informants' accounts, I realised that the emphasis, even for them, is not so much on the desire to do meaningful UN work but to do meaningful work. And while some of the informants still did that in the UN system, others no longer did. This realisation refined the conceptualization of "the want", distancing it from a specific organisation. Glaser (1999) writes about "apparent disparate facts" that can have an "underlying uniformity". Having seen deeper into Skylar's negative case and subsequently to others' data, what first appeared as the negative case turned out not to be one after all – it was the want that needed a different perspective. There was an underlying uniformity. □

Example of a memo prompted by interview data, which in turn triggers reflections about the linkages with an entry in the methodological journal

When developing the pictorial of the tensions in the UN system, I made a conscious decision to exclude the tensions between the UN and the host governments in the countries UN operates. It was simply to manage the study scope; expanding the depiction of tensions beyond those inside the UN system would require, I think, a more thorough description of all the other tensions between external parties and the UN (e.g., media, businesses, donors etc.), which is not in the scope of this study. The scope is quite big as is.

But … The host government has now been mentioned in the interviews many times, both as a helping and a hindering force, so I cannot *not* include it. I need to modify the pictorial.

And now that I have realised the need to include host governments, I am realising there is more to it … I have had a blind spot. This is no longer a mere matter of managing scope creep or hearing the data I'm told – I just realised this whole thing is another manifestation of organised hypocrisy I have been exploring in my method journal: the host governments are already in the tensions picture, even if they cannot be seen in it. They are inside the system, under the alias of 'UN member state'. When acting under the label of the 'UN member state', a country can demand the UN civil servants to be more effective, efficient, ethical, and more fairly geographically represented, but when acting under the label of the 'UN host government' in the very country the civil servants are to operate effectively and efficiently and ethically, the very same government can make it hard, even impossible, for work to take place – just like my informants' accounts show. A clear case of organized hypocrisy. □

Appendix 7. Data management plan

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Research data management plan

1. Research data

Research data refers to all the material with which the analysis and results of the research can be verified and reproduced. It may be, for example, various measurement results, data from surveys or interviews, recordings or videos, notes, software, source codes, biological samples, text samples, or collection data.

See also the Table 1 of data sources with additional details on page 2.

Research data type	Contains personal details/information*	I will gather/produce the data myself	Someone else has gathered/produced the data	Other notes
Scholarly literature			X	Literature related to aid and development sector & aid effectiveness; UN system; humanitarian work psychology
Interviews		X		UN informant data anonymised
UN official data sources			X	UN Official Document System; UN Digital Library; UN Regulatory Framework Policy Portal; UN News Centre; UNdata; The United Nations iLibrary; Websites of UN entities
Newspaper and magazine articles; audiovisual materials			X	Interviews, webinar recordings, and speeches of UN civil servants, scholars, and other relevant stakeholders in the sector
Trade & professional literature by aid and development industry insiders; memoirs & autobiographies			X	"Development blockbusters" authored by current or former officials in the aid and development industry; commercially published personal narratives by UN workers

* Personal details/information are all information based on which a person can be identified directly or indirectly, e.g., by connecting a specific piece of data to another, which makes identification possible. For more information about what data is considered personal go to the Office of the Finnish Data Protection Ombudsman's website

Table 1: Data sources

Data Source	*Description*	*Purpose*	*Time period*
Scholarly literature	Literature related to aid and development sector & aid effectiveness; UN system; humanitarian work psychology	To review extant studies relevant for the topic; to review topic-related theories. Used before empirical data collection to establish research gap, and post-interviews to review findings in the context of extant scholarship.	Throughout the research process.
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews with former / current UN staff with field experience. Interviews with senior UN leaders and other subject matter experts.	The primary means of capturing field worker perspectives on effectiveness in the setting of nested pressures and tensions, and to understand how they navigate such tensions in their daily operations. To check for the latest thinking in the UN system on effectiveness or other related topics.	31.05.2023 – 23.01.2024 14.06.2023 – 05.12.2023
UN official data sources: ▪ UN Official Document System ▪ UN Digital Library ▪ UN Regulatory Framework Policy Portal ▪ UN News Centre ▪ UNdata ▪ The United Nations iLibrary ▪ Websites of UN entities	General Assembly resolutions; policy and strategy documents; handbooks; rules; instructions; guidance; surveys; reports; audits; statistics; plans; announcements; speeches.	To understand the policies, strategies, and plans; to retrieve statistics.	Throughout the research process.
Newspaper and magazine articles; audiovisual materials	Interviews, webinar recordings, and speeches of UN civil servants, scholars, and other relevant stakeholders in the sector.	To provide other data sources fully delinked from the interview process. Triangulation of multiple data sources is used as a validation strategy to strengthen the quality and credibility of the study.	Throughout the research process.
Trade and professional literature by aid and development industry insiders; autobiographies and memoirs authored by UN staff	"Development blockbusters" authored by current or former officials in the aid and development industry; commercially published personal narratives by UN workers.	To provide other sources of UN staff accounts that are fully delinked from the interview process and whose construction cannot be affected by the researcher. Triangulation of multiple data sources is used as a validation strategy to strengthen the quality and credibility of the study.	Throughout the research process.

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2. Processing personal data in research

If your data contains personal details/information, you are obliged to comply with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Finnish Data Protection Act. For data that contains personal details, you must prepare a Data Protection Notice for your research participants and determine who is the controller for the research data.

I will prepare a Data Protection Notice** and give it to research participants before collecting data ☐

The controller** for the personal details is the student themself ☐ the university ☐

My data does not contain any personal data ☒

** More information at the university's intranet page, Data Protection Guideline for Thesis Research

3. Permissions and rights related to the use of data

3.1. Self-collected data

Necessary permissions and how they are acquired: See communication sent to informants in this file. Agreement to interviews has been sought and obtained under the condition of informant anonymity. Commitment has been made to not disclosing any information that could identify the informants in reporting the findings. Consent to record the interviews for transcribing purposes was obtained, with the recordings to be retained securely by the researcher until the thesis is published and destroyed thereafter.

3.2 Data collected by someone else

Do you have the necessary permissions to use the data in your research and to publish the results? Are there copyright or licencing issues involved in the use of the data? Note, for example, that you may need permission to use the images or graphs you have found in publications.

Rights and licences related to the data:

No copyright or licencing issues involved in the use of the data.

All figures and graphs are designed by the researcher. The Microsoft icons and SmartArt used in the development of such figures and graphs are used for non-commercial purposes only and as such, allowed without separate licensing agreements.

The PresenterMedia elements (e.g., arrows, clipart) are also royalty-free and can be used, as per the applicable End User License Agreement, in the subscriber's projects.

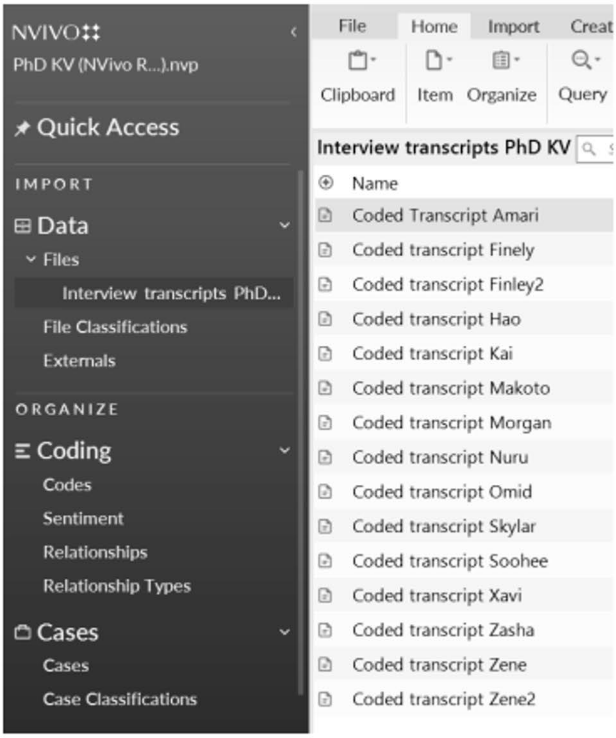
4. Storing the data during the research process

Where will you store your data during the research process?

~~In the university's network drive~~ ☐
~~In the university-provided Seafile Cloud Service~~ ☐
Other location, please specify: ☒

Recordings (the original data files) are stored in an external hard drive in a home safe.

For coding management purposes, NVIVO contains the transcripts, however, they are linked to the pseudonyms (see below) but not to the real identities of the informants.



5. Documenting the data and metadata

How would you describe your research data so that even an outsider or a person unfamiliar with it will understand what the data is? How would you help yourself recall years later what your data consists of?

5.1 Data documentation

Can you describe what has happened to your research data during the research process?

To document the data, I will use:

A field/research (methodological) journal ☒

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A separate document (memos – analytical notes to self that may relate to codes, analytic and methodological questions, or comparisons between data fragments) where I will record the main points of the data, such as changes made, phases of analysis, and significance of variables ☒

~~A readme file linked to the data that describes the main points of the data ☐~~
~~Other, please specify: ☐~~

5.2 Data arrangement and integrity

How will you keep your data in order and intact, as well as prevent any accidental changes to it?

I will keep the original data files separate from the data I am using in the research process, so that I can always revert back to the original, if need be. ☒

Version control: I will plan before starting the research how I will name the different data versions and I will adhere to the plan consistently. ☐

I recognise the life span of the data from the beginning of the research and am already prepared for situations, where the data can alter unnoticed, for example while recording, transcribing, downloading, or in data conversions from one file format to another, etc. ☐

5.3 Metadata

I will save my data into an archive or a repository that will take care of the metadata for me. ☐

I will have to create the metadata myself, because the archive/repository where I am uploading the data requires it. ☐

I will not store my data into a public archive/repository, and therefore I will not need to create any metadata. ☒

6. Data after completing the research

What happens to your research data, when the research is completed?

~~I will store all data for xx years.~~

I will destroy all data immediately after completion (publication of the dissertation), because this was my commitment to the research informants.

~~I will destroy part of the data, but store part of it for xx years, because:~~

~~If you will store the data, please identify where:~~

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[COMMUNICATION TO INFORMANTS]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project as an interviewee. The interviews form a part of the data set I am collecting for my work-in-progress PhD dissertation at the Turku School of Economics (University of Turku) in Finland.

The topic of my thesis is *effectiveness within the humanitarian and development sector*. I focus on the UN system, and specifically on the views of international professionals with experience (past or present) in the field. I am exploring **how UN staff in the field feel, think, and act when trying to get work done in settings characterised by conflicting needs, priorities, and other challenges.** The working title of my study is 'Navigating the effectiveness agenda and tensions within the humanitarian and development sector: focus on field practitioners in the United Nations system'. I am seeking to paint a picture of field realities as perceived by you and the other interviewees, analysing any emergent themes that may or may not be aligned with current scholarship, UN policies, or practitioner literature. The purpose is to introduce real voices from the field to the development discourse that tends to ignore the complex and at times messy reality of those whose job it is to turn the policies into practice and make things happen on the ground, under dynamic – at times messy – circumstances.

This is an independent study and not conducted for or on behalf of any third party. My aim is to have at least 10 interviewees from different UN entities. All of you remain anonymous throughout the study. While disguised interview extracts may be quoted in the study, you will not be recognizable by name or title(s) or linked to the employing UN entity/entities. The discussion will be recorded for transcribing purposes so that I can focus on the discussion, not taking notes. The recordings are accessed only by me and will be deleted once the dissertation is published.

The interview does not follow a strict set of pre-determined questions. Rather, it is more of a discussion on work effectiveness in the field, guided by your views and experiences. Themes include e.g. worker skills and characteristics, inter-agency work, staff rotation, and use of technology. To start with, we have agreed on a one-hour discussion. Depending on things to discuss and your schedule allowing, we may schedule another session to continue. Also, depending on the course the interviews with the others take, I may come back to you with some follow-up questions.

Please note that you can withdraw from the process at any time.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Kaisamaija Välimäki

Doctoral Researcher
Turku School of Economics
kaisva@utu.fi

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Interview consent form

Interview consent: Doctoral Thesis

Consent to take part in research

Researcher: Kaisamaija Välimäki

Participant:

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without consequences of any kind. I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I agree to my interview being recorded and that the interview notes and audio recordings are retained until the publication of the thesis. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis.

Signature of research participant

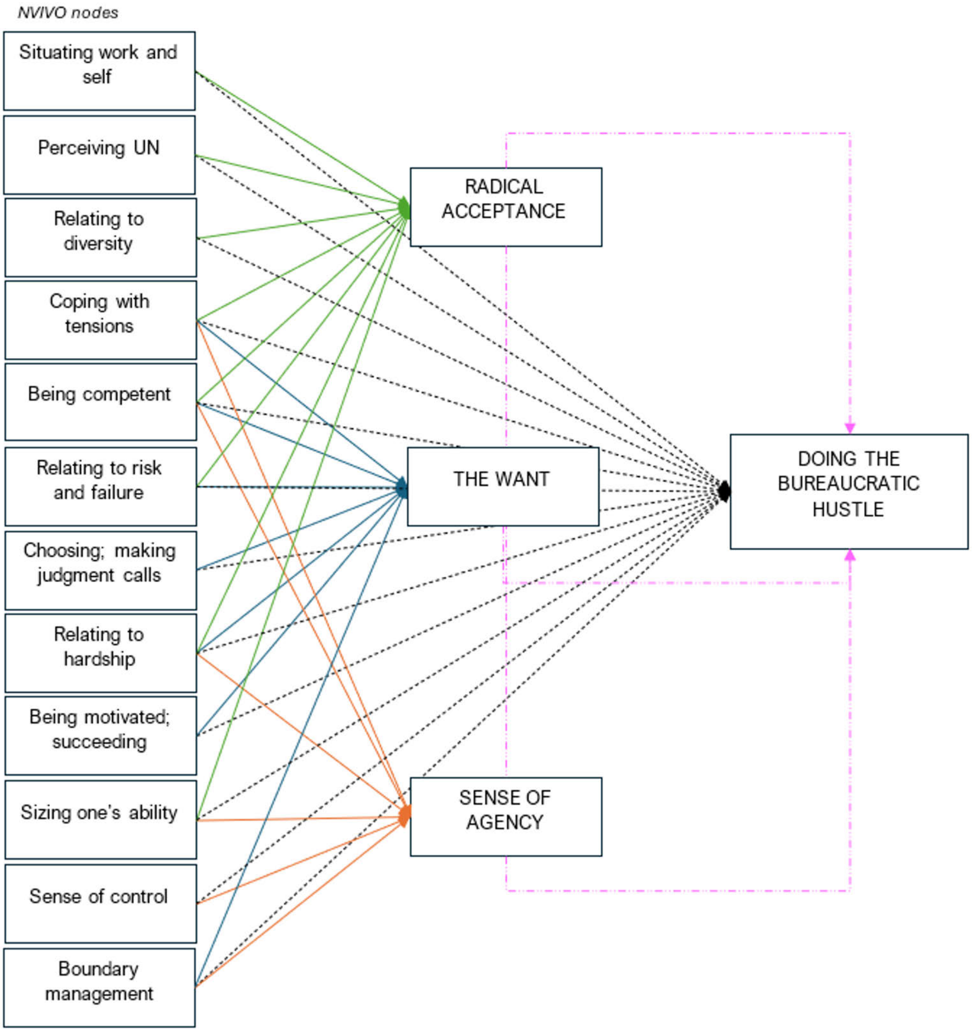
Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix 8. Examples of aid effectiveness studies

Macro effects	"Aid and growth: What does the cross-country evidence really show?" (Rajan and Subramanian 2008) "Aid, Policies, and Growth: Revisiting the Evidence." (Burnside and Dollar 2004) "Aid Effectiveness Disputed." (Hansen and Tarp 2000)
Global principles	"A decade since Busan: Towards legitimacy or a 'new tyranny' of global development partnership?" (Taggart 2022) "Development narratives in a post-aid era: Reflections on implications for the global effectiveness agenda." (Gulrajani 2022)
Organisations	"Annual Development Effectiveness Review 2019 - Integrating Africa, Connecting People." (African Development Bank Group 2019) "Raising the standard: the Multilateral Development Review." (DFID 2016) "Review of Development Effectiveness, 2012-2015." (UNICEF 2017)
Interventions	"Nutritional training in a humanitarian context: evidence from a cluster randomized trial." (Kurdi, Figueroa, and Ibrahim 2020) "The effectiveness and value for money of cash-based humanitarian assistance: a systematic review." (Tappis and Doocy 2017)

Appendix 9. NVIVO coding hierarchy



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