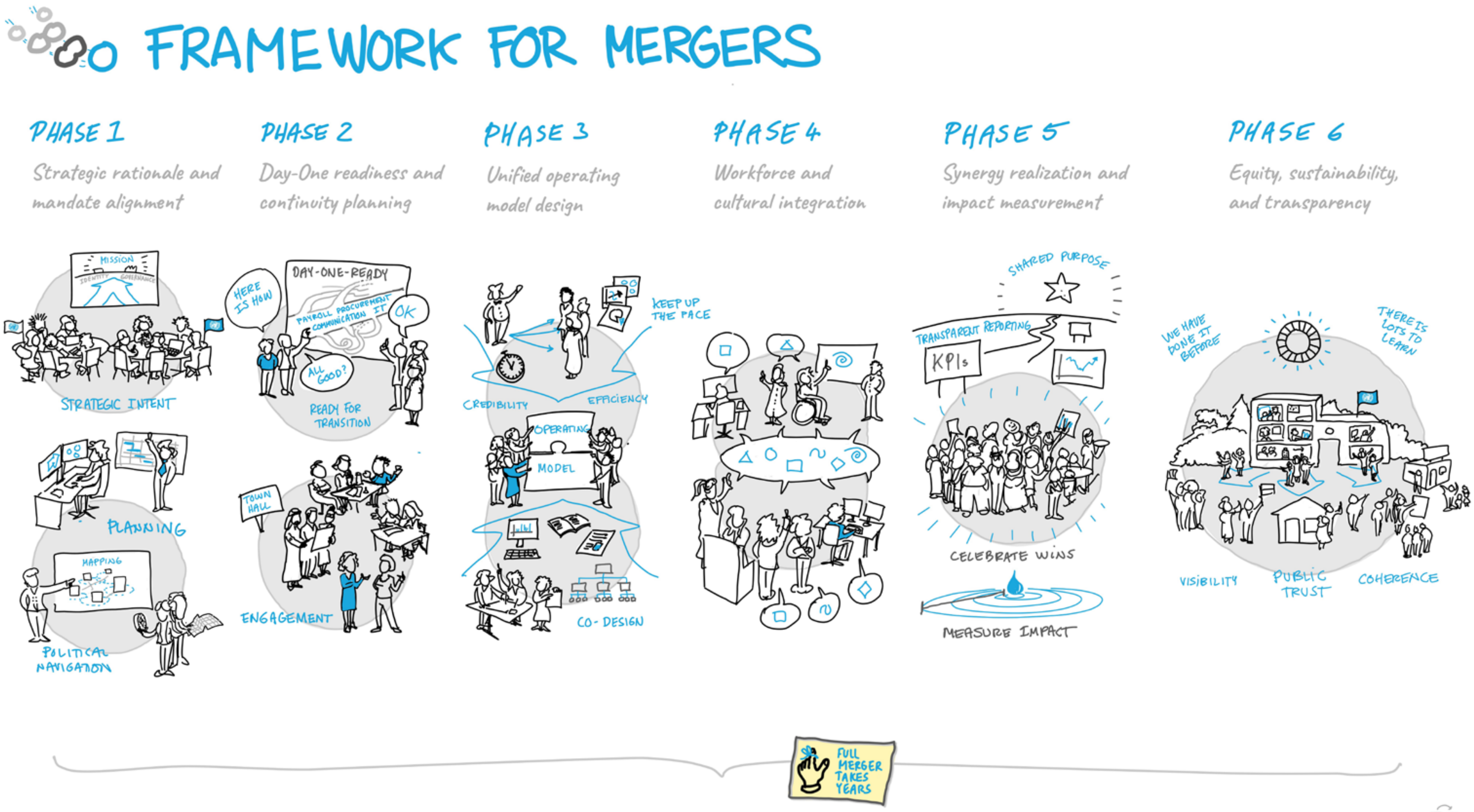
UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM STAFF COLLEGE

Merging for impact: Lessons from UN Women and a framework for future UN consolidations



This report is a part of **'UNLOCK-ing Change in the United Nations'** series, prepared by UNSSC, within the ambit of the United Nations Lab of Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK) initiative. It provides a set of lessons learnt from past change endeavors, and a future roadmap to support the change and system-wide transformation in the context of the UN80 initiative. UNLOCK is a UNSSC project, devoted to organizational change and transformation. In addition to knowledge curation, the UNLOCK team is convening change practitioners across the UN system, providing change advisory services and capacity development.

This paper draws on a range of organizational experiences related to mergers within the United Nations system. Some of the cases referenced are ongoing, while others have concluded, offering a mix of real-time insights and retrospective reflections. The individuals interviewed and quoted in this report drew on their professional experience in the UN system. Their perspectives are shared in a personal capacity and do not represent the official views of their organizations.

We extend our sincere thanks to all those who generously contributed their time and insights through interviews. Their reflections have been invaluable in shaping the analysis and recommendations presented. Special thanks go to Mads Svendsen for conducting the interviews and leading the drafting of this report with thoughtfulness, rigor, and care. The insightful illustrations, translating complex concepts into engaging ideas, were produced by Ole Qvist-Sørensen.

For further information, please visit [our website]() or contact us at unlock@unssc.org.

Bonn, October 2025

Sabine Bhanot

UNLOCK Coordinator

UN Lab for Organizational Change & Knowledge, KCLM,

UNSSC

Bonn, Germany

Berin McKenzie

Head

Knowledge Center for Leadership & Management KCLM,

UNSSC

Turin, Italy

Juliana Ribeiro

Chief

Hub for UN Transformation

UNSSC

Turin, Italy

Overview

Executive Summary
1. The urgency of reform: Why reform matters
2. Strategic intent and political navigation
3. Navigating identity and organizational culture
4. Operational complexity and transitional architecture
5. Leadership and governance
6. Measuring success
7. Strategic considerations for future mergers
8. Role of change managers and leaders
9. Key lessons from UN mergers: What future consolidations should prioritize

Annexes

Annex A: Interview references
Annex B: Case summaries
Annex C: Six-phase framework for UN entity mergers
Annex D: References
Annex E: Further reading

Executive summary

As the United Nations embarks on a new phase of reform, the consolidation of entities is re-emerging not merely as a cost-saving measure, but as a strategic imperative to enhance coherence, reduce duplication, and strengthen institutional impact. While only 7 percent of respondents to UNLOCK's 2025 State of Change Management survey[1] identified mergers in May 2025 as one of the change initiatives currently happening in their organizations, it is likely that the effective management of mergers will be a priority for change sponsors and managers in the months and years ahead.

This paper examines the landmark merger that created UN Women – bringing together four distinct entities – as a case study in navigating political complexity, cultural integration, and operational transformation. Drawing on lessons from UN Women and other internal UN mergers, such as the functional realignment of United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the Inter-Agency Procurement Services Office (IAPSO) functional realignment and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific consolidation (case study summaries are provided in Annex B), the paper identifies key dimensions that shape successful mergers: strategic clarity, political navigation, governance design, operational planning, cultural alignment, and leadership humility. In an era of fiscal constraint and heightened scrutiny, future consolidation efforts must be guided by clear intent, inclusive leadership, and robust change management.

[1] State of Change Management in the UN System 2025, UNSSC/UNLOCK, forthcoming; 123 respondents from 38 organizations.

Mergers are not a panacea – but when executed thoughtfully, they can unlock greater strategic clarity, institutional strength, and system-wide reform.

This paper is structured around a guiding inquiry: What factors influence the success or failure of mergers within the UN system?

The paper aims to illuminate key dimensions that shape merger outcomes. It explores what a "successful" merger might look like – one that achieves strategic coherence, operational efficiency, and cultural integration – while also considering how and why mergers can fall short. Through the lens of UN Women and other internal UN consolidations, the paper offers a practical framework (Annex A) and strategic guidance for reform leaders navigating future merger efforts.

1. The urgency of reform: Why mergers matter today

The UN system is structurally fragmented. Over decades, agencies, funds and programmes have proliferated – each with its own mandate, governance structure, and funding model. While this diversity reflects the political will of Member States, it has also led to inefficiencies, mandate overlap, and competition for resources. In today's climate of donor retrenchment, reform momentum, and operational pressure, the idea of merging entities is gaining traction.

The fragmentation reflects the United Nations's origins as a federation of organizations, each shaped by distinct mandates, governance structures, and political interests. Rather than a single, holistic design, the United Nations evolved through incremental additions driven by Member States and UN officials operating in a competitive environment. Coordination mechanisms have emerged over time, but structural coherence has remained elusive. In this context, mergers are not simply administrative exercises, they are a potentially effective tool to reduce duplication, enhance strategic alignment, and improve the system's overall effectiveness in delivering on its mandates.

"A fragmented UN system was not accidental – it was driven by sovereign interests." –
Manoj Juneja (formerly from WFP)

The UN80 initiative has surfaced questions about whether the current constellation of organizations is fit for purpose. Mergers, whether of full organizations or of specific functions, are not a panacea, but they may offer a pathway to greater coherence, strategic clarity, and institutional strength.

The creation of UN Women in 2010 remains the most significant precedent of a full organizational merger, and a rich source of lessons. Other mergers – such as the functional realignment between UNOPS and IAPSO, and the consolidation of UNDP's Pacific offices – offer additional insights into the operational, cultural, and governance dimensions of merger processes. These cases are referenced throughout the paper to provide a broader view of merger dynamics across different organizational contexts. A summary of each case is also provided in Annex B.

2. Strategic intent and political navigation

The merger that established UN Women was a strategically ambitious and politically intricate reform effort. It aimed to unify fragmented gender equality efforts across the UN system by consolidating four distinct entities – each with its own mandate and institutional culture – into a single, more coherent and authoritative body. The strategic intent was clear: to elevate gender equality through a triple mandate encompassing normative, operational, and coordination roles. Yet, achieving this vision required navigating a complex political landscape. Member States, civil society, and internal stakeholders brought competing priorities and sensitivities to the table, making the merger as much a negotiation of influence and identity as it was a structural redesign. The resulting governance model, mandate alignment, and symbolic decisions reflect a careful balancing act – one that underscores how strategic clarity in the public sector must be forged through consensus, compromise, and diplomatic agility.

The merger that created UN Women brought together four separate entities in 2010: The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which focused on operational activities; the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), responsible for normative work; the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), specializing in research and training; and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), which led policy coordination. Each had its own history, constituency, and internal culture. The rationale for the merger was clear—gender equality needed a stronger institutional home, and the existing architecture was fragmented and underpowered. It had been recommended in 2007 by the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment: Delivering as One.

The UN Women case underscores the critical importance of strategic clarity for a merger to be successful – and it also illustrates how, in the public sector, strategic clarity is more complex than in the

private sector. The success of a merger is not just about cost efficiency – it must reflect a shared mission and be communicated in a way that earns buy-in across political, operational, and cultural lines.

The political momentum was strong. Member States, especially from the Global South and Nordic countries, pushed for consolidation. Civil society organizations campaigned for a "super agency" for women. The General Assembly endorsed the merger, and the Secretary-General appointed a transition team to lead the process.

Yet, the politics were delicate. Each of the four entities had champions within the United Nations and among Member States who advocated for their continued existence or influence. UNIFEM was strongly supported by field-based gender advisors and civil society networks; DAW had backing from Member States engaged in intergovernmental processes like the Commission on the Status of Women; INSTRAW was valued by Latin American countries for its research and training role; and OSAGI had influence within the Secretariat and among policy-focused delegations. Negotiating the governance structure required balancing normative authority with operational capacity. The result was a composite governance model and a triple mandate – normative, operational, and coordination.

Beyond governance, the merger required substantive alignment of mandates and programme activities. UNIFEM's operational focus on field-based gender programming had to be integrated with DAW's normative work, INSTRAW's research agenda, and OSAGI's coordination role. This involved redefining programme priorities, consolidating overlapping initiatives, and developing a unified strategic framework that could serve both global norm-setting and local implementation. The triple mandate – normative, operational, and coordination – was not just a governance model but a programme architecture that had to be built from the ground up.

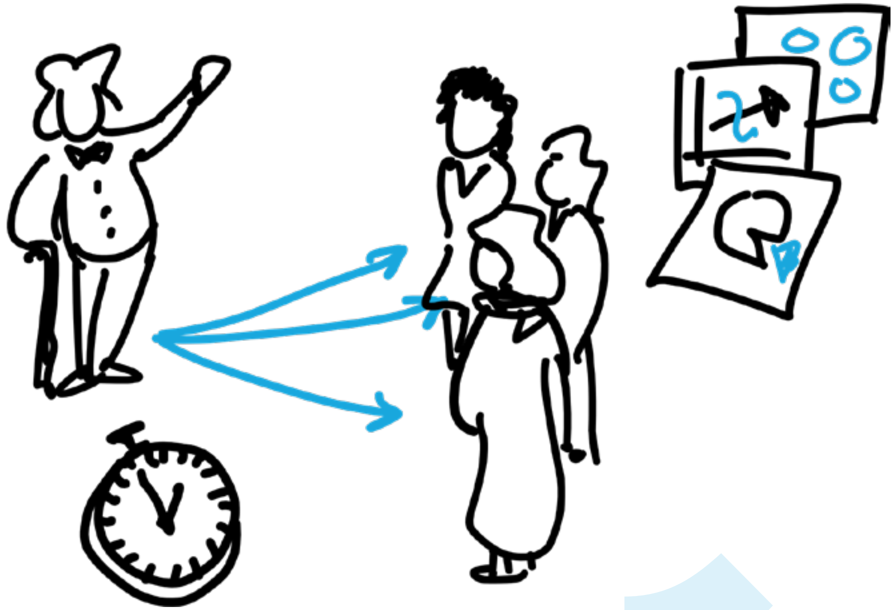
The political navigation that enabled the creation of UN Women was as intricate as the merger itself. Member States were active architects, each with distinct interests, sensitivities, and strategic calculations. Moez Doraid, who led UNIFEM's engagement in the merger, described the process as a "negotiation of authority without dominance," a delicate balancing act in which Member States asserted influence while consciously avoiding power imbalances, striving instead for shared ownership and mutual respect.

At the heart of the political compromise was the General Assembly resolution 64/289, which gave UN Women a new mandate to "lead, coordinate, and promote accountability" across the UN system. The choice of the word "promote" rather than "ensure" was deliberate. Member States resisted granting UN Women formal authority over other entities, preferring a softer formulation that preserved institutional autonomy while signalling system-wide ambition.

This tension between coordination and control played out in the governance design. UN Women was structured as a composite entity, combining Secretariat-style normative functions with Fund/Programme-style operational roles. Its governance reflected this hybridity: Oversight came from both the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and a newly created Executive Board, which included reserved seats for top donors – both traditional and emerging. This dual structure was politically innovative but operationally complex, requiring UN Women to navigate both United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and General Assembly processes, including dual reporting and financial frameworks.

Political sensitivities also shaped the dissolution of UNIFEM. Despite contributing ~90 percent of the resources to the new entity, UNIFEM was dissolved immediately upon adoption of the resolution, months before UN Women became operational. Moez Doraid negotiated a critical clause allowing the "continuation of operational arrangements until replaced," which preserved continuity and avoided service disruption. This language became a strategic buffer, enabling the transition team to "build the ship while sailing it."

Behind the scenes, Member States expressed concern that UNIFEM's dominance might overshadow smaller entities like DAW, INSTRAW, and OSAGI. This led to symbolic and structural decisions aimed at balancing influence – such as rejecting UNIFEM's name and logo – and appointing a neutral coordinator (Sally Fegan-Wyles) to lead the transition. Her appointment, initially met with distrust, ultimately proved effective due to her openness and adaptability.



In sum, the political navigation of the UN Women merger required:

- Agreement and commitment by Member States
- Carefully crafted language to balance institutional ambition with respect for Member State autonomy

- Governance innovation to reflect composite mandates
- Symbolic concessions to manage institutional identity
- Diplomatic leadership to foster trust and cooperation among diverse Member State factions

These lessons underscore that mergers within the United Nations are not just technical exercises, they are political negotiations shaped by sovereignty, symbolism, and strategic calculus.

"Many of the UNIFEM staff wanted to maintain the symbolic aspects, like the name and logo." – Moez Doraid, UN Women

A useful comparative case is the functional merger between UNDP's IAPSO and UNOPS, which took place around 2006–2007. Rather than a full structural consolidation, this transition involved the transfer of specific inter-agency procurement functions – such as the UN Global Marketplace and related platforms – from UNDP to UNOPS. The aim was to clarify UNOPS's service delivery role and reduce tensions or overlaps with other UN entities, positioning it as a neutral, technical provider rather than a competitor within the system.

The UNOPS–IAPSO case offers a useful example of a functional merger. It demonstrated how targeted functional transfers can resolve mandate tensions and improve service delivery. As Jan Mattsson (former head of UNOPS) noted, the transition was driven by a desire to clarify roles and reduce perceived conflicts in inter-agency procurement. Future mergers may benefit from similarly focused approaches that align with operational strengths and system needs.

A third instructive example is the merger of UNDP's Pacific Regional Centre and the Fiji Multi-Country Office between 2013 and 2015. This internal consolidation aimed to resolve overlapping mandates, streamline reporting lines, and align UNDP's structure with other UN agencies operating in the region. As Peter Batchelor (former head of UNDP Pacific Regional Office) noted, the dual structure had created organizational confusion and inefficiencies, which the merger sought to address through a unified governance model and clearer leadership roles.

Building on the political dynamics and governance designs described above, the next section examines how organizational identity and culture shape merger outcomes.

3. Navigating identity and organizational culture

Strategic mergers within the UN system must grapple not only with mandates and governance, but with the deeply **embedded identities and cultures** of the organizations involved. The creation of UN Women was a bold strategic move to unify gender equality efforts, but its success hinged on navigating the emotional and cultural terrain of four distinct entities. Each brought its own ethos, loyalties, and operational style, requiring not just structural integration but a deliberate effort to build shared purpose and trust. Political sensitivities around legacy influence, symbolic identity, and institutional autonomy shaped how staff responded to change. The transition team had to manage these dynamics with empathy and strategic clarity, recognizing that cultural alignment is an indispensable part of the merger process. This section explores how leadership, symbolism, and inclusive processes helped bridge divides and foster a new organizational culture, offering lessons for future mergers where identity and politics intersect.

One of the most challenging aspects of the UN Women merger was cultural. Staff from the four entities merged brought distinct organizational identities, loyalties, and ways of working. UNIFEM had a strong field presence and activist ethos. DAW was rooted in intergovernmental processes. INSTRAW focused on research and training. OSAGI operated within the Secretariat's policy machinery, serving as the central coordination unit for gender mainstreaming across UN departments.

Cultural integration must account for not only organizational identity but also geographic and political context. Harmonization requires returning to shared strategic goals and building trust through inclusive processes. Without intentional cultural alignment, mergers risk internal resistance and fragmentation.

Emotional attachment to legacy brands – especially UNIFEM – created resistance. Staff identified strongly

with their organizational histories, values, and ways of working and feared losing their identity, influence, and autonomy. For example, UNIFEM's activist ethos and field-based orientation clashed with the more policy-driven, headquarters-centric culture of DAW and OSAGI. These differences manifested in behaviours such as reluctance to collaborate across teams, resistance to adopting new branding and reporting lines, and informal gatekeeping of legacy practices. Some staff continued using old logos or resisted integrating programmatic approaches, while others questioned the legitimacy of new leadership structures.

To move from cultural fragmentation to alignment, organizations must go beyond acknowledging differences. They must actively shape a shared culture. Culture expresses itself in everyday behaviours: leadership styles, decision-making processes, core values and beliefs, communication patterns (formal and informal), and how people are managed and recognized. These elements influence how staff experience change and whether they feel part of the new organization.

Based on UNLOCK's experience, successful cultural integration can be facilitated through a deliberate, multi-step approach such as the one outlined below:

1. Assess existing cultures through surveys, interviews, and observations to understand values, behaviours, and pain points.
2. Define a joint culture and shared change vision, articulating what the new organization stands for.
3. Set cultural priorities and key goals that reflect strategic intent and staff needs.
4. Embed the new culture into human resources (HR) policies, performance management, workflow processes, and daily practices.
5. Reflect the new culture through symbols: branding, events, and rituals that reinforce belonging and shared purpose.
6. Track, measure, and adapt cultural integration efforts using feedback and behavioural indicators.
7. Ensure leadership ownership, as leaders must model the behaviours and values they want to see.

These steps help translate abstract cultural goals into tangible practices. In the case of UN Women, and other mergers such as UNDP's Pacific offices and UNOPS–IAPSO, cultural alignment was not a byproduct of reform – it was a prerequisite for success.

As Jan Mattsson noted in the UNOPS–IAPSO case, even in functional mergers, early stakeholder mapping and cultural alignment are essential to avoid misunderstandings and turf protection. In the case of UN Women, the transition team had to navigate these sensitivities with empathy and strategic clarity. Change managers had to address these tensions not just through technical integration, but by fostering trust, empathy, and a shared sense of purpose. They organized joint retreats, cross-functional teams, and onboarding sessions to build shared ethos.

The merger was not just structural, it was deeply personal. For many staff, it meant letting go of a professional identity and embracing a new, uncertain future. Leadership had to acknowledge this emotional dimension and create space for dialogue, dissent, and healing. They did so by actively engaging staff in town halls, listening sessions, and retreats, where concerns could be voiced and addressed. Leaders also recognized the symbolic importance of institutional identity, such as names and logos, and treated these not as trivialities but as meaningful expressions of belonging and legacy.

Despite the uncertainty, leadership made a deliberate effort to safeguard staff livelihoods. A structured job placement process was introduced, including job fairs and clear criteria for transitioning roles. Functions that remained unchanged were matched directly, while senior or newly defined roles underwent competitive selection. This transparent approach helped ensure that over 90 percent of staff from the merged entities found a place in the new organization. Crucially, the merger was framed not as a downsizing exercise but as an expansion, an opportunity to build a more powerful, better-resourced institution. This framing helped ease anxieties and foster a sense of shared purpose during a time of profound change.

UNDP’s Pacific Offices merger also highlighted cultural contrasts within the same organization. The Regional Centre was staffed primarily by international personnel, while the multi-country office had a predominantly Fijian national workforce. Differences in salary scales, work styles, and perceived status created sensitivities. As Peter Batchelor (former head of UNDP Pacific Regional Office) observed, managing these dynamics required empathy, transparency, and a shared commitment to the merger’s strategic goals.

4. Operational complexity and transitional architecture

Mergers within the UN system must be underpinned by robust operational planning and transitional architecture to succeed. The creation of UN Women was not only a political achievement but a logistical challenge, requiring the integration of disparate administrative systems, governance models, and contractual frameworks. The strategic intent – to unify and elevate gender equality efforts – could only be realized through careful navigation of operational complexity. Political sensitivities around institutional autonomy and legacy systems meant that transitional arrangements had to balance continuity with reform. Interim structures, legacy contracts, and dual reporting lines were not signs of weakness, but pragmatic tools to maintain credibility and service delivery during a period of uncertainty. This section explores how leadership, legal frameworks, and change management strategies helped steer the merger through its most fragile phase, offering insights into how operational readiness and political diplomacy must go hand in hand in public sector reform.

The operational integration was complex. Contracts, financial systems, programmatic priorities had to be harmonized. UNIFEM operated under UNDP’s administrative umbrella; DAW and OSAGI were part of the Secretariat; INSTRAW had its own governance board. Reconciling these differences required legal, financial, and HR expertise.

The planning and implementation of the merger unfolded over several years, marked by both strategic deliberation and operational improvisation. Momentum began building around 2008, with two years of growing anticipation and uncertainty among staff before the General Assembly formally adopted the resolution in July 2010. The years of negotiation and the subsequent years of institutional consolidation meant that the full arc of the merger – from early planning to functional integration – spanned at least five years.

In the early years, UN Women operated with dual systems and transitional arrangements. Some staff remained on legacy contracts. Budget lines were restructured. Reporting relationships were redefined. The transition team had to ensure continuity while building new structures.

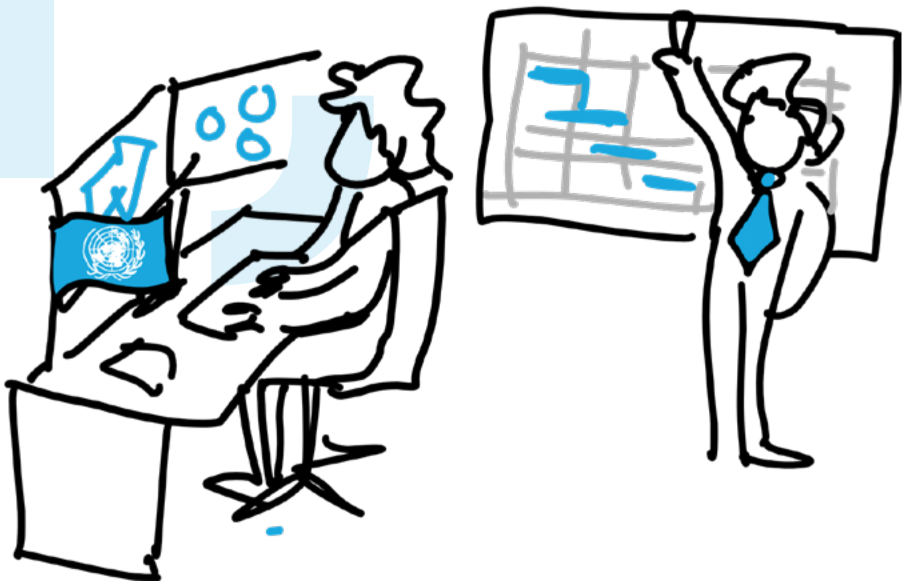
On a more general note, it is important to do the operational planning upfront to ensure day-one operationality and set and maintain a good pace for the merger implementation. Announcing a merger before operational planning is complete can create backlash and service disruption. Operational readiness must be prioritized and put in place before publicly announcing the merger to ensure continuity and credibility.

Where leadership roles are not yet defined, interim governance structures and joint decision-making protocols can maintain continuity and reduce uncertainty. Leadership humility and shared authority are essential to navigate entrenched interests and institutional identities during transition.

At UN Women, change managers coordinated these efforts, often working behind the scenes to resolve bottlenecks, align workflows, and support staff. Their role was not just technical, it was relational, emotional, and strategic.

Moreover, as Moez Doraid emphasized, during merger transitions, it is often prudent to retain existing policies and procedures until new ones are formally developed and adopted. This approach helps maintain operational continuity, reduces confusion, and ensures that staff and stakeholders remain anchored in familiar frameworks while the merged entity evolves.

As noted earlier, the UNOPS–IAPSO merger maintained operational continuity through shared location in Copenhagen and smooth transitions (see Section 2).



Staff proximity helped ease the shift, and the functions were absorbed with minimal disruption. However, Jan Mattsson emphasized that even in such cases, early stakeholder-mapping and cultural alignment are essential to avoid misunderstandings and ensure long-term integration.

5. Leadership and governance

Leadership and governance were instrumental in steering UN Women through its formative years. The merger introduced not only a new organizational structure but also a bold and complex mandate that required careful orchestration. Early leadership decisions helped lay the groundwork for institutional coherence, while governance mechanisms were crafted to reflect the entity's unique hybrid nature. These foundational choices – balancing normative ambition with operational pragmatism – set the tone for how UN Women would engage with Member States, manage internal transitions, and assert its role within the broader UN system. What follows is an exploration of how these leadership and governance strategies shaped both the immediate consolidation and the long-term positioning of the organization.

Leadership was critical. The appointment of Michelle Bachelet as the first Executive Director of UN Women gave the new entity visibility and credibility. Her stature as a former Head of State helped position UN Women as a serious player within the UN system and on the global stage.

Internally, leadership had to balance ambition with realism. The triple mandate was bold and required careful sequencing. Normative work had to be anchored in intergovernmental processes. Operational work needed field capacity and partnerships. Coordination demanded diplomacy and tact.

UN Women's governance structure was a notable innovation within the UN system. Unlike most entities, it reports to both the General Assembly and ECOSOC, reflecting its hybrid mandate – normative, operational, and coordination. This dual reporting line helped UN Women navigate political sensitivities, integrate gender equality across policy and programming, and position itself as both a development actor and a normative leader.

Unlike the UN Women merger, the UNOPS–IAPSO transition involved limited formal governance engagement. The functional realignment – transferring inter-agency procurement services from UNDP's IAPSO to UNOPS – was executed with minimal involvement from Member States or intergovernmental bodies. This allowed for greater agility and speed, as decisions could be made internally without navigating complex political processes. However, this case does highlight the value of structured oversight in maintaining transparency, legitimacy, and long-term coherence. As Jan Mattsson reflected, even in smaller or functional mergers, having a neutral coordinating entity or an external review mechanism can help balance institutional interests, mitigate risks, and ensure that reforms serve the broader goals of the UN system. The absence of such oversight in the UNOPS–IAPSO case did not result in failure, but it highlighted the potential vulnerabilities of informal transitions, particularly in terms of stakeholder alignment and accountability. Future mergers, even those involving limited scope, may benefit from lightweight but formal governance structures to guide implementation and safeguard system-wide coherence.

Leadership alignment was a key success factor in the Pacific merger. Peter Batchelor's voluntary decision to step aside as Regional Centre manager helped ease tensions and model collaborative change. As he reflected, *"If you'd had somebody in my position who resisted, that would have been very problematic."* This underscores the importance of leadership humility and strategic role transitions in merger contexts.

With governance structures in place, the next challenge is to assess whether the merger delivers on its intended impact. Section 6 explores how success is measured and what indicators matter most.

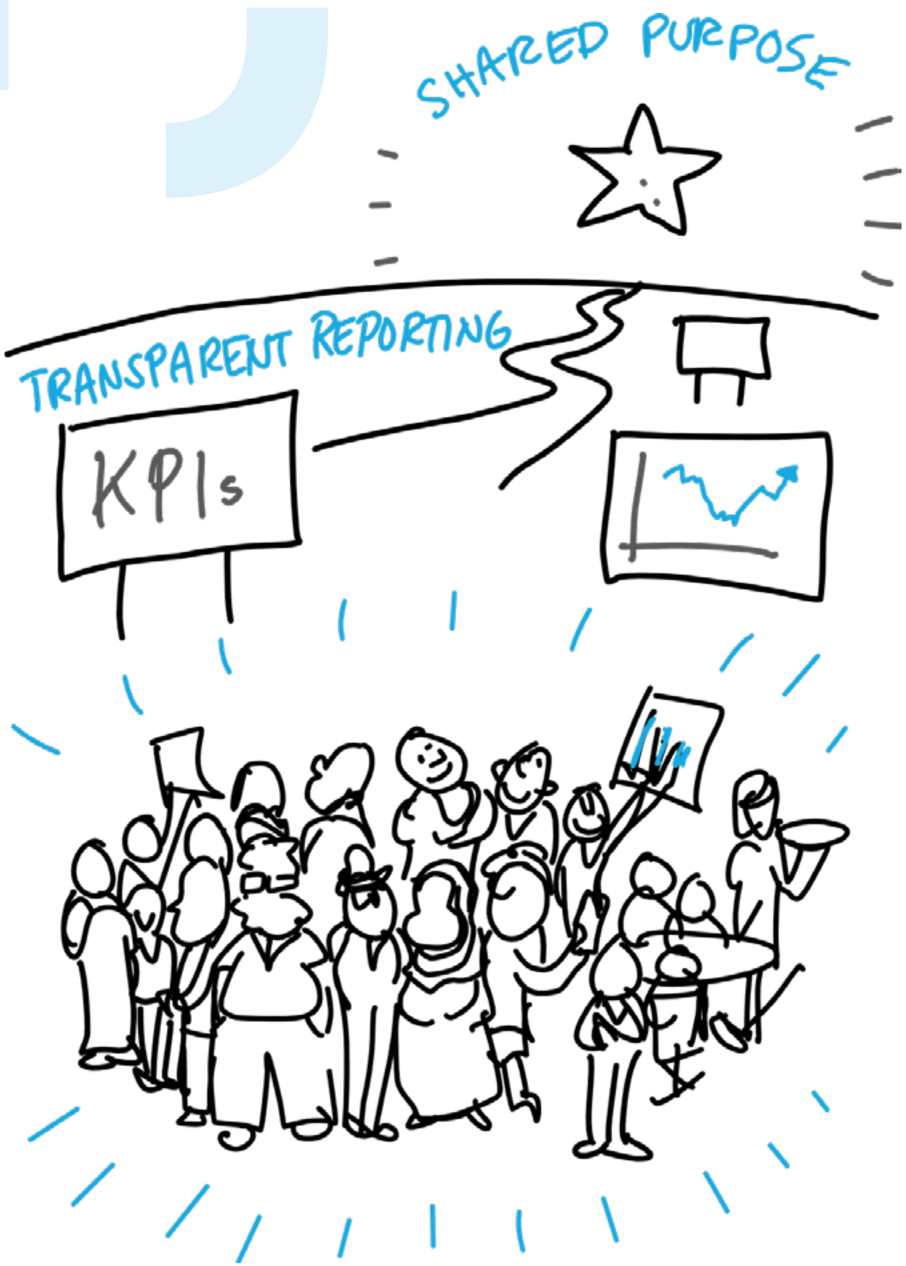
6. Measuring success

Measuring the success of UN mergers is both challenging and essential. In the case of UN Women, growth in funding and influence served as strong indicators of progress, even though no merger-specific metrics were defined at the outset. Instead, success was tracked through strategic plans, audit results, and initiatives like the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP). Similarly, the transition from UNOPS to IAPSO demonstrated operational continuity—an informal but meaningful signal of success.

While formal metrics are ideal, they are not always in place. Informal indicators such as staff retention, service continuity, and stakeholder confidence can offer valuable insights, even if they emerge organically. However, future mergers would benefit from clearer upfront frameworks to assess dimensions of success, both structural and cultural.

To enable credible and transparent measurement, merged entities must invest in harmonized data systems. Without consistent definitions and collection methods, performance indicators cannot be reliably tracked. Data integration is essential—not only for accountability, but also for learning and continuous improvement.

This section explores how success has been assessed in past mergers and identifies practical lessons for future efforts, emphasizing the need for both formal metrics and flexible, context-sensitive approaches to evaluation.



UN Women's growth from ~USD 200 million in 2010 to ~USD 650 million in 2024 in annual expenditure is one indicator of success. But more important was its emergence as a global voice on gender equality. The merger gave gender issues a stronger institutional platform and improved coherence across the UN system.

UN Women became a key actor in global norm-setting (e.g., through CSW), field programming (e.g., initiatives to End Violence Against Women – EVAW), and promotion of women's leadership, and system-wide coordination (e.g., UN-SWAP). It also built partnerships with civil society, the private sector, and regional organizations.

These achievements reflect not only structural consolidation but also the successful alignment of programme mandates. The merger enabled UN Women to unify disparate programme strands into a coherent strategy, linking global advocacy with field-level implementation. Future mergers must similarly prioritize programme integration, ensuring that merged entities deliver on their mandates in a unified and synergistic way.

While the creation of UN Women is widely cited as a success, some system fragmentation remains – as highlighted by the 2023 Independent Review of the UN System's Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality. Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue that intersects with nearly every aspect of the UN's work – from peacebuilding and humanitarian response to health, education, and climate action. As such, effective implementation requires ongoing coordination with a wide array of UN entities, each with its own mandate, governance structure, and operational culture. While the creation of UN Women consolidated key functions and elevated the institutional profile of gender equality, it did not – and could not – eliminate the structural complexity of the broader UN system. Entities such as UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, and others continue to play critical roles in gender-related programming, necessitating robust interagency collaboration. The merger helped unify leadership and strategy within one entity, but systemic coherence still depends on shared frameworks, joint programming, and mechanisms like the UN-SWAP. In this sense, the merger elevated the conversation, creating a stronger institutional voice and platform for gender equality, but it also highlighted the enduring need for coordination across a fragmented system.

In the UNOPS–IAPSO transition, success was reflected in the seamless continuation of services and the effective absorption of key procurement functions. While no formal Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were tracked, the lack of disruption and the operational stability achieved offer useful indicators. Future mergers might consider combining informal feedback with structured metrics defined upfront to assess both technical and relational outcomes.

7. Strategic considerations for future mergers

The UN Women merger offers valuable insights for future institutional consolidations, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. While mergers can enhance coherence and efficiency, they require careful planning, inclusive leadership, and sustained momentum. Political complexity, operational integration, and cultural alignment must be managed deliberately to prevent disruption and “reform fatigue”. This section outlines key strategic dimensions and practical lessons to guide future UN mergers, drawing from UN Women and other comparative cases.

UN Women offers a blueprint for future mergers, but also a cautionary tale. Political will is essential, but so is operational realism. Cultural integration takes time, and success must be measured in influence, not just efficiency.

In today’s environment of reform and funding pressure, mergers may become more attractive. But mergers must be approached strategically – with clear intent, inclusive leadership, and robust change management.

“We had to build the plane while flying it... merging four entities while launching a new one.” – Moez Doraid, UN Women

To support future consolidation efforts, the table that follows outlines the key dimensions that shape institutional mergers, drawing from the UN Women experience and other system-wide integration efforts. It offers a practical lens for assessing strategic viability, operational complexity, and stakeholder impact.

Mergers within the UN system are often proposed to enhance efficiency and coherence, a major obstacle lies in the divergent governance structures and political interests of Member States. Agencies governed by separate intergovernmental bodies – each with distinct oversight mechanisms, funding arrangements, and strategic mandates – are difficult to consolidate. Member States frequently have vested interests in preserving the autonomy of specific entities, especially when those entities align with national priorities or regional influence. This dynamic underscores that institutional reform in the UN is not merely a technical exercise, but one deeply shaped by political considerations and the architecture of global governance.

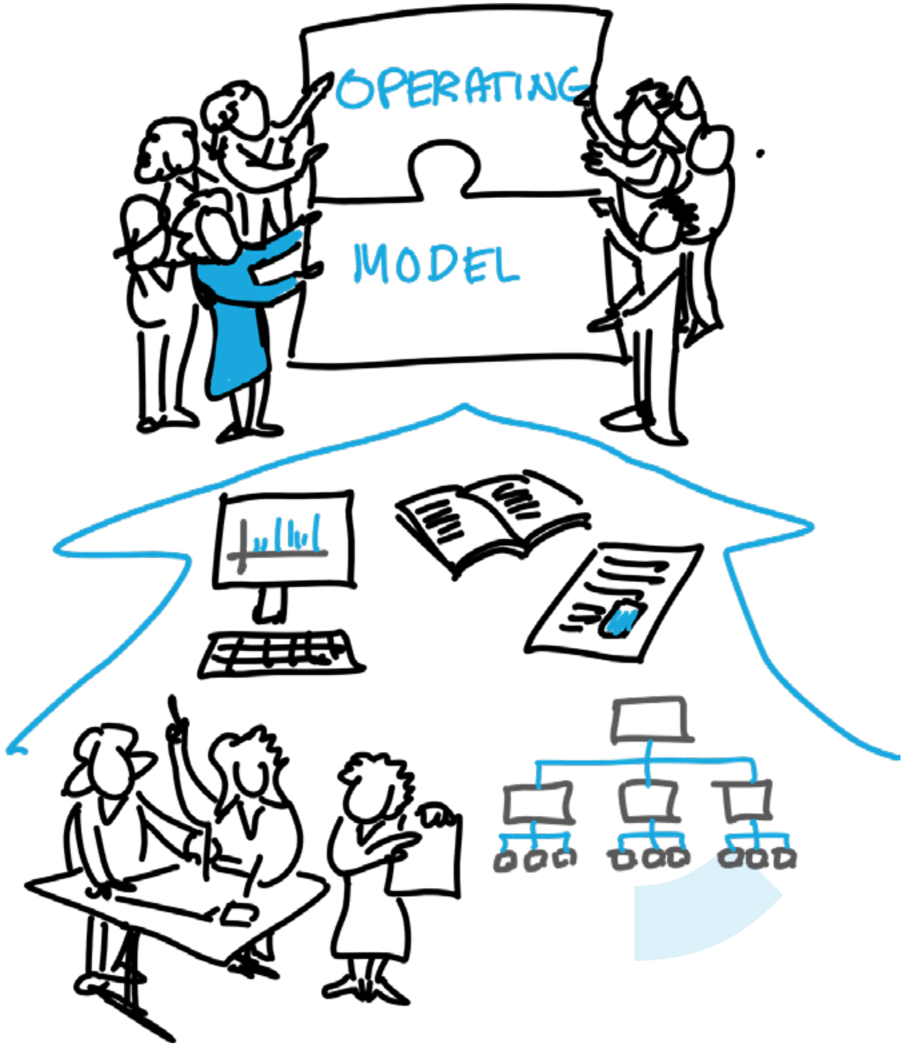
This complexity carries the risk that mergers become bogged down in operational and political entanglements, delaying reform and eroding stakeholder confidence. It is therefore critical that mergers be paced deliberately to maintain momentum.

Table: Key dimensions of institutional mergers

Dimension	Description	Strategic implications	Examples
Strategic rationale	Core reason for merging (e.g., mandate alignment, cost efficiency, reform)	Drives legitimacy and long-term value creation	UN Women: merged 4 entities for coherence and impact
Mandate compatibility	Degree of overlap or complementarity in missions and functions	Affects synergy potential and risk of mandate dilution	UNAIDS: merged programs under unified strategy
Governance structure	New leadership and decision-making model post-merger	Shapes accountability and agility	UN Women: Executive Director-led unified entity
Organizational culture	Compatibility of values, norms, and work styles	Influences staff morale and integration success	UN Women: culture harmonization across entities
Staffing and HR impact	Changes in roles, contracts, locations, and career paths	Requires clear communication and transition support	UN Women: staff reassignment and contract harmonization
Operational integration	Merging of systems, processes, and infrastructure	Determines speed and cost of transition	UNDP–UNCDF: shared services integration
Transition governance	Structures and processes guiding the merger implementation phase to ensure outcomes are in the interest of overall UN and Member States	Provides legitimacy, transparency, decision-making and risk mitigation through independent oversight and stakeholder engagement	UNOPS: Jan Mattsson's emphasis on external review mechanisms; World Bank Inspection Panel model
Financial model	Budgeting, cost-sharing, and funding mechanisms	Impacts sustainability and donor confidence	UN Women: consolidated budget and donor pool
Stakeholder engagement	Involvement of Member States, donors, and partners	Builds trust and ensures political support	UN Women: broad consultation pre-merger
Legal and policy alignment	Harmonization of legal frameworks, policies, and reporting lines	Prevents compliance issues and ensures coherence	UN Women: unified reporting to General Assembly and ECOSOC
Monitoring and evaluation	Mechanisms to assess merger outcomes and course-correct	Enables learning and accountability	UN Women: annual progress reports to Executive Board

While full integration may take years, core functionality – such as governance, financial systems, and service delivery – must be established early to demonstrate viability and build trust. Merger experts warn that drawn-out transitions risk undermining reform objectives, creating space for entrenched resistance, and weakening leadership credibility. In public sector contexts, where continuity of services is non-negotiable and political cycles are short, delays can also jeopardize funding, disrupt operations, and trigger reputational damage. A well-paced merger signals strategic intent, protects institutional legitimacy, and sustains the energy needed to carry reforms through to completion.

To avoid stagnation and loss of credibility, merger-pacing must be actively managed through a combination of strategic, operational, and behavioural measures. First, institutions should define and communicate clear milestones – such as day-one readiness, interim governance, and early wins in service delivery – to signal progress and build confidence. Second, establishing a dedicated project management office with authority to coordinate across functions ensures that decisions are tracked, dependencies are managed, and bottlenecks are addressed swiftly. Third, embedding change agents within merged entities helps sustain energy and resolve resistance. Fourth, leaders should prioritize continuity in core systems – such as payroll, procurement, and communications—while allowing flexibility in non-critical areas. Finally, regular stakeholder updates, including transparent reporting on KPIs and risks, help maintain trust and reinforce the merger's strategic intent. These measures collectively help sustain momentum and reduce the



risk of reform fatigue.

The UNOPS–IAPSO experience shows that functional mergers can be effective when grounded in operational logic and mutual respect. While not driven by high-level reform mandates, the transition resolved a long-standing tension and clarified service roles. Future consolidation efforts should consider hybrid models. Where full structural integration may not be feasible, functional realignment can still yield system-wide benefits.

"Merging entities with different governance bodies is not just a technical challenge, it's a political one shaped by the interests and influence of Member States." — Manoj Juneja

The UNDP Pacific merger offers additional lessons for future consolidation efforts. While it was an internal merger within a single entity, it involved significant cultural integration, leadership transitions, and governance redesign. As mentioned earlier, Peter Batchelor's willingness to step aside as Regional Centre manager helped ease tensions and model collaborative change. The merger was guided by a clear strategic rationale – resolving organizational confusion and aligning with other UN agency models – and was supported by a proactive staff engagement strategy. This case reinforces that successful mergers require not only structural clarity but also leadership humility, tailored change management, and a shared commitment to purpose.

8. Role of change managers and leaders

In the case of UN Women, leaders negotiated political consensus, designed governance structures, and set strategic direction. Change managers coordinated integration of mandates, staffing, and systems, facilitated cultural onboarding, and supported staff through uncertainty. Their role was pivotal – not just in execution, but in shaping the emotional and relational dynamics of change.

Finally, as mentioned above, one of the most overlooked yet critical enablers of successful mergers is the willingness of leaders to step aside when necessary. Mergers often involve overlapping mandates, competing loyalties, and entrenched leadership structures. In such contexts, the ability of senior figures to relinquish roles or influence – voluntarily and with grace – can send a powerful signal of commitment to the merged entity's future. This kind of leadership humility not only eases tensions but also creates space for new governance models, fresh talent, and more inclusive decision-making. Without it, mergers risk becoming turf wars rather than transformative opportunities.

Ultimately, mergers succeed not just through structure, but through people. Change managers and leaders must navigate complexity with empathy, strategic clarity, and commitment to the merged entity's future.

9. Key lessons from UN Mergers: What future consolidations should prioritize

Drawing on the UN Women merger and comparative cases, this section distils practical lessons. The lessons are presented across the six phases of the merger framework presented in full in Annex A (based on Ernst & Young's approach to similar public sector integrations). These lessons are intended to guide leaders and change practitioners in future consolidation efforts within the UN system, ensuring that mergers are politically viable, operationally sound, and strategically impactful.

The following lessons, organized by the six-phase framework, distil what future UN mergers should prioritize to succeed – politically, operationally, and culturally. They reflect structural insights and human dynamics drawn from the cases examined.

Phase 1: Strategic rationale and mandate alignment

- **Strategic clarity is essential:** Mergers must be driven by a compelling rationale – such as mandate alignment, systemic reform, or strategic coherence – not merely cost-saving. The rationale must be clearly articulated and widely understood to build legitimacy and momentum.
- **Political navigation is foundational:** Mergers are shaped as much by political interests as by technical considerations. Member States often have vested stakes in the autonomy, visibility, or mandate of specific entities. Strategic language (e.g., "promote accountability"), symbolic concessions, and inclusive governance design (e.g., dual reporting lines) are essential tools for building consensus.
- **Scenario-planning and mandate-mapping are critical:** As seen in the UN Women and UNOPS–IAPSO cases, early feasibility assessments help avoid downstream blockages.

Phase 2: Day-one readiness and continuity planning

- **Operational transitions require careful planning:** Retaining existing policies and procedures during the interim period helps maintain continuity and reduces confusion until new frameworks are formally adopted. This was a key success factor in both the UN Women and UNOPS–IAPSO transitions.
- **Merger pacing must be deliberate:** Core systems, such as governance, finance, and service delivery, should be operational early. Delays can erode credibility, create space for resistance, and disrupt services. "Build the plane while flying it" is only viable with strong transitional architecture.
- **Continuity is non-negotiable:** Especially in humanitarian or field-based agencies, any disruption to services can have real-world consequences. Day-one readiness plans must include IT, payroll, procurement, and communications.

Phase 3: Unified operating model design

- **Governance design shapes success:** Hybrid models can balance normative authority with operational capacity. UN Women's dual reporting to ECOSOC and the General Assembly, and its composite governance structure, offer a template for future mergers.
- **Functional mergers can be effective:** Where full structural integration is not feasible, targeted realignments (e.g., procurement, human resources, or policy functions) can still yield system-wide benefits. The UNOPS–IAPSO case illustrates this well.
- **Avoid bureaucratic expansion:** Operating models should prioritize simplification, agility, and mission alignment—not just structural consolidation.

Phase 4: Workforce and cultural integration

- **Cultural integration takes time:** Emotional attachments to legacy brands and organizational identities must be acknowledged and managed with empathy. The UN Women merger revealed how deeply personal these transitions can be.
- **Leadership humility matters:** Voluntary transitions and role relinquishment by senior figures can ease tensions and model collaborative change. Peter Batchelor's decision to step aside in the Pacific merger exemplifies this.
- **Staff engagement is essential:** Joint retreats/co-creation, onboarding sessions, and deliberate symbolic decisions on highly visible issues related to identity (e.g., naming, branding) help build a shared ethos and reduce resistance.
- **Address fears around job security:** Especially in staff council or donor-sensitive environments, efficiency is often perceived as a euphemism for job cuts. Mapping competencies and offering mobility pathways or alumni support can mitigate reputational harm and operational risks.
- **Take deliberate steps to shape a shared culture:** A structured approach to cultural alignment includes:

  a. Assessing existing cultures through surveys, interviews, and observations to understand values, behaviours, and pain points

  b. Defining a joint culture and shared change vision, articulating what the new organization stands for

  c. Setting cultural priorities and key goals that reflect strategic intent and staff needs

  d. Embedding the new culture into HR policies, performance management, workflow processes, and daily practices

  e. Reflecting the new culture through symbols – branding, events, and rituals that reinforce belonging and shared purpose

  f. Tracking, measuring, and adapting cultural integration efforts using feedback and behavioural indicators

  g. Ensuring leadership ownership, as leaders must model the behaviours and values they want to see.

Phase 5: Synergy realization and impact measurement

- **Success must be measurable:** Merged entities must invest in harmonized data systems and define Key Performance Indicators to track progress. Without consistent definitions and collection methods, performance indicators cannot be reliably tracked.
- **Celebrate early wins:** Demonstrating early impact – whether through improved service delivery, cost savings, or strategic influence – helps sustain momentum and stakeholder confidence.
- **Transparency builds trust:** Regular reporting to governing bodies and stakeholders reinforces legitimacy and enables course correction.

Phase 6: Aligning with UN values and social impact

- **Stakeholder reassurance is critical:** Donors and other stakeholders must be reassured that their strategic goals will still be met post-merger. Transparent dialogue is essential to preserve funding and influence, especially when governance structures or mandates shift.
- **Stakeholder engagement builds legitimacy:** Early and inclusive consultation with Member States, staff, civil society, and partners is critical. Engagement must begin before public announcements to avoid entrenched opposition.
- **Change managers are pivotal:** Their role spans technical coordination, emotional support, and strategic facilitation. Embedding change agents and leveraging behavioural science tools can help navigate resistance and foster collaboration.
- **Mergers must enhance public value:** Beyond internal efficiency, mergers should strengthen the ability of the United Nations to deliver on its normative and operational mandates, align with the Sustainable Development Goals, and reinforce transparency, equity, and sustainability.

Taken together, these lessons suggest that successful mergers require not only structural clarity, but also emotional intelligence, political navigation, and a sustained commitment to creating public value. Reform leaders must approach consolidation not as a technical fix, but as a strategic transformation grounded in trust, inclusion, and purpose.

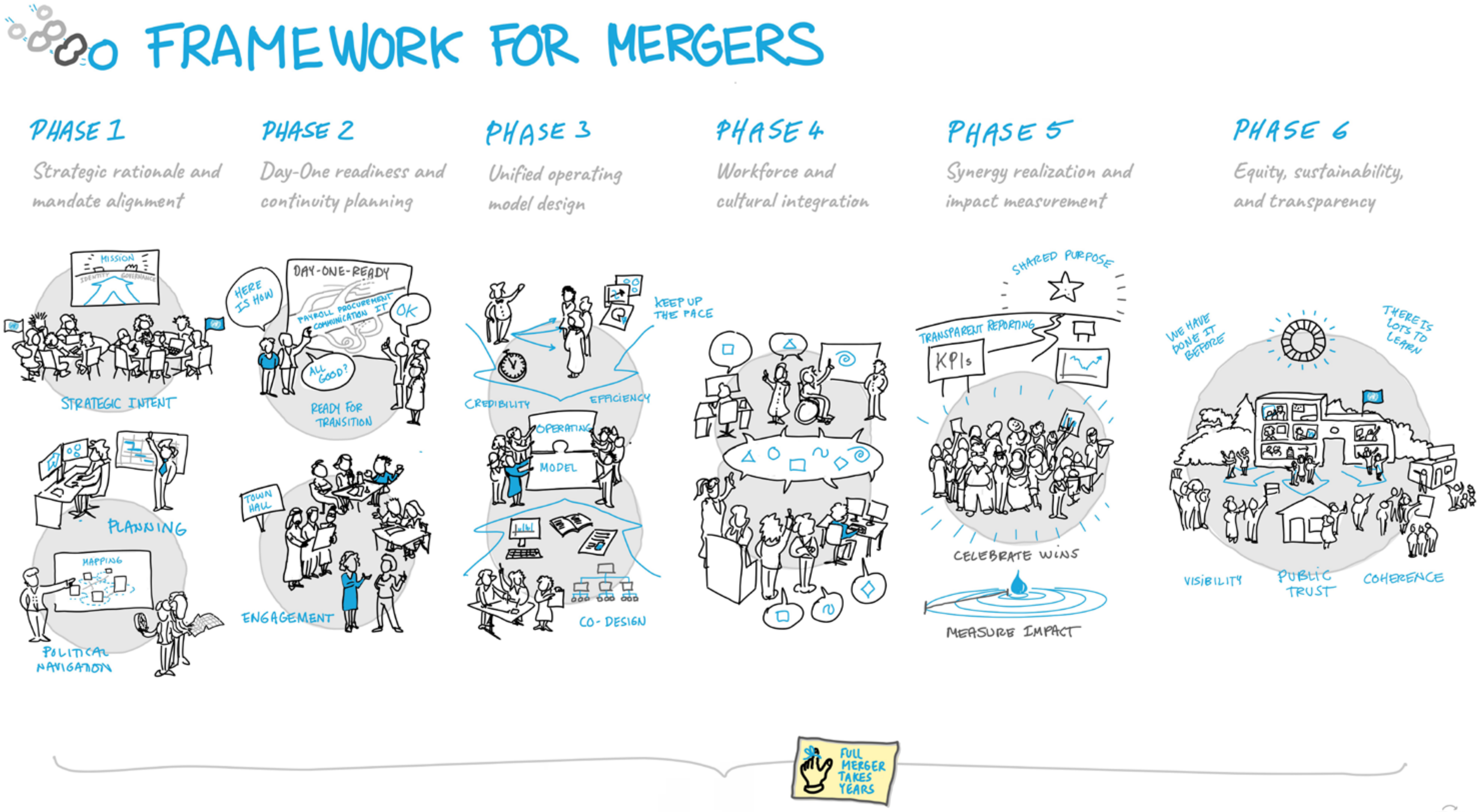
Annex A: Six-Phase framework for UN entity mergers

For guiding a merger within the UN context, a structured framework is essential to manage complexity, ensure alignment with mandates, and maintain stakeholder trust. This framework considers EY's approach to similar public sector integrations with lessons from UN Women, UNOPS–IAPSO, and UNDP Pacific. It is tailored to the political, operational, and cultural realities of the UN system.

Phase 1: Strategic rationale and mandate alignment

Objective: Establish a compelling, mission-aligned rationale for the merger.

Key actions:



- Conduct mandate-mapping and gap analysis.
- Align with UN Charter, SDGs, and agency mandates.
- Secure political buy-in through discreet stakeholder engagement.
- Use strategic language to balance ambition and autonomy (e.g., "promote accountability").

Why it matters: Without strategic clarity, mergers risk becoming reactive or politically vulnerable.

Change management focus: Engage early with internal champions and sceptics to build trust and shape a shared vision.

Phase 2: Day-one readiness and continuity planning

Objective: Ensure uninterrupted service delivery and internal operations from the first day.

Key actions:

- Develop continuity plans for payroll, procurement, IT, and communications.
- Establish interim governance structures and joint decision-making protocols.
- Retain existing policies and procedures until new ones are adopted.
- Communicate clearly to manage expectations and reduce uncertainty.

Why it matters: Public institutions cannot afford downtime – continuity is non-negotiable.

Change management focus: Prepare staff emotionally and operationally for transition; use town halls and listening sessions to surface concerns.

Phase 3: Unified operating model design

Objective: Create a streamlined, agile, and mission-aligned organizational structure.

Key actions:

- Integrate back-office systems (finance, HR, IT).
- Define core and non-core functions for integration.
- Avoid bureaucratic expansion; prioritize simplification and agility.
- Clarify reporting lines and governance pathways (e.g., dual GA/ECOSOC reporting).

Why it matters: A coherent operating model underpins credibility and efficiency.

Change management focus: Co-design structures with staff input to foster ownership and reduce resistance.

Phase 4: Workforce and cultural integration

Objective: Harmonize organizational cultures and manage staff transitions with empathy.

Key actions:

- Map identities, values, and work styles across entities.

- Use behavioural science tools to work with resistance and foster collaboration.
- Address fears around job security.
- Provide retraining, mobility pathways, and alumni support.
- Take deliberate steps to shape a shared culture, including:

  a. Assessing existing cultures through surveys, interviews, and observations to understand values, behaviours, and pain points

  b. Defining a joint culture and shared change vision, articulating what the new organization stands for

  c. Setting cultural priorities and key goals that reflect strategic intent and staff needs

  d. Embedding the new culture into HR policies, performance management, workflow processes, and daily practices

  e. Reflecting the new culture through symbols – branding, events, and rituals that reinforce belonging and shared purpose

  f. Tracking, measuring, and adapting cultural integration efforts using feedback and behavioural indicators

  g. Ensuring leadership ownership, as leaders must model the behaviours and values they want to see.

Why it matters: Cultural misalignment is a major source of merger failure. People must feel included and supported.

Change management focus: Map existing cultures, define a shared vision, embed new behaviours into daily practices, and support leaders in their efforts to model the desired culture. Joint retreats, onboarding sessions, and symbolic integration (e.g., naming, branding) help foster trust and cohesion during transition.

Phase 5: Synergy realization and impact measurement

Objective: Demonstrate that the merger delivers measurable strategic benefits.

Key actions:

- Define KPIs for cost, service quality, and strategic impact.
- Harmonize data systems to enable reliable measurement.
- Report transparently to stakeholders and governing bodies.

Why it matters: Without evidence of success, mergers risk losing legitimacy and support.

Change management focus: Celebrate early wins and communicate progress to sustain morale and momentum.

Phase 6: Equity, sustainability and transparency

Objective: Ensure that the merger enhances equity, sustainability and transparency

Key actions:

- Align with SDGs and UN values.
- Strengthen transparency through reporting and stakeholder engagement.
- Demonstrate how the merger improves public trust and global outcomes.

Why it matters: UN mergers must serve not just internal efficiency, but broader societal goals.

Change management focus: Embed equity and inclusion in all merger communications and leadership practices.

Annex B: Case summaries

UN Women merger

- Year: 2010
- Entities merged: UNIFEM, DAW, INSTRAW, OSAGI
- Rationale: Fragmentation in gender equality mandates; need for stronger institutional home
- Outcome: Creation of UN Women with composite governance and triple mandate
- Strategic impact: Elevated gender equality within UN system; improved coherence; budget growth from ~USD 200 million to ~USD 650million

UNOPS/IAPSO functional merger

- Year: ~2006–2007
- Entities involved: UNDP (IAPSO functions) and UNOPS
- Rationale: Clarify procurement roles; reduce duplication; reduce inter-agency tension
- Outcome: Transfer of procurement services to UNOPS; IAPSO dissolved
- Strategic impact: Improved efficiency; clarified procurement roles across system

UNDP Pacific merger

- Year: 2013–2015
- Entities involved: Pacific Regional Centre and Fiji Multi-Country Office
- Rationale: Resolve mandate overlap; align with other UN agency models; reduce costs; improve coherence in regional programming
- Outcome: Unified structure under one leadership; improved clarity and efficiency
- Strategic impact: Improved donor engagement; reduced duplication; cultural integration challenges

Annex C: August 2025 interviews

- Moez Doraid, currently Regional Director for UN Women, Arab States, and at time of merger in 2010 he was the Deputy Executive Director for Partnerships, Resource Mobilization and Operations at UNIFEM. He was the main UNIFEM interlocutor in the intergovernmental and interagency negotiations that led to the establishment of UN Women.
- Natalie Jaresko, Managing Director of Strategy Consulting for Government and Public Sector at EY-Parthenon and former Minister of Finance of Ukraine and Executive Director of the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico. She provided insights on public sector mergers, strategic clarity, operational planning, stakeholder engagement, and the role of project management offices in complex institutional transitions.
- Manoj Juneja, former Deputy Executive Director and Chief Financial Officer at WFP, now Catalyst Advisory LLC.
- Peter Batchelor, former head of UNDP Pacific Regional Office.
- Jan Mattsson, former head of UNOPS, now EverImpact.

Annex D: References

Penklis, D.J. (2011). Implications of the 1993 to 2008 Burundi Peace Process for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. [PhD thesis, The University of Sydney] pp.38-47.

Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment: Delivering as One (2007). https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/602746?ln=en&v=pdf

United Nations (2023, February 11). *Independent review of the UN system's capacity to deliver on gender equality* (final report). Executive Office of the Secretary-General. https://www.passblue.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023.02.11-UN-Systems-Review-on-Gender-Equality-vFinalSG-1.pdf

UNSSC/UNLOCK (2025). The State of Change Management in the United Nations.

UNSSC/UNLOCK (2025). UN-Locking Reflections on Downsizing in the UN

UNSSC/UNLOCK (2025). UN-Locking Reflections on Relocations in the UN

The University of Sydney Library repository. Retrieved from https://sydney.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61USYD_INST/1c0ug48/alma991015877919705106

Annex E: Further reading

Baumann, M. O. (2025, June 4). *UN at 80 needs a new approach to reforming the UN development system*. IPI Global Observatory. Retrieved from https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/06/un-at-80-needs-a-new-approach-to-reforming-the-un-development-system/. Summary: Critiques past reform efforts and calls for deeper structural changes beyond coordination, including merging entities and redefining mandates.

Lilly, D. (2025, April 29). *The world is changing rapidly: Can the United Nations restructure to stay relevant?* IPI Global Observatory. Retrieved from https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/04/the-world-is-changing-rapidly-can-the-united-nations-restructure-to-stay-relevant/. Summary: Explores the UN80 reform initiative, including potential mergers of UN entities, structural realignment, and political challenges to reform.

Mishra, V. (2025, May 12). *UN chief calls for major reforms to cut costs and improve efficiency.* UN News. Retrieved from UN chief calls for major reforms to cut costs and improve efficiency | UN News. Summary: Official UN coverage of the Secretary-General's UN80 reform initiative, outlining structural reform priorities, mandate reviews, and cost-saving measures.

United Nations. (2025, September 25). Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver – Report of the Secretary-General, Workstream 3: Changing Structures and Realigning Programmes. UN80 Initiative. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2025-09/UN80_WS3-1_250921_1238.pdf. Summary: Sets out proposals for structural reform and programme realignment across the UN system, including cross-pillar collaboration, pooled funding, and the creation of a UN System Data Commons.

UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM STAFF COLLEGE

MAIN CAMPUS AND HEADQUARTERS

Viale Maestri del Lavoro 10,

10127 Torino, Italy

UNSSC BONN OFFICE

Langer Eugen

Platz der Vereinten Nationen 1,

53113 Bonn, Germany

@UNSSC

facebook.com/UNSSC

linkedin.com/company/unssc

@UNSSC

www.unssc.org

VISIT OUR PAGE

unlock@unssc.org