

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

FRAMEWORK FOR MERGERS

PHASE 1

Strategic rationale and mandate alignment



PHASE 2

Day-One readiness and continuity planning



PHASE 3

Unified operating model design



PHASE 4

Workforce and cultural integration



PHASE 5

Synergy realization and impact measurement



PHASE 6

Equity, sustainability, and transparency



1. The purpose of mergers in the UN system

Mergers have historically been rare in the United Nations but are now being actively considered in the context of the UN80 reform initiative. As the system faces mounting financial pressures, shifting stakeholder expectations, and the need to deliver more with less, mergers are emerging as a potential tool to reduce duplication, enhance strategic alignment, and improve the system's overall efficiency and effectiveness in delivering on its mandates.

But mergers are not just about combining structures or saving costs. When approached with vision and care, they offer a unique opportunity to clarify roles, foster collaboration, and renew organizational culture. Mergers can unlock synergies, and create more agile, responsive teams – if managed with strategic intent and empathy.

Recent UN experiences show that successful mergers are driven by a clear business case, strong leadership, and a focus on both operational and cultural integration. When well managed, mergers avoid confusion, loss of morale, and diminished effectiveness. The real purpose of a merger is not just to survive, but to emerge stronger, more coherent, and better equipped to deliver on the UN's mandate.

“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.”

- UN Women case reflection

2. Prescription: What must be done for mergers to succeed

To turn mergers into moments of renewal and coherence, UN leaders and change practitioners need to lead with strategy, empathy, and discipline. Here's how:

A. Clarify the strategic intent

- Articulate the “why” behind the merger – clarity of purpose is essential for buy-in.
- Develop a robust business case, mapping out expected benefits, risks, and success criteria.
- Align the merger with broader reform agendas and long-term organizational goals.

B. Engage stakeholders early and often

- Involve staff, partners, and Member States. Use multi-channel communication - town halls, FAQs, direct messaging - to keep everyone informed.
- Create feedback loops to adapt plans in real time and address emerging issues.

C. Integrate cultures and teams

- Recognize that merging structures is easier than merging cultures - prioritize team-building and shared values.
- Identify and empower change agents to model new behaviours and bridge divides.
- Celebrate quick wins and legacy contributions to foster a sense of shared purpose.

D. Manage operations with discipline

- Map workflows, systems, and interdependencies to avoid fragmentation and service gaps.
- Use phased implementation and transitional infrastructure (e.g. temporary double incumbency and dual systems) to maintain continuity.
- Establish project and change management offices to keep the merger coordinated and on schedule.
- Ensure that core systems and services are ready from the start (day-one readiness) and maintain momentum and pace of integration efforts.

E. Support people through the transition

- Offer career transition services, emotional support, and recognition for affected staff.
- Ensure fairness and transparency in selection, placement, and separation processes.
- Provide targeted support for vulnerable groups and maintain open channels for feedback.

F. Track progress and learn

- Track progress with clear metrics - service delivery, staff adaptation, and stakeholder satisfaction.
- Evaluate outcomes, document lessons, and share insights across the system.

Checklist for leaders and change practitioners

- ✓ Clarify the purpose and business case for the merger
- ✓ Engage stakeholders early and communicate transparently
- ✓ Prioritize cultural integration and team-building, including joint goal, role and process clarifications
- ✓ Maintain operational continuity and integration momentum
- ✓ Support staff with empathy and fairness
- ✓ Capture lessons and invest in future change capacity

Final thought

Mergers are complex, but how they are led will define the United Nations' coherence, credibility, and capacity for years to come. This is a moment to lead boldly, build trust, and turn complexity into opportunity.

“We had to build the plane while flying it... merging four entities while launching a new one.”

— Moez Doraid, Regional Director for UN Women, ad interim for the Arab States, UN Women