

Relocations in the United Nations: Strategy, empathy, and the art of moving

RELOCATION FRAMEWORK

PHASE 2

Planning and design



PHASE 3

Implementation



PHASE 4

Consolidation and learning



PHASE 1

Strategic assessment





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.

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Executive summary

Relocations within the United Nations (UN) system are often seen as logistical tasks, but they are in fact strategic decisions with deep human implications. Whether prompted by cost pressures, security concerns, or proximity to main beneficiaries, relocations affect staff identity, institutional memory, and operational continuity.

This paper examines the strategic, operational, and cultural dimensions of relocation, drawing on lessons from reforms across IOM, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNMIL, UNON, UNOPS and WHO (case study summaries are provided in Annex B). Relocations today are not just about saving money – they are opportunities to realign strategies, strengthen regional- and country-level delivery, and renew organizational culture.

Relocations that achieve their objectives depend on strong leadership and effective change management. Strategic framing, early engagement with stakeholders, and phased implementation are essential. Change managers and embedded change units play a vital role in guiding transitions, building trust, and aligning staff behaviours with new organizational realities.

One quarter (25 percent) of respondents to UNLOCK's 2025 State of Change Management survey¹ identified relocations as one of the change initiatives currently taking place in their entities.

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

Drawing on interviews, evaluations, and case studies, this paper offers a practical framework to support future relocation efforts across the UN system.

The four-phase framework (Annex A) provides a comprehensive roadmap for managing such transitions. Each phase builds on the previous one, enabling organizations to move from high-level decision-making to practical execution and long-term integration. The key elements of the four-phase framework are:

- **Scoping and feasibility:** Define triggers, assess locations, and engage stakeholders early
- **Planning:** Map functions, redesign workflows, and plan staff/family support
- **Implementation:** Use phased approaches, dual systems, and strong change management
- **Consolidation and learning:** Evaluate outcomes, document lessons, and build and sustain culture.

1. Why relocations matter now

The UN system is under mounting pressure from multiple directions: a deepening financial crisis driven by delayed and reduced member contributions; intensifying geopolitical divisions that undermine consensus and paralyse decision-making; and growing demands for greater efficiency, transparency, and relevance in the face of complex global crises. These challenges are forcing the United Nations to fundamentally reconsider its structures, operations, and footprint. In this context, relocation is increasingly viewed not just as a cost-saving measure, but as a strategic tool to enhance agility, coherence, and impact as part of broader reform efforts like the UN80 Initiative.

Relocations within the UN system are not a new phenomenon, but their significance has grown in today's rapidly evolving global context. As the United Nations adapts to shifting geopolitical, financial, and operational realities, the imperative to locate functions and teams where they can deliver the greatest impact has gained renewed momentum.

Several factors are driving this renewed focus:

- **Changing operational needs:** The United Nations' mandate increasingly requires proximity to beneficiaries, partners, and field operations. Relocating functions closer to where programmes are delivered enables more responsive, context-specific support and strengthens the organization's ability to adapt to emerging challenges.

- **Financial pressures:** Persistent budget constraints and the need for greater efficiency have prompted entities to reconsider the geographic distribution of their operations. Relocations can help reduce overhead costs, optimize resource allocation, and ensure that limited funds are directed toward mission-critical activities.
- **Organizational transformation:** Many UN entities are undergoing broader reforms, including decentralization, restructuring, and integration of support services with other agencies. Relocation is often a key lever in these processes, enabling entities to realign delivery models, foster innovation, and renew institutional culture.
- **Staff and institutional resilience:** The COVID-19 pandemic and other global disruptions have underscored the importance of organizational agility and staff well-being. Thoughtful relocations can help preserve institutional memory, maintain morale, and support staff in adapting to new environments.

While often viewed through a logistical lens, relocations are in fact moments of strategic consequence. They shape not only where the United Nations operates, but how it delivers on its mandate, engages with stakeholders, and sustains its institutional culture. When approached with clarity of purpose and empathy for those affected, relocations can become powerful levers for renewal, resilience, and reform.

2. Strategic intent

Relocations within the UN system serve as strategic interventions that go beyond physical movement. When grounded in a clear business case, relocations can help entities adapt to evolving mandates, improve proximity to beneficiaries, and strengthen operational efficiency. They offer opportunities to:

- **Realign delivery models** to improve proximity to beneficiaries and enhance responsiveness
- **Reduce overhead costs** through lower salary scales, travel efficiencies, and shared services
- **Strengthen organizational agility** by enabling restructuring, mandate shifts, and integration with other UN entities
- **Renew institutional culture** to foster inclusivity, client orientation, and regional ownership.

These strategic drivers are reflected in recent UN relocation initiatives, which have sought to optimize cost-effectiveness, reinforce mission alignment, and catalyse deeper transformation. As Linda Maguire (Director of the Bureau for Management Services UNDP) aptly noted, “Relocation is not just about geography, it’s about strategy.” The examples that follow are illustrative.

Realign delivery models: The relocation to Nairobi by UNFPA illustrates a strategic shift toward proximity to programme delivery. As Andrew Saberton (Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of Management, UNFPA) noted, over 50 percent of UNFPA's total resources are spent in Africa, and nine of the ten countries with the highest maternal mortality rates are found on the continent. Relocating technical and policy teams closer to the field was seen to improve programme relevance and responsiveness.

Reduce overhead costs: WHO is relocating functions from Geneva to Tunis to reduce costs and improve proximity to regional partners. By streamlining its operations and consolidating back-office services in lower-cost locations, WHO aims to lower costs and provide more efficient support to technical teams working in high-demand regions. At the same time, WHO is introducing a new cost-recovery mechanism. This approach illustrates how strategic relocation can both realign the delivery model and be a powerful tool for reducing overhead costs.

IOM accelerated relocations that began in 2023 as part of its ongoing structural reforms and decentralization of functions. It relocated supply chain functions and other cross-cutting support functions to lower-cost locations and regional offices.

Strengthen organizational agility: UNDP's relocation of Deputy Regional Directors and country support functions to hubs like Istanbul and Bangkok will allow for faster response times, closer proximity to field operations, and experimentation with integrated service platforms tailored to regional needs.

Renew institutional culture: The relocation of UNDP's Junior Professional Officer Service Centre and payroll functions to Copenhagen illustrates how strategic drivers can extend beyond cost. As emphasized by Jan Mattsson (former Executive Director, UNOPS; and former Director, Bureau of Management, UNDP), proximity to European stakeholders, Danish government incentives, and the opportunity to rebuild service culture were key motivators. The relocation was not just logistical – it was a chance to reset client orientation and improve feedback loops, resulting in a more energized, client-focused team.

Similarly, at UNOPS, the relocation to Copenhagen alongside broader reform efforts led by Jan Mattsson – including a strong emphasis on certification of core management functions, business processes, and personnel to align with leading international standards – helped reshape organizational identity. These initiatives aligned relocation with a drive for operational excellence and accountability, turning the move into a platform for deeper institutional transformation.

Multiple strategic intents: UNICEF's Headquarters Efficiencies Initiative (HQEI) was anchored in four pillars: diversifying headquarters (HQ) presence; centralizing services; enabling partnerships; and achieving cost savings. The development of a clear business case transformed relocation from a reactive cost-cutting measure into a strategic realignment tool.

3. Planning and implementation

While the strategic intent behind relocation shapes its direction, the success of any move depends on how well organizations manage the practical and human realities involved. Relocations require careful coordination across multiple domains: operational planning, workflow redesign, staff support, and cultural adaptation. This section examines these dimensions through the lens of the four-phase framework outlined in Annex A, drawing on concrete examples from recent UN experiences. Emotional and cultural aspects are explored in greater depth in section 4, while strategies for maintaining morale and continuity are covered in section 5.



Phase 1: Scoping and feasibility

Relocation begins with a clear strategic rationale. Organizations must define the triggers – such as cost pressures, proximity to beneficiaries, or reform imperatives – and assess the viability of potential locations. This includes conducting cost-benefit analyses, travel pattern reviews, and workforce availability assessments. As an example of this upfront work, UNICEF used travel pattern analysis to ensure that relocated staff were within nine hours of their primary mission destinations, enabling more travel in economy class and reducing both costs and emissions.

Host government engagement is essential. Denmark's support for UN City in Copenhagen, including incentives and infrastructure, was a key enabler for UNDP and UNOPS relocations.

Governance and oversight structures should be established early to ensure accountability and cross-functional coordination.

Cultural and emotional implications must also be considered from the outset. As Hatem El Khodary (Director of Operation Support Services WHO) noted, *"You're not just moving desks – you're moving lives."*

Phase 2: Planning

Detailed planning ensures operational continuity and staff support throughout the transition. Organizations should develop a clear business case and multiple relocation scenarios to support decision-making. Geographic scope must be clarified, whether relocation options are limited to existing duty stations or open to new locations.



Member State engagement is also critical to secure political support. Functions and teams to be relocated must be identified, ensuring alignment with strategic priorities and operational feasibility. UNDP used a multi-criteria methodology to map location-dependent functions and assess talent and partnership potential.

Workflows and interdependencies should be mapped to avoid fragmentation. UNFPA merged two divisions into a new Programme Division, which operated in New York for six months before relocating to Nairobi, allowing for early integration and coherence-building.

Transitional infrastructure such as dual systems and temporary staffing helps maintain continuity. UNDP's payroll relocation to Copenhagen used a dual-system setup supported by Danish funding.

Staff and family support includes onboarding, housing, schooling, and medical services. The United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON) maintained relationships with international schools and hospitals to support staff and families being relocated to Nairobi. In addition, the needs of staff with disabilities, caregiving

responsibilities, or dual-career families should be assessed and addressed, ensuring that relocation processes and facilities are accessible and support is tailored as needed.

Change management and communication strategies must be tailored to diverse staff and staff groups. UNICEF used branded SharePoint pages, welcome guides, and FAQs to ease transitions. UNFPA held webinars, matched jobs, and offered counselling.

Phase 3: Implementation

Execution requires phased relocation with clear timelines and realistic transition windows, such as alignment with school calendars. WHO began with voluntary relocations before transitioning to mandatory moves, mitigating disruption. UNFPA's two-year transition period allowed staff time to prepare and adapt.

Maintaining delivery during transition is essential. Organizations should anticipate productivity dips and use staggered onboarding or dual operations. UNICEF and WHO used dual operations and phased approaches to maintain service delivery. To mitigate temporary loss of institutional capacity, entities anticipated gaps through workforce planning and used transitional staffing.

Change agents and peer influencers play a vital role in building trust and supporting staff. WHO Regional Office for Africa (WHO-AFRO) used a peer-nomination approach to identify influencers who fostered procedural transparency and staff engagement.



Monitoring and evaluation tools such as UNICEF's Out-Posting Tracker enable real-time tracking and coordination of relocations planned and completed by destination, division, grade, funding type, among other factors.

UN entities have found that early engagement with host governments and legal teams proved essential to avoid delays in host country agreements and office setup.

Supporting onboarding and settling in requires coordination across human resources (HR) and logistics services, as well as with host governments. IOM held webinars with HR, insurance, IT, and visa services to provide practical and emotional support. UNON, as manager of the large UN Gigiri compound in Nairobi, proactively expanded its facilities to accommodate relocations, including constructing new buildings and implementing environmental safeguards.

Phase 4: Consolidation and learning

Post-relocation efforts focus on embedding change, evaluating impact, and sharing lessons. Organizations should evaluate strategic impact, operational performance, and staff experience using baseline indicators and decentralized tracking.

UNICEF conducted after-action reviews and used decentralized monitoring tools to assess progress. Regular team debriefs and feedback loops improved performance and informed future relocations.

Documenting lessons learned and sharing insights across agencies strengthens inter-agency learning. UNICEF has documented its recent relocation experiences and held a series of webinars through UNSSC/UNLOCK to share the helpful lessons learned.

For a detailed checklist for each phase, see Annex A.



Key Lessons from UNICEF's HQ Efficiencies Initiative (HQEI)

UNICEF's HQEI offers valuable insights for system-wide change efforts. Success hinged on a clear strategic vision, strong senior leadership sponsorship, and a staff-centred, transparent approach. Early engagement with host countries and internal stakeholders ensured smoother transitions. Full-team relocations to lower-cost, mission-proximate duty stations enhanced operational efficiency and cohesion. Robust planning, communication, and monitoring mechanisms – such as the UNICEF Fiori Out-Posting Tracker – were critical. The initiative projects annual savings of USD 54.2 million without abolishing posts, demonstrating that well-managed relocations can strengthen organizational effectiveness while safeguarding staff well-being and programmatic alignment.

In summary, relocation is a complex, multi-phase process that requires strategic foresight, operational planning, and deep empathy for staff. By following the four-phase framework and integrating lessons from across the UN system, organizations can ensure that relocations are not only logistically successful but also culturally and emotionally sustainable. For further insights into the emotional and cultural impact of relocation, see section 4; for strategies to maintain morale and continuity, see section 5.

4. Emotional and cultural impact

Relocation isn't just operational – it's emotional. Staff face:

- **Disruption of family life:** Relocation can separate families or uproot children from schools and support systems, creating emotional and logistical strain.
- **Loss of community and identity:** Staff may feel disconnected from familiar networks, routines, and the institutional culture they helped shape.
- **Anxiety about new environments:** Unfamiliar settings, languages, or social norms can create stress and uncertainty, especially for staff relocating internationally.
- **Uncertainty about career prospects:** Relocation may raise concerns about job security, promotion pathways, or future role clarity, especially if mandates shift.

While the emotional and cultural impact of relocation is significant, it can be mitigated through thoughtful, people-centred approaches. UN entities have adopted a range of strategies to support staff through these transitions, recognizing that empathy, clear communication, and inclusive planning are essential to maintain morale, cohesion, and operational continuity. The examples that follow illustrate how different organizations have addressed emotional needs, cultural adaptation, compensation concerns, and team dynamics during relocation processes.

Empathy: Empathy can be expressed in many ways. WHO held informal consultations and offered relocation support. UNDP used town halls and one-on-one coaching. IOM HR supported relocating staff through a series of webinars bringing together several services, including HR, insurance, staff welfare, supply chain, common services, IT, and visa and protocol, to provide practical information as well as welfare and emotional support. Local focal points were designated for issues such as visas, shipments, and other relocation matters from housing and schooling to cultural adaptation and daily life.

UNFPA supported emotional and cultural adaptation through transparent planning, inclusive dialogue, and personalized staff assistance.

For international staff, relocation often entails a reduction in salary due to lower post adjustment rates, and relocation to duty stations that may be less desirable for them or their families. These changes can lead to resentment, reduced morale, and lower productivity. Transparent communication about compensation changes, coupled with support mechanisms such as family integration services and career counselling, can help mitigate these effects. UN entities should also consider offering incentives or career development opportunities to offset perceived losses and maintain engagement.

Aitor Maguna (Chief of Human Resources, UNON) emphasized the importance of separating logistical and emotional change management roles. Entities that combined these functions often neglected staff engagement, leading to confusion and anxiety.

General Service staff: Typically, it is difficult to move General Service staff because their roles are locally recruited and contractually tied to specific duty stations, making international relocation complex due to legal, financial, and administrative constraints. UNFPA paid particular attention to General Service staff with voluntary separation packages and internal placement efforts, ensuring minimal job loss.

Onboarding: In the UNOPS relocation to Copenhagen, staff continuity was preserved by inviting experienced personnel to come to Copenhagen for a short time to support onboarding. This approach helped stabilize operations and rebuild internal capacity. Jan Mattsson noted that even in turbulent times, investing in people and relationships was key to resilience.

Nairobi's team used multimedia onboarding – videos, testimonials, and peer stories – to help staff visualize life in the new duty station beyond the workplace. This included housing, schools, leisure, and community integration.

Staff well-being: At UNICEF staff well-being was supported through the establishment of Staff Associations and assignment of Staff Counsellors. As mentioned before, UNICEF also created branded SharePoint pages for each location, offering welcome guides and FAQs to ease transitions.

Keeping teams together: A key lesson from UNICEF's experience was the importance of relocating full teams, including supervisors. Initially, some divisions relocated

only mid-level staff, leaving 86 percent without their direct supervisors in the same location. This created confusion, reduced cohesion, and increased anxiety. Future phases will prioritize co-location of teams to preserve team dynamics and accountability.

5. Maintaining morale and continuity

Relocations can fracture teams and disrupt workflows. Maintaining morale requires:

- **Timely and diligent planning, support, and communications:** Staff need timely, clear, and consistent updates throughout the relocation process to reduce uncertainty and build trust.
- **Recognition of staff contributions:** Acknowledging the efforts and legacy of staff helps preserve morale and institutional memory during the transition.
- **Support for accompanying spouses and children:** Families often face challenges in adapting to new environments, and without adequate support, these pressures can affect staff well-being and retention.
- **Opportunities for feedback and agency:** Providing structured channels for staff input fosters inclusion, improves planning, and strengthens ownership of the change.

Timely and diligent planning, support, and communications: Nairobi's team highlighted the importance of realistic timelines. Entities that repeatedly shifted relocation dates created uncertainty and disengagement. Best practice includes offering relocation windows (e.g., June–September) aligned with school calendars and providing early access to housing, school, and medical information.

UNHCR's Decentralization and Regionalization reform revealed that early communication efforts were helpful, but the absence of a consistent strategy and feedback mechanisms hindered staff buy-in. Socialization workshops were planned but disrupted by COVID-19. This points to the need for resilient, multi-channel communication strategies that can adapt to external shocks.

UNICEF reflected that equipping people managers with change leadership tools and aligning relocation timelines with family needs (e.g., school calendars) were key to maintaining morale and reducing resistance. UNICEF also developed multiple guidance tools focused on fostering inclusion, enhancing collaboration across locations and time zones, to maintain team morale and engagement. A dedicated senior communications specialist oversaw staff engagement and internal communications to ensure that concerns were addressed effectively.

UNFPA held webinars, matched jobs, offered counselling, used phased transitions, and maintained transparent staff communication.

Communication strategies should be segmented by audience and sustained throughout the lifecycle of the

change effort. The 2019 Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) study of 47 reforms highlighted that regular team debriefs, and after-action reviews can improve performance by up to 25 percent. Using multiple voices and authorities – such as departmental representatives and business owners – can increase message acceptance.

Recognition of staff contributions: UNMIL, during its closure, relocated some staff to other missions and celebrated their legacy. IOM held farewell events and offered career transition services.

Support for accompanying spouses and children: Ideally, this should include employment facilitation and educational continuity. Host duty stations should provide access to international schools with flexible enrolment periods and curricula compatible with prior education. Employment support for spouses – such as job fairs, networking events, and visa facilitation – can significantly improve family well-being and retention. In Nairobi, the UN Staff Spouse Association plays an active role in supporting incoming families by offering informal networking and practical guidance to help spouses integrate into the new setting.

Opportunities for feedback and agency: WHO allowed staff to comment on organograms and relocation plans before final decisions were made. This inclusive process gave staff a voice in shaping the changes that would affect them, fostering a sense of ownership, reducing anxiety, and ultimately strengthening morale and trust throughout the transition.

Post-relocation integration: After the move, it is essential to build the new team culture and workflows. Entities should invest in team-building activities, structured onboarding, and regular check-ins to support adaptation. UNICEF exemplified this by establishing onboarding groups to help newly relocated staff integrate into their new environments. Staff associations and subject matter experts were used to assist with training and integration. Staff surveys and feedback mechanisms – such as biannual satisfaction surveys and in-depth interviews – were used to monitor morale and identify emerging issues, enabling timely interventions and continuous improvement.

6. Strategic considerations for future relocations

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As relocations become a more frequent and strategic tool across the UN system, future efforts must move beyond reactive cost-cutting and embrace a more holistic, forward-looking approach. The experiences documented in this paper suggest that successful relocations are not only about where functions are moved, but how decisions are made, how transitions are managed, and how organizations learn and adapt over time.

One key consideration is the integration of relocation with broader organizational reform. Relocations often coincide with budget reductions, decentralization and broader restructuring. When these processes

are aligned, relocation can serve as a catalyst for deeper transformation. However, when pursued in isolation, relocations risk creating fragmentation. Future efforts should embed relocation within a wider change strategy, supported by clear governance, cross-functional coordination, and leadership sponsorship.

Another strategic dimension is the timing and sequencing of relocations. Several cases highlighted the importance of aligning relocation windows with school calendars, budget cycles, and operational readiness. Yet few entities appear to have developed standardized protocols for sequencing moves or managing transitions. A more deliberate approach to timing – supported by scenario-planning and readiness assessments – could reduce disruption and improve staff experience.

Staff segmentation and differentiated support also warrant greater attention. While many relocation plans include general provisions for onboarding and family support, few distinguish between the needs of different groups – such as dependents and those with special needs and requirements. Future relocations should incorporate tailored support strategies, including career transition services, spouse employment facilitation, and flexible onboarding pathways. This is especially important for morale and productivity in contexts where relocation entails salary reductions or diminished career prospects.

Future relocations should also systematically consider diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. This means proactively identifying and addressing barriers faced by underrepresented or vulnerable staff groups,

ensuring that relocation processes and new duty stations are accessible, and that support is tailored to the needs of all staff. Accessibility includes ensuring that physical infrastructure (such as offices, housing, and transportation) accommodates persons with disabilities, that digital platforms and communications are usable by all staff regardless of ability, and that relocation procedures are inclusive of diverse family structures and personal circumstances.

The rapid digitalization of UN operations and the increasing consolidation of service delivery across functions and locations are reshaping traditional assumptions about the value of physical proximity to beneficiaries. Advances in digital platforms, data analytics, and remote collaboration now enable organizations to coordinate, monitor, and deliver services across borders with unprecedented efficiency. In some contexts, this has allowed for more centralized management of operations, reducing the need for a large regional footprint and enabling specialized expertise to be leveraged from global hubs.

These developments suggest that the optimal configuration of functions – whether centralized, regionalized, or hybrid – should be determined by a careful assessment of organizational goals, digital maturity, and the specific needs of beneficiaries. While proximity remains important for certain types of engagement and responsiveness, digital tools increasingly allow for effective delivery and oversight from a distance. As the UN system continues to evolve, relocation strategies should remain flexible, balancing the benefits of physical presence with the opportunities

offered by digital transformation and integrated service models.

Data-informed decision-making is another area in need of attention. While travel pattern analysis and cost modelling were used in some cases, few entities appear to have systematically tracked relocation outcomes over time. Developing common metrics – such as service continuity, staff retention, and cost reductions compared to baselines – could enable more rigorous evaluation and inter-agency learning. Tools like out-posting trackers and decentralized dashboards offer promising models for real-time monitoring and adaptive management.

Finally, inter-agency coordination and shared infrastructure remain underutilized. Many relocations involve similar destinations, such as Bangkok, Copenhagen, and Nairobi, yet coordination across entities is often limited. Future efforts could benefit from joint planning, shared service platforms (such as the Common Back Office in Nairobi), and common relocation protocols. This would not only reduce duplication and cost but also strengthen the UN's collective presence and operational coherence in key hubs.

In sum, future relocations should be guided by strategic intent, operational realism, and human empathy. They should be planned with foresight, implemented with care, and evaluated with honesty. By learning from experience and investing in systems that support staff and organizational agility, the UN system can transform relocation into a lever for renewal, resilience, and reform.

The table that follows distils key dimensions that should inform the strategic planning and execution of future relocations. It brings together operational, organizational, and staff-related factors that have shaped past experiences – highlighting not only what to consider, but why each element matters for long-term success. By systematically addressing these dimensions, organizations can better anticipate challenges, leverage opportunities, and ensure that relocations contribute to both immediate objectives and broader institutional goals.

Table: Key dimensions of UN relocations

Dimension	Description	Strategic implications	Examples
Strategic driver	Primary rationale for relocation (e.g., cost, proximity, reform)	Aligns structure with mission; enables decentralization	UNFPA Nairobi (field proximity & sustainability); IOM HQ: 2023 onwards exercise to align structure with mission
Scope of relocation	Number of staff/functions affected; full or partial move; intact teams or individuals	Determines complexity and risk; affects continuity	UNFPA: ~118 staff to Nairobi; UNDP: partial HQ shift to Copenhagen; UNICEF: Initially not moving full teams
Time horizon	Duration of planning and implementation	Allows longer timelines for phased transitions and staff buy-in	UNFPA: 18-month phased transition; IOM HQ: Relocations beginning 2023 facilitated phased transition and tools to accelerate in 2025
Host country engagement	Level of support from host government (e.g., facilities, incentives)	Influences cost, political viability, and staff experience	Denmark's support for UN City in Copenhagen
Staff impact	Effects on staff (e.g., morale, family, career, safety)	Requires empathy, support systems, and clear communication	UNOPS HQ move (staff continuity); UNFPA Nairobi shift (GS support); WHO-AFRO (change agents)
Diversity, equity and inclusion; and accessibility	Inclusive and accessible relocation for all staff	Promotes equity, retention, morale	UNICEF onboarding guides; accessible facilities
Operational complexity	Logistical challenges (e.g., visas, IT, contracts, workflows)	Demands strong coordination and change management	UNICEF multi-site moves; Nairobi infrastructure expansion
Cost model	Funding structure (e.g., cost recovery, host subsidies, internal budget)	Affects sustainability and replicability of relocation model	WHO Tunisia hub: self-funded via cost recovery; UNICEF HQEI: savings reinvested
Governance and oversight	Decision-making authority and accountability mechanisms	Ensures transparency and alignment with strategic goals	UNICEF HQEI two-tier governance (leadership providing strategic oversight; location site subgroups managing operational details)
Monitoring and evaluation	Tools to assess impact and adjust course	Enables learning, accountability, and refinement	UNICEF use of out posting tracker

7. Role of change managers and leaders

Change managers and leaders play a central role in ensuring that relocations are successful, strategic, and sustainable. Relocations are not just operational shifts. They require cultural adaptation, behavioural alignment, and staff engagement. Leaders should act as visible sponsors of the change effort, articulating a clear vision, aligning relocation with organizational strategy, and providing sustained support throughout the transition. Their sponsorship helps build legitimacy, mobilize resources, and maintain momentum.

A collaborative and inclusive approach is essential. Successful relocations depend not only on top-down leadership but also on bottom-up engagement. Leaders should foster open dialogue, invite feedback, and co-create solutions with staff at all levels. This includes engaging staff associations, peer-nominated influencers, and informal networks to surface concerns and build trust. Inclusive planning ensures that diverse perspectives – especially those of General Service staff, family dependents, and regional teams – are reflected in relocation strategies.

Change managers are responsible for translating strategic intent into operational reality. They coordinate across departments, guide staff through uncertainty, and ensure that relocation plans are implemented in a phased and coherent manner. Effective change management includes readiness assessments,

stakeholder mapping, and the use of tools to monitor progress and address resistance. Staff influencers and peer-nominated change agents can help build trust and deepen reform ownership.

To support behavioural alignment, entities should use structured onboarding, feedback loops, and communication strategies tailored to different stakeholder groups. Dedicated change teams embedded within the entity can harmonize efforts and ensure continuity across phases. Ultimately, the partnership between leaders and change managers is essential to ensure that relocations strengthen mission delivery, preserve morale, and enable long-term agility.

8. Key lessons from UN relocations

As the United Nations continues to adapt to a changing global landscape, relocations will remain a strategic tool for enhancing mission delivery, improving cost-efficiency, and strengthening regional relevance. When approached thoughtfully, relocations can do more than shift operations – they can renew organizational culture, deepen staff engagement, and reinforce strategic coherence. Experiences across UN entities reveal a set of strategic, operational, and cultural lessons that can guide future efforts.

Strategic lessons

- **Relocations should be driven by a clear business case** aligned with an organizational strategy. While cost savings may be part of the rationale, they alone are not sufficient.
- **Relocations should be aligned with strategic goals** to reinforce mission delivery and organizational coherence.
- **Host country incentives and regional relevance** can enhance strategic value and long-term fit.
- **Using data on organizational needs**, stakeholder proximity, infrastructure quality, cost, legal requirements, and talent availability will best guide the choice of out-posting location.
- **Engaging host governments early** will ensure that facilities, incentives, and political support are secured.
- **Educating potential host governments** on UN operational needs will improve bid quality and ensure sustainability.
- **Relocations should be framed as a strategic opportunity**, not merely a cost-cutting measure, but a chance to realign delivery models and renew organizational culture.

Operational lessons

- **Early planning and clear communications** will build trust, manage expectations, and reduce uncertainty.
- **Phased implementation and transitional infrastructure**, such as dual systems, temporary staffing, and staggered onboarding, helps anticipate and bridge capacity gaps, reducing disruption and ensuring continuity of service delivery.
- **Governance structures with senior leadership** and cross-functional teams ensure accountability and coherence.
- **Out-posting trackers and decentralized monitoring tools** support real-time tracking, informed decision-making, and transparent reporting.
- **Budgets should allow for change management and hidden costs**, such as productivity dips, onboarding needs, and temporary staffing – recognizing that only one-fifth of the reforms reviewed by the JIU had dedicated budgets.

Cultural and emotional lessons

- **Support staff emotionally and logistically** to safeguard well-being, retention, and morale.
- **Develop and sustain a formal culture strategy** to guide leadership behaviour, team dynamics, and organizational identity during and after relocation.

- **Foster transparent communication, realistic timelines, and respectful treatment**, which are essential for maintaining morale.
- **Relocate full teams** where possible to preserve cohesion, accountability, and reduce anxiety.
- **Use multimedia onboarding and peer testimonials** to help staff visualize life in new duty stations and ease transitions.
- **Establish change agent networks** to deepen staff engagement, support behavioural alignment, and embed reform.
- **Use multilevel communication strategies** with feedback loops to clarify expectations and adapt to emerging concerns.

Finally, relocation might take place alongside downsizing or mergers. Therefore, we recommend the two reflection papers on “Downsizing” and “Mergers” as additional reading.

Annex A: Framework for planning and implementing relocations

This framework summarizes the phased approach to scoping, planning, and implementing UN relocations.

RELOCATION FRAMEWORK

PHASE 2

Planning and design



PHASE 3

Implementation



PHASE 4

Consolidation and learning



PHASE 1

Strategic assessment



Phase 1: Scoping and feasibility

- Define strategic objectives and triggers for relocation, including cost, proximity to beneficiaries, and organizational reform.
- Conduct cost-benefit analysis, travel pattern review, and workforce availability assessment.
- Engage host governments early to explore incentives, infrastructure, and political support.
- Establish governance and oversight structures to ensure accountability and cross-functional coordination.
- Assess cultural and emotional implications to inform early planning and leadership-framing.

Phase 2: Planning

- Develop a clear business case and multiple relocation scenarios to support decision-making.
- Clarify geographic scope – whether relocation options are limited to existing duty stations or open to new locations.
- Plan for Member State engagement to secure political support and align with UN system priorities.
- Identify functions and teams to relocate, ensuring alignment with strategic priorities and operational feasibility.
- Assess and plan for the needs of staff with disabilities, as well as for caregiving responsibilities and diverse backgrounds.

- Design transitional infrastructure, including dual systems and temporary staffing to maintain continuity.
- Plan onboarding, housing, schooling, and medical support for staff and their families.
- Map workflows and interdependencies to avoid fragmentation and ensure service continuity.
- Establish communication and change management strategies tailored to diverse staff groups.

Phase 3: Implementation

- Execute phased relocation with clear timelines and realistic transition windows (e.g., aligned with school calendars).
- Maintain regular communication and feedback loops to address emerging concerns and adapt plans.
- Monitor operational continuity and staff well-being, using tools such as out-posting trackers and readiness assessments.
- Support staff emotionally and logistically, including counselling, cultural orientation, and family integration services.
- Use change agents and peer influencers to deepen engagement and foster behavioural alignment.
- Ensure continuation of delivery during transition through workforce planning, dual operations, and staggered onboarding.

Phase 4: Consolidation and learning

- Evaluate strategic impact, operational performance, and staff experience using baseline indicators and decentralized tracking.
- Document lessons learned, including emotional and cultural insights, and update relocation protocols accordingly.
- Share insights across agencies and with host governments to strengthen future relocation efforts and inter-agency learning.
- Sustain culture strategies and team cohesion post-relocation to embed reform and maintain morale.

Annex B: Case summaries

IOM functional relocation and regional consolidation

- Year: 2023–2025
- Trigger: Accelerated process strengthened the role of the regional offices and consolidated its global shared services
- Scope: Relocation of HQ functions, and consolidation of regional offices across IOM
- Approach: IOM is redistributing functions to regional HR business partners, and relocating IT and HR functions from Geneva to more cost-effective hubs.
- Strategic impact: It is anticipated to lead to lowered operational costs through geographic redistribution, and to strengthened regional HR and administrative capacity. Institutional knowledge has been preserved by retaining core staff, and continuity of services has been enabled despite downsizing pressures.

UNDP strategic relocations

- Year: 2024–2025
- Trigger: Anticipated funding shortfall
- Scope: ~USD 100 million savings target; 4–10 percent institutional budget cut across bureau
- Approach: UNDP is mapping which functions are location-dependent in New York and which are not, considering moving a significant portion of its New York functions outside of New York. This is a strategic

move to align location with function, talent, and partnership potential, driven by a rigorous, multi-criteria methodology. UNDP is shifting Deputy Regional Directors and country support functions to hubs like Istanbul and Bangkok. This will enable faster response times, closer proximity to field operations, and experimentation with integrated service platforms tailored to regional needs.

- Strategic impact: If implemented as planned, there will be faster response times, closer proximity to field operations, and the ability to experiment with integrated service platforms tailored to regional needs to align location with function, talent, and partnership potential. UNDP is leveraging these relocations to strategically realign its service delivery, demonstrating how geographic shifts can enhance agility and responsiveness.

UNDP Junior Professional Officer Service Centre relocation

- Year: 2005
- Trigger: Strategic proximity to European donors and Danish government incentives
- Scope: Relocation of Junior Professional Officer Service Centre to Copenhagen
- Approach: The approach involved a phased relocation with overlapping incumbencies and host government support.
- Strategic impact: Implementation resulted in a rebuilt service culture of the service centre, improved donor engagement, and enhanced feedback loops.

UNDP payroll relocation

- Year: 2006
- Trigger: Operational efficiency and cost savings
- Scope: Transfer of payroll functions from New York to Copenhagen
- Approach: A dual-system setup was run with phased implementation and supported by Danish funding for the transition.
- Strategic impact: The approach ensured continuity of operations, and the relocation led to reduced costs and improved system confidence.

UNFPA New York to Nairobi relocation

- Year: 2023–2025
- Trigger: Strategic repositioning to enhance field proximity and programme effectiveness
- Scope: Merger of two divisions and relocation of ~25 percent (108 staff) of New York workforce and 10 from other duty stations to Nairobi, comprising positions from two divisions and from the independent evaluation office, which works closely with these divisions.
- Approach: The approach was a phased transition with job- matching, staff consultations, and support mechanisms.
- Strategic impact: This is anticipated to lead to improved programme delivery, cost savings, stronger Global South partnerships, and reduced travel footprint.

UNHCR decentralization and regionalization reform

- Year: 2019–2023
- Trigger: Strategic shift toward field empowerment and regional agility
- Scope: Relocation of functions from HQ to Regional Bureaux and restructuring of regional architecture
- Approach: The reform was aimed at delegating authority and resources to regional and country levels to improve operational effectiveness and responsiveness. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the formal delegation of authority to meet urgent operational needs, but it severely disrupted the planned roll-out by halting in-person training, delaying the deployment of key support staff, and hindering the change management activities essential for building understanding and ownership of the reform.
- Strategic impact: The relocation led to improved responsiveness to emergencies, enhanced donor engagement, and increased regional adaptability. At the same time, it created challenges in terms of standardization and cultural alignment.

UNICEF Headquarters Efficiency and Future Focus Initiatives

- Year: 2022–2026
- Trigger: Budgetary constraints and strategic intent to decentralize and strengthen field alignment
- Scope: Relocation of HQ functions from New York and Geneva to six lower-cost duty stations (Brussels,

Budapest, Florence, Istanbul, Nairobi, and Valencia), later expanded to four Centres of Excellence (Amman, Bangkok, Nairobi, Panama) under the Future Focus Initiative.

- Approach: The approach was initially framed as a cost-saving measure and later reframed with a business case, governance mechanisms, and staff support strategies. Staff were allowed to complete their tour of duty before relocating. Future phases will remove this provision in order to accelerate implementation.
- Strategic impact: The relocation preserved operational continuity and allowed UNICEF to maintain staffing levels during the initial phase by enabling staff to complete their existing tours of duty before relocating. Over time, the initiative supported strategic decentralization, although it also surfaced challenges related to team cohesion, supervisor co-location, and emotional impact. Lessons learned informed broader organizational transformation and change management practices.

UNMIL staff reassignment

- Year: 2018
- Trigger: Mission closure
- Scope: Reassignment of staff to other missions and agencies
- Approach: The approach placed emphasis on career transition support, recognition events and job fairs.
- Strategic impact: The closure process managed to preserve morale, honour legacies and ensure continuity.

UNON as a Strategic Relocation Host

- Year: 2022–ongoing
- Trigger: Increased demand for cost-effective, field-aligned duty stations and strategic repositioning of HQ functions
- Scope: Hosting relocated HQ and regional functions from multiple UN entities including UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP, and UN Women; expansion of office space and support infrastructure to accommodate incoming staff.
- Approach: UNON provided common back-office services, streamlined host government interactions, and proactively supported staff integration through school coordination, and inclusive relocation planning.
- Strategic impact: Nairobi emerged as a major UN hub, offering operational proximity, cost savings, and access to skilled national staff. UNON's inclusive and responsive support systems – such as LGBTQ+ friendly schooling and spouse networks – enhanced staff well-being and retention.

UNOPS headquarters relocation

- Trigger: Crisis response and organizational reform
- Scope: Relocation of UNOPS HQ to Copenhagen
- Approach: Staff continuity was achieved through onboarding support. In addition, efforts were made to professionalize the management practices through training, certifications and focus on nurturing a service culture.
- Strategic impact: A cultural renewal was achieved with a professionalized service orientation.

WHO Geneva to Tunis relocation

- Year: 2025
- Trigger: Budget constraints and strategic realignment
- Scope: Merger of three departments and relocation of key functions to Tunis
- Approach: Voluntary relocation was followed by mandatory moves. Staff were consulted during the planning process.
- Strategic impact: It is anticipated that the relocation will lead to cost savings, improved regional alignment, and streamlined operations.

Note: At the time of writing, the UN80 initiative is underway, including a specific workstream focusing on efficiencies at the UN Secretariat, which includes proposals of relocation from New York and Geneva to lower-cost duty stations. Decisions on these relocation proposals will only be made in the forthcoming General Assembly session, expected at the end of December 2025, and therefore have not been taken into consideration for this paper.

WHO-AFRO transformation

- Year: 2018–2021
- Trigger: Organizational reform to improve regional effectiveness and staff engagement
- Scope: Cultural transformation and operational strengthening across WHO-AFRO
- Approach: The approach included a voluntary change agent network, peer-nominated influencers, structured communication, and a staff engagement strategy.
- Strategic impact: This approach led to increased staff ownership of reform, improved procedural fairness, deeper change management integration, and enhanced regional coordination.

Annex C: Interview references

- Michael Emery, Director of Human Resources, IOM
- Hatem El Khodary, Director, Operation Support Services, WHO
- Joaquin Gonzalez-Aleman, UNICEF Representative in Brazil; formerly Chief of Strategic Planning, Division of Private Sector Fundraising and Partnerships, UNICEF Geneva
- Nono Louise Harhoff, Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, UNICEF HQEI and Future Focus Initiative Team
- Manoj Juneja, former Deputy Executive Director and Chief Financial Officer at the World Food Programme (WFP), now Catalyst Advisory LLC
- Linda Maguire, Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator, and Director of the Bureau for Management Services, UNDP
- Aitor Maguna, Chief of Human Resources, UNON
- Jan Mattsson, Former Executive Director, UNOPS; Former Director, Bureau of Management, UNDP
- Andrew Saberton, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director (Management), UNFPA
- Mihoko Yotsui, Change Management Specialist, Division of Private Sector Fundraising and Partnerships and UNICEF HQEI Team

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