

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

RELOCATION FRAMEWORK

PHASE 2

Planning and design



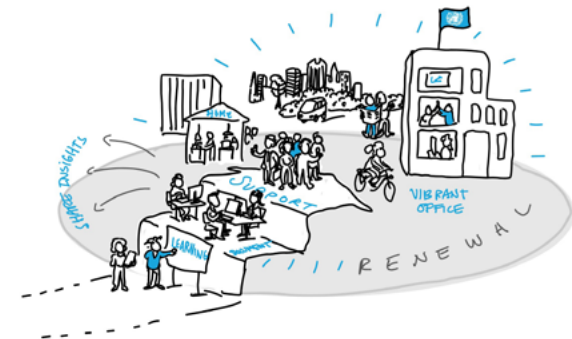
PHASE 3

Implementation



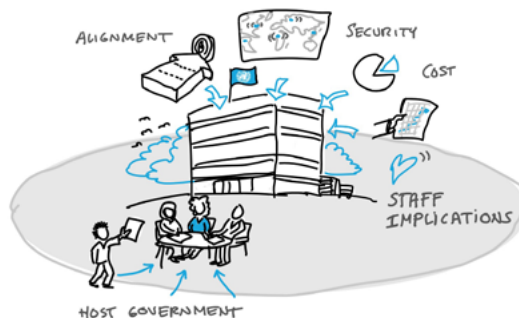
PHASE 4

Consolidation and learning



PHASE 1

Strategic assessment



1. The purpose of relocations in the UN system

Relocations are no longer just logistical exercises in the United Nations – they are strategic interventions that shape the organization’s future. As the United Nations faces mounting financial pressures, shifting geopolitical realities, and demands for greater agility, relocations are increasingly used to realign delivery models, bring operations closer to beneficiaries, and renew institutional culture.

Relocations are not simply about moving offices or reducing costs. When approached with vision and empathy, they offer a unique opportunity to enhance responsiveness, foster innovation, and strengthen organizational resilience. Recent UN experiences show that successful relocations are driven by a clear business case, strong leadership, and a focus on both operational and human dimensions. When managed well, relocations avoid the risk of disrupting teams, eroding morale, and undermining mission delivery. The real purpose of relocation is not just to adapt to change, but to use movement as a lever for renewal, relevance, and impact.

“You’re not just moving desks – you’re moving lives.”

— Hatem El Khodary, Director of Operation Support Services.
WHO

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

To turn relocations into moments of renewal and strategic advantage, UN leaders and change managers need to lead with clarity, empathy, and discipline. Here’s what that looks like:

A. Clarify the strategic intent

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

B. Engage stakeholders early and often

- Involve staff, partners, receiving offices, and host governments from the outset to surface concerns and build trust.
- 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. Plan for operational and human realities

- Map workflows, systems, and interdependencies to avoid fragmentation and service gaps.

- Use phased implementation, dual systems, and transitional staffing to maintain continuity.
- Provide onboarding, housing, schooling, and medical support for staff and families.

D. Support people through the transition

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

E. Sustain morale and culture

- Recognize staff contributions and preserve institutional memory.
- Relocate full teams where possible to maintain cohesion and accountability.
- Use multimedia onboarding and peer testimonials to help staff adapt to new environments.

F. Track progress and learn

- Monitor delivery, staff adaptation, and stakeholder satisfaction with clear metrics.
- Evaluate outcomes, document lessons, and share insights across the United Nations system.
- Invest in ongoing change management capacity to support future reforms.

Checklist for leaders and change practitioners

- ✓ Clarify the purpose and business case for the relocation
- ✓ Engage stakeholders early and communicate transparently
- ✓ Plan for both operational and human dimensions
- ✓ Establish a relocation team that includes colleagues from sending and receiving operations, human resources, facilities, and communications, as well as change managers
- ✓ Maintain business continuity and track progress
- ✓ Support staff with empathy and fairness
- ✓ Capture lessons and invest in future change capacity

Final thought

Relocations are complex, but how they are led will shape the UN's agility, credibility, and capacity for years to come. This is a moment to lead boldly, build trust, and turn movement into momentum.

“Relocation is not just about geography – it’s about strategy.”

— Linda Maguire, Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator, and Director of the Bureau for Management Services, UNDP