Beyond Mainstreaming? Past, Present and Future of UN Support for South-South and Triangular Cooperation

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United Nations (UN) entities have repeatedly been asked to mainstream their support for South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC). However, there is hardly any systematic evidence on whether and how they have done so. This article contributes to addressing this gap. The analysis focuses on organizational efforts over the last two decades to integrate SSTC support into institutional processes across the UN development system. It centers around a scorecard of fifteen UN entities that maps the levels and contours of their organizational focus on SSTC. In light of a highly diverse SSTC support landscape and the complex political dynamics behind mainstreaming efforts, the article discusses the way ahead for UN engagement with SSTC, including the potentials and challenges of a continued focus on mainstreaming itself.

Keywords   South-South and triangular cooperation, United Nations, mainstreaming, international organizations, international development, China

Introduction

South-South cooperation—broadly understood as collaboration among countries self-identifying as developing—has been referred to as a key feature of the evolving landscape of world politics (Mawdsley 2012; UNDP 2013a; Gosovic 2016; Gray and Gills 2016; see Haug, Braveboy-Wagner, and Maihold 2021). The United Nations (UN), in particular, has provided a crucial framework for coordination among and collective action by the world's "poorer nations" (Prashad 2012; see Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala 2020). At the UN, support for South-South schemes has been hailed as a central and essential (UN 2019a) part of multilateral efforts contributing to "more diverse opportunities for development" (UNGA 2019, 2), also as a means for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN-DESA n.d.). Major policy documents on the matter have

highlighted the need for UN entities to expand their support for South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC), with triangular cooperation referring to South-South arrangements assisted by a "Northern" donor or a multilateral body (HLC-SSC 2016; UNGA 1978, 2020a).

The notion of *mainstreaming*, in particular, has been central to discussions about UN support for SSTC (HLC-SSC 2016; UNDP 2003; UNGA 2009). Referring to efforts of bringing a particular concern into the conventional core of a given institutional space, mainstreaming terminology at the UN initially increased in popularity through efforts to broaden the focus on gender equality in the 1990s (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002). In this context, the UN's Economic and Social Council defined mainstreaming as a strategy that makes a particular issue or concern "an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies and programmes in all…spheres" (ECOSOC 1997, 2).

While a number of UN entities had early on begun supporting cooperation among developing countries, for decades this support remained in the shadow of a strong focus on Northern-funded assistance schemes, and thus unfolded on the side-lines of UN engagement. It was only around the turn of the millennium that the expanding clout of Southern member states led to an increased visibility of references to UN engagement with South-South—and later also triangular—cooperation, and this discussion quickly integrated the language of mainstreaming in order to push for broader institutional engagement (UNDP 2003; UNGA 2009).

Although official documents and frameworks have asked UN entities to engage in SSTC mainstreaming efforts, it is unclear to what extent and how mainstreaming has actually taken place. More generally, there has been little systematic analysis on what the broader SSTC landscape looks like across the UN, and how UN engagement with SSTC has evolved over the last decades. Available information on SSTC at the UN itself has usually taken the form of aspirational policies or the descriptive presentation of exemplary initiatives prepared by UN entities themselves. The scholarly discussion about the "rising South" (UNDP 2013b)[1] at the UN, in turn, has largely been directed at voting patterns at the UN General Assembly (Ferdinand 2014; Dijkhuizen and Onderco 2019) or the changing contours of the UN development system (Browne 2014; Weinlich 2014; Weiss and Abdenur 2014; Weiss and Roy 2016; Baumann 2018a).

While this latter strand of the literature has repeatedly mentioned South-South (and less often triangular) cooperation in passing, UN engagement with SSTC as such—let alone UN mainstreaming efforts—have been all but absent from the debate. The handful of existing contributions explicitly tackling SSTC support (Zhou 2013; Haug 2016; Milhorance and Soule-Kohndou 2017; see Weinlich 2014, 1834f) provide short references or limited selections of case studies with little insight into broader dynamics. This not only highlights a gap in the empirical knowledge about institutional processes at the UN, but also points

to larger questions about whether and how the alleged "rise of the South" (UNDP 2013a) has reshaped multilateral development practices.

Given the decades-long insistence on—and the dearth of—systematic information about UN engagement with SSTC, this article examines to what extent, and how, SSTC support has been mainstreamed at the UN. Instead of delving into the growing number of projects and initiatives that have been listed as examples of UN support for SSTC, I focus on organizational efforts by UN entities to make SSTC an integral component of their institutional setup in order to provide a framework for coordinated operational engagement. The combination of a review of secondary literature, a detailed examination of official UN documentation as well as insights from thirty semi-structured interviews with UN officials and observers conducted between September 2020 and March 2021 allows for a detailed analysis of previously unavailable information.

The article is structured as follows. I first provide an overview of how the UN has been supposed to engage with SSTC. In order to map and discuss the extent to which SSTC has actually been mainstreamed across UN entities, I then present a scorecard that ranks fifteen UN entities with reference to a detailed mapping of their SSTC engagement across strategies, reports, monitoring frameworks, budgets and organizational setup. I provide an overview of both the diversity of institutional realities as well as underlying patterns that are taken as a basis for tentatively labelling UN entities as SSTC "stragglers," "waverers" or "champions." Key dynamics that have accompanied mainstreaming efforts range from internal strategies and leadership preferences at the UN to the rise of geopolitical tensions among member states, with a specific focus on dynamics centring around (mostly Northern/Western wariness about) China's expanding engagement. Finally, I provide a tentative appraisal of mainstreaming efforts to date and discuss the way ahead for UN engagement with SSTC, including the potentials and challenges of a continued focus on the very notion of mainstreaming.

Towards Mainstreaming: South-South and Triangular Cooperation at the UN

Concerted efforts by representatives of countries identified—and self-identifying —as developing have long been an integral part of UN processes. Following the setup of the UN in 1945 and the expansion of operations in the 1950s, the UN Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Group of 77 as the inter-governmental alliance of developing countries were established in 1964 (Toye 2014). They offered a crucial space and reference for a growing number of institutional mechanisms and fora to advocate for alternatives to the multilateral status quo that would take the concerns and agency of countries in the so-called developing world into account (Weiss and Abdenur 2014; Fioretos 2020). In the

1970s, it was under the umbrella of "Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries" and its acronym "TCDC" that UN bodies—including the General Assembly—contributed to setting up a more formal framework for assistance processes within and between developing countries and regions (UNGA 1978). It was also in the 1970s and particularly the 1980s that the dichotomy of North and South emerged as a more visible reiteration of long-standing binaries—from orient/occident and old/new worlds to developed/developing or First/Third worlds—used for global meaning making (UNCTAD 1985; see Wagner 2017).

Building on framings and substantive discussions put forward by the Brandt Report (ICIDI 1980) and the South Commission (1990), among others, the 1990s saw a substantive rise in references to South-South cooperation across UN fora (UNGA 1991, 1995). Following the end of the Cold War and the first signs of broader shifts in traditional developed/developing patterns among member states, "South-South" terminology took up in UN resolutions in the 1990s and, by the early 2000s, had replaced TCDC as the major shorthand for cooperation among developing countries at the UN (UNGA 2005, 2007; see Haug 2021a).

At the UN, South-South cooperation is currently defined as collaboration between "two or more developing countries" or "countries of the South"—these terms are used as synonyms—in all kinds of domains and at all levels towards meeting their development goals (UNGA 2019, 2; UNOSSC n.d.-a). Triangular cooperation, in turn, has been taken to refer to the support provided by "traditional donor countries and multilateral organizations" (UNOSSC n.d.-a) to facilitate South-South schemes. Increasingly, "South-South and triangular cooperation" and the acronym "SSTC" have been employed as a combined phrase and reference in UN circles, even though the main focus has been directed at South-South schemes with triangular cooperation mostly remaining at the margins of both strategies and operational activities (Haug 2021a, 5f). The concrete definitional contours of SS(T)C have differed across institutional spaces and world regions, ranging from a focus on technical cooperation modalities—notably in Latin America—to broad political framing practices (ibid., 9f). As I have shown elsewhere,[2] de facto practices at the UN suggest that SSTC has mostly been used as a broad umbrella term to capture inter-state cooperation unfolding beyond North-South schemes.

Although official UN documents do not provide details on how TCDC and SSTC are understood in practice, they have consistently highlighted the importance of UN support for South-South schemes. As the first major UN guiding document on cooperation among developing countries, the 1978 BAPA outcome document highlighted that "the entire United Nations development system must be permeated by the spirit of TCDC and all its organizations should play a prominent role as promoters and catalysts of TCDC" (UNGA 1978, 19). More specifically, the Plan of Action asked all UN entities to "reorient their internal policies and procedures to respond adequately to the principles and objectives of

TCDC" (ibid., 23).

These notions of permeation and reorientation were arguably the 1970s version of system-wide *mainstreaming*. As alluded to above, bringing something to the mainstream has meant making a particular issue or concern "an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of…policies and programmes" and assessing related implications of "any planned action…in all areas and at all levels" (ECOSOC 1997, 2). Overall, mainstreaming demands in UN documents—such as the Quadrennial Comprehensive Performance Reviews (UNGA 2012, para. 74; 2016, para. 23)—are part of requests formulated in member state declarations or UN Secretariat reports that usually have a limited immediate impact on the concrete workings of UN entities, also due to the absence of effective sanctions.[3] By and large, entities follow funding incentives and the directives of their respective oversight bodies, such as executive boards, where the relative strength and positions of representatives often differ from General Assembly settings (see Baumann 2018b; UN n.d.; Weinlich 2011, 72f).

This "decoupling" (Gulrajani and Swiss 2019, 357) of official rhetoric in resolutions and reports vis-à-vis the de facto practices of UN entities has been a defining feature of UN support for cooperation among developing countries. Until the close of the twentieth century—and despite the repeated insistence in resolutions and reports for the UN system to expand its support—TCDC had been anything but mainstreamed across UN bodies and processes. Except for UNCTAD—founded to give a voice to the multilateral South and traditionally a strong advocate of South-South linkages (Toye 2014)—and maybe the UN Development Programme (UNDP) as host of a special unit dedicated to South-South cooperation, UN entities and their Northern donors had had limited to no interest in meaningfully expanding institutional engagement with cooperation among developing countries. Most Southern stakeholders, while rhetorically building on developing-country overtures in the 1960s and 1970s, had indeed very much adapted to traditional North-South assistance schemes (Gosovic 2016).

This changed, however, with what has been referred to as "the rise of the South" (UNDP 2013a) in the early 2000s. With the increasing clout of countries outside the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development as international development actors (Chaturvedi, Fues, and Sidiropoulos 2012; Mawdsley 2012; Bracho 2015), many UN entities decided to more explicitly and forcefully engage with SSTC,[4] and the notion of mainstreaming began to be used to frame the need for expanded UN support for South-South cooperation (UNDP 2003; UNGA 2009). The repeated insistence across resolutions and reports over the last two decades for UN entities to mainstream SSTC reflects and epitomises the broader intention of making support for South-South schemes a fundamental and cross-cutting feature at the UN, to be considered in the preparation of "any planned action…in all areas and at all levels" (see ECOSOC 1997, 2; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; UNDP

2000).[5]

In line with previous provisions on supporting TCDC, UN resolutions and reports have asked UN entities to support SSTC by acting as conveners and advocates; knowledge brokers; partnership builders; and/or analysts and progress monitors (HLC-SSC 2016, 8). The extent to which UN entities have managed to play these roles, however, is largely unclear, notably because so far there has been no systematic system-wide reporting on the matter. Instead, there is now a growing body of descriptive evidence of a wide range of engagement practices, mostly focussing on individual UN entities (see, for instance, UNOSSC n.d.-b). Available documentation suggests that UN entities have fared rather poorly when it comes to gathering and analyzing meaningful data on SSTC. This is mostly due to the often vague and sometimes contradictory definitions of how member states approach SSTC (see Haug 2021a; Waisbich 2021), something that so far has also contributed to limiting the space for UN entities to design a shared framework for monitoring their own SSTC support (see below).

Although UN-wide coordination on SSTC used to be rather weak, the UN system as a whole can cite a range of visible examples when it comes to convening large meetings on SSTC—such as the 2019 BAPA+40 conference in Buenos Aires or annual South-South Expos (see UNOSSC n.d.-c)—or advocating for the explicit inclusion of SSTC in global policy frameworks (such as SDG 17; see UN-DESA n.d.). UN entities have also designed a number of tools for brokering demand and supply among SSTC partners—such as the South-South Galaxy platform (see UNOSSC n.d.-b)—and have come up with compilations of how they have facilitated concrete SSTC projects and initiatives in cooperation with programme countries (see UNOSSC 2020).

To what extent brokering efforts have been successful, however, is often difficult to tell. Upon closer look, not even all projects and initiatives listed by UN entities as examples of SSTC actually centre around cooperation among developing countries, but instead include rather "typical" UN collaboration with individual programme countries.[6] The idiosyncratic landscape of reports, brochures and general claims about the UN's unique position for supporting SSTC (UNGA 1995; HLC-SSC 2016) thus only provides a limited set of insights into the concrete contours of UN engagement with SSTC.

Mapping Mainstreaming Efforts

Under the headline of mainstreaming efforts, UN entities have been asked to not only support the expansion of SSTC activities per se but also adapt their internal structures and policies accordingly. Official guidelines on SSTC provide tools and references for UN entities "towards mainstreaming their support for South-South and triangular cooperation at the global, regional and national levels" (HLC-SSC

2016, 1). They centre on "priority mainstreaming actions" for integrating SSTC into UN work, including at the level of UN entities globally. It is not self-evident, however, what—for the UN itself—would count as successful mainstreaming. With regard to individual UN entities, official guidelines (ibid., 10) only suggest that "the mainstreaming of the internationally mandated South-South policy directives…begins with agencies ensuring that South-South cooperation is integrated into their corporate policy and programming frameworks."

In order to provide more systematic and comparative insights into the current state of a process that has accompanied the UN development system for more than four decades, I present and discuss a scorecard on how individual UN entities have engaged with—and to what extent they have effectively mainstreamed their support for—SSTC at the institutional level (Table 1). As the structures and practices of organization-wide engagement—reflected in reporting formats, budget lines or staff positions—are a prerequisite for the coordinated implementation of SSTC support, the scorecard provides insights into macro patterns across UN entities that also condition engagement at the operational level.

The Scorecard: A Systematic Overview of Fifteen UN Entities

In order to allow for comparison and enable a meaningful mapping, the sample of UN entities for the scorecard exercise includes all specialised agencies, funds and programmes that are part of the so-called core group of the UN Sustainable Development Group, charged with leading on UN-wide integration and coordination efforts (UNSDG 2018, 4). This includes the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNDP, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) were added in order to also take into account UN entities whose mandate and country-level work touch upon key development issues, but whose total annual expenses are slightly less significant (UNGA 2020b). The selected group of entities covers a wide range of mandates and includes the largest and most visible UN agencies. As their combined expenses made up roughly 80 percent of all UN expenses for development and humanitarian issues outside the UN Secretariat in 2018 (ibid., 48f.; see Annex II.1), the scorecard sample offers a rather comprehensive base for assessing SSTC mainstreaming across the UN development system.

During the evidence gathering process, publicly available sources covering the last two decades—including two UN inspection reports (JIU 2011, 2018)

Table 1. A Scorecard: South-South (and Triangular) Cooperation Mainstreaming Efforts across UN Entities

|	SS(T)C in strategies	SS(T)C in annual reports	SS(T)C publi-cations	SS(T)C monitoring framework	SS(T)C-specific funding	SS(T)C-specific organiza-tional capacity	Overall SS(T)C score	Tentative labels
FAO	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	Champions
IFAD	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	
ILO	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	
UNDP	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	
UNIDO	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	
WFP	2	2	2	2	2	2	**12**	
UNFPA	2	1	1	2	1	2	**9**	Waverers
UNICEF	1	1	2	2	2	1	**9**	
UNEP	2	1	1	1	1	1	**7**	
UN-Habitat	1	1	1	1	1	1	**6**	
UNESCO	1	1	1	0	0	1	**4**	
UN Women	1	0	0	0	0	1	**2**	Stragglers
WHO	1	1	0	0	0	0	**2**	
UNODC	0	1	0	0	0	0	**1**	
UNHCR	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**	

Source: Author's own compilation based on interview data and publicly available information
Note: See Annex I for the scoring operationalization

providing detailed, if incomplete, information about entities' SSTC support—were triangulated with insights from semi-structured expert interviews (see Annex II.2). The thirty officials who agreed to be interviewed included not only the SSTC focal points of the UN entities under investigation[7] but also representatives from the UN Secretariat, UNCTAD, the High-Level Committee of South-South Cooperation and the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) who, in line with their expertise and function, have been actively engaged with SSTC support processes.

The scorecard methodology reflects the intention to provide a first comprehensive overview of mainstreaming efforts across UN entities. The scorecard as such does not necessarily provide insights into the actual support UN entities provide to cooperation among developing countries, as the relationship between

Figure 1. References to South-South Cooperation over Time: Annual Reports (2000-2019)
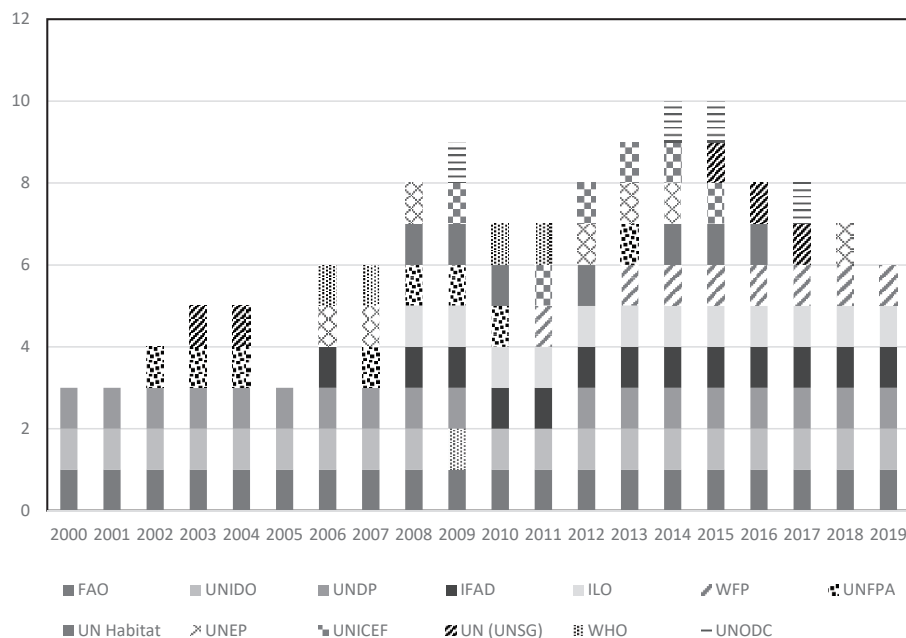
Source: Author's own compilation based on publicly available material.

Note: Annual reports by UN Women and UNHCR have not mentioned SSTC at all, and UNESCO does not publish an annual report covering the work of the entire organization. "UN (UNSG)" refers to annual reports by the UN Secretary-General.

official SSTC frameworks and actual practices often falls prey to the "gap between policy intent and practical implementation" (Gulrajani and Swiss 2019, 357). It also does not provide an assessment of whether UN entities have actually taken on the roles of conveners, knowledge brokers or progress monitors outlined in official reports (HLC-SSC 2016, 8). What the scorecard provides instead is a systematic, comparative mapping of the extent to which fifteen UN entities have integrated SSTC support into their "corporate policy and programming frameworks" (ibid., 24), as reflected in corporate strategies, annual reports, stand-alone publications, monitoring frameworks, budgets as well as their organizational setup in terms of staffing and focal point assignations (see Annex II.3). Empirical data used for the calculation of scores covers insights from the last 20 years (2000-2020), collected through publicly available sources and triangulated with interview accounts (see Annex II.4).

In substantive terms, the scorecard suggests that most UN entities under investigation have included a reference to SSTC in their *strategic plans*, but only eight have also developed separate SSTC strategies.[8] A detailed review of *annual reports* over the last twenty years shows that a handful of entities have included

SSTC in every annual report since the year 2000, whereas others have mentioned it occasionally or not at all (see also Figure 1). The same goes for stand-alone *publications* on SSTC initiatives or best practices: Some entities have repeatedly or regularly shared (usually descriptive) details on their SSTC support, whereas others have not produced a single booklet or brochure on the topic. In terms of *monitoring frameworks*, advances have been limited overall.[9] Although no entity has so far come up with a detailed and extensive SSTC-specific indicator framework, entities that have established some sort of monitoring practices on SSTC—in terms of country office reporting, project design templates and/or full-scale evaluation processes—have received the highest mark on the scorecard.

In terms of *funding*, the entities with the highest scores have publicly provided information on financial resources explicitly dedicated to SSTC. Overall, however, financial resources for SSTC support have remained rather modest.[10] Whereas UNDP can point to its regular core funding support for UNOSSC (see JIU 2011) and FAO reports having spent more than US$370 million on SSTC support over the past two decades (FAO 2019),[11] for many entities the only expenses explicitly and regularly dedicated to SSTC are salaries for those staff members whose job descriptions mention SSTC. For most funds, programmes and specialised agencies, *organizational capacity* on SSTC centers around these designated focal points that often have no or only limited support in terms of promoting and/or following up on SSTC across their respective organization.

Mainstreaming Patterns: Champions, Waverers, and Stragglers

Against the backdrop of what are often complex institutional realities, the scorecard includes labels for groups of entities as a shorthand to capture tentative patterns that emerge from the analysis of mainstreaming dimensions. Whereas "champions" perform—relative to other entities—strong across all dimensions, "waverers" show a less visible and overall more variable performance, but all refer to SSTC in both strategic and reporting documents and have at least one member of staff designated to work on SSTC. "Stragglers," in turn, lack that coverage and have only minimally engaged with SSTC when it comes to strategies, reports and monitoring, and they are overall far from mainstreaming SSTC in their organization-wide work.[12] The labels of champions, waverers and stragglers do not imply a normative mapping of "good" and "bad" entities or a general assessment of their SSTC support performance. They rather refer to performance relative to mainstreaming requests and guidelines formulated by UN bodies and fora. Champions have followed suggested frameworks and action points more closely, whereas waverer entities have been less consistent, with stragglers lagging considerably behind.

A more detailed look at the three groupings provides a general idea of the overall heterogeneity of SSTC mainstreaming to date. SSTC mainstreaming *champions* have, by and far, managed to not only keep SSTC on the organizational

radar but, in most cases, significantly expand SSTC visibility over the last years, including the ways in which they monitor and report their SSTC engagement.[13] Although the high scores across dimensions do not imply that there is no space for consolidation or improvement, UN entities in this segment have showcased a visible commitment to the notion of SSTC, as put forward in UN reports and guidelines. The Rome-based agencies working on issues related to nutrition and agriculture—FAO, IFAD and WFP—have been particularly prominent supporters of the SSTC agenda (FAO, IFAD, and WFP 2018). As illustrated by a detailed look at references to SSTC in annual reports (see above), UNIDO and ILO have also been long-time promoters of South-South linkages, and they have steadily solidified their SSTC mainstreaming over the last decade (ILO n.d.; UNIDO 2021). All champion entities have not only designated SSTC focal points, but also—usually small but dedicated—units in charge of mainstreaming SSTC efforts, often in coordination with additional focal points across divisions at headquarters and at regional and/or country levels.

On the other side of the spectrum, UN entities labelled as SSTC mainstreaming *stragglers* have by and large failed to mainstream SSTC, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. UNHCR stands out as the UN entity the furthest removed from SSTC debates and processes; SSTC, as such, seems to play not even a minor role in how the organization structures and reports on its work.[14] UN Women is an atypical case, insofar as it counts with a rather long-standing SSTC focal point staff that has published statements and short articles on the link between UN Women's mandate and SSTC (UN Women 2016; Kabir 2017). So far, however, this does not seem to have materialised in terms of how the organization presents, structures or reports on its work. Together with UNHCR, UN Women is the only entity among the fifteen analyzed in this study that has not even once mentioned South-South cooperation in one of its annual reports, generally taken as a strong indicator that SSTC is not an organizational priority (see JIU 2011, 2018). UNODC and WHO, in turn, seem to have a rather pragmatic stance towards SSTC. They report on it occasionally in an ad hoc manner, notably when asked through a UN system-wide coordination process,[15] but SSTC as a frame of reference does not play a role for their work at an organization-wide level, and it is not a relevant category for how they engage with their stakeholders. Whereas at WHO it is the regional branch in the Americas—the Pan American Health Organization—that has explicitly engaged with SSTC (PAHO n.d.), UNODC has focussed more on its support for "emerging and national donors" (UNODC 2015, 124) and for how programme countries cooperate on specific issues and processes, without using the SSTC label and operational toolkit. During interviews with representatives from this cohort of UN entities—in the absence of designated focal points, this meant people who had been identified by colleagues or superiors as the ones with the most South-South-related expertise— some stated that they were not aware of UN system-wide processes on SSTC,

or that SSTC had become a major area of work for other UN organizations, and a couple of respondents were surprised to hear that something like a UN office exclusively dedicated to South-South cooperation even existed.

Beyond stragglers and champions, the group of SSTC mainstreaming *waverers* is arguably the most diverse and dynamic one when it comes to the complexities behind mainstreaming SSTC. Over the last two decades, waverers have been more than just midfielders that simply engage less than champions and more than stragglers. The zigzag of (not) mentioning SSTC in their annual reports over the last two decades (see Figure 1) is an indicator for rather erratic engagement patterns.[16] UNFPA, for instance, was an early mover on the SSTC agenda[17] and one of the first UN entities with a separate South-South cooperation strategy, but it was in 2013 that a UNFPA annual report explicitly mentioned SSTC for the last time. UNEP also integrated SSTC in its work earlier than other entities and had a separate team working on SSTC, but over the last six years, only one annual report has mentioned SSTC (see below). In a similar vein, UN-Habitat and UNICEF did not include explicit references to SSTC in their latest annual reports, even though previous editions used to mention it repeatedly. However, UNICEF still has allocated funding specifically for SSTC and also has a small number of full-time staff working on SSTC at different organizational levels. Overall, the heterogeneity of mainstreaming efforts and the oscillation over time among waverer entities arguably epitomizes the SSTC mainstreaming landscape at the UN. Although the occasional or systematic lack of an explicit focus on SSTC does not necessarily mean that a given entity does not support cooperation among program countries in its operational work, it suggests that mainstreaming efforts have not been a (consistent) priority at the institutional level.

Understanding Mainstreaming Efforts

Integrating support for SSTC into the institutional setup of UN entities has been part of a broader trend to expand and strengthen UN engagement with the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda outlined under SDG 17 (UN-DESA n.d.). Across member states and the UN bureaucracy, many have argued that SSTC is a key vehicle for reaching both national and global development goals (UN 2019a; UNCTAD 2018). However, this general belief in—and commitment to—SSTC has not been the only motivation behind UN engagement patterns. Across "champion," "waverer," and "straggler" entities, a range of idiosyncratic factors have conditioned (the lack of) attempts to mainstream SSTC support. The triangulation of interview accounts with publicly available sources points to three interrelated sets of dynamics that have been particularly influential in shaping the heterogeneous SSTC mainstreaming landscape. As it would be a wane—and arguably unhelpful—exercise to break down empirical complexity stemming from

processes involving fifteen UN entities over the course of two decades in order to formulate a neat argument, these sets of dynamics are not supposed to explain scorecard performances in straightforward positivist-causal terms (see Flyvbjerg 2001; Adler-Nissen 2013). Instead, they are among the pushing and pulling factors that have conditioned UN support for SSTC and warrant particular attention when making sense of the context in which UN mainstreaming efforts have unfolded.

Starting in the early 2000s (see above), a growing number of UN entities began to approach SSTC support as a tool to remain relevant and adapt to changing patterns of power and wealth (Haug 2021a). UNDP, for instance, set up a separate corporate agenda to expand its support for SSTC in order to expand relations with "emerging partner" countries, notably the BRICS, Indonesia, Mexico and Turkey (UNDP 2014; Haug 2016). While high expectations at UNDP and elsewhere about raising core funding from these Southern providers have not materialised (UN-DESA 2020b; see Baumann and Weinlich 2020; UNGA 2020b), "champion" entities—including not only UNDP but also FAO, ILO or WFP— have managed to use SSTC support to expand their business model and, at least to a limited extent, showcase their ongoing relevance in a shifting cooperation landscape (UNOSSC 2020, 2021). Other entities, in turn, have effectively given up on trying to use SSTC as an instrument for mobilizing resources, reflected in the fact that a decreasing number of entities mention South-South cooperation in their annual reports (see above).

Another factor that has shaped mainstreaming efforts is the level of support engagement with SSTC has received from the leadership of UN entities as well as the readiness of staff to engage. In a context where most organizational units across the UN development system depend on and focus on funding flows from Northern donors, the (lack of) commitment of leaders has had a crucial impact on the SSTC support trajectory. At UN-Habitat, for instance, engagement with SSTC support had taken up speed towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s under the leadership of an executive director from Tanzania. It lost standing during the tenure of her successor from Spain and has now again received more organizational space since the appointment of a Malaysian official at the helm of the organization.[18] In organizational contexts where few people are familiar with cooperation practices beyond Northern-funded schemes, senior management's (lack of) support for the SSTC agenda, in turn, has had a palpable impact on the ability of staff in charge of promoting SSTC to deliver. As one UN official put it during an interview: "Very few people [inside the organization] know what South-South cooperation really is; when our leadership doesn't make this a priority, it becomes very difficult to expand our [SSTC] support" (author's interview with a UN official, New York City, November 2020).

The arguably most far-reaching—and increasingly visible—set of dynamics shaping UN support for SSTC, however, has centred on rising geopolitical

tensions between China and countries belonging to the Western Europe and Other States Group (WEOG) at the UN.[19] Interviews with officials from a wide range of member states over the past five years suggest that WEOG representatives have increasingly perceived South-South cooperation as a shield under which China has been trying to expand its influence across the UN, notably by linking the work of UN bodies to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[20] The main issue for many WEOG member states has not been whether SSTC actually contributes to development-related processes, but rather to what extent the Chinese government has managed to use SSTC to expand its control at the UN, notably to promote its foreign policy goals (see Fung and Lam 2020; Rosenow 2020; Igoe 2021).

Against this backdrop, what UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has referred to as the "great fracture" and "epic geostrategic tensions" between China and the United States (UN 2020) has also had an impact on UN engagement with SSTC support. UN entities have not been oblivious to geopolitical dynamics, and some of them have taken measures accordingly to steer away from potentially controversial waters. Some shifts have been hardly noticeable, such as the UN System Staff College discontinuing its training course on South-South cooperation support.[21] Others have been somewhat more visible, even though they have mostly taken place behind closed doors. At the UNDP executive board, for instance, WEOG member states have been openly critical about the expansion of UN support for SSTC with Chinese involvement, particularly its connection with BRI (UNDP 2020, 2021). At UNEP, tensions of China's influence on the SSTC support agenda have even led to the dismantlement of UNEP's SSTC unit. Following WEOG concerns about the unduly influence of China through separate South-South funding schemes, UNEP no longer promotes SSTC support as a distinct and popular engagement tool (UNEP 2018a) but instead refers to it as "an integral cross-cutting delivery mechanism" (UNEP 2020, 7). Where once an entire team led UNEP's expanding work on SSTC (UNEP 2018b), as of early 2021 only one headquarter staff follows up part-time on SSTC-related matters (author's interview with a UNEP official, Nairobi, October 2020).

Beyond the experiences of individual entities, an examination of Chinese funding patterns across the UN points to a rather complex picture when it comes to China's influence via South-South schemes. DAC donors still dominate the funding landscape of the UN development system (see Baumann and Weinlich 2020; UNGA 2020b), and although China is currently the second-largest contributor to the UN's regular budget (UN Secretariat 2019), its share in voluntary funding for individual entities—similar to that of India and Brazil—is rather low when compared to WEOG donors. According to 2018 funding data, the 15 UN entities under investigation in this article received on average just under three per cent of their member state funding from the Chinese government.[22] Chinese contributions outweigh those of other programme countries, however,

and for some UN entities—such as IFAD and UNIDO—China's importance as a funding provider has markedly increased. A closer look at the relationship between SSTC mainstreaming efforts of UN entities and the level of funding they receive from China—calculated based on the SSTC scorecard and 2018 funding data—tentatively indicates an overall positive correlation.[23] The general trend suggests that UN entities which receive rather limited funding from China also tend to engage less with SSTC mainstreaming efforts.

A triangulation of these findings with interview accounts suggests that particularly smaller entities—and entities that receive close to no funding from China—have been increasingly reluctant to engage with mainstreaming SSTC. Against the backdrop of heightening tensions between China and the United States, many "waverer" and "straggler" entities have recently preferred to stay away from controversial debates that might alienate WEOG donors; another factor contributing to explaining why references to SSTC in annual reports have been declining.[24] So far, China's financial and political clout at the UN development system (Mao 2020) has not reached a point where most UN entities would feel comfortable siding with China when faced with the above-mentioned "great fracture," which would increase the distance to their main donors. Overall, the recent politicization of SSTC has increased the likelihood of controversy. Member state geopolitics have thus had an often hidden but overall tangible impact on SSTC mainstreaming efforts across UN entities.

Beyond Mainstreaming?

One central promise of South-South cooperation has arguably been to make the international sphere a more inclusive and equitable one, and to explore interaction that unfolds beyond practices dominated by Northern donors. Even though cooperation among programme countries might reflect vertical cooperation structures similar to those associated with ODA—particularly, but not only, with regard to China as provider—it offers an additional set of options for addressing development-related concerns. Mainstreaming, streamlining or promoting South-South cooperation, and increasingly also triangular schemes (UNGA 2019, para. 28),[25] across the UN is one way of making space for these alternative forms of cooperation. If questions of access, legitimacy and equitable burden-sharing matter, it is arguably in the long-term interest of all member states to make sure forms of cooperation beyond ODA receive institutional support.

While SSTC mainstreaming efforts over the last two decades have been patchy across the UN development system, they have contributed to something unheard of before the turn of the millennium. UN efforts to integrate considerations for South-South cooperation across a wide range of organizational dimensions have contributed to cooperation between programme countries now

being "a thing" across the UN and beyond. This is no minor feat in a context in which, notably due to funding patterns, UN entities have remained attached to traditional donor-recipient logics where Northern donors provide funding to UN entities for work in, and with, Southern recipient countries. The significant increase in earmarked funding (Weinlich et al. 2020)—where (mostly) Northern donors provide financial resources to UN entities with explicit limits on where and/or how they are to be spent—has arguably increased the tendency to operate according to donor preferences, and not to support the systemic ramifications of Southern interests through the promotion of cooperation among programme countries.

Against this backdrop, the increasing focus on South-South schemes across a substantial range of UN entities covering a large number of mandates has arguably widened the space for alternative forms of cooperation. This has not only included schemes set up by large Southern providers such as China, Brazil and India, but also a growing number of often less resource-intensive and mostly shorter-term initiatives of peer learning, knowledge-sharing and technical assistance among programme countries, facilitated by UN entities (UNOSSC 2020). Although the processes leading to these initiatives as well as their outcomes and impact have often remained outside systematic monitoring and evaluation efforts, the increasing space for South-South dynamics can be seen as a rather positive development, notably with regard to the need of mobilising all available venues and mechanisms to increase the likelihood of reaching the SDGs (CEPEI 2017; SDG-Fund n.d.). As a UN official put it during an interview, "We need this explicit focus on South-South; we need [UN support] to be continued if we want to move at some point beyond the dominance of traditional donors…we need more not less of this" (author's interview with a UN official, New York City, November 2020).

The evidence discussed in this article suggests that, overall, efforts to mainstream SSTC support at the UN have evolved in a complex environment and are far from homogenous. With reference to requests in UN resolutions and reports, the SSTC scorecard mapping reflects a roughly two-decades-old appraisal by the UN itself, namely that "despite some progress, the mainstreaming of… South-South cooperation in the programmes and projects of…United Nations organizations and agencies is…still not optimal" (UNDP 2003, 11). Mainstreaming efforts have differed widely across "champions," "waverers" and "stragglers," with some entities, such as FAO, employing SSTC teams at both the global and country levels, whereas others—like UNHCR—do not even have a designated SSTC focal point.

This heterogeneity—and often lack of coordination—has not gone unnoticed. In 2017, the UN Secretary-General asked UNOSSC to set up a framework that would allow a more coordinated approach across agencies (UNGA 2017). Under the guidance of UNOSSC, representatives of UN entities have developed a

system-wide strategy and an action plan on SSTC (UNOSSC 2021), with many officials hoping that a shared guiding document will ensure not only "more coherent and coordinated support by the United Nations system" (UNGA 2017, para. 94), but also more systematic institutional efforts across entities. The system-wide strategy builds on some of the more comprehensive strategic documents of individual UN entities, notably those of the "champions,"[26] and it is set to become the go-to reference for UN support for SSTC across the board.

At the same time, however, the system-wide strategy does not bring full clarity to questions of monitoring and reporting, and on how to classify funding, as this would touch upon issues of definitional vagueness that have been important for influential member states, including China (see above). While the strategy's action plan puts forward some tentative operationalizations and adds broad indicators to monitor whether mainstreaming SSTC "as a specific implementation modality…is holistically incorporated into policies, strategic frameworks and other planning and programming instruments of UN entities" (UNOSSC 2021, 35), it does not establish a comprehensive or mandatory base for coherently approaching SSTC support across UN entities. In fact, recent UN coordination mechanisms—such as a new generation of cooperation frameworks developed in parallel with the system-wide strategy (UNSDG 2020; cf. UNSDG 2019)—indicate neither a common understanding of, nor a mainstreamed approach towards, SSTC.[27] At both the strategic and—even more so—the practice level, the heterogeneity of mainstreaming efforts is thus set to remain a defining feature of the SSTC support landscape at the UN.

Given the decades-long requests for—and the rather sluggish and fissured approaches to—SSTC mainstreaming across UN entities, a broader question for the future of SSTC support concerns the very notion of mainstreaming itself. If comprehensive mainstreaming—that is, the notion of considering SSTC with regard to "any planned action…in all areas and at all levels" (ECOSOC 1997, 2)—is apparently far from being an empirical reality across UN entities, is it at least (still) a desirable reference for future efforts? Is it actually useful to have SSTC brought into all major strategies, budget templates, monitoring tools, reporting schemes and organigrams? Some entities identified as SSTC mainstreaming "stragglers"—such as UNODC and WHO—have de facto answered this question in the negative. For years, and often decades, they have engaged with, supported and promoted programme country to programme country cooperation without calling it SSTC support or adapting their workflows to SSTC as a cross-cutting issue. There is little evidence suggesting that this will change in the near future. During interviews, most SSTC focal points indeed highlighted that SSTC "is one modality among others"[28] and that it was currently neither imaginable nor desirable to actually include the SSTC lens in all work streams at all levels. Even a UNOSSC official stated that:

> SSTC does not need to be everywhere; we should use [SSTC support] whenever it is useful and appropriate…Unlike universal principles such as human rights or gender equality, South-South cooperation is a *cooperation modality*. The logic of application [of this modality] should be different [from applying universal principles] (Author's interview with a UNOSSC official, New York City, September 2020, emphasis added).

This reflects a rather clear stance against applying the notion of mainstreaming to SSTC support as an integral dimension of policies and programmes in all spheres, and indeed resonates with the most recent authoritative framework on SSTC. The outcome document of the 2019 BAPA+40 conference mentions mainstreaming efforts only once, tellingly with reference to gender equality and not SSTC itself (UNGA 2019, 4; see UNGA 2020c, para. 35).[29] When it comes to the role of UN entities, the outcome document emphasises the long-term insistence that funds, programmes and specialised agencies should "continue incorporating South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation into policies, programmes, strategic frameworks and other planning instruments" (UNGA 2019, 6), but it refrains from using mainstreaming terminology. Strengthening SSTC frameworks and tools is still at the centre, but not necessarily with regard to any planned action, in all areas and at all levels. This reading of BAPA+40 turns against or goes beyond previous guidelines on SSTC support. It suggests that future UN engagement with SSTC should be less about mainstreaming and more about expanding the capacity of UN entities in specific areas, for the processes and spaces where it is deemed to make sense.

Conclusion

This article has provided a systematic comparative examination of UN entities' efforts to mainstream support for SSTC. Based on a review of past trajectories, I have mapped and analyzed recent SSTC mainstreaming dynamics across fifteen UN entities. The combination of insights from strategies, reports, monitoring frameworks, funding and operational setups has provided the basis for grouping entities in what I have tentatively labelled as "champions," "waverers," and "stragglers." The analysis of patterns within and across these groups has provided the backdrop for discussing key factors that, while mostly unfolding behind closed doors, have conditioned how UN entities engage with SSTC support. In addition to strategic considerations for positioning the UN in an evolving funding environment as well as the role of leaders and staff in individual entities, SSTC support has evolved in the context of rising geopolitical tensions between WEOG countries and China. A considerable number of traditional donor representatives have come to perceive South-South cooperation mainly as an umbrella for the expansion of China's clout, contributing to the increasing politicization of SSTC.

Insights from recent inter-agency processes suggest that SSTC support strategies at the UN are likely to leave mainstreaming provisions behind and, instead, embrace more pragmatic approaches. Heterogeneity across entities is thus likely to remain a key feature of UN support for SSTC.

Against the backdrop of these findings, future research might want to examine bilateral funding patterns and their link with SSTC support structures across UN entities. With reference to China, it would be of particular interest to focus on why and how cooperation with individual entities has expanded and, based on programme country accounts, identify whether a surge in (Chinese) South-South funding has contributed to increasing the quality of SSTC support. Another strand of research could examine the scorecard groupings of champions, waverers, and stragglers in more detail and expand the focus on institutional mainstreaming by including a comprehensive assessment of programme and project activities to examine what kind of initiatives different entities support under the SSTC umbrella, and to what extent they lead to tangible results. More generally, this could feed into an assessment of whether and how SSTC schemes contribute to SDG implementation, and/or suggestions on how to overcome SSTC measurement challenges (see IAEG-SDG 2020; UN 2019b). Finally, insights from this study could serve as a reference for a comparative analysis of mainstreaming efforts on prominent concerns across international organizations—including gender, human rights or youth-related issues—in order to contribute to the conceptual discussion of (impediments to) institutional mainstreaming. Overall, UN engagement with cooperation beyond traditional North-South schemes offers a dynamic, evolving and rather timely field of inquiry that provides detailed insights into the evolving landscape of multilateral cooperation practices.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   For general discussions including a focus on the UN, see Braveboy-Wagner 2009; Alden, Morphet and Vieria 2010; Prashad 2012.

2.   See Haug 2021a; for a discussion of different dimensions of the (global) South as a category and South-South cooperation as a rather broad and inclusive arena, see Haug 2021b.

3.   Interviews with UN officials and experts, 2016-2020.

4.   The main reasons behind this shift were not only the need to reflect the expanding relevance of (large) Southern member states as increasingly vocal players but also hopes that they would increase their funding to the UN's operational work; see below.

5.   At the UN, mainstreaming has also been used to promote a cross-cutting perspective on youth-related issues; see UN 2018a.

6.   The UNESCO South-South webspace, for instance, contains projects that neither mention South-South as a modality nor seem to focus explicitly on cooperation among programme countries; see UNESCO n.d.

7.   UN Women was the only entity whose focal point did not respond to interview requests.

8.   FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNFPA, UNIDO and WFP; UNICEF is currently preparing their SSTC strategy.

9.   Questions about SSTC monitoring and evaluation have been rather controversial; see Besharati and MacFeely 2019; Waisbich 2021.

10.   The absence of common standards of what counts as SSTC expenditure makes a detailed comparison of SSTC-specific funding a rather complex undertaking. The four South-South trust funds currently administered by UNOSSC–set up respectively by the UN General Assembly, the G77, the India-Brazil-South Africa alliance as well as the government of India (UNOSSC n.d.-d)–have recently become a more visible source of funding for SSTC across UN entities.

11.   As a point of comparison: In 2018 alone, FAO received overall contributions of more than US$1.4 billion (UN-DESA 2020a).

12.   For details on scoring and labelling, see Annex II.

13.   As the host of UNOSSC, UNDP is a special case; see Haug 2021a, 26f.

14.   For details, see Haug 2021a.

15.   For an exception, see WHO's country presence reports (WHO 2019).

16.   This focus on annual reports does not take into account other forms of regular reporting that may include references to SSTC, such as updates on operational activities at UN-Habitat.

17.   See UNFPA's annual reports from 2002 onwards.

18.   Interviews, UN officials, New York City and Nairobi, November 2020; see UN 2018b.

19.   WEOG comprises Western European countries, Turkey, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

20.   On BRI, see Chatzky and McBride 2020.

21.   Conversation with a UN official in September 2020. For the 2017, 2018 and 2019 editions of a UNSSC course on SSTC and the 2030 Agenda, see UNSSC 2019.

22.   Only UNIDO and IFAD received roughly 10 percent of their member state funding from China, all others between 6 and less than 0.1 per cent; see UNGA 2020b.

23.   For details see Haug 2021a, 27f.

24.   In fact, among the sample used in this study, only the six "champion" entities mentioned SSTC in their 2019 annual reports (see above). For a decline WHO country offices using references to SSTC, see WHO 2019.

25.   While triangular cooperation has received significantly less attention than South-South cooperation across the UN system, BAPA+40 has contributed to a reinvigorated interest in triangular cooperation as a modality that connects South-South spaces with traditional donors (Haug 2021a). The potential and pitfalls of triangular cooperation in multilateral settings beyond the combined acronym of "SSTC" require a separate and more detailed investigation.

26.   Interview, UNOSSC staff, New York City, September and November 2020.

27.   As of October 2020, the eight publicly available Cooperation Frameworks beginning with implementation in 2020 (UNSDG n.d.) refer to SSTC as a component of financing strategies (DRC and Republic of Congo), or as a tool for collaboration with large Southern partners such as China (Ethiopia), mention it in passing (Angola, Sierra Leone) or not at all (Colombia, Iraq). Only one of the currently available Cooperation Frameworks (Paraguay) uses SSTC as a systematic focus of engagement, including performance indicators.

28.   This formulation was used by many SSTC focal points during interviews.

29.   The system-wide strategy also does not use mainstreaming language; see UNOSSC 2021.

Annex I: Scorecard Operationalization

			OPERATIONALISATION OF SCORES				
	SS(T)C in strategies	SS(T)C in annual reports	SS(T)C publications	SS(T)C monitoring framework	SS(T)C - specific funding	SS(T)C - specific organisational capacity	Overall score tags
S 2	SS(T)C mentioned in detail in corporate strategy and/or a separate SSTC strategy	SS(T)C mentioned throughout (at least over the last five years)	More than two stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	SS(T)C monitoring in place, such as explicit SS(T)C indicators	Major and/or long-term funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	SS(T)C unit with staff	Predominantly scoring 2 (more than 3x): champions
C O R E S 1	SS(T)C mentioned in corporate strategy	SS(T)C mentioned occasionally (not consistently over the last five years)	A limited number of (up to two) stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	Some basic form of SS(T)C monitoring in place	Some funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	SS(T)C focal point but no unit/team	Predominantly scoring 1 (at least 3x): waverers
0	SS(T)C not mentioned in major organisation-wide strategies	SS(T)C never mentioned in annual reports (2000-2019)	No stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	No SS(T)C-related monitoring tools in use	No funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	No SS(T)C focal point and no unit/team	Predominantly scoring 0 (at least 3x): stragglers

Source: Author's own compilation; see Haug 2021a.

Annex II: Scorecard Details

1. The total expenses listed under "United Nations" and "United Nations Peacekeeping" were excluded from the total in order to allow for a focus on UN entities outside the main organs of the UN.

2. In addition to participant observations from 2012 to 2015 and interviews with UN and member state officials since 2016, semi-structured interviews with SSTC focal points took place from September to November 2020. For a list of entities and the interview template, see Haug 2021b.

3. The scorecard's funding dimension focuses on the extent to which funds are explicitly and regularly assigned to SSTC, such as staff salaries (often funded via core contributions) or projects and programmes (usually funded by earmarked contributions). As entities provide different kinds of mostly incomplete information that is difficult to compare, scores do not refer to amounts but capture whether an entity has no (0); some occasional or one-off (1); or regular and/or substantial (2) financial resources assigned to SSTC (see below). Annual reports and stand-alone SSTC publications are assessed separately in order to examine whether SSTC has been seen as important enough to be included in annual reports year by year, and whether there are reports providing detailed insights into concrete projects and initiatives. The organisational capacity score reflects the state of affairs in November 2020.

4. The six scorecard dimensions are inspired by the framework set out in the 2016 UN Operational Guidelines as the main steps for mainstreaming SSTC at the level of UN entities (HLC-SSC 2016, 24f). For each dimension and their proxies, I have designed a three-step (0-1-2) assessment tool to reflect a range of basic engagement levels, from none (0) to some (1) and substantial (2), that allow for a systematic comparison. Even if the weighing of scores is adapted, or if dimensions are slightly rearranged, the overall picture remains the same: Relative to each other, "champion" entities score very high and "straggler" entities very low on (almost) all dimensions, whereas "waverer" entities present a more mixed picture.

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