



United Nations Development Group:

RESPONSE TO THE CHANGING AID ENVIRONMENT

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The United Nations Development Group (UNDG) Working Group on Aid Effectiveness consists of
the following organizations and agencies:

United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

World Food Programme (WFP)

World Health Organization (WHO)

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Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| BWI | Bretton Woods institution |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD) |
| HACT | Harmonized approach to cash transfers |
| JAS | Joint assistance strategy |
| MDG | Millennium development goal |
| NDS | National development strategy |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PER | Public expenditure review |
| PFM | Public financial management |
| SWAp | Sector-wide approach |
| TCPR | Triennial comprehensive policy review |
| UNCT | United Nations country team |
| UNDAF | United Nations development assistance framework |
| UNDG | United Nations Development Group |

I. Introduction

1. Development aid has contributed to tangible results in approaching certain development goals, such as those in health and primary education. Additional efforts are needed to ensure the achievement of all internationally agreed development goals and the commitments made, notably, in the Millennium declaration in 2000, including the Millennium development goals (MDGs); the [Monterrey consensus](#) on financing for development in 2002;¹ and the [World Summit in 2005](#). One important instrument to this end is the [Paris declaration on aid effectiveness](#) of 2005, with its 12 indicators of aid effectiveness. The declaration requests that the donor community increase the quantity and improve the quality of aid by strengthening predictability, untying aid, increasing its coherence and alignment with countries' priorities and systems, and improving harmonization among donors. National development strategies (NDSs) and poverty-reduction strategies, developed and implemented under programme country leadership, would serve as anchors for measures to meet these goals.

2. The key principle of the Paris declaration -- of national ownership and leadership, including responsibility for coordinating all external assistance -- has always been a key principle of the United Nations system's operational activities for development, as consistently reflected in policies emanating from Triennial comprehensive policy reviews (TCPRs). Therefore, the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) signed the Paris declaration, and United Nations Member States welcomed the Paris declaration in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Since then, the 2007 TCPR (General Assembly resolution 62/208) welcomed efforts and initiatives to enhance the quality of aid and to increase its impact, including the Paris declaration. The resolution called for "concrete, effective and timely action in implementing all agreed commitments on aid effectiveness, with clear monitoring and deadlines." As a signatory, the UNDG advocates the strengthening of partnerships between donor and programme countries to ensure the predictability of aid flows, the development of country capacities to manage for results and the implementation of the Paris declaration, in particular, in countries that are party to it.

3. The UNDG Working Group on Aid Effectiveness prepared this paper based on country-level experience and the lessons learned from various activities. These include (a) the implementation of the UNDG action plan on the Paris declaration; (b) previous guidance notes and position statements on the subject, especially the UNDG position paper "The role of the UN system in a changing aid environment: sector support and sector programmes"; (c) the UNDG workshop held in Maputo, Mozambique, in December 2006, on the challenges and needs faced in country-level engagement in the changing aid environment; and (d) the draft "Synthesis report: findings and recommendations from a seven country study of UN engagement in poverty reduction and national development strategies", commissioned by the UNDG Working Group on the Millennium Declaration and MDGs.

4. The purpose of this paper is to guide United Nations positioning at the country level in the changing aid environment.² The paper is intended for all United Nations staff at all levels.

¹ "Mobilizing and increasing the effective use of financial resources and achieving the national and international economic conditions needed to fulfill internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration, to eliminate poverty, improve social conditions and raise living standards, and protect our environment, will be our first step to ensuring that the twenty-first century becomes the century of development for all", Monterrey declaration, 2002, paragraph 3.

² It responds to policy guidance from the TCPR (res. 62/208), particularly preambular paragraph 16 on the role of the United Nations system in assisting developing countries in managing current aid modalities

II. United Nations operational and programming response

5. The United Nations system has already made significant contributions to shaping and responding to the changing aid environment. It has taken measures to improve efficiency, focused its responses on development challenges and enhanced its performance at the country level. In 2005, the UNDG spelled out its position on sector support and programmes in a position paper, “The role of the UN system in a changing aid environment: sector support and sector programmes.”

6. In December 2006, the UNDG led an inter-agency self-assessment workshop in Maputo, Mozambique, to analyse its positioning in the changing aid environment. The workshop identified obstacles to and solutions for improved country-level engagement. It called for guidance on engagement and identified the need for immediate action at headquarters to provide such guidance as well as changes to rules and regulations to allow the required engagement.

7. The UNDG action plan³ for the implementation of the Paris declaration prescribes the steps required to meet United Nations commitments under the Paris declaration, especially at the country level through United Nations country teams (UNCTs) and in the global process led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC). UNDG members have been requested to amend all regulations inhibiting the use of national systems. Progress has been made in implementing the UNDG action plan, although not all agencies and organizations have been ready to meet the targets. Further, headquarters’ response to the need for guidance and changes in rules and regulations has been lagging behind action taken by country offices.

Sector support and sector programmes – The United Nations role

Providing conceptual coherence: Drawing on normative work, evidence-based policy and best practices, the United Nations should become involved in all aspects of policy dialogue with government and other partners to help shape the purpose, boundaries and scope of the sector-wide approach (SWAp).

Convening: UNCTs can play a pivotal role in supporting national leadership and in helping national partners to ensure and verify that sector-based programmes are effectively accessible to all.

Developing capacity: The United Nations role in developing national capacity is quintessential in the development of SWAps.

Contributing: Financial contribution is not considered to be the factor that defines United Nations engagement in a SWAp.

8. The first Monitoring survey on the implementation of the Paris declaration, undertaken in 2006, defines the baseline for tracking progress made on the indicators in the Paris declaration. According to the survey, the United Nations used common arrangements and procedures in 29 per cent of the aid provided, and 30 per cent of aid flows from the United Nations were aligned with national priorities; 18 per cent of aid distributed for the government sector was allocated through the use of country public financial management systems, and 8 per cent of aid was allocated through country procurement systems. The two indicators on joint work show that the United Nations had undertaken joint missions in 30 per cent of the total missions and had undertaken joint country analytical work in 63 per cent of the country analyses⁴ (see table). This data, however, should be used with caution as the various agencies and organizations provided some different answers.

³ The UNDG action plan is available on <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=219>

⁴ OECD, 2007. “OECD 2006 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration: Overview of the Results.”

| United Nations | | |
|-----------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Indicators | | 2005 Baseline ratio |
| 3 | Aid flows are aligned on national priorities | 30% |
| 4 | Strengthen capacity by coordinated support | 44% |
| 5a | Use of country public financial management systems | 18% |
| 5b | Use of country procurement systems | 8% |
| 6 | Avoid parallel implementation structures | 31.5% |
| 7 | Aid is more predictable | 32% |
| 8 | Aid is untied | -- |
| 9 | Use of common arrangements or procedures | 29% |
| 10 a | Joint missions | 30% |
| 10 b | Joint country analytic work | 63% |

Source: OECD, 2007. "OECD 2006 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration: Overview of the Results."

III. Role of the United Nations system

9. The following section spells out the repositioning of the role of the United Nations vis-à-vis the five major themes of the Paris declaration.⁵ The United Nations recognizes that the five partnership commitments of the Paris declaration call for:

- (a) Strengthening MDG-based NDSs of programme countries and the operational frameworks associated with those strategies;
- (b) Increasing the alignment of aid with programme countries' priorities, procedures and systems, including increased use of budget support by countries and help to build national capacities;
- (c) Improving harmonization among donors, including better coordination, simplification of donor policies and procedures, and the provision of more predictable multi-year aid flows to programme countries;
- (d) Enhancing donor and programme countries' accountability to their citizens and parliaments for their policies, strategies and performance;
- (e) Defining measures and standards of performance and accountability of programme country systems in public financial management, procurement, fiduciary safeguards and environmental assessments.

A. National ownership

10. The focus on ownership reflects a wide consensus that sustainable development is rooted in national leadership and local action. The Poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) and, more broadly, the NDSs are becoming the framework through which national leadership over development priorities is exercised and implemented. These planning documents are evolving into vehicles for coordinating bilateral and multilateral support around a nationally owned agenda.

11. Reforms within the United Nations system have given special attention to improving the United Nations system's contributions to these frameworks by linking the NDS processes to longer term plans for the attainment of MDGs as part of national priorities. MDG-based NDSs contain measurable poverty-reduction indicators which permit an evaluation of public investment policies. In its role as neutral facilitator, the UNCT does the following:

- (a) Supports and strengthens national capacities to lead and manage the development process through broad and inclusive consultative processes and acts as a facilitator of dialogue between development partners and national stakeholders;
- (b) Works with government to integrate the rights-based approach in national development processes;

⁵ Lessons learned are drawn from the draft "Synthesis report: findings and recommendations from a seven country study of UN engagement in poverty reduction and national development strategies, UNDG Working Group on Millennium Declaration/MDGs.

- (c) Supports governments in fulfilling obligations they have undertaken in signing international treaties and conventions and achieving internationally agreed standards;
- (d) Promotes transparency and accountability;
- (e) Undertakes a multidimensional and cross-sectoral analysis for the NDS to identify a comprehensive and more long-term development agenda by bringing together social, economic, environmental and developmental concerns as well as crisis and conflict management;
- (f) Advocates “pro-poor” policies;
- (g) Funds and supports governments in experimental and pilot initiatives to inform policy development.

B. Alignment

12. United Nations participation in the processes of formulating NDSs has led to greater coherence and increased alignment of the United Nations system’s planning instruments with national priorities, mainly through the United Nations development assistance framework (UNDAF). In this context, the UNDAF is focusing on capacity development. It supports the implementation of Paris declaration commitments, strongly reinforcing United Nations positioning at country levels by ensuring government leadership and ownership principles through:

- (a) Alignment of the UNDAF with the NDS and development priorities;
- (b) Alignment with national procedures and the use of national systems wherever possible;
- (c) Coordination and coherence within the UNCT as the UNDAF is developed, implemented and monitored.

13. Similarly, as a result of stronger national ownership and greater coherence in national-sector plans and budgets, some United Nations organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), have aligned their financial contributions to sector plans and budgets by changing from stand-alone projects or programmes to joint funding modalities, including sector budget support, pooled and basket funds. Stand-alone programmes or projects should be allowed only when they are of an innovative character, such as pilot activities, and are compatible with sector-level arrangements.

14. Progress has been made on the UNDG goal of amending policies and regulations to allow for full participation in the new funding modalities. Some United Nations agencies and organizations have already developed country-level guidelines.⁶ Others have not yet met the 2005 targets as defined in the UNDG position paper on sector support and sector programmes.⁷

15. The 2007 TCPR (res. 62/208, paragraph 103) encourages inviting the United Nations development system “to participate, ex officio, in current and new aid modalities and coordination mechanisms, at the request of the programme country, and invites the United Nations development system to enhance its participation in this regard.”

16. United Nations funds and programmes as well as specialized agencies have a pivotal role in the strengthening of government capacities in the identification, formulation and implementation of sector strategies, annual work plans and budgets – referred to as sector-wide approaches (SWAs) - - in sectors such as education, health, agriculture and rural development. Another important role is that of ensuring that cross-cutting issues are included in all sectors and that non-State actors are involved in these sector approaches, with the consent of the host government.

17. The United Nations provides “upstream” analytical work, and technical assistance in building capacities in coordination and monitoring and evaluation, among others. The United Nations facilitates consensus-building to help key line ministries and other government institutions debate various strategies and integrate sector priorities into national priorities. In some direct budget support (DBS) recipient countries, the medium term expenditure framework (MTEF) has been set by annual budget proposals which are consistent with an MDG-oriented macroeconomic framework – the result of intensive policy dialogue between the United Nations and national governments.

18. The United Nations has an important role in supporting countries in hedging or balancing against the risks associated with shifts to new aid modalities. While the United Nations system positions itself mostly in SWAs, there is also an important challenge to provide impartial policy advice in the context of general budget support. The United Nations provides not only advice on cross-cutting issues but also important policy inputs regarding macroeconomic assumptions about a country's capacity to manage its trade, foreign exchange position and monetary policies vis-à-vis globalization -- all of which underlie critical assumptions of macroeconomic stability, including internal revenue generation.

⁶UNFPA and UNDP have developed specific country-level guidelines on engagement in budget support.

⁷The UNDG targets include the development of more detailed operational guidance for UNCTs on engagement with sector programmes in the Common country assessment (CCA)/UNDAF Guidelines; amendment of legislation, rules and procedures to allow all UNDG agencies to contribute resources to pooled sector-funding arrangements; commitment to increase UNCT support for the development of national capacities for the management of various aid modalities; reduction of transaction costs on national partners; reduction of the number of agency-specific missions; review of the implications for staffing and skill mix at country level; and the monitoring of the United Nations system's own performance against these commitments. (UNDG, “The role of the UN in a changing aid environment: sector support and sector programmes”, 8 February 2005, Section 5.)

C. Harmonization

19. The piloting of a team approach for “Delivering as One” in eight “programme country pilots” has brought about a major change in the way of doing business within the United Nations: from an individual agency focus to one of team support which, in and of itself, would result in reduced transaction costs. The UNCT through the “Delivering as One” model – one leader, one programme, one budgetary framework, and one office – carries forward the United Nations goal of harmonization. Although the United Nations launched the eight pilots to adopt this working model, many other UNCTs in non-pilot countries have followed suit. Nevertheless, the primacy of the country context and national priorities as the roadmap for United Nations reform remains.⁸ Within “Delivering as One”, the relatively new way of delivering assistance, through joint programming and joint programmes which are increasingly being aligned to NDSs, helps reduce administrative costs and also has the advantage of combining complementarities of expertise. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the joint programme support now in many countries are examples of joint programming. The pilot concept of one budgetary framework is also significant and provides the basis for a management tool at the country level, linking performance to funding.

20. The 2007 TCPR encourages the Secretary-General to support “programme country pilots” to “evaluate and exchange their experiences, with the support of the United Nations Evaluation Group.” It emphasizes “the need for an independent evaluation of lessons learned from such efforts, for consideration by Member States, without prejudice to a future intergovernmental decision” (res. 62/208, paragraph 139).

21. For many UNCTs, there is a continual drive towards the development of common arrangements and simplified procedures, with the goal of gradually using national systems and processes, particularly budgetary ones, and strengthening national execution. A specific example of this is the agreement by UNDG Executive Committee Funds and Programmes to harmonize the way cash is transferred to implementing partners at the national level. This agreement – the harmonized approach to cash transfers (HACT) – has significantly reduced transaction costs.

22. Parallel to the United Nations harmonization efforts is the development and implementation of joint assistance strategies (JASs),⁹ in which UNCTs in some countries have been entrusted to lead coordination efforts among development partners, including the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs). Here, again, the United Nations system has played a role in supporting national capacities to coordinate what is often a contentious and tedious process. Yet, the result has been a division of labour among donors in some of these countries.

⁸A stocktaking of the One United Nations pilots was being undertaken at the time of the drafting of this paper.

⁹Joint assistance strategies are a strategic framework which allows development partners and national governments to set the rules of the game espousing the Paris declaration principles. It is not a programming process but a statement of intent between partners in a specific country context.

D. Managing for results

23. Although the harmonization and alignment process is important, the focus should be on the impact and results of the United Nations response to specific country contexts. The United Nations has made important advances in managing for results, namely:

- (a) At the agency level, developing results-based management and reporting frameworks and aligning these with information technology systems in and across agencies;
- (b) At the country level, providing assistance to national governments and non-State actors in the monitoring, evaluating and reporting of progress towards the MDGs by strengthening and reinforcing national capacity in using and tracking development indicators, including the availability of DEVINFO, the database system for monitoring progress towards the MDGs;
- (c) At the global level, supporting the Partnership in statistics for development in the 21st century (PARIS 21)¹⁰ activities, developed to build national statistical capacity in developing countries and to support their statisticians and policymakers in establishing and including national statistical development plans in their development and poverty-reduction policies.

E. Mutual accountability

24. Closely linked to the question of managing for results is the issue of mutual accountability. The principle is that both donor and programme countries are accountable for the commitments made to one another, acknowledging the need for transparency and accountability on both parts. The United Nations, as a neutral partner, helps governments in reviewing implementation of the Paris declaration at the country level as part of the effort to ensure their own accountability. In some countries, UNCTs have set up a country-specific monitoring matrix, based on the Paris declaration (“aid effectiveness action plan”), against which national performance can be assessed. Through its broad-based partnerships, which include non-State actors, the United Nations is able to support national governments in making this monitoring a transparent and inclusive process, thereby promoting the principle of mutual accountability among all actors at the country level.

¹⁰The overall PARIS 21 objective is to develop a culture of transparent, evidence-based policymaking and implementation which serves to improve government accountability and effectiveness in reducing poverty and achieving the MDGs.

IV. The way forward

25. United Nations efforts have resulted in the delivery of more coherent and effective country-level development assistance. Still needed are significant improvements in maximizing the role of the United Nations in supporting policy development, coordination and capacity development to ensure that international commitments on aid effectiveness are implemented and that international development goals – in particular, the MDGs – are met. The United Nations should, therefore, strengthen its response vis-à-vis donor/recipient partnerships to support the implementation of the Paris declaration through actions at various levels, outlined below.

A. Country level

26. At the country level, the following actions should be undertaken:

- (a) *Enhance United Nations involvement in nationally led processes as part of the UNCT mandate, both as coordinator and as trusted partner:* Despite the greater strategic involvement of the United Nations in coordinating nationally led processes, important gaps remain in the United Nations engagement in these processes. With regard to the new aid modalities, such as SWAs and JASs, there is an opportunity for the United Nations to use its leverage as a partner trusted by governments and to ensure that key development goals such as the MDGs and cross-cutting issues – including human rights, gender, poverty reduction, food security, trade and environment – are clearly articulated and integrated into nationally led processes. In practice, this means eliminating parallel processes and/or deferring to nationally led processes. It also entails reporting systematically on United Nations engagement at the country level in its entirety, not solely with respect to the UNDAF. The “Delivering as One” pilots and other country-led experiences provide valuable lessons on how to strengthen the development of this mode of working;
- (b) *Decide on a division of labour to avoid overlap and duplication:* The UNCT should agree upon a clear, strategic and adequately resourced division of labour among agencies, with collective and individual incentives, to promote and ensure that development goals are mainstreamed and costed for development effectiveness;
- (c) *Align United Nations programming with national development planning cycles:* As a rule, the UNDAF and/or the United Nations country programming tool should be a direct derivative of the country’s NDS. Where this is not the case, greater convergence between the two processes should be sought;
- (d) *Deliver technical assistance in the changing aid environment:* Among the most important contributions of the United Nations to the aid-effectiveness agenda is the provision of policy advice informed by its development mandates, advocacy, capacity-building and technical support. These non-monetary contributions of the United Nations reflect its comparative advantage in development activities. The United Nations should reshape its delivery of high-quality technical assistance to support the strengthening of national systems. Such assistance should also respond to national demands for expertise to fill gaps emerging as a result of the repackaging of development assistance by donors and international finance institutions to focus increasingly on budget support mechanisms;
- (e) *Participate systematically in public expenditure reviews (PERs)/public financial management (PFM) reviews:* At the heart of the Paris declaration is a reformed PFM system. For United Nations organizations to firmly anchor their development work within

national priorities and national budgetary processes, an understanding of the situation of a country's PFM system is needed. United Nations participation in a PER of a country's financial system is, therefore, a prerequisite to the development of the UNDAF or any similar United Nations planning instrument, as well as engagement in sectoral PERs by the appropriate agencies and organizations;

- (f) *Define respective and complementary roles with BWIs:* In support of the principle that all development providers should harmonize around national processes, systems and procedures, the Paris agenda provides an opportunity to further articulate and promote the United Nations partnership with the BWIs. In particular, UNCTs should capitalize on the MDGs-NDS agenda to clearly define respective and complementary roles and better coordinate development work with the BWIs;
- (g) *Strengthen partnerships with non-State actors:* The Paris declaration principles set forth accountability not only to governments and donors but also to national stakeholders. With the agreement and consent of the host country, the United Nations development system should assist national governments in creating an enabling environment with strengthened links and cooperation among all entities involved in the development process -- national governments, the United Nations development system, civil society, national non-governmental organizations and the private sector. This process would include, as appropriate, the UNDAF preparation process, with a view to seeking new and innovative solutions to development problems in accordance with national policies and priorities;
- (h) *Support systematic reporting on United Nations performance against Paris declaration indicators:* More efforts should be made to ensure that any pilot exercises concerning the changing aid environment are closely monitored and reviewed to verify whether the new models of cooperation do, indeed, result in increased alignment with national priorities, harmonization with national systems, reduction of transaction costs and contribution to development effectiveness. This could entail, for example, having the UNCT report specifically on how the United Nations is meeting the Paris declaration targets at the country level.

B. Agency level

27. At the agency level, the following actions should be undertaken:

- (a) *Strengthen the United Nations human resource capacity:* The policy and analytical skills, experience and expertise demonstrated by United Nations staff in fulfilling the new roles expected by governments and major donors will become critical indicators of success. For this reason, strengthening its capacity in these areas requires attention. Such new tasks demand that individual agencies and organizations refocus their work. This needs to be reflected in the agencies' skills mix and in United Nations staff job descriptions and performance criteria, with incentives to encourage inter-agency collaboration;
- (b) *Seek intergovernmental guidance on implementation of the United Nations commitment to the Paris declaration:* The implications of the changing aid environment must be discussed in the respective executive boards and/or governing bodies of all United Nations system agencies and organizations to sensitize members to the issues and to instigate the required changes in regulations which would facilitate working in the

changing aid environment and would be conducive to real harmonization with national systems;

- (c) *Improve coordination of financial systems:* To respond to the need by UNCTs to use common financial arrangements and simplified procedures, more effort should be made to harmonize and simplify financial systems, as was the case with the development of HACT.

C. United Nations level

28. At the United Nations level, the following actions should be undertaken:

- (a) *Develop a comprehensive set of guidelines linking Paris declaration commitments, United Nations reforms and NDSs – within the context of national ownership:* There are examples of good practice at the country level with respect to linking the internal United Nations reform process to the changing aid environment. Some of these practices have been packaged into guidelines issued by the United Nations system and disseminated at large. Absent from these guidelines, however, is the focus on national ownership and its linkages to United Nations reform and Paris declaration principles. Without a clear understanding and demonstration of the processes linked to domestic ownership as well as guidance on how the United Nations can support governments in these processes, United Nations measures to implement the reform and the Paris declaration commitments will lose legitimacy and sustainability;
- (b) *Leverage the impartial role of the United Nations to strengthen mutual accountability:* The Paris principles represent a barometer against which the United Nations can measure its effectiveness and relevance as a development partner in the new aid environment. Recognizing this, the United Nations system is, nevertheless, in a privileged position to also help governments of both donor and programme countries to monitor their commitments to the Paris principles. It is a neutral forum which embodies universal values based on global consensus. The Paris declaration was a milestone in setting out basic principles and launching a process through which stakeholders can address weaknesses in Official Development Assistance (ODA). OECD leadership in this area has been effective in advancing the analytical discussions of these issues and achieving the participation of DAC donors. Among parties directly involved in the process, there is increasing recognition that, to accelerate progress, intensifying and regularizing the participation of developing countries in both the conceptual and the operational aspects of the aid-effectiveness discussion is indispensable. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Development Cooperation Forum can play a crucial role in building the political accountability of both donors and recipients to these principles.