

Business Operations Strategy - FAQs

1. What is the Business Operations Strategy?

The Business Operations Strategy (BOS) is a results-based framework that focuses on joint business operations with the purpose of eliminating duplication, leveraging the common bargaining power of the UN and maximizing economies of scale. It enhances the cost-effectiveness and quality of operational support processes such as procurement, information technology, human resources, logistics, administration and finance. The BOS was initially created in 2012 as a response to a call for simplification and harmonization of the United Nations system.

2. Why does the guidance have two documents?

The BOS guidance consists of two documents: an Executive Summary which is a short overview on the BOS intended for senior audiences, and a manual that provides a step by step overview on how to develop a BOS and is intended for technical level BOS practitioners at country level. Both can be found in the BOS online platform.

3. How will the BOS help country teams and individual organizations?

The BOS provides a strategic outlook on operational support services, reinforcing programmatic links with operational support. It focusses on reducing the cost of operations and/or enhancing the quality of operations support. It allows the operations management team (OMT) to plan ahead and focus on high-impact/high-value initiatives, and spread the workload over multiple years, while retaining a strategic vision for operations. The BOS also allows the UN country team (UNCT) to monitor and report on the impact of common business operations.

4. Is the BOS mandatory?

In December 2017 the UN Secretary-General (SG) issued a proposal to reposition the United Nations Development System (A/72/684). For business operations the SG set out his vision, which included a requirement for all UNCTs to comply with an improved BOS by 2021, in support of a more effective programme delivery on the 2030 Agenda.

5. We are a small office and lack capacity to develop a BOS. Do we still need to do it?

Yes. In his UN reform, the SG made it mandatory for all UNCTs to have an active BOS by 2021. Country teams with limited capacity can select a limited number of common services to cooperate on and scale them up on a yearly basis. Good news is that it is now easier to develop a BOS and you can do it to fit your needs and to better support the programmes in country.

6. How often does an office do a BOS?

The BOS no longer has a set cycle. Instead the BOS implementation is monitored and reviewed annually to ensure it is progressing well and it is updated to respond to the current country context. Planning can be done for one year or for several years as OMTs can set the implementation date of specific services in the opportunity analysis and can set up the targets for several years as well.

7. How does the BOS link to the OMT annual work plan?

The OMT annual work plan derives from the BOS. The opportunities identified during the development of the BOS form the basis of the OMT work plan, which can be monitored through the planning section of the online platform.

8. How do we align the BOS to the UNSDCF cycle?

This is no longer a requirement. The new BOS continues to support programmatic activities but it is now updated annually to ensure it remains relevant and is adaptable to the changes in the country context.

9. The BOS country typology provides clarity on what common services lines countries should focus on – one size does not fit all. Will country offices have the option to choose other common service lines?

Definitely! The BOS country typology only provides recommendations based on a study done of previous BOSs that showed the areas of higher return on investment depending on operation size. However, all common service lines are open to all countries and UNCTs and OMTs should select the service lines that are most appropriate to their operational context. A minimum of two service lines should be selected but OMTs may choose to cooperate on all six.

10. Will Country Offices with a current BOS will have to input their service information into the new online tool?

Yes. This is part of the transition to the new BOS.

11. What are the governance mechanisms and who’s accountable for BOS?

Whilst every country context is different, there is a general structure accountable for the BOS. At country level, the Resident Coordinator (RC) is accountable to the SG for the development, implementation, monitoring, and reporting on the BOS. The UNCT provides overall oversight on the BOS process, approval, and mobilization of necessary agency and joint resources. It is also responsible for endorsement of the final BOS and for its annual reporting. The OMTs and its working groups are responsible for facilitating the development and implementation of the BOS at the country level. For detailed information on roles and responsibilities on the BOS, refer to Annex 2 of the BOS Guidance.

12. In my country, we call the UNCT and the OMT by different names. How do we approach the accountability Framework if we don’t have an OMT?

Formal UN structures are set up at country level according to the operational context. In countries that do not have an OMT, then the accountability and responsibility of the OMT, as detailed in the BOS Guidance, should be applied to the most likely local structure, as selected by the RC/UNCT. Their contacts should be added in the BOS online platform under UNCT/OMT as the entity with the matching responsibility/accountability.

13. What is the main criteria for selection of a common service managing agency?

There is no specific criteria. The OMT and UNCT may agree on the selection of a lead agency taking into consideration their capacity, programme volume, staffing structure, track record etc.

14. If not all UN agencies want to participate, can the BOS still be developed?

Yes, but maximizing impact of the BOS depends on including as many agencies as possible.

15. What happens to agency operations under the BOS?

The BOS deals with common services and inter-agency business operations. A significant part of operations only supports one agency’s programmes and therefore remains with it. There may be a specialist task that not

many agencies do, leaving no business case to perform it jointly.

Ultimately, the UNCT decides on which services are undertaken commonly. The common operations agenda is perfectly complementary to agency operations planning—each focuses on its own set of activities.

16. How does the BOS relate to regional or global service centres?

The BOS focusses on local common services, such as local procurement, recruitment, information technology infrastructure, etc. Regional and global centres have a different service portfolio often focused on mass processing, such as for transactions and payroll. Most of these services will rarely, if ever, be a common service at the country level, so there is no overlap. Even so, an agency can withdraw from any of the services under the BOS if it feels the service will be more efficiently performed at regional/global level.

17. What should be a common service instead of an agency service?

A service should be a common service if more than one agency needs it, the monetary and non-monetary benefits of joint delivery outweigh the cost of developing and delivering it, and/or there is a quality benefit in having it.

18. Can the BOS be adapted to the local context?

Yes. The BOS online platform suggests a range of services. The OMT can common select services based on local need and can suggest any other services specific to country context. The number and type of services should depend on team capacity and local potential/need.

19. How long does it take to prepare the BOS?

The BOS preparation has five key steps that take between 8 to 16 weeks. The actual time requirement will depend on local level capacity, the number of common services identified, access to verifiable data and approval times. UNCTs complete their BOS by providing inputs into each step of the BOS online platform.

20. What resources are required for BOS preparation?

To develop a BOS you need access to two resources: the BOS Guidance and the online platform. If you haven’t logged in yet, you may register to request

access. Access will be given depending on your role in the development of the BOS at country level.

21. How can I get access to the online platform?

To gain access to the BOS online platform, you need to register. Access is granted by the RC’s office at country level and the level of access will depend on your role in the development of the BOS at country level. Depending on your access rights you may be able to edit or just view sections of the platform.

22. Where can I find step by step guidance on how to use the BOS online platform?

In the bottom strip of the platform, you will find a light bulb icon. Click on it for step by step guidance on the development of BOS.

23. Why is the stock take analysis important?

The stock take analysis includes an assessment of existing business operations harmonization initiatives (including common services). Based on the performance of each common service, the OMT assesses its added value to the UN system. This forms the basis for the results framework and any recommended actions. In that sense, it is a quality check for existing services.

24. Why conduct an opportunity analysis?

This step identifies and describes needs for new joint operational support services. It is during this phase that the links between programme and operations are assessed, e.g. where needs from a programmatic perspective are identified, as well as regular non-programmatic operational needs. This step is also meant to foster creative discussions where the OMT and UNCT come up with potential new common services that could be beneficial for the country context.

25. Why carry out a cost-benefit analysis (CBA)?

For certain common services, the cost-benefit analysis is critical in helping to prioritize scarce human and financial resources. It guides the UNCT and/or OMT towards pursuing the highest impact/lowest cost initiatives first, ensuring the maximum return on investment.

26. When to do a CBA?

To facilitate the work of OMTs, the online platform has attributed a specific CBA calculation to each common service based on its potential for cost avoidance and quality improvements. Some common services do not need a CBA, as they are selected mostly for their quality enhancements. The platform guides users through the

common services that need a simplified CBA. For more complex services, a detailed CBA is recommended.

27. What are the elements of CBA?

A cost-benefit analysis considers two types of costs and benefits associated with each suggested business operations harmonization initiative:

- On time costs: Monetary costs and benefits
- Recurrent costs: monetary costs and labour costs

28. Why complete the planning framework?

The planning framework outlines parameters a given service should meet in terms of quality, timeliness or cost-effectiveness, expressed in the form of key performance indicators. The process forces the UNCT and OMT to think through what it expects from a service—before making an investment in labour or money to make it real.

To facilitate the process, the online platform uses two mandatory standard indicators for every common service: one focused on avoided cost and one focused on quality of service. The targets are not standardized and will be up for the OMT to define them according to the baseline.

29. Can I add more key performance indicators (KPIs) to a common service?

Certainly! You may add more KPIs in two ways: by selecting from a list of optional KPIs already pre-loaded in the platform or by adding a specific new one. If you would prefer to add a KPI, remember to make it SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

30. Is there a maximum number of KPIs I can add for a particular common service?

No. You may add as many KPIs as you’d like, however, beware that KPIs should only be added if there is a real need to monitor progress on a specific aspect. It is recommended that OMTs avoid selecting/developing too many KPIs as this can result in heavy reporting duties for the country office.

31. How can I make UN Agencies in my country accountable for delivering on an agreed activity for a common service?

The online platform supports the development of an implementation plan that tracks progress made towards specific activities and identifies the focal person for follow up. The OMT can bring to the

attention of the UNCT when activities are not being completed as planned.

32. Will the online platform alert the UNCT if a pre-established target is not met?

Indeed, the online platform will alert the relevant colleagues at the different stages of the BOS. For this reason, it is important to have the Accountability Framework updated.

33. How are the costing arrangements defined for services provided by one agency to others?

This is not prescribed and has to be agreed between the Agencies at OMT and UNCT level. Agencies are advised to adhere to the Principles for the costing and pricing of services exchanged between UN entities. They can be found in the library of the online platform.

34. Does achieving savings from the BOS result in staff reduction?

Not necessarily. Initiatives under the BOS may free up staff time. In many countries, it has reduced pressure on overloaded staff, as more time can be spent on agency-related operations, enhancing the quality and timeliness of operations on the agency side.

35. The online platform is a good idea but it does not facilitate discussions with the OMT/UNCT on the BOS. We will continue to use the old templates to table discussions on BOS.

The online platform does not only develop your BOS but under *Reports* you will be able to download and print tables with all the information entered at each step of the BOS. Analytical reports will also be available through this section to help guide future discussions on BOS. The *Reports* section is meant to support OMT and UNCT meetings on BOS.

36. Do we also need to develop a BOS document for signature?

No. The sign-off is now done by RC on behalf of the UNCT through the online platform. For reference purposes, the BOS document is automatically generated by the platform once the OMT inputs all the relevant information. This is a simplified report. Reports are also generated at the completion of each step to facilitate the discussions and the endorsement. You may add these reports as Annexes to your BOS document.

37. Can I update our BOS after it is endorsed and signed-off by the UNCT and the RC?

Once the BOS is endorsed and signed-off, the platform will lock the BOS until it is time to review it. Between the sign-off and the review steps, OMTs will only be able to add new opportunities to the BOS unless there is a significant change in the country context. If that is the case, the BOS can be unlocked and fully updated at the decision of the BOS Task Team.

38. What support and information is available for country offices?

The online platform has a global BOS library displaying country BOSs and BOS related reports, CBA reports, workplans, evaluations as well as guidance documents and templates. Training materials and powerpoint presentations are also available through the platform. For more support, you may contact the Task team through the help page.

39. I'm having technical problems with the online platform. How can I get support?

You can contact the technical support team through the help page of the online platform.

40. How can the BOS Task Team help?

The BOS Task team was created to provide support to UNCTs in the development and implementation of BOS. You can find their TORs in Annex 6 of the 2019 BOS Guidance. Their responsibilities include:

- Providing guidance and support to UNRCs and UNCTs in developing, implementing and reporting on the BOS;
- Providing quality assurance on the proposed BOS by country;
- Identifying, fine-tuning, and sharing with UNCTs best practices within the common service lines.