



**SUMMIT
OF THE FUTURE**
A GLOBAL DEAL
TO RESHAPE FUTURE
GOVERNANCE

Anna Ayuso (coord.)

CIDOB **REPORT #12, 2024**

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INTRODUCTION: THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE, AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE



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12- 2024

The United Nations, the global governance instrument established by the international community following the devastation of the Second World War, needs a major overhaul if it is to respond to the new governance crises and challenges in the 21st century. The Summit of the Future, convened by Secretary-General António Guterres on September 22nd and 23rd, 2024, is intended to act as a catalyst to reinvigorate an organisation at a low ebb. The last two decades have stretched the UN legal and institutional framework's capacity to adapt to a new geopolitical reality, as some of the principles underpinning it until now and which form the pillars of the liberal order are coming under increasing challenge.

Negotiations are conditioned by factors such as China's consolidation as an assertive power with worldwide reach, or the emergence of a Global South that questions the geopolitical order of a globalisation fashioned to suit Western powers and which perpetuates inequality and dependency. The lack of representation in the organisation's main bodies, most notably in the Security Council but also in the economic and financial organs, is a source of grievance for states and regions that feel sidelined. And it is not just countries: other actors that wield increasing influence in the international arena, such as cities

and civil society organisations, are also demanding more participation and inclusion, and more transparency in decision-making and accountability.

Other demands stem from the need to provide multilateral institutions with the financial, human and technical resources to get the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) back on track in the wake of the multiple, overlapping crises of recent decades. There are also concerns about the need to arm the multilateral system with a greater capacity to anticipate and react to such crises and to manage the effects of looming climate change. Added to that is the uncertainty arising from rapid technological change and the breakthrough of artificial intelligence.

THE AIM OF THE PACT FOR THE FUTURE IS NOT TO CREATE A NEW AGENDA BUT TO HELP FULFIL EXISTING ONES AND FOSTER STRUCTURAL CHANGES SO THAT THE UNITED NATIONS CAN ADAPT ITS MANDATE TO A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY.

According to the [General Assembly mandate](#), the summit must adopt a “Pact for the Future” negotiated with the member states. Rather than draw up a new agenda, its goal is to help achieve and improve existing ones, like the 2030 Agenda or the [Paris Agreement on climate change](#). The summit must also foster the changes required for the United Nations to fulfil its mandate of preserving peace and human security. To these ends, the secretary-general structured the Pact for the Future

into five chapters: 1) sustainable development and financing; 2) peace and security; 3) science, technology and innovation; 4) youth and future generations, and 5) transforming global governance.

This *CIDOB Report* seeks to provide answers to three key questions: a) what are the reasons and arguments driving the reforms; b) what type of proposals and measures are under negotiation; and c) what is the position of the various actors involved and what interests are in play. The analyses in the report spell out the divergent views of the Global North and Global South. But that is not the only debate, as other fault lines are apparent that shape coalitions and groupings of variable geometry depending on the conditions and capabilities of the different actors. The idea is to clarify some of the main challenges and issues in play, and to look back and see where progress has been made and where the main obstacles to an effective reform for better governance lie.

The two opening chapters address the first item on the agenda: financial matters. Víctor Burguete looks at reforming the international financial architecture. He examines the proposals to provide the financial

institutions with greater legitimacy and transparency; and with the capacities to respond quickly and effectively to sovereign debt problems in a manner that is fair to the countries of the South, many of which are reporting record debt levels in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. José Antonio Alonso, meanwhile, tackles the crucial issue of financing the development agenda. The Summit of the Future will lay the foundations and set the tone for the discussions at the International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in 2025. He proposes devising a way to maximise funding sources that are currently underutilised, like special drawing rights or the multilateral development banks. He also flags the need to bring some order to the ineffective web of financial instruments working in disarray at present.

The following two chapters are devoted to the challenges of the peace agenda, which is currently under the onslaught of a proliferation and escalation of conflicts. Rafael Grasa explains the ongoing negotiations to tackle the reform of the Security Council against a backdrop of a crisis of legitimacy owing to the blocking tactics employed by the major powers with the right of veto. He warns that, besides reform of its composition and functioning, the very values and principles of the international order are at stake. Next, Jordi Armadans delves into peacebuilding instruments from a human rights perspective, warning that democratic backsliding and growing threats to people's security undermine sustaining peace. He also warns of the dangers of arms proliferation and of taking a militaristic view of collective security.

The next two chapters explore the challenges of the digital transition. Marta Galceran looks at the Global Digital Compact negotiations, which are taking place in parallel with the discussions over the Pact for the Future. The goal of the compact is to establish a worldwide consensus on the principles governing cyberspace to ensure a transparent, inclusive, secure and responsible digital transition. The negotiations have brought to light the existence of a geopolitical divide, but also controversy over the role of the states in a space where decentralised governance has prevailed until now. Carme Colomina, meanwhile, takes a deep dive into the issue of information integrity, starting from the premise that truthful information is a public good protected by international law. She alerts readers that disinformation and hate speech directed at certain collectives have a negative impact on every area of development; and that this warrants a framework of accountability and responsibility for the platforms and agencies involved.

The following chapter, by Anna Ayuso and Waldo Swart, analyses the secretary-general's initiative to include a declaration on coming generations as an annex to the Pact for the Future. The declaration seeks to address the need to promote a long-term view that considers the effects that present

decisions will have on future generations. To this end, the authors signal the obligation to foster participatory processes that include younger generations in negotiation procedures and to incorporate a principle of intergenerational justice that tackles the fight against current inequalities. Anticipation, transparency, participation and innovation are also front and centre in Cristina Gallach's chapter on institutional reform of the United Nations. She notes that to be able to act in a timely and effective manner requires strengthening capacities but also a change in the institutional culture and the incorporation of technical innovation tools.

The last chapter, by Ricardo Martinez, examines the role of cities in global governance as agents of change and innovation to achieve the SDG targets. Despite the difficulties cities encounter when it comes to taking part in intergovernmental negotiations, they have succeeded in including an urban dimension in the Pact for the Future. But it is far from commensurate with their importance in terms of population and economic, social and cultural output worldwide.

Most of the authors acknowledge it will not be possible to reach global agreements in every area mentioned. But the ambition and scope of the debates can lay the groundwork for a future governance that is more suited to the challenges and level of complexity and uncertainty of the international context.

REFORM OF THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH

The United Nations has put forward ambitious proposals to reform global economic governance ahead of the Summit of the Future, but in the current climate of geopolitical rivalry and strategic competition many of them are unlikely to achieve the required consensus. Reforms that are seen as the relinquishment of a privilege on the part of some powers to the benefit of others will be more limited, though those aimed at improving debt management and financing for development do appear attainable.



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In the summer of 1944, in a village north of New York called Bretton Woods, delegations from 44 countries gathered for the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference to lay the foundations of the future international financial architecture. The goal was to foster open markets, temper economic nationalism and promote the reconstruction of economies after the Second World War, although the new design of economic governance gave the allied industrialised countries control over the system and the production structures. Fixed exchange rates against the US dollar and gold were introduced, and the United States became the biggest shareholder (with **power of veto**) in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), newly created institutions whose chiefs since then have always been from the US and Europe, respectively.

The system has evolved over the last 80 years, but the changes have been *ad hoc*, in response to economic and political crises and made largely to suit the needs of the big Western powers. A clear example of that came in 1971 when the United States chose to leave the gold standard and change the international monetary system unilaterally in order to fund the Vietnam war. But the changes introduced in recent decades

were not designed to adapt economic and financial governance to a post-colonial, globalised world that has 149 more nations than when the Bretton Woods institutions were created.

Today, the expression “international financial architecture” refers to the current set of financial frameworks, regulations, institutions and markets that safeguard the stability and operation of global monetary and financial systems. Apart from the original institutions like the IMF or the World Bank, the actors that make up this architecture today include public financial

THE BRETTON WOODS SYSTEM HAS EVOLVED OVER THE LAST 80 YEARS, BUT THE CHANGES HAVE BEEN AD HOC, IN RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISES AND MADE LARGELY TO SUIT THE NEEDS OF THE BIG WESTERN POWERS.

institutions such as development banks; private financial regulation bodies like the Basilea Committee on Banking Supervision; informal groups of norm-setters, such as the G7 or the G20; formal but non-universal norm-setting bodies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); groups of sovereign debt creditors such as the Paris Club, or the United Nations itself.

All these institutions, however, have something in common: they lack effective representation of developing countries. And global coordination as it stands clearly does

not suffice to promote investment and sustainable development, remove inequality and systemic risk, or support the 2030 Agenda. In the words of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, “the global financial architecture is outdated, dysfunctional and unjust, incapable of adapting to the multipolar world of the 21st century”. To meet this challenge, a United Nations policy brief has put forward a series of reforms for adoption at the [Summit of the Future](#), to be held in September 2024.

Proposals to enhance legitimacy and transparency

For the Global South, which is represented at the United Nations by the Group of 77 (G77), the priority in the reform of the financial architecture must be to adjust the voting power and the governance structures in the international financial institutions (IFIs) in order to broaden developing countries’ effective participation in decision-making processes and open up their access to resources (Pedroso Cuenca, 2023). This demand, which is directed at the World Bank and the IMF in particular, already featured in the [Monterrey Consensus](#) in 2002 and is Target 10.6 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in the 2030 Agenda. There has been little progress in this area, however (Martens, 2023).

Some scholars think it is near impossible for the United States to allow its share of votes in the IMF to drop below 15% and thus lose its veto power, because it would be seen as a concession that favours China and the agreement would have to be ratified by US Congress. The countries from the Global North are more interested in broadening the organisations' mandate for the provision of global public goods such as the fight against climate change or pandemics. It is a proposal that the Global South eyes with suspicion, fearing it will divert development financing funds or result in new conditions on accessing them.

The summit policy brief also underscores the need for greater regulation of the global financial markets. Namely it states that the most pressing matter is to tackle the non-bank financial sector, which currently accounts for over 50% of total global financial assets yet acts outside the most stringent banking regulations. It proposes applying the principle of "same activity, same risk, same rules" to address risks to the stability and integrity of the financial system, as well as speeding up and stepping up efforts to adapt the financial markets to the SDGs.

THE CREDITOR STATES IN THE GLOBAL NORTH ARE AWARE OF THE NEED TO TACKLE THE DEBT PROBLEM BUT FEEL NO URGENCY TO DO SO BECAUSE THIS CRISIS MAINLY AFFECTS COUNTRIES WITH WHICH THEY HAVE VERY LIMITED TRADE AND FINANCIAL TIES.

While it is a commendable goal, analysis of the concrete proposals reveals the difficulties in putting them into effect. Because the question is this: does the United Nations have the mandate to tell the IFIs how they should be run? For this proposal to come to fruition requires the United Nations and these institutions to coordinate and there would have to be a consensus among the main actors involved. In this case, the discrepancies are not so much between the Global North and Global South, but rather among the countries of the Global North, who have notable differences over how to regulate capitalism.

Proposals to increase countries' resources

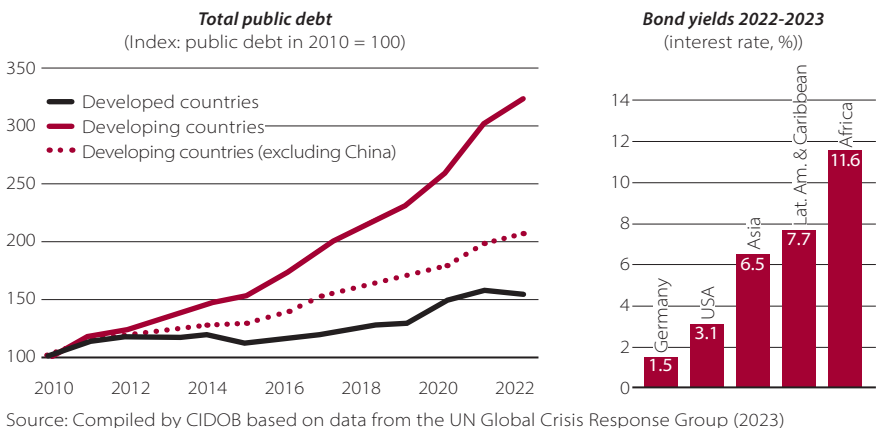
The second priority for the G77 countries is to tackle the reform of the financial safety nets that come into play in the event of a crisis. The IMF has a central role here as a lender of last resort through its special drawing rights (SDRs), which allow countries access to unconditional liquidity. If a global crisis strikes, the IMF allocates new rights to countries in proportion to their quotas in the institution. This means that until 2009 over a fifth of IMF member countries had never received an SDR

allocation and that, in 2021, in the biggest issuance in history in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, developing countries only received around a third of that liquidity; the main beneficiaries were the richest countries (United Nations, 2023: 21).

Given these circumstances, the Summit of the Future policy brief sides with the G77 in its call for SDRs to be issued automatically in the event of exogenous shocks, and for allocations to be based on a country's needs, not its quotas in the IMF. In order to avert countries' rejection of increases in their contributions to the IMF, it makes the case for selling part of the institution's gold reserves. Valued at historical cost, they could generate \$175bn in realised gains.

Third, the G77 urges tackling the management of external debt. Debt service (repayment of the principal and interest) is at record levels as a result of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the increase in interest rates (see Figure 1). What is more, developing countries now depend more on private creditors, such as investment funds, and non-Western official bilateral creditors, like China. This has helped to drive up the cost of borrowing and make debt restructuring more complex.

Figure 1. The increase in debt and its cost has been much more pronounced for developing countries



So far, multilateral responses to debt problems such as the [Debt Service Suspension Initiative](#) or the [Common Framework for Debt Treatments](#), have proven insufficient. Given this, the summit policy brief proposes,

for one thing, lowering debt-related risks through measures such as the creation of sovereign debt markets that support the SDGs and, for another, reforming current debt restructuring processes.

The creditor states in the Global North are aware of the need to tackle the debt problem but feel no urgency to do so because this crisis mainly affects countries with which they have very limited trade and financial ties; what are judged to be “countries that pose no systemic risk” (those that do not matter). In addition, they fear that restructuring the debt will make it easier for these countries to meet their debt obligations to China, and they reject extending the renegotiating framework to middle income countries because of the costs involved. China, for its part, has no wish to see its debt play a subordinate role to that of the Paris Club and is more inclined to renew loans than undertake a restructuring.

Fourth, the G77 has spoken in the United Nations to make an urgent call to recapitalise the multilateral development banks and attract private capital (**blended finance**) in order to improve borrowing conditions for nations of the Global South and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. These proposals are very much in line with those the United Nations has made for the Summit of the Future, where the aim is to promote changes in the multilateral development banks so that they lend at least \$500bn a year, double the current amount.¹

Last, but no less important, is the issue of reforming the global tax architecture. Illicit financial flows cause losses close to **\$500bn** a year, mostly due to tax evasion and avoidance by multinationals. This has a disproportionate effect on developing countries given their greater reliance on corporate income tax.

After years of vagueness, the need to finance increased spending arising from the pandemic prompted **140 countries** to reach an OECD-led **landmark agreement** in 2021 to ensure multinationals pay more tax. But the initiative has been heavily criticised on account of the **considerable delays in implementing it**, its lack of transparency and because the countries of the Global South were left on the sidelines when devising the measures. That was why the African bloc in the United Nations **proposed** creating a broad binding framework on international taxation within the organisation, and not only focused on taxing multinationals.

1. For more details, see the paper by José Antonio Alonso in this volume.

Significantly, **the Global North** voted in bloc against the resolution, which passed with the support of 125 countries from the Global South.

The aim at the Summit of the Future is to push for (i) simplified global tax rules, as developing countries prefer straightforward approaches; (ii) a higher global minimum corporate income tax rate, and (iii) the creation of non-reciprocal tax information exchange mechanisms to benefit developing countries. Currently, the European Union (EU) only supports United Nations rulings on tax issues being non-binding, allowing them to protect **tax havens** (most of which are in Europe) and control over their tax regimes.

Outlook

The search for the consensus required to underpin the decisions may dilute the Summit of the Future's ambition and scope, all the more so in an international climate of geostrategic competition and heightened political polarisation. In the areas where there is a greater divergence of interests between the Global North and Global South, such as those related to governance, tax reform or non-bank regulation, the agreements may be more limited, while it is more likely there will be meaningful progress in those where the interests of the major powers converge.

In any case, it is hard to change the development paradigm without tackling a reform of the rules of global commerce, their governance (the cause of the current deadlock in the World Trade Organisation, WTO) or the developing countries' unequal access to technology and property rights, all of which are demands of the Global South that have been left out of the summit's policy brief.

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TOWARDS A NEW FINANCING FOR DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

If the 2030 Agenda is to be achieved, new resources must be mobilised to serve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Summit of the Future 2024 and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025 present an opportunity to do that. It is a matter of identifying underutilised resources, closing channels through which developing countries leak funds and organising strategic areas for sustainable development. All this falls within the necessary reform of the financing for development architecture.



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Reform is a must

We are living through a particularly turbulent time on the global stage. Multiple crises (health, economic, environmental, humanitarian) happening at once have increased the severity of the challenges we must face. Meanwhile, the international atmosphere is becoming increasingly strained due to tensions between old and emerging powers and the rise of illiberal regimes little inclined to engage in international cooperation. Many challenges require a coordinated international response, yet at the same time such a response is looking increasingly unlikely in an environment where there are rising voices opposed to the multilateral

route as a means of tackling common problems. It is in this complex and contradictory international context that the necessary overhaul of the financing for development system will have to be undertaken.

The task looks unavoidable. We are two-thirds of the way down the road now, but the figures show that if we continue as we are, the goals of the

**REACHING THE SDGs
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MORE RESOURCES,
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2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are unlikely to be reached. Righting the course to get countries to quickly converge towards the goals requires mobilising more resources than committed so far and enlisting new actors, capabilities and instruments. We need changes in the rules and structures of the international financial architecture, then. There are some valuable precedents for such a task. These include the agreements resulting from the first and third editions of the International Conference on Financing for Development: the Monterrey Consensus (2002) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (2015). They also include the more visionary [proposal](#) drawn up in 2009

by the Commission of Experts on Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System (also known as the Stiglitz Commission) (United Nations, 2009).

There are two opportunities to make strides in this area coming up. The first is the Summit of the Future to be held in September 2024, whose agenda includes an item on the issue.¹ A second and more comprehensive opportunity is the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, which will be held in Spain in 2025. Both events must be leveraged to lay the foundations of a financing for development system capable of realising the SDGs, one that fosters a fairer distribution of global development opportunities.

The “holistic approach” announced in Addis Ababa should be adopted as the springboard for deploying the full gamut of financial resources available (public and private, concessional and market-based) in the service of sustainable development. There should also be agreement on the need to mobilise private resources to serve sustainable development,

1. See the paper by Víctor Burguete in this volume.

using the pulling power of public funds to draw them in through blended finance, venture capital funds or de-risking mechanisms, among other tools. With respect to the spirit of Addis Ababa, today it pays to be more critical regarding the prospects attributed to that mobilisation of private resources as a mechanism for closing the financial gap that the SDGs bring. The most reliable estimates put this component at around \$50bn a year (OECD, 2023); not a negligible amount, but it falls well short of securing the transition **from billions to trillions** (World Bank Group, 2015) that the new agenda was calling for. To avoid frustration, expectations must be more realistic.

Instead, and without relinquishing the aim of mobilising private resources, this time more effort should be devoted to mapping the potential to boost development of hitherto little explored (if at all) public resources. More precisely, it is matter of triggering a double movement. First, identifying already available (or easily available) resources that could support countries in their transition towards sustainable development and, at the same time, closing the channels through which those same countries leak resources that could be useful for financing their own strategies.

Maximise sources, limit losses

An initial goal should be to trigger resource mobilisation mechanisms that are currently underused. Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), an important source of liquidity in the global economy created by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the late 1960s, are a case in point. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown that in times of crisis it is important for countries to have access to a source of international liquidity provision. While they were created with that purpose in mind, the effectiveness of the SDRs have fallen well short of their potential for three reasons: i) because issuances have been sporadic (five throughout history, the last coming in 2021); ii) because their distribution is determined in proportion to an IMF member country's quota, meaning most of the resources go to those who least need them, and iii) because the use of these funds has been highly restricted in international operations. These three obstacles should be removed. This liquid asset needs to be increased through sequential issuances, in line with the growth path of the global economy. And allocations must be decoupled from country quotas to ensure that the resources are available to those who most need them. Lastly, if the most recent issuance envisaged the possibility of the resources being used to cover the liquidity needs dictated by the pandemic, there is no reason why in the future those resources cannot be allocated to other international public goods that impact development.

Another underutilised resource provision mechanism is that of the multilateral development banks. Their diminishing weight in international financing is an illustration of the gradual dissociation of the business model with which these institutions were founded from the type of financing that countries require today. Multilateral banks are currently seen as under capitalised, overly bureaucratic, unimaginative institutions with little tolerance of risk. It is no surprise,

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CANNOT STAND BY AS DONORS REPEATEDLY FAIL TO HONOUR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE COMMITMENTS ONE AFTER ANOTHER.

then, that countries seek alternative financing mechanisms, be it in the private capital markets or among new suppliers (institutional investment funds or sovereign providers like China). Yet multilateral banks are more necessary than ever, given the levels of investment required for the green and digital transitions. For these institutions to perform their function, however, they would need to be better capitalised and overhaul their mandates and business models.

Estimates suggest that the funds mobilised by these institutions could double if they undertook the proposed reforms (see, for example, Lee *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, more cooperation should be encouraged between the multilateral banks and countries' development finance bodies (banks or not), which form a dense network of institutions with enormous potential.

Apart from putting partially untapped mechanisms to use, it is also necessary to block those that deprive developing countries of resources. First among them is the global tax system, which is plagued with regulatory gaps and shady areas as there is little connection between spaces of revenue generation and those of tax collection. Certain progress has been made in the framework of the "Base erosion and profit shifting" (BEPS) initiative, a G20 and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) project relating to the taxation of multinational enterprises. Developing countries, however, think (and rightly so) that this is insufficient progress, that the proposed distribution of what is collected is unbalanced and, above all, the body chosen for the agreements (the OECD) is unrepresentative. That is why in November 2023, embracing an African initiative, the United Nations decided to take on a more active role in the matter, overcoming the resistance of the developed countries. The result is the Platform for Collaboration on Tax, an initiative comprising the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD.

The absence of an effective and fair mechanism for dealing with sovereign debt crises is another major way developing countries lose resources. It is an important issue, because as the IMF and UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) point out the number of countries facing financial stress has grown in the last decade (UNCTAD, 2024). The situation is likely not as serious as it was in the 1980s, but it is trickier to address the problems of over-indebtedness now. Official debt has lost ground to private debt and new actors (institutional funds and countries such as China) have emerged as major creditors, rendering previous mechanisms of concerted crisis management (like the Paris Club) less operative. It is necessary, then, to seek new institutional responses for a quick, efficient and fair exit from such situations. Some steps have been taken through the **Common Framework for Debt Treatments beyond the Debt Service Suspension Initiative**, promoted by the G20 and the Paris Club. But again, it is a limited initiative, one which excludes middle income countries. Moreover, if this initiative were to be extended, it would be necessary to move towards a statutory response to sovereign debt crises by establishing an inclusive and representative arbitration authority that fosters coordination among creditors and balance between the conflicting interests.

Strengthening global governance

Advances in tax cooperation have shown that it is not enough to find technical solutions to problems; it is also important that inclusive and representative institutions promote such agreements. A good deal of global economic governance rests on structures that reflect a world that no longer exists. Meanwhile, emerging actors choose to operate outside these structures because they consider them ineffective and unrepresentative. Part of the reform effort must be devoted to laying the foundations of a global economic governance that is not only more efficient but also more inclusive.

Progress must also be made on clearing up the muddled landscape of certain areas of international finance. Climate finance is one example. There is an imbalance between the funds allocated to mitigation (where provision is greater) and those geared towards adaptation or biodiversity protection, despite the fact that the latter funds are crucial for the poorest countries. Donor activism, moreover, has given risen to a dense architecture of funds and initiatives with overlapping mandates. This impairs overall effectiveness and makes it harder for countries with fewer capabilities to access resources. To make matters worse, there is neither proper identification of resources that are strictly for climate purposes, nor is there appropriate assessment of how much of the funds are additional, resulting in a clear underfunding of this area.

Reforms are also necessary in the field of development cooperation. It can no longer remain anchored to a metric – Official Development Assistance (ODA) – and an international body – the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) – that leave out a part of the system, such as South-South and triangular cooperation. At the same time, the international community cannot stand by as donors repeatedly fail to honour international assistance commitments one after another. Some sort of mechanism to ensure agreements are binding must be put in place. And it is also important to move towards exploring complementary avenues of resources via global levies on activities that generate global public ills (such as taxes on carbon emissions, financial transactions or international travel).

While they may complex to operate, none of the proposals set out above is unworkable. The important thing is that there is the political will to move forward with them. The Global South has backed many, which already featured in the Stiglitz Commission or in the more recent **Bridgetown Initiative**. Europe and the United States must now comprehend that there is little point in maintaining control over institutions that are increasingly inoperative. It seems better to relinquish that privilege and lay the foundations for sharing the organisation of tomorrow’s world.

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THE MYTH OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY AND THE REFORM OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Collective security and the reform of the United Nations Security Council will be a key issue at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, given the body's crisis of legitimacy brought on by its inability to react to conflicts such as the aggression against Ukraine and the war in Palestine. The summit provides a window of opportunity resulting from shifts in geopolitical competition, the lobbying power of the General Assembly and the growing importance of the countries of the Global South, one which requires a pragmatic and multistage approach.



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The latest phase of the reform of the United Nations' peace and security pillar began in 2015, when a group of experts proposed speaking of *sustaining* peace rather than *building* peace. It sprang from the many de facto changes, debates and proposals after the end of the Cold War derived from what has been called the "liberal peace consensus", a concept that came out of the first and only Security Council meeting at the level of heads of state and government, in January 1992, and the "[An Agenda for Peace](#)" report. I shall limit myself in this paper to collective security and the reform of the Security Council.

To provide some context, we will begin with what happened between 2016 (when the Security Council and General Assembly adopted resolutions on building and sustaining peace) and January 2018 (when the secretary-general released a [report](#) on the subject). In the interim, in 2017, the Security Council was extremely busy: 296 formal meetings, 61 resolutions, 27 presidential statements and 93 press statements. It was also extremely ineffective, with a failure to act in many crises and conflicts that posed serious threats to peace and security, and six vetoes: five from Russia (accompanied by China

in one case) and one from the United States. The former were related to the conflict in Syria and the latter to Israel, and Jerusalem's status as its capital. Once again, there was a flood of invective among Council members and criticism from the other UN members and public opinion over the Council's inability to provide peace or security.

INTERPRETING THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL'S NATURE, PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE AS A PROTECTOR OF STATES AGAINST AGGRESSION IS A MYTH THAT ONLY LEADS TO MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

Since then – particularly after Russia's aggression and invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Hamas attack of October 7th, 2023, and the subsequent, ongoing Israeli response – things have only gotten worse, to the point of triggering a crisis of legitimacy and confidence in the United Nations.

Criticism of and possible solutions to the situation will be key issues at the summit in September, which is why we shall begin by dispelling a myth and clarifying the scope for reform of the Council.

The United Nations myth of collective security

The idea stems from the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919), primarily its preamble and Articles 10 and 16, which guaranteed and committed its members to preserve against external aggression the political independence and territorial integrity of all. There were subsequent developments, such as the Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes (1924) and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928). But the idea stalled in the 1930s in cases like Japan's occupation of Manchuria (1931) and Italy's invasion and subsequent annexation of Ethiopia (1935).

The issue was back on the table in the meetings between the major powers to establish the post-war international order, prior to the formal creation of the United Nations. They agreed to establish five permanent members of the Security Council and assign them a role as police officers of the new international system. They also agreed to confer on the Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, including veto power for the five permanent members. That combined with the prohibition of the use of force, except in (individual or collective) self-defence and in cases deriving from Security Council rulings under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. In addition, the charter provides for measures for the peaceful settlement of disputes and a relevant role for regional security bodies.

That system has often been portrayed as a mechanism of collective security, with the Security Council as a protector of states against any aggression and almost as a supranational entity. Unfortunately, this is a myth and interpreting the Council's nature, purpose and structure in this way only leads to misunderstandings. Its design, agreed before the San Francisco Conference, is akin to the Concert of Europe that emerged from the Congress of Vienna (1815). It was conceived as a forum through which the major powers would be able to coordinate policies and manage the international system collectively. They were therefore incentivised with a permanent seat and right of veto, obliging them to seek consensus to reach decisions, but which also allowed them to block decisions they considered contrary to their interests. Put in terms of Roman law, the veto guaranteed (and still guarantees) those five members unrestricted power over the law: *princeps legibus solutus*.

**REFORM OF THE
SECURITY COUNCIL
WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE
WITHOUT TAKING INTO
CONSIDERATION THE
BASIC INTERESTS OF
ITS FIVE PERMANENT
MEMBERS.**

The situation described above is clearly unequal and unfair, and it would be good to have a real collective security mechanism. But we should not confuse desire with reality. Facing the facts, however, does not mean we have to resign ourselves to them from a moral standpoint. Combining the two things, we can draw a lesson for the agenda of the Summit of the Future and for the times ahead, focusing on improving future prospects. Lobbying to reform the Council's composition, structure and functioning necessarily involves accepting that any attempt to improve global governance, to correct the growing discredit of the United Nations, to bolster order in the international system and the effectiveness of the rules governing it, must start from the premise reflected in the United Nations Charter. Namely, any process of reform will be impossible without taking into consideration the basic interests of the five permanent members.

It is necessary, then, to come up with mechanisms and proposals that might be appealing to them and, perhaps, ways of sometimes making decisions without them. Not forgetting, in any case, that the legitimacy and health of the Council are seriously debilitated. There is, nevertheless, a window of opportunity resulting from changes in the positions of the permanent members, the geopolitical competition underway, the increased lobbying power of the General Assembly and the growing importance of the countries of the Global South.

Reform of the Security Council

There has been a great deal of talk about the subject for years, but very little has been achieved. In late 1992, the General Assembly created a working group to seek equitable representation on the Council. Thirty years on, the group continues to meet, but to no effect. In October 2008, the United Nations formally authorised intergovernmental negotiations to seek that equitable representation and increase the number of Council members. In 2024 there are still no results, not least because the member states have never agreed to negotiate on the basis of a draft working text.

Ukraine and Gaza have raised the pressure. In his address to the General Assembly in September 2022, US President Joe Biden reiterated his longstanding support for increasing the number of permanent and non-permanent members. And he broke new ground by speaking about permanent seats for countries from Africa and Latin America.

THERE IS A HUGE DEFICIT OF REPRESENTATION OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH, DESPITE THE FACT THAT MOST OF THE PEACE OPERATIONS THE COUNCIL AUTHORISES TAKE PLACE THERE.

There is a consensus that not all states that deserve to be on the Council are there, and some that are there might not deserve to be; that the Western presence is overstated; that it fails to represent the security needs of many of the world's countries; and that the veto system often blocks the decision-making process. There is no permanent seat for Africa

or Latin America and only one for Asia. And there is a glaring inconsistency between the huge deficit of representation of the Global South and the fact that most of the peace operations the Council authorises take place there.

In a nutshell, people are agreed that the number of permanent and non-permanent members must increase in search of more equitable representation. The discrepancies arise over the candidates and whether they would also have the right of veto. To foster rotation among non-permanent members from middle and emerging powers, a "semipermanent member" status has even been suggested.

There are several mooted candidates: Brazil and Mexico for Latin America; Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa in the case of Africa; India, Indonesia or Japan for Asia, as well as European countries such as Germany, Poland or Ukraine. These candidacies are often based on population and GDP. Leaving aside the veto issue for the moment, there is, in any case, real

tension between representation and effectiveness. An expansion to 20-25 members would boost the Council's legitimacy and authority, but it would lower its effectiveness and efficiency. Its initial design, skewed in favour of the victorious big powers, pursued effective problem management.

The reform of the Council is about values and about power. Its composition has normative value and material implications for the world order. Any alteration in the Council (inevitable in the medium term) will alter the balance of power, give certain national interests precedence over others and influence the way we understand and apply the notion of "security". It is contentious issue, and it will trigger resistance and subsequent impacts: there is no action without a reaction. Both the states and the people and groups interested in exerting influence should be flexible and take an approach based on clear criteria that ensures procedural transparency and the possibility of making changes gradually, without waiting decades.

GIVEN THE EFFORTS THAT COUNTRIES FROM THE SOUTH ARE PUTTING INTO THE ISSUE, FRUSTRATION ARISING FROM THE LACK OF PROGRESS WOULD ALSO HAVE HARMFUL EFFECTS ON THE UNITED NATIONS.

That assumes dispensing with the previously mentioned myth of the Security Council as a collective security mechanism. While we can morally reject an unjust reality, it is important to approach the reform not only from the viewpoints of justice and desirability, but also from one of feasibility. The paving stones of the Council are too tough to break and reach the beach, to paraphrase a slogan from May 1968.

As for putting an end to the right of veto, it is a pipe dream in the short term, even if it may be alluring to put the issue on the table. Nor is it a certainty that new permanent members will all and always have the right of veto. It would be better to focus not on eliminating it but on limiting its use through different types of agreements, some of them on ways of working. France and the United Kingdom, for example, are known to have had little recourse to the veto since the Cold War. France put forward an interesting proposal in 2015: procedurally restrict the use of the veto in situations of mass atrocities. There is also scope for using the General Assembly for security matters when there is deadlock on the Council, a path that was first opened during the Korean War and which was used recently for the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

It is also useful to hone the working methods, which are still governed by the rules of procedure of 1982 and a series of *ad hoc* practices. Reforming

the working methods requires no amendment of the charter or ratification by the member states, which makes it viable. Proposals from the **Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group** of 22 countries have existed for some time, some of which are now in use. Suggestions range from including non-Council members in discussions to more reporting on briefings and informal consultations or new meeting formats, such as the **“Arria formula”** in which the Venezuelan ambassador invited a Bosnian priest to testify before the Council during a break for coffee.

Lastly, we shall turn our attention to the four groups that take quite irreconcilable positions on reform:

- The first group comprises the five permanent members, each with their own stance, although they all agree on maintaining their right of veto and trying to restrict the right of prospective new members.
- The second group is the G4 coalition, consisting of the four main contenders for permanent membership (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan). They seek the same status as the five current members, although they are fairly flexible on the right of veto, and they also champion Africa having two permanent seats.
- The third one is the **“Uniting for Consensus”** group, led by the regional rivals of the G4 (including Argentina, Mexico, Italy, Poland, Pakistan, South Korea and Turkey). They call for increasing the number of non-permanent members from ten to 20, arguing that instead of reinforcing the hierarchy of the major powers we would see a more globally representative and equitable Council.
- The fourth bloc is formed by the African Union. Its 54 members explicitly back what is known as the **“Ezulwini Consensus”**, which calls for two permanent seats with full veto rights for the region, as well as at least a further three non-permanent seats.

Reform of the Council faces crucial challenges, yet despite recent discredit and ineffectiveness it remains an indispensable stabilising force and forms the backbone of the rules-based international order. And in spite of the deterioration of this order, there is no short-term prospect of replacing its role under the rules as they stand in the charter. A failed update of its composition and operating rules may undermine that role even more than the habitual deadlock of recent years. And the absence of a true collective security mechanism and a lack of confidence in the Council will encourage the expansion, reinforcement or creation of new

collective defence bodies, a disturbing development in a climate of deep militarisation and widespread rearmament.

In addition, given the efforts that countries from the South are putting into the issue, frustration arising from the lack of progress would also have harmful effects on the United Nations. In any event, we cannot rule out the scenario of a deterioration of the current *status quo*. Hence the two final suggestions on how to pursue those feasible changes and reforms. The first: to work from a draft text structured to prompt negotiation and bargaining over the content of the reform. That would require consensus between the African Union and the G4 and certain collaboration on the part of some of the current permanent members, though this appears difficult in the cases of China, the United States and Russia. The second suggestion also involves a change of position on the part of the G4, with the group opting for a two-stage reform. It would mean dropping the insistence on securing permanent seats in this first stage and advocating semipermanent positions. It is, however, doubtful that India under Narendra Modi's government is ready to accept such a relinquishment at present.

The summit, then, comes at a time of uncertainty. All the same, reform of the Security Council is a *sine qua non* of enhancing the building and sustainment of peace, with diagnoses of necessary changes in peace operations that have been put off since the [Brahimi Report](#) of 2000. It would be wise to choose a pragmatic approach today, taking Dag Hammarskjöld's phrase as the principle for establishing a road map: "The United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell".

**PEACEBUILDING:
HUMAN RIGHTS,
DEVELOPMENT,
DISARMAMENT
AND SECURITY**

Peacebuilding, a driving force in the creation of the United Nations, is at a critical juncture. It is crucial that the way states respond to this situation does not neglect the environmental, social and human rights challenges we face. Otherwise, levels of security and peace will fall.



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One of the five points that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has put forward to structure discussions at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 is devoted exclusively to international peace and security. This is to some extent logical: the United Nations came into being as a collective response to channel the desire to maintain peace in the face of the atrocities occurring in the 20th century (the Holocaust, the Second World War, the atomic bomb). But its prominence in the document is also a reflection of the enormous challenges to security we must meet and of the precariousness of peace at the present time. It is a warning sign and a wake-up call, too. Because without peace the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the climate agenda and the guarantee of human rights are at even greater risk.

After the end of the Cold War and a number of years when the reinforcement of the international system and a drop in armed conflicts suggested a less belligerent, more rules- and consensus-based world was on the horizon, war is back again. And it is taking a heavy toll on the international system, human rights and security. The facts are clear: we face an era of more armed conflicts, with a high number of deaths on account of those conflicts and many more refugees and displaced persons

fleeing war. In addition, all the vectors that form an integral part of the progress and possibility of peace (human rights, democracy, sustainable development, etc) are also in a critical state. Which is why it is essential to react, propose concrete steps forward and demand commitment and engagement from governments.

Rights at a crossroads

The number of democratic countries is shrinking, while authoritarianism is on the rise. According to the *Democracy Index* compiled by *The Economist* since 2006, the years 2022 and 2023 saw the lowest levels of democratic countries (full or hybrid) and the highest numbers of authoritarian regimes. Similarly, the *V-Dem Democracy Report 2024* found that the advances in

THE BEST TOOL TO PREVENT ARMED CONFLICTS IS NOT TO DISMANTLE THE HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM BUT RATHER TO STRENGTHEN IT.

global levels of democracy in the last 35 years have evaporated: several countries are shifting from democracy to dictatorship and 71% of the world's population live in autocracies. Not only is authoritarianism gaining ground, it is also rated more highly. According to an *Open Society Barometer from 2023*, 42% of people under 36 across the world think that a military dictatorship is the best political regime. The

crisis of legitimacy and credibility that many democratic governments are suffering, the inability to find answers to the many social and economic problems besetting people, or the growing dissatisfaction and fear among a good part of citizens are certainly not helping to strengthen democracies.

But we are not only facing a world with more authoritarianism. We can also see how the quality of democracy is becoming more precarious and fragile in democratic countries and how numerous human rights violations are being normalised and mainstreamed. It is significant that a couple of decades ago, in the expectation (and confidence) that civil and political rights appeared to be firmly embedded around us, human rights organisations considered beginning to pursue demands in the area of social and economic rights. Yet precisely in the last two decades there has been a notable decline in the most fundamental human rights (freedom of expression, of assembly, of demonstration, etc). As Amnesty International alerted in relation to its recent *report on the state of human rights in the world*, "powerful states cast humanity into an era devoid of international rule of law, with civilians paying the highest price".

Powers and other states talk on human rights; not in a committed manner but rather using them as a political weapon in a disruptive and polarised

environment divided into blocs. Some governments call for and demand the implementation of UN recommendations or International Court of Justice rulings or regulations when it falls to adversaries or enemies to act. But they ignore them, and even disparage or attack them, when it concerns action of their own or that of friendly or allied countries and powers. Reactions in relation to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, for instance, are a prime and shameful example. It is so evident that the United Nations secretary-general himself calls it for what it is: he decries the **double standards** that inhibit the enforceability of the global system's rules and undermine confidence in it. And he recalls that the growing distrust between the Global North and Global South poses a risk to collective security.

As lucidly pointed out in the UN's **New Agenda for Peace** in 2023, a policy brief drafted by the secretary-general as part of the **Our Common Agenda** proposal that is to serve to inspire the content of the Summit of the Future, the best tool to prevent armed conflicts is not to dismantle the human rights system but rather to strengthen it. Similarly, the **draft** of the summit's Pact for the Future and the secretary-general's recommendations make it clear there is an imperative need to incorporate the gender dimension: to take account of the specific impact of violence on women, as well as to enhance and channel the transformative and preventive capital that the empowerment of women and their greater institutional, public and social presence (in diplomatic negotiations and peace processes too) would bring to the advancement and the guarantee of peace.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE MECHANISMS TO CONTROL AND PREVENT THE TRADE IN WEAPONS, AND THE LACK OF INSTRUMENTS AND COMMITMENT ON THE PART OF STATES, FACILITATE A PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS THAT FEEDS ARMED VIOLENCE IN WARS, SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND ORGANISED CRIME.

Arms and (in)security

There is a simplistic idea that associates more weapons with more security, but the evidence keeps telling us otherwise. Two decades of increasing military expenditure, and a booming arms trade, offer a bleak picture in terms of collective, regional and internal security. In the second half of the 20th century, the international system was preoccupied with the regulation and prohibition of weapons of mass destruction (understandably so, given the disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). At the end of the century, however, with the Cold War over and in the conviction that many conflicts were being fought with small arms and light weapons, attention turned to

stopping the growing epidemic of deaths caused by armed violence and its lack of regional and global regulation.

Right now, we must attend to both risks, as stated in the [draft](#) of the Pact for the Future. The shortcomings of the mechanisms to control and prevent the trade in weapons for want of instruments and commitment on the part of states regarding them facilitate a proliferation of small arms and light weapons that feeds armed violence in wars, social conflicts and organised crime. Meanwhile, the realisation that the nuclear threat is not a thing of

THE REMILITARISATION DYNAMICS IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES, AND WHICH FEED OFF ONE ANOTHER, LEAD TO SERIOUS NEGLECT OF THE HUGE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES WE FACE.

the past but wholly current has set alarm bells ringing. Together, the nine countries in possession of nuclear weapons (five official ones, according to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France – and four unofficial ones – Pakistan, India, Israel and North Korea) have an arsenal of over 12,000 atomic bombs at their disposal. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in its [Yearbook 2024](#), these nine countries continued to modernise their arsenals and some of them deployed new nuclear weapons or nuclear-capable systems. What is most striking, however, is that the number of operational nuclear warheads (deployed on missiles and launch systems) has increased.

States have pivoted significantly against this backdrop of crisis and unease. Rather than look to the international system (the generation of mechanisms of trust and collective security) they are looking inward again, pursuing their geostrategic ambitions (and fears), placing deterrence capability and, in the case of the nuclear powers, nuclear deterrence, at the heart of their defence policies. The risk this shift poses is clear, as the dangers in terms of global security are intensifying. In fact, as the secretary-general said in his [Our Common Agenda](#) report, there were more arms control mechanisms during the Cold War than there are now. Apart from arms control, the draft Pact for the Future makes a clear commitment to disarmament and calls for work towards the effective universalisation of the various existing agreements, on both weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons. It is significant, however, that the secretary-general's report mentions the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), whereas the draft for the summit, which must be approved by the states, talks of "nuclear disarmament" but makes no explicit mention of the TPNW, surely so as not to inconvenience the powers and governments that actively and irresponsibly oppose the agreement.

Another common concern, and one that is covered extensively in the summit draft, is the capacity of new technologies to generate further threats to the security of people and communities. Various UN bodies have already raised the alarm about the proliferation of investment and research by several countries to equip themselves with “killer robots”.¹ But the challenges posed by cyberwarfare, the spread of drones and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in weapons systems cause even greater concern regarding their possible impacts on civilians, owing to the lack of effective regulation and gaps, and the difficulties when it comes to establishing accountability for their use, leading to the risk of greater impunity. All the same, it is important to highlight both the determination gathered in the draft to revitalise the role of the United Nations in promoting disarmament (it has certainly kept too low a profile in recent years) and the secretary-general’s proposal (mentioned in the [New Agenda for Peace](#)) to push for the Security Council to play a more active role in deterrence: not just the use but the threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Disregarded development, a necessary reaction

The establishment of the SDGs in 2015 set out modest measures and gradual advances towards an outlook of fair and sustainable development. While progress was tentative, it has been derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and other factors. The SDGs seem well out of reach. In fact, in 2023 a [report](#) by Guterres to the General Assembly on the progress towards the SDGs already mentioned that “many of the SDGs are moderately to severely off track”. The Summit of the Future revolves around the profound interdependence between human rights, sustainable development and peace. To a large extent, peace is the outcome of the satisfaction of human rights for all and of the capacity to overcome the climate crisis. And security, beyond a strictly military view, is founded on human beings and on guarantees of survival, freedom and dignity.

The [Our Common Agenda](#) report states that trust is a cornerstone of the collective security system. In the absence of trust, states fall back on the basic instinct of guaranteeing their own security, which, being reciprocal, creates more global insecurity. Moreover, the remilitarisation dynamics in which we find ourselves, and which feed off one another, lead to serious neglect of the huge social and environmental challenges we face. Which

1. Or lethal autonomous weapons.

is why the secretary-general's pledge to report to ensure that increased military expenditure does not come at the expense of meeting the SDGs is so important. The world is in flames, with peace in tatters, while vectors that are integral to the good health and building of peace are under heavy attack (international law), being pushed back (human rights) or disregarded (sustainable development). Action to remedy the situation is both necessary and urgent, because as the secretary-general points out in the [New Agenda for Peace](#), "what is at stake is not the future of the United Nations, but of our nations and humanity".

THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT AND A RESPONSIBLE, INCLUSIVE TRANSITION

The United Nations Global Digital Compact seeks to establish a worldwide consensus on the principles to underpin an open, free and secure digital future. The negotiations have exposed a divide between the nations that wish to continue with Internet governance in its present form and those that push for a more statist approach. That, along with the importance human rights should have in such an agreement, diminishes the prospect of progress towards global digital governance frameworks capable of rising to today's challenges.



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Shortly after taking up the post in 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres announced that global digital governance and cooperation would be a core component of his ambitious agenda to reform and strengthen the multilateral system. Following several rounds of consultations, the [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#) was released in 2020. It gathers the secretary-general's vision for how the international community can best exploit the opportunities that digital technologies offer and, at the same time, tackle the challenges they present. The secretary-general's idea to include a technological track in his [Our Common Agenda](#) report, leading to the approval of a Global Digital Compact (GDC), should be interpreted as part of this long haul commitment to placing the United Nations at the heart of global digital cooperation.

The Global Digital Compact, presented as an annex to the Pact for the Future to be approved in September 2024, seeks to establish a global consensus on the principles to underpin an open, free and secure digital future for all. It revolves around eight specific goals: 1) closing digital divides by guaranteeing connectivity and digital skills; 2) expanding and guaranteeing the

benefits of the digital economy; 3) avoiding Internet fragmentation and ensuring it remains inclusive, open, secure and shared; 4) improving data management and protection; 5) applying human rights in the digital sphere; 6) establishing digital commons as a public good; 7) moving towards enhanced levels of digital security and confidence to reinforce accountability mechanisms for discrimination and misleading content; 8) regulating artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

WHILE IT IS AN INTER-GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS WHICH, IT IS HOPED, WILL INVOLVE ALL MEMBER STATES, IT IS THE OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL THAT IS BEHIND THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT INITIATIVE.

It is worth noting that, unlike other digital cooperation processes in the UN system, the idea of establishing a GDC and the conceptualisation of its key pillars did not come from the member states. While it is an intergovernmental process which, it is hoped, will involve all UN member states, it is the Office of the Secretary-General that is behind it. The role of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology was created for that purpose in 2022. They perform the function of coordinating the Roadmap for Digital

Cooperation and, within this framework, moving towards approval of the Global Digital Compact in close consultation with the member states, the tech industry, civil society and other stakeholders.

Do we need more *multilateralism* for Internet governance?

It has always been said that the Internet is a system which, by design, is capable of withstanding the abuse of power. As a decentralised technology, it was supposed to be an open governance model based on the voluntary participation of multiple stakeholders (governments, the private sector, the tech community and civil society). A model that would guarantee that Internet grew and evolved out of open standards. And that has been the case over the last few decades. A single, highly decentralised governance model has taken root in which several organisations, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) or the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) oversee the Internet's technical architecture. This model limits direct state or multilateral intervention in the processes of developing Internet standards and protocols.

This is not to say that the United Nations has remained on the sidelines of Internet and digital governance, but it does mean that its participation has been more or less fragmentary. At the end of the 1990s, when the importance of digital technologies and the need for some sort of

international cooperation were beginning to become clear, the United Nations organised the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). After two rounds of negotiations, in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), the foundations and principles on which the future of the Internet should rest were established. The main WSIS outcome was the creation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which was to be the preferred (though non-binding) space for political dialogue, where governments, businesses, the tech community and civil society would meet periodically to discuss matters on an equal footing.

While this model has worked reasonably well, it has not been without controversy and disagreement. And, as with all models, there is room for improvement. Generally speaking, there is an enduring divide between a group of states that wish to continue with Internet governance in its current form, with strong participation of non-state actors, and those that push for a more statist approach, where government and intergovernmental bodies are the main players. This latter group maintains there is Western bias in most of the multistakeholder governance spaces, since the decision makers are largely actors from the Western private sector and tech communities. Consequently, while on paper forums such as the IGF seek to promote Internet interoperability, resilience and growth in a neutral manner, the standards and protocols presented often inherently reflect certain preferences for privacy, security and openness, in line with a liberal and democratic world view (Ringhof, 2023).

THERE IS AN ENDURING DIVIDE BETWEEN A GROUP OF STATES THAT WISH TO CONTINUE WITH INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN ITS CURRENT FORM, WITH STRONG PARTICIPATION OF NON-STATE ACTORS, AND THOSE THAT PUSH FOR A MORE STATIST APPROACH.

Tensions between the two models have become more evident in the last few years. The group of countries that would like a broader role for the state in digital management, including China, Russia and the Gulf states, have tried to weaken the multistakeholder model, promoting a multilateral intergovernmental governance instead. The strategy they have chosen is to try to transfer some of the functions these spaces perform to certain intergovernmental bodies, like the International Telecommunication Union (UTI), where the chances of garnering support are greater (Gjesvik and Schia, 2023). The Western states' response to date has been to reject such expansions, which are seen as a kind of "authoritarian multilateralism" (Raymond and Sherman, 2023), arguing that the multistakeholder model is the only one that can guarantee an open Internet governed according

to democratic principles. The UTI has traditionally been responsible for the development of telecommunication standards and infrastructures, but not Internet governance.

Given this, some have seen the Global Digital Compact as a dangerous movement towards recentralising Internet governance around the United Nations and a top-down bid to minimise the role of the tech community. While it may seem positive that the secretary-general should care about moving towards a more inclusive digital multilateralism, some states fear the GDC may spell the beginning of the end for the collaborative and multistakeholder model and, therefore, a concession to those more authoritarian states. This view holds that instead the United Nations should step up efforts to improve the current governance model to make it more efficient, inclusive and representative (Komaitis, 2023). Since the start of the process, what's more, questions have been raised about the choice of New York as the centre of negotiations rather than Geneva, which is where the most important UN digital governance bodies (like the ITU) are based.

This concern helps us to understand how some negotiations have developed. For example, the “**zero draft**” of the GDC proposed as many as five new structures or processes. Arguably the most controversial of these was the proposal for a new forum of intergovernmental digital cooperation with a broad mandate and which would to a large extent duplicate existing spaces, such as the IGF. Most of these initiatives were reframed or ended up disappearing from the **first revision** on account of the opposition of certain major states. The chief criticism is that rather than duplicating structures that are already working perhaps it is better to reinforce the existing ones. In addition, these new structures may require too many resources, particularly for civil society groups, and call for funding that few countries can provide (and which would lead to reinforcing certain countries' dominance over Internet decision-making).

Human rights versus development: a false dilemma

The second major topic in the final stretch of the GDC discussions is the weight given to safeguarding human rights in the digital sphere. **G77 and, particularly, Chinese inputs** appear to be geared towards trying to curtail US, EU and other Western nations' efforts to enshrine and reinforce the observance of political and civil rights in the final document. They are trying to switch the narrative to bolster the importance of safeguarding state security and propose that economic development be recognised as “the primary and basic human right”. They are also calling for the GDC

to “reaffirm the sovereign right of states to determine their national rules for Internet usage and their prerogative to govern the digital sphere within their jurisdiction, in conformity with international law”.

Following this logic, that group of nations is trying to approve provisions that would commit states to refrain from “politicising human rights issues or interfering in others’ domestic affairs and challenging others’ judicial sovereignty under the excuse of protecting online human rights” (Lynch, 2024). A specific example of this movement is the proposal (backed by states including Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as China) to remove a provision from the draft that calls on the UN secretary-general to outline a plan for a United Nations digital human rights advisory service.

SOME STATES WANT TO REAFFIRM THE SOVEREIGN RIGHT TO DETERMINE THEIR NATIONAL RULES FOR INTERNET USAGE AND THEIR PREROGATIVE TO GOVERN THE DIGITAL SPHERE WITHIN THEIR JURISDICTION.

Instead, the G77 countries emphasise being more ambitious on goals like guaranteeing global connectivity and reinforcing action aimed at developing technological skills, particularly in Global South countries, where fears about being left behind are deepest.

They call for considering an international technology framework aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which would offer developing countries preferential access to relevant advanced technologies with a view to developing their productive capacities. China’s inputs often frame this debate as a competition among monopolist Western tech corporations that seek profits and domination at the expense of the poorest countries, which suffer growing inequality.

Looking beyond the GDC

The GDC has potential implications in several key areas. These include access to affordable and reliable digital services and Internet connectivity; digital inclusion and the possibility of bridging digital divides; human rights protection and ethical considerations in the digital world; the digital economy and its connection to economic growth; governance frameworks for regulating new technologies; or the need for global cooperation to jointly address issues such as cyberthreats or disinformation.

There should be no cause for controversy in the response to these fundamental issues. Yet discussions at UN headquarters have revealed

a deepening geopolitical divide that advises caution when predicting the outcome of the GDC negotiations. A good illustration of this is the diluting of the references to human rights in the **second revision**, the deletion of the goal to fight Internet fragmentation, or the first appearance of a problematic mention of the GDC applying exclusively to the “non-military” domain.

In addition, this latest revision emphasises the “critical” role the United Nations must play in digital cooperation, illustrated by the recovery of the controversial high-level review mechanism proposed for the GDC, which is suspiciously like the previously criticised forum for intergovernmental digital cooperation. These changes, along with the softening of the language regarding the primacy of the multistakeholder governance model, have triggered some significant reactions, such as the publication of an **open letter** where some of the world’s most authoritative voices on Internet development warn the secretary-general of the dangerous turn the GDC appears to be taking.

As one might expect in such circumstances, the divisions are already impacting (and will likely continue to impact) other negotiations taking place in parallel, such as the UN’s efforts to regulate artificial intelligence (AI). We will need to pay close attention to these other processes in the coming months, as they may be instrumental in complementing what will (surely) remain open or incomplete in the GDC. The first important stop is the 20-year review of the WSIS in 2025, where the renewal of the IGF’s mandate will be under discussion. It will be the moment to debate how to implement the GDC to move towards such urgent goals as connecting the 2.6 billion people in the world who remain unconnected to the Internet.

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INFORMATION INTEGRITY: GOVERNANCE OR FRAGMENTATION

The United Nations is looking to establish a governance framework to guarantee and protect information integrity in an era of falsehoods and disinformation. Several matters are it issue, however, ranging from the very concept of information integrity to its impact on the technological platforms' responsibility as amplifiers of disinformation, hate speech or even the algorithmic suppression of content and voices that challenge a certain way of exercising power.



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Technology has transformed our experience of immediacy and our relationship with the truth. Algorithmic recommendations have risen up as opaque decision makers that hierarchise and select our access to information. The Internet has plunged us into a boundless world of (dis)informative possibilities, of a myriad sources and contradictory narratives that have wrought cultural changes in the norms of communication and how we consume information. It is a systemic, rapid and global revolution traversed by the geopolitical confrontation of technological models and a gradual fragmentation of the Internet (Mueller, 2017).

And this whole process of communication transformation has been engineered with the indispensable intermediation of the big technological platforms; digital giants that create no content but make crucial decisions about its dissemination: “what they will distribute and to whom, how they will connect users and broker their interactions, and what they will refuse” (Gillespie, 2017). This realisation has raised government pressure on the platforms to hold them to account and demand greater transparency over the algorithmic architecture that orders the Web.

Infocracy, or the “information regime” in the digital world, about which Byung-Chul Han (2022) has theorised, is a form of domination in which “information and its processing by algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) have a decisive influence on social, economic and political processes”. The capacity to alter information or data, decisive factors for obtaining power, has direct consequences on democratic processes. In such circumstances access to quality information, considered a public good established in international law,¹ is under increasing threat.

DISINFORMATION COMPROMISES HUMAN RIGHTS AND THREATENS FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND THE RIGHT TO DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION; IT ALSO IMPACTS LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE INSTITUTIONS AND IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES.

Disinformation compromises human rights and threatens freedom of thought, the right to privacy and the right to democratic participation. It has the capacity to erode economic, social and cultural rights and has a direct impact on levels of confidence in the institutions and in democratic processes (Colomina *et al*, 2021). In a survey carried out in 2022, 75% of United Nations Blue Helmets deployed around the world said that disinformation had caused them **security problems** on their missions. Similarly, “information pollution” (Orman, 1984) – taken as the flow of low-value content that diminishes our capacity to access quality information, either because of its inaccuracy, its irrelevance or redundancy – was identified as a significant concern by 75% of **United Nations Development Programme** offices (2021).

This presents a scene of “**information disorder**” (Wardle, 2017) of which disinformation is only one symptom of a much larger problem that is set to be tackled at the United Nations Summit of the Future (September 2024).

A new framework of responsibility

The slow-moving multilateral governance machinery released the new **Global Principles for Information Integrity** on June 24th, 2024, emphasising the need to take “immediate” measures to address the harm caused by disinformation and hate speech and, at the same time, safeguard both human rights and freedom of expression.

1. United Nations General Assembly, 1948 **Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.

The United Nations defines **information integrity** as “the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem” (UNDP, 2022). With this concept, borrowed from the field of information security in corporate systems (commonly used to refer to data and information protection systems in businesses), the United Nations aims to cover the broad spectrum of vulnerabilities that range from the social and individual impact that “information pollution” might have to the big technological platforms’ responsibility as necessary intermediaries in its mass distribution.

Secretary-General António Guterres’s policy brief on information integrity on digital platforms (United Nations, 2023), released in 2023 and aimed at stakeholders that include governments, tech companies, digital platforms and advertisers, calls for a concerted international response to the proliferation of hatred and lies in the digital space via a code of conduct, which he will take to the Summit of the Future. The code (which draws on the **governance experiences implemented by the European Union** for over five years) looks to set out principles and commitments for online platforms and the digital advertising sector,

THE UNITED NATIONS RECOGNISES THE ROLE THE PLATFORMS PLAY TO AMPLIFY VOICES THAT PREVIOUSLY WENT UNHEARD AND BREATHE LIFE INTO GLOBAL MOVEMENTS, BUT IT ALSO ACCUSES THEM OF HAVING “EXPOSED A DARKER SIDE OF THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM”.

with transparency demands particularly over how their algorithmic recommendation systems work. The United Nations (2023) recognises the role the platforms play to amplify voices that previously went unheard and breathe life into global movements, but it also accuses them of having “exposed a darker side of the digital ecosystem”.

Yet the very concept of “information integrity” raises some questions. First, because of its origins in the field of information security in corporate spaces, since focusing on **securing the information system** may breed distrust of government communications or traditional media among some sections of society. Second, certain academic circles consider it to be **a Global North concept**, although it is already beginning to form part of various government strategies, from **Canada and the Netherlands to Brazil in the framework of the G20**. The UN secretary-general maintains that problems in defining it should not inhibit the efforts to tackle the real challenge: lack of information integrity is considered harmful to the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Erosion of rights

According to the United Nations, the erosion of the information ecosystem undermines efforts to combat climate change or eradicate poverty, and may accelerate processes of social, economic and political exclusion. Similarly, gender-based hate speech, disinformation and violence are used to systematically subjugate women by silencing them and pushing them out of the public sphere, suppressing their voices and fuelling self-censorship, thus jeopardising the progress made on gender equality.

THE CODE OF CONDUCT FOR INFORMATION INTEGRITY (AIMED AT BOTH COMPANIES AND GOVERNMENTS) SHOULD GUARANTEE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA, INCREASED TRANSPARENCY, USER EMPOWERMENT, AND STRENGTHENED RESEARCH AND DATA ACCESS, AS WELL AS STRONGER DISINCENTIVES TO SPREAD MISINFORMATION.

Both the secretary-general of the United Nations (2023) and UNESCO (2022) have repeatedly denounced gendered disinformation and hate speech directed at women and girls on digital platforms as a serious threat to information integrity, something which requires the urgent attention of governments and technology companies. For all these reasons it is considered essential to approve a code of conduct for information integrity on digital platforms that moves beyond the inadequate model of self-regulation and content moderation that the various tech giants have put in place, each with its own internal functioning and in an opaque manner.

According to Guterres, this code (aimed at both companies and governments) should guarantee respect for human rights, support for independent media, increased transparency, user empowerment, and strengthened research and data access, as well as stronger disincentives to spread misinformation. He also denounces government abuses of ordering blanket Internet shutdowns and bans on certain platforms, which may lack legal basis and infringe human rights, as well as the introduction of laws that may infringe freedom of expression. Speaking at the AI summit in Seoul, the UN secretary-general called for “universal guardrails”; rules and safety against “harmful” business models that prioritise user “engagement” on networks above human rights and privacy.

But how can information integrity be guaranteed in unstable democracies with deep inequalities and high media concentration, or with freedom of expression under threat? Or in countries without the capacity to exert

pressure on the huge digital giants or social networks that influence the shaping of their public opinion? How much compliance will a code of conduct for governments and multibillion-dollar companies that makes no provision for enforceability or the possibility of sanctions actually achieve? For all these reasons, expectations for the code are low.

Various **civil** and **digital** rights and **pro-freedom of expression associations** believe the text of this code goes no further than the basic principles that have already been declared repeatedly by the United Nations Charter. They criticise its ambiguity on implementation and call for a more stringent accountability and responsibility framework. **Article 19**, an international organisation working for freedom of expression, recalls that disinformation and hate speech are often government-led and, therefore, calls on the United Nations to be more forceful on states' obligations as regards protecting freedom of expression and other human rights.

Information is a public good in the hands of private and transnational platforms based on a business model that has had a legal, cultural and ethical impact on the public space. The challenge for the Summit of the Future will be to create spaces of common responsibility for divergent digitisation processes, fragmented media systems and authoritarian-leaning regimes that use the concepts and tactics of this information disorder to attack their critics and harass, even criminalise, civil society movements, while attempting to undermine multilateral efforts to reach a consensus on protecting the information space.

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THE PACT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Ahead of the United Nations Summit of the Future, the main goal of which is to transform global governance and renew confidence in the multilateral institutions, the secretary-general of the organisation, António Guterres, has stressed the importance of taking the long-term view. The Declaration on Future Generations aims to incorporate the perspective of these generations into global governance by attending to their rights, interests and concerns, with a commitment to intergenerational justice as the overarching principle.



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Concern about ensuring a better future for humanity was at the root of the creation of the United Nations in 1945. The first sentence of the founding charter's **preamble** sets out the determination to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war", and its purposes speak of equality, social development and respect for human rights. That long-term idea is also incorporated into the concept of "sustainable development". Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), defined the concept as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The idea of intergenerational justice, which focuses on ensuring that the decisions of the current generation do not harm succeeding generations by promoting sustainability and a responsible use of natural resources, has been integrated through other instruments like the UNESCO **Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations** (1997).

During the gestation period of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement of 2015, foresight methodologies and tools were incorporated into the decision-making

process to analyse their impact on the generations that will experience them. Mechanisms to encourage the participation of civil society and other actors were also developed. In September 2018, the [UN Youth Strategy](#) was launched with a view to increasing young people's participation in the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. And in September 2022, the United Nations Youth Office was established in order to (among other matters) facilitate intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, collaboration and solidarity. The Summit of the Future in September 2024 again makes the crucial connection between future generations and global governance.

THE SDGS AND THE PARIS AGREEMENT OF 2015 INCORPORATED FORESIGHT METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS INTO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS TO ANALYSE THEIR IMPACT ON FUTURE GENERATIONS. MECHANISMS TO ENCOURAGE CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION WERE ALSO DEVELOPED.

The [Declaration on Future Generations](#), which is to be included as an annex to the Pact for the Future, offers the opportunity to open new debates on the institutionalisation of long-term thinking with the inclusion of young people's voices. Similarly, it incorporates foresight as a tool to shape the future, civil society participation channels and intergenerational justice, and it points to the need for fundamental changes to address longstanding inequities.

The debate on foresight as a look towards the future

Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1, published by the secretary-general's office and entitled "[To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)" (United Nations, 2023a), expands on long-term thinking and foresight methodology. The brief includes proposals to define and make concrete the duties to future generations, such as the appointment of a special envoy for future generations and better use of foresight and data. Other subsequent briefs like "[Valuing What Counts: Framework to Progress Beyond Gross Domestic Product](#)" (United Nations, 2023c) and "[Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes](#)" (United Nations, 2023b) also follow the line of seeking a paradigm shift in the way we measure and evaluate what is important, placing the emphasis on the best use of science and data. This new boom in foresight methodology at present can be put down to the urgent need to get to grips with the volatility, uncertainty and complexity of a world marked by polycrisis.

The desire to reduce risks and threats means foresight is a useful tool to give space to new actors with a view to trying to solve problems that compromise the interests of future generations. There is, however, tension between foresight linked more to anticipatory governance and one that focuses on

seizing opportunities to transform the international system. While both try to reduce risks, one is more geared towards improving current governance, whereas the other seeks to better understand the impact of unsustainable models of production and is driven by the urge to transform.

There is a call from civil society for a more critical approach to the status quo and a demand for transformation. In addition, given the bulk of future generations will largely be in the Global South, the debates are closely connected to developing countries' traditional role in multilateral spaces. These countries advocate for a large-scale reform of the system, but often lack institutional capabilities that incorporate the foresight tool. The countries that have incorporated the tool are usually from the Global North and they have done so more with the intention of navigating uncertainty. The prospects for the way we integrate future generations into the institutions depend, to a large extent, on how the tension between transformative and conservative views plays out and to what extent we can move beyond the perspective of short-term national interests.

THERE IS TENSION BETWEEN FORESIGHT LINKED MORE TO ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND ONE THAT FOCUSES ON SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES TO TRANSFORM THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM.

Channels of participation

The policy brief on youth participation (United Nations, 2023a) highlights that as the largest generation in history and the predominant one in countries of the South, young people today play a crucial role as agents of positive change. Yet millions of young people face adverse conditions that limit their potential. In the same terms, Chapter 4 of the first revision of the [draft for the Pact for the Future](#) highlights the need to invest in young people's skills to equip them with the tools to enable them to thrive in a changing world, pledging to strengthen participatory processes at both the national and international level.

Young people have been able to take part in several initiatives in the process of the Summit of the Future negotiations. These include the [ECOSOC Youth Forum](#) held on April 16th-18th, 2024, in New York; or the [United Nations Civil Society Conference](#), which took place on May 9th-10th, 2024, in Nairobi and was structured around [ImPACT](#) coalition sessions, based on the idea of multiple stakeholders, one of which was devoted to "[youth and intergenerational engagement](#)". A parliamentary summit of Committees of the Future was held in 2022. The [joint statement](#) at the close of the summit

committed parliaments to increasing future-orientation in decision-making. Young people will also be able to take part in the Summit of the Future as part of the member states' official delegations or as representatives of bodies that have a standing invitation to participate as observers.

But there are doubts about whether these channels really are securing representation for the diverse perspectives of young people. There are critical voices that note that the proliferation of summits and greater participation by civil society do not necessarily mean better results, since the representatives of the states and social organisations are nearly always the same. Some young people have the perception they have been exploited by other interests of private and state actors or interest groups, which take charge of selecting the participants in such forums. They have also expressed frustration over the gap between inputs and impact (United Nations, 2023b).

This raises the dilemma of what is best to enhance the legitimacy of and people's confidence in the system: continue with the proliferation of mechanisms for young people's participation in UN forums and summits or pursue concrete results through the incorporation of youth views in existing negotiating spaces. Global North countries appear comfortable with the multistakeholder participation process within the existing mechanisms, even though institutional change is very slow. Policy Brief 3 (United Nations, 2023b) establishes some core principles for meaningful engagement, which include such engagement being rights-based, institutionally mandated, designated, resourced, transparent, accessible, voluntary, diverse and inclusive. The idea is to make the shift from quantity to quality.

In terms of outcomes for global governance, the risks of corporate capture of participatory spaces (where actors with different powers and ends sit at the same table) diminish the negotiating capacity of some states and of civil society in general. There is, then, some concern over the outcomes of the Summit of the Future because most decisions will be made by consensus. In the current climate of polarisation it may mean a decline in standards that have already been accepted by most states. For this reason, Policy Brief 1 (United Nations, 2023a) proposes incorporating a document with commitments already made to future generations and recognition of the duty to protect those generations.

The limits of intergenerational justice: interests and rights

In parallel to the UN processes, in July 2023, a prestigious [group of experts](#) drew up the [Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations](#) (2023). They sought to clarify the current state of international law as it relates to the rights of future generations, consolidating the legal

framework, stating the binding obligations of states and fostering the progress of human rights. In a way, it is an attempt to limit the power of current generations over the future of those who cannot speak today. Again, the question arises over who speaks on behalf of those future generations. The idea of appointing a special envoy for future generations in an advisory role and to defend their interests across the system, prepare reports and share best practices is one of the proposals for the declaration to be included as an annex to the pact. The envoy would also be responsible for monitoring the agreements adopted. A new initiative is to create a subsidiary body of a forum for future generations that guarantees stakeholder participation.

Another concern is whether the declaration should also include the need to redress the inequalities of the past that determine the present. In some quarters of Global North countries, there is little desire to relinquish privileges and they consider it unnecessary to extend the time frame for the rights perspective from the past into the future. Yet a large part of civil society, including indigenous peoples, young people and social activists, see the declaration as a major opportunity to establish a binding legal principle on the rights of future generations in international relations. The success of the Pact for the Future in bringing about the changes that the international financial architecture, digital regulation and corporate legal accountability require depends to a large extent on whether such a pact is read from the perspective of future generations and the need to redress inequalities that will otherwise inhibit succeeding generations from being able to exercise their rights. The **revised version** of the draft Declaration on Future Generations acknowledges the interconnectedness of past, present and future and the need to eliminate historical and structural inequalities. But in the negotiations the focus on the rights of future generations appears to be given a back seat to concentrate more on interests.

THE RISKS OF CORPORATE CAPTURE OF PARTICIPATORY SPACES (WHERE ACTORS WITH DIFFERENT POWERS AND ENDS SIT AT THE SAME TABLE) DIMINISH THE NEGOTIATING CAPACITY OF SOME STATES AND OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN GENERAL.

In conclusion, the incorporation of future generations into global governance is crucial to the legitimacy of the process, but it presents challenges. Intergenerational justice requires a genuine commitment to redressing the inequalities of the past and the present, ensuring that future generations do not inherit a world plagued by injustice and inequality. Only through inclusive and transformative global governance that truly considers the needs and rights of those who follow us will we be able to build an equitable and sustainable future for all.

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THE UNITED NATIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: INNOVATION, INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND ANTICIPATORY CAPACITIES

Innovate, collaborate, anticipate: three verbs that should be employed much more at the United Nations in the 21st century. They are very much needed in the Pact for the Future, which is intended to initiate an overhaul of an organisation as essential as it is outdated. Time is moving faster than ever, but the United Nations system has stagnated as far as its institutional culture, early warning and anticipatory capabilities, and speed of action are concerned. Good policy can be even better and even more transformational if procedures are modernised.



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The dizzying speeds at which events unfold; the complexity of the crises, problems and transformations to be dealt with; and the close interconnections between the various spheres of local and global public life define the current moment, one which bears little or no resemblance to the post-war era when the United Nations came into existence and developed. Apart from paralysing political confrontation, the evident mismatch between present challenges and bureaucratic mechanisms and processes that remain stuck in the past is denting the public's confidence in the organisation and its capacity to act. The more the United Nations is needed, the less it is seen.

Innovate, collaborate, anticipate

If the Summit of the Future in September 2024 is to signal a qualitative leap forward, it requires three essential strides: undertake significant changes in the organisation's institutional culture; innovate in terms of both analysis and procedures; and develop sound anticipatory capacities. These and other major changes must help to overhaul the UN system. The Pact for the Future is essential to deliver on agreed commitments, particularly the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This overhaul will be neither effective nor transformative if it fails to bring about significant modifications at the very core of the way the system operates. It presents a major challenge, and it comes precisely at a time when the agendas to be implemented require unprecedented levels of coordination, innovative collaboration procedures, an inpouring of scientific knowledge and new technological tools. There are clear interconnections with advances in the SDGs: action or lack thereof on one impacts the others, and those impacts can be positive or negative.

THE UN SYSTEM DOES REQUIRE A GOOD MEASURE OF MODERNISATION OF THE METHODS AND PROCESSES WHICH HAVE A DIRECT BEARING ON INCREASING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT OF POLICY.

Simplicity is not possible, but greater effectiveness is

If the world and its problems are enormously complex, we have to concede that the system at the UN, whose mission is to help improve things, is itself extremely convoluted. Just take a look at the [overview](#) of the UN system chart, which contains details of the various organs, funds, programmes, their position in the system, their collaborative relationships, and the ties between them, including the Secretariat and its departments. Fitting it all on one page is an

achievement in itself and helps to get a better understanding of it.

Added to this are the intrinsic difficulties of acting by combining the proposals, interests and commitments of member states in the system's principal organs, such as the Security Council; the General Assembly and its subsidiary organs (which are, incidentally, undergoing their own processes of renewal); the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); or the Secretariat. The initiatives to be undertaken, then, should not be aimed at merely simplifying a system that plainly will always be complex, because of the sheer number and variety of actors and procedures to take into consideration. It does, however, call for a good measure of modernisation of the methods and processes which have a direct bearing on increasing the effectiveness and impact of policy, and that they be seen as such by citizens and governments.

First, it is essential to harness technological advances to infuse the whole system (particularly the Secretariat, as the organ responsible for day-to-day business) with innovative methods and procedures that help to anticipate and make the most informed decisions possible, optimising current timescales.

Anticipate better, act in good time

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the system lacks an effective anticipatory and early warning capability and that it needs to strengthen especially dedicated mediation capacities. This is making the organisation a reactive mechanism in the face of crises, people-generated conflicts and natural disasters. To operate effectively it requires a partnership that includes data management; information; and analytical, trending and scenario-mapping capabilities. These instruments should be open to external actors: research institutes, scientific bodies, etc. The impact that the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, created in 1988) has had on climate policy is a prime example of how invaluable inputs to the decision-making process can come from outside.

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The motto might be something like “Know how to anticipate, prepare to act and dare to do it”. How often have we seen crises coming but not known how, not been able or not wanted to trigger the action, for a whole host of reasons? Artificial intelligence, data analytics capabilities, blockchain and other frontier technologies must be harnessed and introduced into the system to act as a lever for the development of a culture of creative solutions. Technology will contribute to better risk management. It is no small revolution, and it requires a giant technological leap to ensure that it is also system wide. This will only be possible if it comes with a credible financial commitment and effective processes for adapting human resources, the most precious capital of any group or business and something which must also apply at the United Nations.

Many governments today are experimenting with initiatives like GovTech to design new and innovative solutions in combination with digital technologies to respond to citizens’ day-to-day problems. The United Nations, then, must get behind some sort of innovation lab, bringing together both internal experts and know-how from the member states and private sector. The latest draft of the Pact for the Future includes a proposal to “build capabilities by harnessing new technologies and data to anticipate risks and seize opportunities”. To this end, the UN 2.0 vision was launched recently. It is now essential to give it a major push.

More parity, more inclusion and more transparency

These advances must be designed to improve transparency and accountability, which are other black holes in the current system. They are measures that will have a clear impact on the changes to ensure that an undeniably stagnant institutional culture becomes more inclusive, more agile and more effective. A crucial step towards this end is to reach system-wide gender parity, balanced geographical representation and to find mechanisms to incorporate the voices of young people, minorities, indigenous peoples and communities that are traditionally marginalised from decision-making processes.

A CRUCIAL STEP TOWARDS THIS END IS TO REACH SYSTEM-WIDE GENDER PARITY, BALANCED GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION AND TO INCORPORATE THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE, MINORITIES, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND COMMUNITIES THAT ARE TRADITIONALLY MARGINALISED FROM DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES.

The United Nations will be more robust if it is equal, inclusive and diverse. It is essential to pick up the pace of the steps taken in this direction. An excellent guide is the call to action from Global Women Leaders-Voices for Change and Inclusion ([GWL-Voices](#)), an organisation created to foster a transformation of the system based on the full participation of women in the management of major global challenges such as inequality, climate crises, conflicts, new technology development or economic justice. It is crucial to ensure that the calls for action towards gender equality contained in the current draft of the pact are maintained. Similarly, the opportunity should be seized to

reinvigorate the Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW](#)), which, together with the [Beijing Declaration](#) of 1995, is essential for achieving gender equality.

Fragmentation is the enemy

But it will be impossible to transform the institutional culture without addressing other deep-rooted obstacles in the system. A former senior staff member in the organisation sums up one of these major challenges like this: "We must be capable of overcoming the fragmentation of the different actors when it comes dealing with crises or in policy deployment. We have to move from operating in silos to obtaining the aggregate value of the system. It's about making a multidisciplinary diagnosis, based on a quick, cross-sectional reading, and then having the courage to take action, overcoming the prevailing risk aversion". This fragmented approach is evident at UN headquarters and on the ground. The distinguishing logo

often counts for more and is defended more vigorously than the common flag people operate under, and which protects them.

Part of this challenge could be met by optimising the work of the Chief Executives Board (CEB), the traditional coordination forum in the UN system. It is chaired by the secretary-general and made up of 31 members, who are the heads of the agencies, programmes, funds, financial institutions, etc. For many, it is the ideal place to work on consistency and spotting the cracks through which overlooked needs slip.

It is true, however, that a full-blown pact is not essential to push for some of the necessary transformations in the system's institutional culture. A good measure of leadership that musters support and affinities can be a catalyst for meaningful change. The secretary-general himself, for example, could improve diagnosis and take more effective action through operational groups made up solely of those who contribute and those concerned. The selection criterion would be: only those affected

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attend. It is a management model based on teams united by competence, in the sense of both knowledge and engagement. It makes it possible to bring together only those actors that are strictly necessary, thus averting the proliferation of participants in already complex and sometimes interminable working sessions. It is also about being nimble. This method would reveal the secretary-general's discernment regarding those he invites, and his selection would demonstrate his approach to the problem, crisis or initiative.

The Summit of the Future was launched with a highly ambitious goal given the difficult crossroads the United Nations is facing. With only a few weeks to go before it starts, and with negotiations among countries in full swing, there is every indication the bombastic/high-sounding tagline of/ what is loftily billed as "a unique opportunity" to restore eroded trust and demonstrate that international cooperation can rise to the challenges of the day will be rescaled. A broad and far-reaching agreement on all the necessary reforms may not be reached. Rather, September will mark the start of a process of gradual transformations. All the same, there is a pressing need for innovative approaches, substantial shifts in the institutional culture and a reinforcement of anticipatory and early warning capabilities to maintain relevance, increase effectiveness and improve people's lives in such a rapidly changing world. And all so the United Nations, which is more necessary than ever, can be useful to the whole of humanity.

CITIES AS A LEVER FOR CHANGE AMONG ENTRENCHED STATES

Considering the insufficient progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cities offer the multilateral system a lever for change in an increasingly urban world. Yet despite notable steps forward, cities remain on the fringes of the Summit of the Future. The quarters most reluctant to welcome them could well take note of geopolitical tensions that are threatening to compound the United Nations' crisis of legitimacy.



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The Summit of the Future in the era of cities

The heads of state who gather for the Summit of the Future in September 2024 will do so against the backdrop of a world order even more fraught with geopolitical tensions than in 2023, the year initially proposed for the summit in **Our Common Agenda**, the report drawn up by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in 2021. Four years on, the Summit of the Future will take place on a global stage drifting further from the targets of reinvigorating multilateralism and accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set in Our Common Agenda.

Looking ahead to the summit, the question arises as to which areas of the international political system could present opportunities for transformation and help to achieve the objectives identified by the secretary-general. In the last analysis, the founding principles of the United Nations Charter of 1945 (which the Summit of the Future seeks to reaffirm) have been overwhelmed by today's complexity of actors and dynamics that played only a minor role in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The underlying causes of the clearly insufficient progress towards the SDGs and the UN's evident crisis of legitimacy lie in the palpable

mismatch between the global governance needs of the 21st century and the institutional tools at our disposal. Far from simplifying extremely complex institutional problems, cities in fact are at once an emerging international actor this century and a lever for change.

To start with, we live in an increasingly urban world. If in 1950 urban dwellers accounted for 30% of the global population, in 2050 they will constitute 68% of the planet's expected 9.7 billion inhabitants. At the same time, thanks to an unparalleled spatial concentration of resources, cities are the main incubators of economic productivity and generate over 80% of global GDP. Drawing on this demographic and economic centrality, and in line with a diverse geography associated with decentralisation processes at state level, cities have forged close partnerships over recent decades. They have also come together to address issues that transcend national borders and the response capacity of nation states. A testimony to that is that cities, which are responsible for around 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions, are adopting emissions reduction targets that are generally more ambitious than the mitigation goals of their respective states.

Cities in official deliberations

Given this potential, it is hardly encouraging that cities fail to form part of the Summit of the Future's core architecture. Less heartening still is the scant acknowledgement of cities in the draft Pact for the Future, the final document that is to be negotiated and adopted by the participating countries at the gathering. The preliminary draft of the pact mentions local governments in the framework of organisations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), thus equating city governments and the political legitimacy underpinning them with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The first revision of the draft, released in May 2024, is something of an improvement. It calls for strengthening local governments' engagement in United Nations intergovernmental processes and requests the secretary-general to provide recommendations on the matter. The Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments has played a prominent role in this progress. Established in 2023 and working over a one-year period, it is made up of 15 representatives of subnational governments and five representatives of United Nations member states. Its secretariat is provided by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). This advisory mechanism reflects the commitment to multilateral recognition of the various major transnational networks of cities united as a group in the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments,

which is responsible for appointing the 15 representatives of subnational governments in the advisory group.

Still, talks remain nowhere near recognition of formal and permanent observer status at the United Nations General Assembly that cities covet; recognition, meanwhile, that the international organisation has indeed granted to lawmakers and chambers of commerce, institutionalising greater political weight for these groups in official deliberations on the multilateral architecture. Partial advances aside, the clear stagnation of cities' work to increase their political representation in the main UN bodies is a reflection of the entrenchment of states in the defence of their prerogative over national sovereignty, the bedrock of the present international political system (Martínez, 2023).

Recognition policies

As António Guterres said in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, we are living in a **multipolar world** that requires global governance institutions adapted to 21st century political and economic realities. Paradoxically, cities show a greater interest in strengthening and reforming an international political system centred on the primacy of nation states than many countries embroiled in geopolitical tensions that undermine multilateralism's capacity to respond collectively to the challenges of our time (Klaus, 2022).

As we observe the Summit of the Future preparations and note the main United Nations bodies' inability to rethink their institutional mechanisms and adapt to the dynamics and actors of an increasingly urban world, we might reflect on the implications of formal recognition for cities (or lack thereof) in the summit's core architecture and in the succeeding declaration of the Pact for the Future. For example, with respect to the insufficient progress towards the SDGs, of the 17 global objectives it is SDG 11, focusing on cities, for which we have **least data** regarding the monitoring of implementation. This lays bare the inability of intergovernmental processes and organisations to ensure national statistics offices can always rely on the essential collaboration of regional actors in cities (starting with local governments) for data collection. In view of this situation, is formal recognition by the UN system essential for boosting the contribution cities make to global governance? Given the fact that thus far this system has failed to reform for its own good, are there other institutional spaces where cities can increase their multilateral recognition?

THE CLEAR STAGNATION OF CITIES' WORK TO INCREASE THEIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE MAIN UN BODIES REFLECTS THE ENTRENCHMENT OF THE STATES.

As the work of the Urban20 (U20) and the Urban7 (U7) platforms demonstrates, cities have identified multilateral spaces in the intergovernmental forums of the G20 and G7 whose deliberations have an impact on their day-to-day affairs. Hence the growing interest on the part of some of the major transnational city networks to influence their agendas. Neither organisation can boast the level of legitimacy of the United Nations as the universal institutional benchmark for global governance. But the quarters that form the core architecture of the Summit of the Future and the UN system most reluctant to embrace the opportunity for transformation that cities offer, could well take note of the possibilities that these new multilateral forums could open up in the future; and of the prominence it would afford them. A reflection that is all the more imperative given the geopolitical tensions that are threatening to compound the United Nations' crisis of legitimacy.

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The United Nations Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow, takes place on September 22nd and 23rd, 2024. It promises to adopt a “Pact for the Future” whose goal is to act as catalyst to reinvigorate the organisation and adapt it to a new geopolitical reality. Discussions will be conditioned by factors such as China’s consolidation as an assertive power with worldwide reach, or the emergence of a Global South that questions the geopolitical order of a globalisation fashioned to suit Western powers and which perpetuates inequality and dependency.

There is criticism of the lack of representation in the decision-making bodies that shape global governance from states and regions that feel sidelined, as well as complaints from other actors that wield increasing influence in the international arena, such as cities and civil society organisations. Further demands stem from the need to provide multilateral institutions with the financial, human and technical resources to get the 2030 Agenda back on track in the wake of the multiple, overlapping crises of recent decades. There is also a call to arm the multilateral system with a greater capacity to anticipate and react to manage the effects of such crises, like climate change, where the scope is global. Added to that is the uncertainty arising from rapid technological change and the breakthrough of artificial intelligence.

Against this backdrop, this *CIDOB Report* examines the reasons and arguments driving the necessary reforms; the proposals and measures under negotiation; and the positions of the various actors involved plus the interests in play.