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A UN Pact for the Future against national retrenchment and global disorder

A forward-looking agenda to reform the UN was launched by the UN Secretary-General, starting with a summit on sustainable development goals and a Summit of the Future to reform global governance and to adopt a Pact for the Future, with commitments to global objectives and the solutions to deliver them. These will be followed in 2025 by the World Summit on Social Development, the annual COP on Climate, a World Summit on the Information Society and the UN Conference on Financing for Development. This unique political sequence provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the global order for a progressive direction, which is a daunting but compelling task.

The problematic Trump effect on international cooperation is already being assessed in all corners of the world, and a compass is needed to sail in these uncharted waters. A UN Pact for the Future, recently adopted by a large worldwide majority of countries, provides a beacon of hope, but much stronger political engagement is needed in practice.

The current global order is under a larger-scale transformation: existential challenges emerging for humankind; increasing inequalities within and between countries and generations; competing global strategies between great powers; major military conflicts; and the fragilities of the multilateral system. There is a clear gap between the global challenges in front of us and the current global governance system. This multilateral system now has a frustrating performance, even in the face of glaring emergencies such as the climate, pandemics, hunger, absolute poverty, artificial intelligence without rules and hard military conflicts where basic rules, such as territorial integrity, are not being respected.

Despite several and spreading difficulties – notably Trumpism in the US and other countries, effects of and recovery from the pandemic, many armed conflicts and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East – a forward-looking agenda, led by the UN Secretary-General,¹

¹ United Nations (2021) *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations Publications).

to reform the UN was launched, starting with a summit on sustainable development goals (SDGs) last year and, in September 2024, a Summit of the Future to reform global governance and to adopt a Pact for the Future with commitments to global objectives and the solutions to deliver them. These will be followed in 2025 by the World Summit on Social Development, the annual COP on Climate, a World Summit on the Information Society and the UN Conference on Financing for Development.

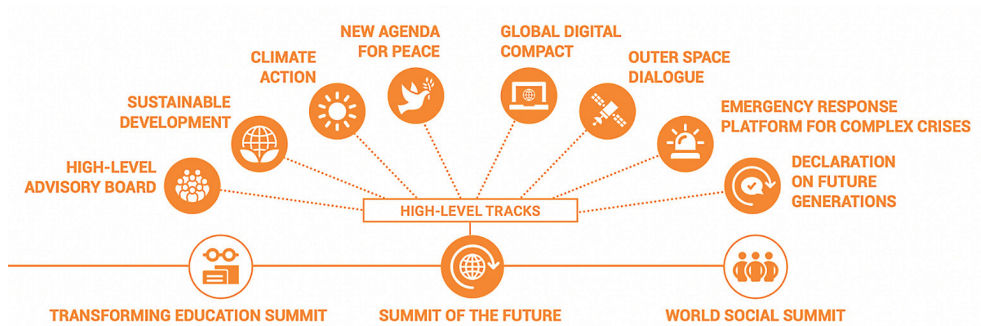
This unique political sequence provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity and should be fully capitalised on by all actors who want to change the global order for a progressive direction – certainly a daunting but compelling task. These mixed feelings were also visible in the last G20 summit, skilfully conducted by Brazil, but where the ghosts of Putin (not attending) and Trump (recently elected but not yet in office) were present. This is the vivid perception I got when representing FEPS, with its UN-ECOSOC status, during the UN Summit of the Future in New York, and with its T20 status at the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro.

The Summit of the Future: A window of opportunity for a new global deal

Let us first recall the recent story of the UN plan to reform global governance. In 2020, ahead of the UN's 75th anniversary, Secretary-General António Guterres launched a Global Conversation, which spurred on more than 3,000 civil society dialogues worldwide and surveys involving some 1.5 million people in 195 countries. The UN75 Office reported that the conversation showed “overwhelming public support for international cooperation” and a more people-centred multilateralism.

These civil society-led consultations fed into and shaped intergovernmental negotiations on the UN75 Declaration, adopted during High-Level Week, at the start of the General Assembly's 75th session in September 2020. With this UN75 Declaration, governments renewed their commitment to tackle global challenges such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, extreme poverty, armed conflict, the arms race and disruptive technologies. At the same time, the declaration asked the Secretary-General „to report back” within a year „with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges”.

In September 2021, *Our Common Agenda* was released. Emphasising ways to accelerate the SDGs and the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, and benefiting from four tracks of consultations (which sought inputs from young people, thought leaders, civil society and governments), the report outlined some 90 distinct recommendations across four pillars: a renewed social contract; a focus on the future; protecting the Global Commons; and delivering global public goods and an upgrade to the United Nations. Recommended ideas for this agenda include three global summits, seven high-level tracks and the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism.



Source: *Our Common Agenda*, p. 7. ©2021 United Nations.

Triggered by *Our Common Agenda*, presented by the UN Secretary-General for his second mandate, a preparatory process for the Summit to the Future started with a High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism of personalities from all continents and mobilised a plethora of contributions that will come from UN member states, regional organisations such as the EU, civil society stakeholders, non-governmental organisations, business, trade union, think tanks and academia.

Afterwards, on 30 August 2023, the scope of the Summit of the Future was defined by Resolution A/77/L.109 in the following terms:

The General Assembly, reaffirming the Charter of the United Nations, and recalling its resolution 76/307 of 8 September 2022 on the modalities of the Summit of the Future, in which it decided that the Summit of the Future would adopt a concise, action-oriented outcome document entitled “A Pact for the Future”, agreed in advance by consensus through intergovernmental negotiations:

- (a) Decides that the scope of the Summit of the Future will encompass the following elements, and that these elements will be reflected in the outcome document, entitled “A Pact for the Future”, comprising a chapeau and five chapters, as follows:
- (i) Chapter I. Sustainable development and financing for development;
 - (ii) Chapter II. International peace and security;
 - (iii) Chapter III. Science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation;
 - (iv) Chapter IV. Youth and future generations;
 - (v) Chapter V. Transforming global governance[.]

The negotiations for the Pact for the Future were long and complex in multiple areas, but they were skilfully led by the German and Namibian governments and ambassadors. Their outcomes and shortcomings are the visible face of the turbulent confrontation of political forces on different fronts: developing countries trying to upgrade their voice and representation; emergent countries, such as India, Brazil and South Africa, raising the stakes of these negotiations with richer countries, notably using the G20 club that they

have been chairing; the geostrategic competition between the US and China, visible on all fronts, notably the digital one, where both prefer a bilateral framework negotiation to a multilateral one, particularly when dealing with the great game-changer emerging now, namely artificial intelligence.

Last but not least, it was painful to see how Russia had decided to block several accepted agreements with the tactical purpose of paving the way for its longer-term strategic objectives. But it was also remarkable to see that this position was contested by the group of African countries in the first place and then isolated by a large majority of 143 member states voting in favour of adopting the Pact for the Future.

The EU was represented by the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, as a speaker at the Summit of the Future, as well as by the High Representative, Josep Borrell, at G20 Foreign Affairs, which fell under the Brazilian presidency. The latter adopted a remarkable Declaration on Global Governance² to show that the G20 can and should support the multilateral approach. The EU maintained a constructive position, but the visibility of its positions remained low-key, also reflecting the current situation of transition towards a new political leadership after the June European elections.

The Pact for the Future: Achievements and shortcomings

The adopted Pact for the Future³ is quite a comprehensive and consistent document, where several relevant priorities and mandates are defined, but where some shortcomings are also visible.

As the SDG agenda – the only current consensual multilateral agenda – is lagging behind its 2030 objectives, a higher commitment was agreed, counting on a larger toolbox of financial instruments. Nevertheless, a real process to implement national strategic plans supported by stronger global initiatives is still to be organised.

A historic agreement was reached to define a UN tax convention, but the way to protect tax resources to invest in sustainable development and in poverty reduction is still unclear, adding to a dramatic debt burden, which is crippling many developing countries, particularly in Africa. Without this, the current dilemma between investing in climate action or poverty reduction in many developing countries cannot be solved.

In the face of the climate emergency, the objective of phasing out carbon emissions and particularly carbon fuels was retained, but a stronger multilateral body to conduct the ecological transition is still to be defined, overcoming the ineffectiveness of current COPs. Access to knowledge, education, science and technology is recognised as key leverage for development, but there was not an agreement on the reform of intellectual property rights

2 “Second G20 Foreign Ministers’ meeting call to action on global governance reform”. U.S. Department of State, 25 September 2024.

3 “Pact for the future, global digital compact and declaration on future generations: Summit of the Future outcome documents”. United Nations, September 2024.

and on the way to promote technological cooperation and co-creation at a much larger scale, starting with green industrialisation and job creation in developing countries. A global digital agenda started – finally! – to be defined, not only to shape its potential for sustainable development but also to control its risks for freedom and democracy. Nevertheless, there is clear resistance to building up multilateral bodies in charge of governing the digital transition.

Stronger European progressive voices should be heard on this global stage in open dialogue with many other stakeholders worldwide. It was with this purpose that FEPS brought a delegation of high-level experts to New York to launch the book *A New Global Deal: Reforming World Governance*⁴ at several side events of the 200 complementing the Summit of the Future. This book has also been a reference for several preparatory events in Europe, Latin America and Africa and will be used to implement the Pact for the Future.

The Pact for the Future and the implications for future generations

As an annex to the pact, a Declaration on Future Generations was also adopted, calling for systematic concern for those who have not yet been born, and proposing a transformation of the decision-making process to a new methodology with foresight and long-term strategic thinking at its core.

Let us conclude with a simple illustration of this new way of thinking to assess some implications for political decisions.

How will future generations live on planet Earth? Two different stories for the 2050 horizon

Key transitions for sustainable development	A negative story, the most likely so far	A positive story, still possible
Food	Malnutrition and unhealthy diets remain very visible.	Hunger is being eradicated and diets are improving everywhere, in connection with the diversification of agriculture and nature-based solutions.
Energy	Renewable energy resources spread slowly and are unaffordable for many.	Renewable energy resources become dominant and more affordable, and consumption patterns have become more frugal.
Climate, natural resources	Climate disasters become very frequent everywhere. Forest and biodiversity destruction goes on to produce food and energy.	Climate disasters become less frequent, and carbon emissions start declining.

4 Rodrigues, M. J. (ed.) (2024) *A New Global Deal: Reforming World Governance* (Brussels: FEPS et al.).

Jobs and social protection	Traditional industrialisation goes on to meet the demand for more jobs and a young population. As the jobs created are low-paid, they do not enable the financial basis for social protection rights to be built up.	New jobs are being created by a new kind of low-carbon industry and infrastructure for low-carbon energy, transport and housing. Higher-skilled jobs provide the financial basis to build up social protection rights.
Education	Universal high-level education is no longer required.	There is a growing requirement for universal high-level education.
Digital	The dominant digital platforms use data to build up algorithms and solutions that are not adapted to different regional needs.	The digital transformation is driven by sectorial platforms – on health, education, transport, environment, housing – and by algorithms adapted to regional needs.
Global enablers		
Technological cooperation	Technological cooperation remains hindered by high intellectual property rights and imbalanced partnerships.	Technological cooperation is multiplied by long-term partnerships based on new knowledge co-creation.
Trade	Trade agreements and the framing of global supply chains hinder capacity building, which is necessary to meet better standards in many countries.	New trade agreements enable the upgrading of capacities in all regions to improve standards and diversify activities.
Finance	Many countries remain hindered by a lack of fiscal space and the lack of international coordination on taxation, high indebtedness reprofiling and financing global public goods.	International coordination of taxation and high indebtedness reprofiling increases the national fiscal space for investment and public services. This is also complemented by higher international financing of global public goods.
Governance	The multilateral system is weak and global governance is divided.	Multilateralism is more effective and inclusive, improving global governance.

What are some of the possible triggers to move from the negative story to the positive one?

- Big climate disasters in developed countries increase the public perception that climate change is an existential and collective threat, which can only be advanced with higher political and financial solidarity;
- Big climate disasters in developing countries make some regions impossible to inhabit, impacting regional and global migration dynamics;
- Digital interactions between companies and people step up the dissemination of more capacities and better solutions;
- Reforming the international tax system (less tax evasion and avoidance, more coordination on corporate taxes and wealth taxes, more progressive taxation) generates the public revenue needed to complement and channel private investment in the right direction of the green, digital and social transitions.

Nevertheless, a central question remains: will rising social inequalities and injustices drive the majority of people to push for higher international coordination – as during the pandemic – or rather to push for more inward-looking defence and retrenchment? This question will define the political colour of the times ahead. In my opinion, the current problem is not the lack of well-defined solutions, but rather the lack of capacity to communicate them and to get stronger public support for them. Progressives will have a lot to do.