

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG



REFORM OF THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM: PREPARING FOR THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE.

PREPARED BY :
DR. BOB WEKESA

DISCUSSION PAPER



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Introduction

September 2024 will be a momentous time for the world as the global governing body, the United Nations (UN), is poised to change if not substantially, at least appreciably. With the anticipated changes in the UN, global governance will equally change, and with it, we shall likely begin to view the world in a manner substantially different from that we do today. Even if the current UN reform does not reach the threshold of catalytic reforms, the buzz already created around the UN and global governance will remain on the global agenda for the foreseeable future. As of April 2024, plans are at advanced stages in various regions of the world in attempts to shape the nature of the proposed reforms at the UN. But how did we get here and what is African agency in the unprecedented reform of global governance?

This discussion paper lays out the brief history of the reform process now commonly referred to as the Summit of the Future, with the abbreviation, SOTF, entering global diplomatic lingua, like SDGs.

The paper is exclusively based on a review of key documents relating to the Summit of the Future. The aim is to provide key developments leading to the Summit. This paves the way for analysis of the zero draft of the Pact of the Future, the document that will be refined and probably endorsed during the September 22-23, 2024 Summit in New York. An eclectic reading of African perspectives is presented with the understanding that a future version will delve a little more into the question of African agency.

Background and context

The expected shift in the UN architecture follows many years of calls for the reform of the United Nations in the face of mounting global challenges, not least the geopolitical battle for a more equitable representation by all countries. Responding to the increasing calls for equity in representation as well as addressing various planetary issues, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, launched a “Global Conversation”ⁱ in early 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2020, world leaders attending that year’s United Nations (UN) General Assembly made the consequential “Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations.”ⁱⁱ

As the declaration rightly noted, the world had changed manifold since the establishment of the UN, more than seven decades back. Yet, the UN had lagged behind these changes therefore being mismatched with the realities of the twenty-first century. Calls for the reform of the Security Council were being given lip service, while the peace and security architecture was fraying at the seams as would be evinced by the Russia-Ukraine war from 2022 and, the Israel-Palestine war from 2023. This called for an “upgrade of the United Nations”. The declaration noted the 2015 “Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development which meant as a key plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda”ⁱⁱⁱ. It, like other promising plans, had fallen short in implementation. This had impeded the achievement of the UN Agenda 2030 on sustainable development with the deadline for achieving the

seventeen goals fast approaching. The most important decision was that the Secretary-General would report to the General Assembly the following year with recommendations for a “common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges”^{iv}. Notably, both the 2030 Agenda, better known as the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, are top-heavy with African interests ranging from addressing issues of poverty to tackling Africa’s financial problems. It is therefore an open question as to whether African issues will be equally elevated in the proposed Pact of the Future.

In September 2021, the Secretary-General issued the “Our Common Agenda” report as a follow-up to the 2020 declaration. It opened ominously stating that “In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough.”^v Setting the agenda for the reform process, the report prioritized six factors couched in diplomatic language that revealed the global governance undercurrents underlying the reform agenda.

First, it advocated, a “re-embrace of global solidarity”^{vi}, perhaps acknowledging the splintering of global governance along north-south, poor-rich, and regional lines. Second, it called a new “social contract between Governments and their people and ... to rebuild trust and embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights.”^{vii} Here we read a concession that large swathes of the world were under authoritarian leadership. In addition, proposals for a social contract were paired with the provision of “global commons” and “global public goods”^{viii}. This implied that global governance was taking different directions undergirded by differing ideologies. The upshot was that nations were increasingly fending for themselves in self-help, everybody-for-himself version.

Third, it lobbied for respect for science in the face of “the infodemic plaguing our world”^{ix}, spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic. This showed sensitivity over the fallout between the West/global North, particularly the US, and the East/global South, led by China over the origins of coronavirus as a major issue at the time. Fourth, it critiqued the methods used to “measure economic prosperity and progress”^x, noting that the pursuit of profits was exerting pressure on the environment. This could be read as a push to halt economic and commercial activities, particularly in and by industrialized nations, and their impact on global warming and climate change. Fifth, the report proposed measures to guarantee young people and “succeeding generations”^{xi} a better future. These measures included “a repurposed Trusteeship Council, a Futures Lab, a Declaration on Future Generations, and a United Nations Special Envoy”^{xii}. It appeared that the Secretary-General was keen on specific instruments through which programs for youth and future generations could be implemented.

Sixth, the report talked of the need for a “more networked and inclusive multilateral system, anchored within the United Nations”^{xiii}. The proposal was for “multi-stakeholder dialogues on outer space and a Global Digital Compact, as well as a Biennial Summit between the members of the Group of 20 and of

the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General, and the heads of the international financial institutions.”^{xiv} The notion of a “common agenda” spoke to diverging interests by global powers often in contradiction of blueprints such as the UN Charter, Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and human rights policies and principles. The interpretation is that the UN was increasingly being ignored, challenged, and shunted aside as new international organizations such as the G20 emerged in an increasingly multipolar world.

In September 2022, much of the Secretary-General’s propositions of September were adopted paving the way for the “Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow”^{xv} scheduled for September 2024. It is a move reminiscent of the 2015 “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”^{xvi}, nearly ten years later. The outcome document of the summit will be “a Pact for the Future”^{xvii} which will guide global governance for the next couple of years. Provisions were made for the participation of a broad range of state and non-state actors in the lead-up to the summit. For instance, participation in the summit will be drawn from “donors, as well as the private sector, financial institutions, foundations, and other donors to support the participation of representatives of developing countries in the Summit and its preparatory international process”^{xviii}. Sustaining the need to abide by the 2015 Agenda 2030 Agenda, it was resolved that the Summit for the Future will be held side by side with the Sustainable Development Goals Summit. This suggests that the Summit for the Future will be the more overtly political event while the SDGs summit will be more overtly programmatic. Visibility for the Summit would be enhanced by media and communications strategies, an attempt at amplifying the new agenda.

In 2023, decisions were made to the effect that Pact of the Future would consist of a chapeau (introduction) and four chapters: (i) Sustainable development and financing for development; (ii) International peace and security; (iii) Science, technology innovation, and digital cooperation; (iv) Youth and future generations; (v) Transforming global governance^{xix}. In January 2024, the zero draft of the Pack of the Future^{xx} was released, following the above four-part thematic structure, providing a glimpse of what to expect in the post-Summit of the Future period. This therefore forms the basis for an analysis of global governance reforms from an African perspective.

Analysis of the Draft Pact of the Future

Sustainable development and financing for development

The sub-section 1.1. of the draft is essentially a recommitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – with a heavy focus on environmental and climate change commitments – and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. It is well-appreciated that Africa bears the brunt of climate change effects even as it is the least contributor to greenhouse gases. The draft foregrounds these two programs as entry points into achieving human rights. What is new is the plan “around strengthening governance and

institutions for sustainable and inclusive transformation”^{xxi}. The “financing for development” sub-section raises concern about shortfalls in the financing of SDGs whose success is needed in Africa more than elsewhere in the world. The commitment “to preventing and combating illicit financial flows”, equally speaks to the hemorrhaging of resources from a continent already saddled by burdens such as international debt. African observers would welcome the principle of states “promulgating and applying any unilateral economic, financial or trade measures not in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations”^{xxii}. Too often, it is global powers such as the US, Russia, and China that have chosen paths independent of UN policy and legal architectures.

International Peace and Security

The entire section on international peace and security is important for Africa given the recent surge in armed conflict including civil wars and violent extremism. The affirmation of “social and cultural rights must be treated in a fair and equal manner”^{xxiii} as a foundation for peace and security should see these being factored in peacebuilding efforts on the continent. Concerns about “the continuous and progressive erosion of international norms in the field of arms regulation, non-proliferation and disarmament”^{xxiv} are justifiable in the African context because the continent is a net importer of weapons manufactured in the wealthy countries. As the draft rightly notes, trade in some of the weapons is illegal. The commitment “to investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and ensure accountability of perpetrators” would be welcome if enforceable. This is because many of the civil wars in several African countries are done with the involvement of both African and non-African foreigners.

The recognition that the UN is the ideal place for diplomatic approaches to mediation and peacebuilding – for instance through preventive diplomacy – seems more of a promise than a current reality as the UN has failed to staunch the scourge of old and new conflicts on the continent. Because Africa is home to the largest number of armed conflicts, it should be expected that the proposed “New Agenda for Peace”^{xxv} would be loaded with African interests. It should be applauded that the draft specifically makes the case for Africa in terms of peace operations and peace enforcement: “the need for adequate, predictable and sustainable financing for African Union and subregional peace support operations [and] ... the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 2719 (2023), in which the Council agreed to consider on a case-by-case basis requests from the African Union Peace and Security Council seeking authorization from the United Nations Security Council for African Union-led peace support operations ... to have access to United Nations assessed contributions”^{xxvi}. African stakeholders ought to keep an eye on the review of the “peacebuilding architecture review” which is underway and due to completion in 2025. Equally, it appears that the Peacebuilding Commission is due to revamping meaning that the African Union and sub-regional organizations should focus on it, by particularly

lobbying for a robust inclusion of learned experiences in the peace and security operations on the continent as well as elevated representation. After all, most of the work of the Commission will revolve around African conflicts.

The sub-section on “emerging domains and new technologies”^{xxvii} is important to consider at least based on the information warfare between global powers in which Africa has been drawn or suffered collateral damage. The call for the “use of information and communications technologies by agreed norms of responsible State behaviour”^{xxviii} is welcome but falls short given that internationally agreed-to rules and regulations of digital technologies are nearly non-existent.

Science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation

The call for closer linkages in science and innovation between governments, businesses, and society is a welcome one. Although there are flashes of innovation on the continent, these three broad domains operate in silos. But even more important, the fact is that Africa is a net consumer of science and technology goods and services rather than a producer, let alone an exporter. Indeed the draft notes “disparities between developed and developing countries in terms of conditions, possibilities, and capacities to produce new scientific and technological knowledge and to generate innovation”. However, no robust mitigation of the disparities is proposed. The launch of the “Secretary-General’s Scientific Advisory Board”^{xxix} should therefore be one that African stakeholders should try to take advantage of. At the same, it will be nearly impossible for the reaffirmation of the need to transfer technologies and technical expertise to be implemented in the current digital geopolitical circumstances. The same largely applies to the commitment “to addressing the major structural impediments to accessing new and emerging technologies, including by scaling up the use of open science, affordable and open-source technology, research and development”. Instead, it would be better for Africa to lobby for rules and regulations that ensure it protects its interests in science and technology including domestic knowledge, protection of local innovations, and regulation of harmful technologies. The proposal for “the United Nations system to support the efforts of developing countries to develop and strengthen their national science, technology, and innovation ecosystems” is more plausible.

Youth and Future Generations

The draft rightly advocated “the importance of the active, meaningful, and inclusive participation of youth in decision-making. We commit to strengthening meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes at the local, national, regional, and global levels.”^{xxx} This is a proposal that African negotiators would have to think through in terms of implementation. The continent is saddled with aging leaders hanging onto state power and only being removed from power through popular uprisings. Even then, cases in various African nations have shown that the youth are unable

to sustain the momentum of taking leadership, except in very few countries. The establishment of “the United Nations Youth Office” may provide some pathways for centering youth interests but the challenge is that the UN is itself an institution of older male politicians and bureaucrats. Proposals such as the establishment of youth-specific entities within the UN are likely to be manipulated by African leaders, rewarding pro-regime young leaders, and showcasing token appointments by states as a show of pro-youth programs.

The section on youth and future generations is unique to Africa, the youngest region of the world, already experiencing issues of youth bulge and youth bulge. The proposal for “investment in universal, accessible, quality and inclusive education, at all levels, and professional training, both formal and non-formal” sectors is important. However, it does not address the problem of unemployment for the millions of African youth already trained in many fields. The proposal for “establishing in the national context robust social security systems as well as social protection floors”^{xxxix} for youth and children doesn’t factor in the overall non-existence of welfare states in Africa. Nonetheless, the proposal for the establishment of “a Global Youth Investment platform to attract and direct financing of youth-related programming to strengthen existing United Nations funds that support youth and key United Nations youth initiatives” is one that African youth-focused organizations should seize. This could be done in conjunction with the proposed partnerships with private sector organizations which are more likely to appreciate the need for talent within their setups.

Transforming global governance

The overarching reform of global governance is where the rubber meets the road. The big issue is the reform of the Security Council, a matter that African states have lobbied for decades. An indication that this will be a hard nut to crack is that the draft deferred proposals until June 2024^{xxxix}. This suggests that while the reform of the Security Council is a priority, states differ on how to go about it. It doesn’t inspire confidence that proposals on the Council will be presented only two months before the Summit of the Future, leaving little room for African states to push for their inclusion. This raises the question of whether Africa should continue pursuing inclusion in the Council at this stage or focus on more attainable interests. In the meantime, the affirmation of the Security Council as the key entity mandated to maintain international peace and security will remain problematic, not least because of the current composition and the rules and regulations guiding its decisions. The draft talks about “Deepening Cooperation between the United Nations and Regional Organizations”. From an African perspective, the moral question of how cooperation between the AU and the African Economic Community regional organizations can proceed if equity in the highest echelons of the UN is off limits for the continent.

Vagueness is also evident in the “Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly”. The draft states that the drafter would examine “whether the format, name, and mandate of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly, including discussions on agenda alignment, remain fit for purpose, and explore further options for strengthening its work”^{xxxiii}. For years, it has been lamented that the General Assembly, populated by nearly thirty percent African representation, is a toothless body even as it is upheld as the main decision-making body. If the General Assembly were to be invigorated, African states would have much more agency in the implementation of solutions to the many problems the continent faces. As with the Security Council, it would appear that repurposing of the General Assembly will be a deferred matter or one that will be shunted to the sidelines. Should this happen, the much-vaunted Pact of the Future will nearly be a hollow and lost cause.

A proposal that is welcome for African civil society is the commitment “to facilitating more structured and inclusive engagement of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, together with major groups, the private sector, youth, local governments and other relevant stakeholders and regional organizations, in the activities of the Council and its functional and regional commissions.”^{xxxiv} As we shall see below, African civil society – writ large – has been active in developing its own set of ideas in response to the draft Pact of the Future. The first test for the reform process will be whether African civil society proposals are incorporated into the draft document to be presented at the Summit or not. The second one will be around the representation of African civil society versed not just in the operations of the Economic and Social Council but more broadly in the United Nations and global governance. In any case, African civil society should not be confined to the Economic and Social Council but be involved across the UN system.

The proposals on the Strengthening the Human Rights pillar of the United Nations are rightly in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If the draft proposal on this issue is upheld, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights will be enabled “to effectively carry out its mandate to respond to the broad range of human rights challenges facing the international community”^{xxxv}. Although the draft grasps human rights as “all”, “including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as the right to development”^{xxxvi}, it is curiously silent on some of the controversial human rights. What are the problems with the language of the draft in these respects? First, there are big problems with political rights, in African countries categorized as authoritarian, the majority on the continent. It is feasible that some African state parties will try to factor in the principle of non-interference in the international affairs of independent countries. This is often a ploy to violate citizens' rights and fend off criticism along with sanctions from Western powers. In this, African leaders are likely to close ranks with their authoritarian counterparts in the global South. Second, economic rights are a Janus-faced issue. On the one, hand, they can be justified under the so-called

developmental state model to defer democratic rights. On the other hand, it is justifiable to argue that economic rights are enjoyed more in the global north and therefore need to be one of the global public good. Third, the draft side steps the hot-button issue of cultural rights which has manifested in Africa in the form of LGBTQ rights. Most African nations are either overtly or covertly opposed to these rights as indeed do other nations in the Middle East and Asia. Fourth, the draft also goes silent on information rights, particularly in the domain of digital technologies.

The proposal for “identifying and addressing complex global shocks”^{xxxvii} seems straightforward until one considers the recent developments around the COVID-19 pandemic. It is instructive that the pandemic, a global shock of a lifetime, brought the ideological split between global powers in sharp relief. Africa was drawn into all manner of geopolitically-motivated conspiracy theories that accompanied the pandemic. Claims were made of vaccine nationalism as was the scourge of mal-information. The draft proposes an Emergency Platform to manage unprecedented developments of a planetary reach. But the global powers are drifting farther apart meaning that it will be difficult to agree on such a mechanism. The cautionary tale here is that Africans will have to consider an independent fallback mechanism in anticipation of the gridlock that the emergency platform is likely to encounter.

The section on “Reforming the international financial architecture and ongoing efforts to improve international debt mechanisms”^{xxxviii} features a set of detailed proposals. Proposals for more equitable participation and representation of developing countries in the global financial architecture, better terms for loans, as well as debt restructuring and relief, are all welcome. For instance, a major critique of international financial institutions is that they lend money to African states with far steeper terms of repayment than they do to developing countries. The issue of unsustainable loans has meanwhile raised the issue of a debt trap in Africa by countries, particularly from the global South. Indeed, the draft proposes efforts to “strengthen the global debt architecture to provide timely, predictable and fair debt restructuring and debt relief, when required”. African countries would do well to present forward-looking proposals to the “Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025” which the draft specifically mentions one of the financial reform avenues.

There are challenges aplenty from an African viewpoint. First, without naming them, the drafters seem to concede that organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund somewhat fall outside of the UN remit. This flies in the face of the Summit’s theme of a common agenda particularly when multilateral financial institutions of the UN are considered much more exclusive for the global North. Indeed, the de-dollarization of the global economy impulse by global organizations such as the BRICS speaks to the frustration with UN financial institutions shared by Africans. The proposal for “a biennial summit at the level of Heads of State and Government between the members of the Group

of 20 and the members of the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General, and the heads of the international financial institutions” is good. Indeed, Africa is now a member of the G20. With the 2024 summit scheduled for November in Brazil, the Summit of the Future provides a first stab at negotiating on financial matters at both the UN and G20 levels.

Conclusion

This draft paper has discussed the brief trajectory of developments leading to the convening of the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024. It made passing comments and reflections on potential areas of African agency in this historic development. The proposed further research work to bring the paper to completion includes the following:

1. Consider the actions that African stakeholders have undertaken in response to the plans for the Summit generally, and the proposed Pact of the Future specifically. African agency would be measured by the extent to which African inputs have been incorporated into the plans.
2. Analyse and present African interests from the point of view of the African Union, the sub-regional organizations, individual governments, and non-state actors.
3. Identify gaps in Africa's involvement in the process and undertake remedial action ahead of the Summit.

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