

# Summit of the Future Has Big Ambitions. Will It Deliver?



by Thin Lei Win



This September, when member states gather in New York for the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, they will have more than the UN budget and the current state of global affairs to consider. They will be putting the final touches on key documents that could move the needle on some of the world's most pressing issues such as climate change and possibly contribute to shaping a new era of multilateralism that includes a reconfiguration of international financial architecture and the UN Security Council.

The documents are a result of a months-long intergovernmental negotiation process that will culminate in an ambitious "Summit of the Future",<sup>1</sup> which has been billed as "a once-in-a-

generation opportunity to reinvigorate multilateralism" by the organisers,<sup>2</sup> in reference to the need to renew and strengthen international cooperation amidst rising geopolitical instability, rapid technological advances, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather.<sup>3</sup>

Scientists now say 2024 could become the world's hottest year, even surpassing the record-shattering 2023.<sup>4</sup> Rising

<sup>1</sup> See the official website: <https://www.un.org/en/node/209909>.

<sup>2</sup> UN News, *Summit of the Future 'Unique Opportunity' to Rebuild Trust: Guterres*, 21 September 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141187>.

<sup>3</sup> Indermit Gill and M. Ayhan Kose, "5 Major Risks Confronting the Global Economy in 2024", in *Brookings Commentaries*, 17 January 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1754935>.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Abnett and Alison Withers, "2024 Could Be World's Hottest Year as June Breaks Records", in *Reuters*, 8 July 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/2024-could-be-worlds->

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temperatures and shifting weather patterns are reducing crop yields and squeezing food supplies, creating what could become a permanent source of inflation, the *Financial Times* reported.<sup>5</sup> Already, one in 11 people globally are chronically hungry and nearly a third cannot afford healthy diets.<sup>6</sup> Rising food prices and failed harvests could push millions more further into extreme poverty and hunger, worsen inequalities and lead to social upheaval.

All of these could lead to a rise in migration in search of better economic opportunities. Yet elections held so far this year have also shown a deeply divided world where a significant section of the populace is attracted by rhetorics that scapegoat immigrants, provide empty solutions to rising costs and dismiss climate action as unaffordable, unachievable and unfashionable.

We need multilateralism now more than ever. But the key question is: can the Summit of the Future help the world course-correct? Or will it become yet another example of a broken system, with much talk and little action?

### *A Pact for the Future*

The Summit of the Future was borne out of a declaration made at the

[hottest-year-june-breaks-records-2024-07-08](https://www.un.org/en/press/docs/2024/04/240408_hottest-year-june-breaks-records-2024-07-08).

<sup>5</sup> Susannah Savage, "Climate Change Is Pushing Up Food Prices – and Worrying Central Banks", in *Financial Times*, 3 July 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/125e89c0-308a-492f-ae8e-6834847d1186>.

<sup>6</sup> FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024*, Rome, FAO, 2024, p. xvi, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd1254en>.

height of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> It was in commemoration of the UN's 75th anniversary, with world leaders committing to a host of initiatives, including upgrading the UN, protecting the environment, achieving gender equality and working with the youth. A resolution adopted two years later defined the Summit's modalities, including when it will be held: 22 and 23 September 2024.<sup>8</sup>

It will be preceded by "Action Days" on 20 and 21 September. Representatives from member states, civil society, private sector, academia, local and regional authorities, youth, and many more will come together, starting with "a dedicated, youth-led afternoon", according to the Summit's website and draft programme.<sup>9</sup> The second day will focus on three priorities: digital and technology, peace and security, and sustainable development and financing. So far, however, the agenda and scale of the four days remain somewhat unclear.

The key outputs to look out for are three documents: "Pact for the Future",<sup>10</sup> "Declaration on Future Generations" and the "Global Digital Compact", all currently being negotiated and revised. The Pact for the Future is the main text

<sup>7</sup> UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations*, 21 September 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/1>.

<sup>8</sup> UN General Assembly, *Modalities for the Summit of the Future*, 8 September 2022, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/76/307>.

<sup>9</sup> Summit of the Future website: *Action Days*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/217887>.

<sup>10</sup> Summit of the Future website: *Pact for the Future - Revisions*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/217496>.

while the other two will be annexed to it.

The latest version of the 30-page Pact covers five areas: sustainable development and related financing; international peace and security; science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation; youth and future generations; and transforming global governance.<sup>11</sup> Climate change, peace and governance featured prominently and across four out of five areas, but the pledge in a previous version to “fundamentally transform our food systems for the benefit of people, planet and prosperity”<sup>12</sup> was dropped in favour of a blander sentence: “promote equitable, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems”.<sup>13</sup> There was no other mention of food systems. Migration was mentioned twice.

The biggest space – nearly eight pages – was dedicated to “Transforming Global Governance”, possibly the most important as well as the most difficult area. A significant chunk concerns the reform of the international financial architecture to make it more diverse and inclusive, address existing inequalities and make it able to support poor nations in their path to a greener and more sustainable development.

<sup>11</sup> Summit of the Future, *Pact for the Future: Rev.2*, 17 July 2024, [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/pact\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_-\\_rev.2\\_-\\_17\\_july.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/pact_for_the_future_-_rev.2_-_17_july.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Summit of the Future, *Pact for the Future: Rev.1*, 14 May 2024, point 6(d), <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact-for-the-future-rev.1.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Summit of the Future, *Pact for the Future: Rev.2*, cit., point 19(c).

The reform of the Security Council, a big bone of contention because of perceived unfairness and ineffectiveness in its current make up,<sup>14</sup> is also on the table, although there is currently no agreed language on this front. A placeholder sentence said, “[We] will present language on this issue as soon as possible in light of ongoing deliberations” in other UN fora.<sup>15</sup>

For its part, the 14-page Global Digital Compact is focused on overcoming digital, data and innovation divides and building “an open, free, secure and human-centered digital future”.<sup>16</sup> Its latest draft includes time-bound commitments by 2030 to develop principles for environmental sustainability across the life cycle of digital technologies and to ensure that digital infrastructures are sustainably designed to be able to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. If agreed, the UN Secretary-General is to prepare a progress report starting in 2026, followed by a high-level review a year later.

At five pages long, the Declaration on Future Generations is the shortest and most straightforward. It goes beyond the participation of youth in policy decisions, and is also concerned

<sup>14</sup> Stewart Patrick (ed.), *UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment, 28 June 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/un-security-council-reform-what-the-world-thinks>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Gowan, “What the Draft UN ‘Pact for the Future’ Tells Us About International Insecurity”, in *Just Security*, 26 July 2024, <https://wp.me/p5gGh3-pwI>.

<sup>16</sup> Summit of the Future website: *Global Digital Compact*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/215109>.

with those yet to be born.<sup>17</sup> Here, climate change, conflicts, hunger and migration are recurring themes. If agreed, this will require regular updates and reviews on whether and how nations are keeping to their commitments to undertake strategies to achieve inclusive economic growth and prioritise urgent action on climate change.

### *A breakdown or a breakthrough?*

In a consensus-based system, agreements tend to be based on the lowest common denominator instead of striving for ambitious actions necessary to tackle today's complex challenges. There is widespread disillusionment among veterans of multilateral negotiations, who, despite being staunch supporters of multilateralism, have grown weary of a never-ending roster of summits and conferences that consistently fail to deliver substantial results.

Sofía Monsalve Suárez, secretary general of human rights organisation FIAN International and member of the International Panel of Experts on Food Systems (IPES-Food), illustrates this frustration. She criticises the draft Pact for the Future for its omission of the right to food and the lack of prominent focus on food issues. "The only concrete measure regarding food insecurity and malnutrition pertains to science, technology, and innovation", she noted.<sup>18</sup> While these

areas are undoubtedly important, Suárez cautions that prioritising them without addressing deeper systemic issues such as corporate power and the concentration of land, market power and wealth in food systems might ultimately benefit corporations more than the people suffering from hunger and ecological destruction.

David Archer, head of programmes and influencing at ActionAid, echoed this scepticism, expressing doubts about the event's potential for meaningful change. "The draft Pact has warm words but little real substance. We are focused on making breakthroughs in changing the colonial nature of the global financial architecture", he said,<sup>19</sup> mentioning activities outside the Summit such as the Financing for Development process and ongoing negotiations for a UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, which he believes hold more promise for real breakthroughs.

Reflecting on the unmet commitments made at past climate summits, Dhanush Dinesh, founder of Clim-Eat, questioned the need for an event such as this. "These summits are increasingly becoming platforms for countries and international organisations to greenwash citizens, making promises they do not intend to keep", he said,<sup>20</sup> criticising the significant time, financial and human resources these summits consume.

<sup>17</sup> Summit of the Future website: *Declaration on Future Generations*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/213103>.

<sup>18</sup> Based on an e-mail interview conducted on 9 July 2024 for this commentary.

<sup>19</sup> Based on an e-mail interview conducted on 11 July 2024 for this commentary.

<sup>20</sup> Based on an e-mail interview conducted on 5 July 2024 for this commentary.

Instead, Edward Davey, head of World Resources Institute Europe's UK office and senior advisor of the Food and Land Use Coalition, maintained a more optimistic outlook. He believes that the Summit can "elevate important multilateral challenges to world leaders' attention" while acknowledging the limitations of such meetings. Still, Davey believes that a well-executed multilateral meeting can drive political attention and action, particularly if it raises the profile of crucial issues like food systems.<sup>21</sup>

Therein lies the complex landscape under which the Summit of the Future is being held, and the significant frustration and scepticism, as well as hope, riding on it.

### *Looking ahead*

It is clear that there is potential for the Summit to lay the groundwork for several critical initiatives, even if it falls short of complete systemic transformation. But there is also a clear risk it could fall into a well-worn pattern of past gatherings which produced lofty declarations but no real change on the ground.

One achievable outcome is the adoption of the Global Digital Compact, with time-bound goals to bridge digital divides. But whether the Summit can go beyond symbolic gestures remains to be seen. A key litmus test will be a bold, forward-looking Pact that will commit world leaders to concrete, time-bound actions on critical issues,

<sup>21</sup> Based on an e-mail interview conducted on 11 July 2024 for this commentary.

including reforming global governance structures within the UN and other international bodies to make them more inclusive and representative.

For example, the proposal in the latest draft of the Pact to create a chair on the IMF Executive Board for sub-Saharan Africa is one specific step towards diversifying the international financial architecture.<sup>22</sup> So are the pledges to finalise negotiations on an international, legally-binding treaty on plastic pollution and to provide "universal coverage of early warning systems by 2027" against climate change-induced disasters.<sup>23</sup> More such steps are needed: currently they are few and far between.

These steps themselves may not resolve all issues, but they can act as a significant push towards reinvigorating multilateralism, because the alternative is worse. Without multilateral frameworks, individual countries are likely to prioritise national interests over collective well-being and this could precipitate a domino effect of worsening geopolitical tensions and economic instability and stymieing the world's ability to effectively address transnational challenges.

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<sup>22</sup> Summit of the Future, *Pact for the Future: Rev.2*, cit., point 73.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, point 25(c).

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