



UN General Assembly Week of Summits: Q&A

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Over a hundred Heads of State or Government are expected to arrive to New York in the last week of September for a series of back-to-back summit meetings at the opening of the General Assembly of the United Nations. On top of the usual photo opportunities and a myriad of bilateral meetings between leaders, this High-level week provides an opportunity for multilateral action to shift away from ‘business as usual’ and address some enormous current challenges.

The calendar is certainly crowded: the [Climate Action Summit](#) and the [High-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage](#) on 23 September, the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\) Summit](#) on 24-25 September, the [High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development \(FfD\)](#) on 26 September, and the [High-level Midterm Review of the SAMOA Pathway](#) on 27 September.

These multiple events enable world leaders to confront policy gaps, address interlinkages among these issues and design policies and actions in an interconnected way. Similar vested interests that resist regulation of the corporate sector to protect the largest greenhouse gas emitters also block increased access to affordable medicines and vaccinations. Further, the conversations on financing the SDGs, particularly on ecological and climate issues cannot be divorced from the programme on Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The incoming [President of the General Assembly](#), Tijjani Muhammad-Bande of Nigeria, calls the High-level week a “key opportunity to demonstrate that multilateralism works”. [Secretary-General \(S-G\) António Guterres](#) notes that the summits hold the power to affect “transformative change that is fair and sustainable.” With such emphasis on the potential of the High-level week, civil society organizations (CSOs) are also emphasizing the urgency to address systemic and structural changes across all the meetings.

Climate Action Summit

The Climate Action Summit will see the presentation of specific “initiatives” as developed by a series of working groups, each assigned to a different “track.” These tracks include: mitigation strategy, social and political drivers, youth and mobilization, energy transition, resilience and adaptation, nature-based solutions, infrastructure, cities and local government, climate finance and carbon pricing and industry.

Closely linked to the issues faced by Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the S-G has requested the Climate Action Summit address systemic issues and promote action needed to slow global warming and both mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Central to climate discussions, even when not explicit, are the issues of extraterritorial impacts of national actions and the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) that point to larger responsibilities of high-emissions countries both within their borders and beyond.

Will the emphasis on accelerating action result in big corporations and large countries reducing their harmful activities or will the conflict with perceived short-term interests prevail?

Will the largest emitters of greenhouse gases (GHG) reduce their emissions first, as agreed to in the 2030 Agenda?

Will priority be placed on climate change mitigation by the major emitters (both public and private) or will Small Island Developing States be burdened further with their need to adapt to survive?

High-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC)

The High-level meeting on UHC will take place on 23 September with opening and closing segments and multi-stakeholder panels. The meeting will adopt a [Political Declaration](#) currently being negotiated, with consensus lacking on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The panels will discuss health as a driver of equity as well as making the case for investment in UHC.

UHC is hindered by systemic inequalities that the mainstream indicators fail to acknowledge. Global health specialist Manjari Mahajan discusses the issue of statistics in her article on [“The IHME in the Shifting Landscape of Global Health Metrics”](#) recently published in the journal *Global Policy*, stating that an “emphasis on quantitative metrics has narrowly conceptualized development and erased complex social and political processes”. Her study examines how the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), a global health statistics institute founded (and primarily funded) by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has operated independently of the WHO and at times in competition with it in an effort to measure and monitor health information. IHME represents what Mahajan has called “a sidelining of international agencies” and an outsourcing of knowledge production. This in turn creates challenges in holding private actors accountable and creating regulations to ensure universal health coverage. Topics like this and intellectual property rights are missing from the proposed agenda of the High-level meeting on UHC. Further, the World Bank has been invited to deliver an opening statement, implicitly placing it at the same level as the WHO in the health field.

What does universal coverage mean and how is it measured—market access or a change to the market itself?

Where does responsibility for increasing access to public health goods (vaccinations, medicines, healthcare, etc.) lie? Governments or Big Pharma?

Does the international community turn to private donors—philanthropists and the private sector—to finance vaccinations and medications or will multilateral institutions establish regulations on Big Pharmaceuticals to reduce costs?

SDG Summit

The SDG Summit will include several panels discussing mega-trends, the [Global Sustainable Development Report \(GSDR\)](#) and its entry points and levers, local action to achieve the SDGs, and partnerships for sustainable development. The SDG Summit will also adopt a pre-negotiated [Political Declaration](#), outlining the key challenges and commitments to the SDGs. The proposed programme places emphasis on Member States registering “[SDG Acceleration Actions](#)” prior to the Summit, where such actions “to contribute to a speeded up implementation of the 2030 Agenda” can be presented. However, beyond a presentation of acceleration actions at the Summit in September, it remains unclear whether any mechanisms exist to measure and assess the actions and their fulfillment.

The SDG Business Forum takes place on UN grounds parallel to the SDG Summit’s partnerships dialogue, highlighting the important role given by the UN to the corporate and business sectors. This partnership priority has been further spelled out by the recently signed agreement (MoU) between the UN and the World Economic Forum (WEF), about which many CSOs have expressed concern. The MoU provides for mutual access to global meetings organized by both parties, and also offers expanded (and privileged) access for members of the WEF to local UN offices and programmes, furthering private business influence on the sustainable development agenda. In [“How the United Nations is quietly being turned into a public-private partnership,”](#) global governance specialist Harris Gleckman explores how this could undermine preferential clauses in country procurement regulations that favour locally-owned small and medium enterprises. Notably, the WEF will be actively involved in the Climate Action Summit.

As the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) meets under the General Assembly only once every four years to review progress and implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this year presents a critical opportunity to address many of the concerns raised annually at the 2019 HLPF under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Voices amongst CSOs raised important questions regarding corporate capture and impunity of the dominant players, public and private, debt

sustainability and wealth redistribution, and questioned whether or not the HLPF as currently configured is fit for its purpose of overseeing the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

How can the HLPF be reformed to better address global obstacles to the SDGs? Would regional fora be a better place to discuss national reviews among peers, with the global meeting focusing on cross-border and extraterritorial responsibilities?

How can indicators of sustainability--material footprint, depletion of stocks of natural resources, natural 'budgets' (e.g., emissions budgets) be incorporated into the global statistical framework for measuring progress on the SDGs?

Will the SDG Business Forum move beyond congratulating business for stop-gapping the financing gap to establish concrete means to hold the corporate sector accountable to the 2030 Agenda in not only their financing but also in their practices?

High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development

The proposed agenda for the dialogue has three interactive sessions, together called “putting public resources to work for more equal and sustainable societies”. These include: 1) combatting illicit financial flows, 2) financing the SDGs and climate action against rising debt burdens, and 3) moving the money to fill the climate action and SDG financing gap. While the first two panels raise important topics like illicit financial flows and debt burdens, the third panel has guiding questions that suggest a desire to increase private sector financing of the development agenda, potentially further de-linking the public sector from financing responsibilities.

Across the High-level meetings, the importance of extraterritorial obligations and the need for international cooperation as a means to address them is very clear. Issues of greenhouse gas emissions by donor countries and the private sector, illicit financial flows, arms sales, corporate and individual tax havens all relate to not only the Financing for Development dialogue, but also to the various meetings taking place during the week.

Is the governance trend shifting responsibility from the public sector and outsourcing financing to the private sector?

What has been the impact of leveraging private investment for the SDGs? Have there been significant results? Not only may it sideline the importance of public resources as opposed to private, it may also be a misuse of them. What are alternative strategies?

High-level Meeting on the implementation of the Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway

This High-level meeting will take place on Friday, 27 September, the final day of the UNGA week. The event will see two roundtables followed by interactive dialogue, focused on “progress, gaps and challenges” and “priorities, solutions and the way forward”. The meeting will serve to review the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) priorities on the implementation of the SAMOA Pathway.

Throughout the 2019 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) review of SDG 13 on climate change it has become clear that SIDS are being asked to adapt to consequences they are not responsible for—while major emitters claim the funding doesn’t exist for serious mitigation to take place. Ambassador Courtenay Rattray of Jamaica stated that “contrary to the Green Climate Fund’s 50/50 rule, 70 percent (US\$ 30 billion) went to adaptation and only 30 percent (US \$12 billion) to mitigation in 2018”. This tension around financing mitigation needs to be addressed.

Parallel and Civil Society Meetings

In parallel to the five Summits of the High-Level week at UN Headquarters, the [Youth Climate Summit](#) will take place on 21 September, the [SDG Business Forum](#) on 25 September, the [SDG Action Zone](#) on 21-27 September and the recently announced Civil Society SDG Forum on 24 September. Also taking place outside of UN Headquarters are various civil society initiatives including the [Youth Climate Strike](#) on 17 September, the [Global Climate Strike](#) 20-27 September, and the [People’s Assembly](#) 24-25 September.

UN DESA describes the Civil Society SDG Forum as “a dedicated space for stakeholders at the margins of the SDG Summit,” announcing the forum on 22 August, a mere month before the forum is scheduled to take place. The Civil Society SDG Forum will build on issues raised at the 2019 HLPF, ranging from a debt workout mechanism to tax justice and fundamental paradigms that produce and sustain inequality within and among countries.

The corporate sector has been accorded considerable space both in the official Summits and the SDG Business Forum and present will be many CEOs that oversee yearly incomes greater than the whole economy of many UN Member States. CSOs will be monitoring this engagement for concrete commitments to solve the finance gap for sustainable development and abandoning questionable business practices that undermine human rights and sustainability.

The Youth Climate Summit will take place on Saturday 21 September, and while participation by Member States is neither confirmed nor unconfirmed, the Summit is described as “a platform for young leaders who are driving climate action to showcase their solutions”. How will the

content of presentations at the Youth Climate Summit find its way into the Climate Summit on 23 September? Many youth leaders, notably Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Our Future movement have spectacularly raised complex and difficult conversations related to climate change in multilateral arenas before, will this continue at the Climate Summit?

Looking ahead to September

The September Summits (UN General Assembly High-level Week) and the global problems to be discussed present an unprecedented opportunity to raise critical cross-cutting issues that necessitate multilateral action. Across the High-level week, Member States are confronted with opportunities to address the urgency of ecological devastation and of securing all human rights for all.

Many assessments in the preparation of High-level week demonstrate that the global community is off-track to achieving the SDGs. UN [Deputy Secretary-General](#) Amina Mohammed has stressed, “through High-level week 2019, leaders from government and beyond can send a clear signal to the world: we are taking the decisions that will get us back on track.” To take the decisions needed in that extraordinary week, the political conversations must be happening now. The future of people and planet requires urgent and far-reaching action at all levels of government.

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