



**Extract from the report:**

Spotlight on  
**Global Multilateralism**

Perspectives on the future  
of international cooperation  
in times of multiple crises

# Executive Summary: Reshaping multilateralism in times of crises

COMPILED BY JENS MARTENS

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When Heads of State and Government met in September 2020 to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations, they painted a bleak, but realistic, picture of the global situation:

“Our world (...) is plagued by growing inequality, poverty, hunger, armed conflicts, terrorism, insecurity, climate change and pandemics. People in different corners of the world are forced to make dangerous journeys in search of refuge and safety. The least developed countries are falling behind, and we still have not achieved complete decolonization.”<sup>1</sup>

They concluded that what was needed is a revitalized multilateralism;

“Our challenges are interconnected and can only be addressed through reinvigorated multilateralism. (...) Multilateralism is not an option but a necessity as we build back better for a more equal, more resilient and more sustainable world. The United Nations must be at the centre of our efforts.”<sup>2</sup>

But since then, the interrelated crises have multiplied. In addition to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, there have been the geopolitical and economic effects of the war in Ukraine, a worldwide cost of living crisis and an intensified debt crisis in more and more countries of the global South.

Scientists are now even warning of the risk of a global polycrisis, “a single, macro-crisis of interconnected, runaway failures of Earth’s vital natural and social systems that irreversibly degrades humanity’s prospects”.<sup>3</sup>

Human rights, and especially women’s rights, are under attack in many countries. Nationalism, sometimes coupled with increasing authoritarianism, has been on the rise worldwide. Rich countries of the global North, especially the EU and the USA, continue to practice inhumane migration policies toward refugees. At the same time, they pursue self-serving and short-sighted “my country first” policies, whether in hoarding vaccines and subsidizing their domestic pharmaceutical industries, or in the race for global natural gas reserves. This has undermined multilateral solutions and led to a growing atmosphere of mistrust between countries.

“Trust is in short supply”, UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the Security Council in August 2022.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Member States defined one of the main purposes of the Summit of the Future in September 2024 to be “restoring trust among Member States”.<sup>5</sup> António Guterres had proposed to hold such a Summit of the Future as “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance (...)”.<sup>6</sup>

1 UN General Assembly (2020), para. 4

2 Ibid., para. 5

3 Homer-Dixon et al. (2021)

4 <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21421.doc.htm>

5 UN General Assembly (2022a), para. 1

6 <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>

Member States will determine the final topics and outcome of the Summit of the Future. However, the UN Secretary-General has already set out the thematic framework in his report *Our Common Agenda*<sup>7</sup> and subsequent statements and policy briefs.<sup>8</sup> The spectrum of topics ranges from a New Agenda for Peace, a Global Digital Compact and mechanisms to take the interests and needs of future generations into account, to reforms of the International Financial Architecture.

The Summit offers an opportunity, at least in theory, to respond to the current crises with far-reaching political agreements and institutional reforms. However, this presupposes that the governments do not limit themselves to symbolic action and voluntary commitments, but take binding decisions - also and above all on the provision of (financial) resources for their implementation. Without such decisions, it will hardly be possible to regain trust between countries.

Of course, it would be naive to believe that the risk of a global polycrisis could be overcome with a single summit meeting. But the series of UN events and negotiation processes of the coming two years can certainly contribute to shaping the political discourse on the question of which structural changes are necessary to respond to the global crises and to foster multilateral cooperation based on solidarity. As a special issue of the *Society for International Development* journal stated: “Reimagining multilateralism is ‘a long but urgently necessary journey.’”<sup>9</sup> The Summit of the Future can mark a milestone on this journey.

Civil society organizations, trade unions and researchers have formulated comprehensive positions and recommendations that can inform the discourse about the future of multilateralism. Some of their analyses and key messages are compiled in this report. They address the following topics:

**A New Agenda for Peace and Common Security:** The need to move away from the idea of nuclear deterrence as

a foundation of international security, identified in the early 1980s, is more urgent than ever. The concept of Common Security can be the alternative to nuclear competition and the threat of mass destruction. The Olof Palme International Centre, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Peace Bureau (IPB) have taken the initiative to analyse how this 40-year-old concept, established by the Palme Commission in the midst of the Cold War, can be adapted to today’s realities. Their recommendations are practical steps, but also set out a vision for a better, safer world (*see article by Anna Sundström and Björn Lindh*). They aim to strengthen the global architecture for peace, inter alia, through giving more power and authority to the General Assembly on security matters (to avoid individual Member States paralyzing the whole UN common security system), and through holding a Helsinki II process in 2025, 50 years after the first Helsinki agreement laid the foundations for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). They call for a new ‘peace dividend’, against the current mainstream trend, and propose to convene a special UN General Assembly for disarmament 2023/2024 to set a global commitment to reduce military expenditures by 2 percent per year. They urge the nuclear powers to reinstate arms control treaties, like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. And they call for binding rules for new military technologies and outer space weapons, to prohibit autonomous weapons systems and to prevent further militarization of outer space.

**A New Social Contract:** Global crises require global solutions, and one of them is to embrace a New Social Contract, as the collective commitment to realize key worker demands (*see article by Paola Simonetti and Giulia Massobrio*). For the ITUC, a New Social Contract comprises the following six elements: 1) the creation of decent and climate-friendly jobs with just transition; 2) the fulfillment of rights for all workers; 3) minimum living wages and equal pay policies; 4) universal social protection, including the establishment of a Social Protection Fund; 5) policies to end all forms of discrimination, such as by race or gender; and 6) ensuring a truly inclusive multilateral system, where countries of the global South have the policy space to define their development models. The

7 UN Secretary-General (2021)

8 <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/policy-briefs>

9 Prato/Adams (2021)

targets of the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, launched by the UN Secretary-General in September 2021, match the trade union demands for a New Social Contract. For instance, the Accelerator sets out a target to create at least 400 million jobs by 2030, primarily in the green and care economies. The care economy is particularly crucial to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda on the participation of women in the labour market and to overcome structural gender-based discrimination. For women workers, the global gender pay gap is still more than 20 percent and the labour force participation gap stands at 27 percent.<sup>10</sup>

**Reforms to the Global Financial Architecture:** The current global financial architecture is deeply dysfunctional and strongly biased towards the interests of the rich countries of the global North. Just recently, the UN Secretary-General called for a reform of the global financial systems through “a new Bretton Woods moment”.<sup>11</sup> New risks such as interest rate increases, higher inflation, collateralized debt and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters are a dangerous combination that already signals that the world is headed towards a new global financial crisis. Key reform areas are the global debt architecture and the global tax governance which as structured, make it impossible for developing countries to mobilize resources needed to meet development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in 2015. Among the key measures needed to reform the current debt architecture are the establishment of a multilateral debt restructuring mechanism under the auspices of the United Nations, an automatic suspension of debt payments when borrowing countries are on the verge of a debt crisis and a comprehensive debt sustainability assessment that allows for the timely identification of debt relief and restructuring needs before a country becomes distressed and defaults (*see article by Patricia Miranda*).

To improve the levels of domestic resource mobilization, much can be done at the national level. But

national economies do not operate in a vacuum and are affected by decisions that are made at the global level. With regard to tax cooperation and efforts to curb illicit financial flows these decisions have been taken so far mainly in the OECD, the exclusive club of the rich countries. The lack of a universal and inclusive global tax architecture has been highlighted as a problem by many countries and civil society organizations, such as, for many years, Tax Justice Network Africa (*see article by Chenai Mukumba*). There is an urgent need to establish a universal intergovernmental tax body under the auspices of the UN and to negotiate a UN Tax Convention to address tax havens and tax abuse, particularly by transnational corporations and wealthy individuals, and other forms of illicit financial flows. The most recently adopted UN General Assembly resolution on the “promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations”, tabled by the African Group, marks a historic turning point and is a concrete step towards reforming the system.<sup>12</sup>

Reforms to the international financial architecture are not only necessary with regard to institutional changes and new governance mechanisms, but also with regard to the normative framework. This is especially relevant for the human rights obligations of the Bretton Woods Institutions, and the IMF in particular (*see article by Aldo Caliari*). The IMF considers that, as a monetary agency, international human rights law does not apply to it. But some of the topics currently covered by the IMF, such as social spending, clearly fall under the application of human rights standards, while others traditionally under IMF jurisdiction have human rights dimensions to consider. To fill the normative governance gap, the creation of an expert panel on the human rights dimensions of IMF programmes could be a first step to embedding human rights in the policies of the organization. The proposed panel would be independent from the IMF and take complaints from individuals or groups who allege damage as a result of an IMF loan or programme.

<sup>10</sup> ITUC (2022)

<sup>11</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2023/dev3447.doc.htm>

<sup>12</sup> UN General Assembly (2022b)

**Recognizing the Human Rights of Future Generations:**

In his report *Our Common Agenda* the UN Secretary-General emphasized the importance of strengthening solidarity with younger and future generations. The *Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations*, adopted in February 2023, provide an important guide to ensure that any action in this regard is in line with international human rights law (see article by Ana María Suárez Franco and Sandra Liebenberg). Future generations are essentially voiceless and largely unrepresented in decision-making and yet their human rights will be profoundly affected by actions and failures to act in the present. The Principles apply the tripartite framework of obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights to future generations. They provide illustrative examples of what would constitute violations of the human rights of future generations, for instance the failure to effectively regulate, and where appropriate prohibit, scientific research and activities that pose a reasonably foreseeable and substantial risk to the human rights of future generations, including genetic engineering and geo-engineering. Necessary measures to fulfil the human rights of future generations include phasing out unsustainable consumption and production patterns that jeopardize the Earth's ability to sustain future generations whilst recognizing that wealthier States must proceed more expeditiously under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.

**Transforming Education Systems:** Of particular importance for current and future generations is the human right to education. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on education, hitting already underfunded and overburdened public systems, and affecting millions of already marginalized children, young people and communities. In response, the UN Secretary-General convened the Transforming Education Summit, the first-ever summit at the level of Heads of State and Government devoted to education. The aim was to get the world back on track towards the goal of quality education for all but also to jumpstart the necessary transformation of education systems. The summit did not result in any decisive actions, but it did provide an opening to address some systemic challenges (see

article by Antonia Wulff). These include the need to improve global education coordination and to increase public education financing. With two thirds of low and lower-middle income countries having cut their education budgets since the start of the pandemic, a third of the poorest countries spending more on debt servicing than on education, and 85 percent of the world's population expected to live under austerity constraints in 2023, education budgets are under real pressure. Therefore, the Call to Action on Educational Investment represents an important step in recognizing the systemic issues underpinning education financing, including the need "to remove obstacles such as public sector wage bill constraints that prevent increased spending on education".<sup>13</sup>

**A Socially Just Digital Transition:** One of the proposed outcomes of the Summit of the Future is a Global Digital Compact (GDC) which is expected to outline principles for an "open, free and secure digital future for all".<sup>14</sup> But it is still unclear whether the GDC will be able to make up for the governance deficit resulting from the lack of a global home for digital public policy issues and the dominance and agenda-setting power of the Big Tech companies. The UN needs to make a clean break from the history of corporatized rule-making for the digital future and the trust in multistakeholder governance (see article by Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chamli). Instead, the GDC should seek consensus for a multilateral mandate on digitalization and sustainable human futures along five key axes: 1) initiating a treaty process on digital human rights that articulates the nature of individual and collective autonomy in the epoch of data and AI as well as the right to development for an equitable international data order; 2) setting up a new specialized agency on frontier technologies and sustainability sciences (akin to the International Telecommunications Union created at the dawn of the telecommunications era); 3) mobilizing dedicated public financing for development cooperation in digital infrastructure capabilities; 4) internationalizing governance of Critical Internet Resources, the

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/financing-education>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>

platformized cybersphere, and ICANN; and 5) overhauling global multilateral rules in trade, intellectual property and taxation for a just digital future.

**Strengthening Inclusive Multi-level Governance:** Multilateralism is no longer just a matter for national governments. Every day, local and regional governments (LRGs) and their workers and trade unions are on the frontline of the world's intersecting global crises. However, their role is not yet adequately recognized in the global multilateral system, although cities, regions and their international associations such as the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) play an increasingly active role (*see article by Edgardo Bilsky and Daria Cibrario*). In the context of efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda, for example, they are working together with other networks and municipal alliances in the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments.<sup>15</sup> If humanity is to successfully tackle the crises of our times, a structural shift in multilateralism is needed to make it more democratic and inclusive. This is why LRGs seek a full-fledged permanent seat at the decision-making table of the multilateral system, as per the UN Secretary-General's proposal to create a UN Advisory Group of Local and Regional Governments. Besides, trade unions and community organizations should be organically included and meaningfully consulted in global policymaking, and in multilateral institutions and processes, as they bring their unique frontline expertise that is so critical to implement all global agendas.

In view of the global challenges, the existing governance deficits and the growing recognition of the need for global cooperation, steps toward a solidarity-based multilateralism are essential. They require a fundamental strengthening of democratic global governance structures and the reduction of power imbalance between global economic and financial institutions and UN agencies responsible for human rights and sustainability. In concrete terms, this means that the relevant UN bodies, in particular the Human Rights Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the High Level Political

Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), must be strengthened and no longer subordinated de facto to international financial institutions and exclusive clubs such as the G20.

Institutional strengthening of the UN also requires closing global governance gaps in areas still dominated by exclusive clubs of rich nations or creditors, such as the OECD (e.g., on tax cooperation) and the Paris Club (on debt policy).

Furthermore, strengthening multilateral cooperation also requires adequate, predictable and reliable funding for the UN system. The UN and most of its specialized agencies are far from achieving this. Governments must reverse the trend toward funding UN institutions through voluntary, earmarked contributions. The increased dependence on the interests of a few financially strong donors, public and private, contradicts the principle of democratic governance and impairs the flexibility and autonomy of the organizations.

Finally, the UN must be equipped not only with the necessary financial resources but also with effective political and legal instruments. This requires a commitment to reverse course on the reliance on non-binding instruments, voluntary commitments and public-private partnerships to pursuing the kind of solidarity-based multilateralism needed to address today's global crises.

<sup>15</sup> [www.global-taskforce.org](http://www.global-taskforce.org)

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Spotlight on

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