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THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS SUMMIT 2023

THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION AT STAKE?

The upcoming SDG Summit aims to bring the 17 Sustainable Development Goals back on track. The outcome will affect other UN processes and the future of multilateral cooperation in general.

This September, world leaders and other stakeholders will meet in New York for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit. This high-level conference arranged under the auspices of the UN General Assembly is the focal point of the UN work in 2023, as it marks the halfway point for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The aim of the summit is to find a way to implement the goals at a time when the pandemic, climate change, and great power rivalry have impacted the furthering of development.

The SDGs provide a people-oriented plan for peace and prosperity, seeking to eradicate poverty and hunger, reduce inequalities, increase well-being and health, and bolster economic growth, among a long list of other ambitious goals. At the heart of the SDGs is sustainable social and economic progress for

all, while respecting the need for climate action.

Progress on many of these objectives has slowed, halted or even reversed in recent years against the backdrop of multiple global economic shocks. Only 12% of the goals are currently on course. According to the UN, the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, increased extreme poverty, hunger rates and food insecurity, as well as reversed a decade of progress in maternal and child health. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has sounded the alarm about this evidence of backsliding on the SDGs, while nevertheless expressing belief in the possibility of change.

There are several reasons behind the descending trajectory of SDG implementation. The pandemic revealed global structural inequalities in the availability of vaccines and recovery funding; already

vulnerable states are being hit hard by the effects of climate change; and conflicts, such as Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, are decreasing food security. Another major issue has been the lack of financing for the SDGs, with estimates of trillions of USD lacking annually. The level of investment has not matched the ambition of the goals, meaning that institutions, the private sector and donor governments must step up to the plate.

The financing gap puts relations between wealthier and developing states at risk. The so-called Global South is pursuing the development agenda, while the West is calling for more attention to be paid to Ukraine and progress on human rights. Unless the developing states are guaranteed financing to reach the SDGs, the rift between the two may widen. While innovative financing mechanisms are needed,

much of the frustration of developing states stems from the operation of the international financial system and its inability to address global challenges fairly. While the upcoming SDG Summit political declaration will have to address the financial side of the matter, it is unlikely to produce a political consensus on reforming the international financial system or on which institution should lead such efforts.

If the SDG Summit fails to produce tangible results concerning SDG financing, there will likely be both short- and long-term consequences for multilateral cooperation. In parallel with preparations for the SDG Summit, UN member states have been laying the groundwork for a potentially more ambitious “Summit of the Future” in September 2024. Secretary-General Guterres has made this event one of the flagships of his tenure, encouraging UN members to create multilateral frameworks to deal with issues ranging from pandemic preparedness to internet governance. This July, he released a “New Agenda for Peace” as part of the build-up to the Summit of the Future. The agenda underlines the need for governments to agree on mechanisms for managing the

military uses of Artificial Intelligence and other new technologies, acknowledging that the multilateral system requires a major overhaul to keep pace with recent scientific breakthroughs.

Yet many UN members have complained that the Secretary-General’s focus on such matters is a distraction from the immediate business of the SDG Summit. Cuba and Pakistan have argued that the UN General Assembly should suspend discussions on the Summit of the Future until after this month’s SDG-focused discussions wrap up. This position has gained support within the Group of 77 developing countries (actually consisting of over 130 states), yet some G77 members have distanced themselves from it. However, diplomats worry that if the “Global South” comes away from the SDG Summit dissatisfied, they may complicate discussions of other matters in the run-up to September 2024, undercutting the Secretary-General’s agenda.

This outcome would be unfortunate because, as Guterres and his advisers are at pains to point out, many of the issues up for debate in the Summit of the Future are relevant to SDG implementation. A new deal on internet governance could,

for example, help bring internet access to the three billion people worldwide who are still without it. This would probably do more to boost international development than many more traditional poverty eradication measures. Leading aid donors must reach out to developing countries to convince them that the Summit of the Future offers a common opportunity to both boost global growth and mitigate shared threats.

The difficulties surrounding the implementation of SDGs also hinder the work on what happens in the more distant future. So far, there are no plans for how to move forward after 2030, when the SDGs should have been implemented. It remains an open question whether the world can unite around “leaving no one behind” one more time, particularly when global tensions are on the rise. The lack of agreement on the development agenda may have harmful effects in the coming years for the world organization. At a time when the international political climate is deteriorating, the world desperately needs positive results, not a further erosion of multilateral cooperation. /