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Op-ed

UN SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE: ON TRACK TO NOWHERE?

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In the grand theatre of global diplomacy, the Summit for the Future, set to take place on 22-23 September 2024 stands as a beacon of hope, a promise of concerted action against the multifaceted crises that plague our world. With the United Nations at its helm, this summit has been portrayed as a pivotal moment to recalibrate, realign, and reinvigorate the global community's commitment to sustainable development and multilateral cooperation. Yet, as representatives from the Global South Perspectives Network convened on March 1st to deliberate on the Zero Draft of the Pact for the Future, their reflections cast a long shadow of doubt over the Summit's capacity to steer us away from impending calamities.

The Summit of the Future presents a unique opportunity to strengthen collaboration on pivotal issues and bridge the gaps in international governance. It's a chance to reaffirm the United Nations Charter as the basis for international cooperation and recommit to key initiatives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on the momentum of the SDG Summit in 2023, Member States are poised to explore strategies for laying down a stronger foundation for global cooperation capable of addressing both current and future threats.

The Zero Draft, as envisioned, is poised to serve as a blueprint for consolidating United Nations activities, instilling a greater sense of urgency in addressing global challenges, and introducing novel initiatives, including the governance of cyberspace and outer space. These elements underscore a commitment to reinvigorating the UN's role at the centre of a revitalised and more effective multilateral system, that can make a real difference in people's lives. Yet, as commendable as these objectives are, they merely skim the surface of the deeper, more systemic issues at play.

The heart of the matter, as articulated by the Global South Perspectives Network, lies not in the what but in the how. The Zero Draft sketches a broad outline of the urgent actions needed but stops short of delving into the institutional and financial aspects of implementation. This omission is particularly glaring against the backdrop of current geopolitical tensions and humanitarian crises, from the nuclear brinkmanship in North Korea and Iran to the enduring conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip. The question that looms large is: How do we move beyond rhetoric to effect real change in these dire situations?

Glaringly amiss in the current draft is any proposal to reform the UN Security Council, most probably the most urgent, called for, and anticipated requirement to restore the credibility of the United Nations. It is proffered that future drafts will tackle this. The lack of 'the how' in the current draft does little to instil confidence that those proposals will indeed be responsive to the demands of the Global South. Time will tell.

This sentiment was echoed in the words of the Chief Director of the UN Political, Peace and Security Division, South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). Mr. Zaheer Laher's reflections on the Zero Draft highlighted both its potential and its limitations. While acknowledging the draft's role in consolidating UN efforts and fostering urgency, Mr Laher lamented its failure to address the practical pathways to resolving the kind of entrenched geopolitical conflicts and disasters that continue to ravage communities and destabilise regions across the globe.

The Global South Perspectives Network's critique extends beyond the immediate concerns of conflict resolution to encompass the broader challenges of global governance. The steady erosion of trust between nations, exacerbated by growing unilateralism and geopolitical rivalries, poses a significant barrier to international cooperation. The Zero Draft, for all its merits, seems to skirt around these foundational issues, offering up a vision for the future that, while aspirational, appears disconnected from the realities of our fragmented world.

Moreover, the emphasis on new initiatives, such as policing outer space, while innovative and important, seems somewhat removed from the pressing needs of the Global South, whose communities are grappling with existential threats that demand immediate attention — poverty, inequality, climate change, and access to healthcare, to name but a few. The draft's failure to directly address these concerns, to provide a concrete roadmap for overcoming them, underscores a critical gap in its approach to shaping a more equitable and sustainable future.

In calling for an action-oriented and inclusive Pact, the Global South underscores the need for a global consensus that transcends mere agreement on principles. What is required is a commitment to actionable strategies that are grounded in the realities of those most affected by global crises. This entails meaningful reform of the international financial and debt architecture, bridging the digital divide, ensuring fair trade, and ramping up financing for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

As we navigate the intricate landscape of global diplomacy, the voices from the Global South ring out with a clarity born of necessity and lived experience. Their insights offer not just critique but a roadmap for genuine engagement and collaborative problem-solving. It is through the lens of their collective wisdom that we can begin to unravel the complexities of our shared challenges, ensuring that solutions are not only proposed but enacted with equity and sustainability at their core.

This brings into sharp focus the pivotal role that the Summit of the Future must play—not as a mere convener of nations but as a catalyst for transformative change. The Summit's success hinges on its ability to bridge the chasm between high-level declarations and the tangible needs of people on the ground. It demands a concerted effort to not just envision a better future but to lay the foundational stones that will lead us there. In this endeavour, the principles of justice, equity, and inclusivity must be the guiding lights, illuminating the path toward a future where the promise of global cooperation becomes a lived reality for all.

As we stand at this crossroads, the Summit of the Future presents an opportunity to redefine the contours of global cooperation. But to seize this opportunity, we must confront the limitations of the Zero Draft head-on. The eventual Pact for the Future, the Summit of the Future outcome, must forge a path that is not only ambitious in its vision but pragmatic in its execution — a path that truly addresses the how, not just the what, of tackling the formidable challenges before us.

In the end, the success of the Summit will be measured not by the loftiness of its declarations but by the tangibility of its outcomes. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders, especially those from the Global South, to ensure that the Pact for the Future does not become a missed opportunity. Instead,

it should mark the beginning of a renewed global commitment to action, solidarity, and an actionable shared vision for a more just and sustainable world. Only then can we hope to steer the Summit from a track to nowhere to a path toward meaningful change.

The Summit of the Future is scheduled to take place on 22-23 September 2024 in New York.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer, and Nicola Bergsteeds is a Research Associate of the Inclusive Society Institute, who, together with the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability and HumanizaCom, convened the webinar on behalf of the Global South Perspectives Network to reflect on the Zero Draft Pact for the Future produced in January 2024 by the Co-facilitators of the Summit of the Future, the Permanent Representatives of Germany and Namibia to the United Nations in New York.