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Abstract

The multilateral development agenda is extremely complex, consisting of a wide array of issues that are increasingly interconnected and technically challenging. International finance and trade, climate change, and the emergence of new technologies all require updated multilateral responses. The recent *Summit of the Future* resolved very few of the issues on the table, while also adding new concerns to the agenda, and highlighting the need to revitalise multilateralism. Think tanks from the Global South play a critical role in supporting these negotiations, by undertaking targeted and coordinated research initiatives around key issues. There is also a need to improve links between think tanks and the negotiators involved in such political processes. Existing networks could be utilised, and formal mechanisms could be established to ensure timely and relevant inputs, including through specific negotiating language. Funding mechanisms also need to be established or existing ones repurposed. Additionally, think tanks can propose and promote initiatives that go beyond existing negotiating frameworks and make ‘outside the box’ contributions to advance the global agenda for the benefit of the people of the Global South.

Keywords

Summit of the Future; Global South; think tanks; development.

Introduction: The global agenda after the Summit of the Future

On 22–23 September 2024, in the days preceding the 79th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN), over 130 heads of state and government, together with a range of UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, academic institutions, private sector actors, and youth representatives, gathered at UN headquarters in New York for the *Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow*.¹ On the first day of the summit, the General Assembly adopted ‘The Pact for the Future’ resolution, the culmination of a complex negotiating process that began in 2020 (United Nations, 2024). The pact commits to bold and transformative actions to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, placing poverty eradication at its core. The pact includes 56 actions in five sections: sustainable development and financing for development, international peace and security, science technology and digital cooperation, youth and future generations, and transforming global governance.

Through the resolution, world leaders pledged to close the SDG financing gap in developing countries, to ensure that the multilateral trading system continues to be an engine for sustainable development, and to accelerate reform of the international financial architecture to strengthen the representation of developing countries. The pact includes a commitment to reform the UN Security Council, recognising the urgent need to make it more representative and accountable. The document also contains terms relating to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as well as a commitment to promote and respect the human rights of young people.

The pact also contains two annexes, the first of which —“The Global Digital Compact —aims to eliminate all digital divides, fostering an inclusive, open, and secure digital space that respects and promotes human rights, and to enhance the international governance of artificial intelligence. The second annex—“Declaration on Future Generations”—establishes guiding principles, commitments, and actions to promote international stability, peace, and security, ensuring peaceful, inclusive, and just societies, addressing inequalities within and among nations, together with the special needs of developing countries and vulnerable groups.

1. <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>

In his opening address, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the summit was needed “because our world is heading off the rails” as “resources that could bring opportunities and hope are invested in death and destruction”, and because multilateralism itself needed to be rescued “from the brink”. Now, having “unlocked the door” by adopting the pact and its annexes, he urged the international community to act on its shared responsibility to “walk through it”. He emphasised that success would not be measured merely by agreements but by tangible actions that improve people’s livelihoods. While the summit was expected to deliver meaningful multilateral reform, countries failed to reach consensus on contentious issues. However, ongoing reform of the international financial architecture, the measurement of progress beyond GNI, reform of the Security Council, and the strengthening of the UN, were not ruled out. The summit also opened several new spaces in the multilateral sphere, such as the appointment of an envoy for future generations, and the launching of specific initiatives for closing the digital divide.

Think tanks from the Global South are able to provide unique expertise across the vast scope of issues on the summit’s agenda. It is crucial that they systematically engage in key discussions, providing action-oriented inputs, and bringing the needs and interests of the people from Global South to the centre of debates.

In this context, the Global South perspectives include concrete examples of this type of contribution.

Relevance of the contributions of this publication

The authors and articles featured in this journal directly engage with the actions outlined in the Pact for the Future while also contributing to broader global conversations and summits on development, governance, climate change, and technology. By linking specific research findings to multilateral commitments, these contributions provide the empirical and analytical backing necessary to ensure that the needs of the Global South remain central to policy discussions. This interplay between research and policymaking is critical to bridging knowledge gaps and reinforcing dialogue.

1. **The impact of information framing on youth engagement in public policy debates** is linked to actions 35 and 36 of the pact, relating to the strengthening of “meaningful youth participation” at the national and international levels. The article addresses a significant challenge in the promotion of youth participation, namely the match of supply

and demand, including the spaces and mechanisms needed to drive the process. There is a call for a multifaceted approach to address those issues, as participation of young people in decision-making is deemed essential to ensure an inclusive society.

2. **Potential impacts of EU deforestation regulation on smallholder coffee farmers: Evidence from Indonesia and Uganda** contributes to action five of the pact, to “ensure that the multilateral trading system continues to be an engine for sustainable development”. The article shows that most small coffee farmers in both countries would not be able to meet the traceability standards of the new European Union Regulation for Deforestation Free Products (EUDR), and that the investment required for that purpose would affect the ability of the producers to invest in increasing their productivity. The article makes concrete proposals to address the issue, including recommendations for the EUDR to be implemented in ways that are less detrimental to small producers from the Global South.
3. **Building health equity in crisis through community-level action and resilience building: The cases of Nigeria, Nepal and Brazil** is linked to action six of the pact, to “invest in people to end poverty and strengthen trust and social cohesion”. The authors find that culturally adapted interventions and other targeted actions improve health outcomes in crisis affected areas.
4. **Taking responsibility for international security: Non-state armed groups and under-governed spaces in the Global South** is linked to actions 24 to “prevent and combat transnational organised crime and related illicit financial flows” and 28 to “seize the opportunities presented by science, technology and innovation for the benefit of people and planet”. Through analysis of the situation in Trinidad and Tobago and in Jamaica, the study highlights that non-state groups in under-governed spaces represent risks for the affected countries, as well as for international security in general. The article highlights the success of the land tenure program in Peru as a good response model, and calls for enhanced governance at the local level and international collaboration to assist those processes.
5. **Global financial governance and debt sustainability in the Global South** is linked to action four of the pact, and also to the upcoming *Financing for Development* conference. The article includes a proposal for measurements to complement the established debt sustainability

analysis, and finds that the debt carrying capacity of developing countries is well below that of the developed economies, and that there is a need for increased investment in the development of non-debt alternatives. The above articles provide useful inputs to several specific ongoing negotiations. It is therefore incumbent upon the relevant actors to ensure that these inputs are brought to the attention of negotiators from the Global South, to strengthen the bargaining position on those related issues.

6. **Safeguarding information integrity in the age of AI: Perspectives from India for the Global South** addresses objective five on artificial intelligence of the digital global compact “to enhance international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity”. The reflective piece addresses the need to control “information pollution”, which has been exacerbated by generated artificial intelligence. The publication includes a specific call to establish a Global South Consortium to combat information pollution.
7. **Breaking chains, building bridges: Rethinking just transitions from a Global South Perspective** is linked to action nine of the pact, which includes a call to “strengthen our actions to address climate change”. The paper calls for support for industrialisation in the developing world through the transfer of resources and technologies from developed countries, to minimise the environmental impact and to generate local employment.
8. **Climate-induced drought and financial systems: the case of Paraguay** informs action four of the pact, as well as the upcoming *Fourth Financing for Development Conference* scheduled for 30 June – 3 July 2025 in Madrid, Spain. The article includes an innovative analytical angle to measure how climate change-induced droughts affect the financial system in Paraguay, allowing countries from the Global South to strengthen arguments around compensation for such externalities.

Towards a more systematic engagement of Global South think tanks

As noted, these high quality, peer-reviewed *Global South Perspectives* articles and reflective pieces make concrete contributions to specific global debates, incorporating a range of perspectives from the Global South. In the complex landscape of multilateral negotiations, it is extremely important that proposals by developing countries are underpinned by the strongest possible

scientific evidence, to strengthen the political arguments and to highlight new issues from a Southern perspective. In effect, the negotiating positions of Global South countries would be greatly enhanced if knowledge produced by think tanks were to directly inform the political positions of those countries. It is therefore very important for decision makers in the Global South to call for targeted research projects to be undertaken, and for the results of this work to be directly linked to the negotiations. For example, the contributions of Global South think tanks on the issues of debt relief and climate issues such as loss and damage have already brought new perspectives to global negotiations.

In this context, to ensure maximum impact, there is a need to establish a more robust and formal link between the work of think tanks and political processes, and to improve and consolidate communication channels with negotiators from the South. Think tank networks are in a position to offer negotiating groups specific and time-sensitive advice on the many open negotiations including, *inter alia*, climate, financing, international security reform, and new technologies. For that purpose, groups such as the G77 or the BRICS might establish new funding mechanisms to provide direct contributions for negotiators. In addition, existing funding mechanisms such as the Perez Guerrero Fund,² which is managed by the G77 in New York, or the UN Trust Fund for South-South Cooperation³ can be repurposed for this objective. These funding mechanisms should respect the intellectual independence of the think tanks, and conditions for funding should focus on the quality, relevance, and timeliness of the research projects. In addition, funders should coordinate with negotiating teams to ensure that the input provided is appropriate and directly aligned with the issues under consideration.

In addition, as external, autonomous actors, think tanks would be able to explore and propose more radical or 'outside the box' positions, to change the parameters of debates. These proposals might include, *inter alia*: responses to issues of emerging Northern protectionism to the non-fulfilment of financial commitments, including ODA volumes and debt restructuring and relief, and including debt forgiveness or jubilees. In addition, responses from Southern countries to a lack of progress on these negotiations could be articulated by think tanks. In such a context, think tanks could go as far as proposing the specific negotiating language and suggesting negotiating strategies.

2. <https://www.g77.org/pgtf/>

3. <https://unsouthsouth.org/un-fund-for-ssc/>

The infrastructure of such coordination already exists. Think tanks from the South have established several networks, among them NeST,⁴ DAKSHIN, CIKD,⁵ the BRICS Academic Forum,⁶ and Southern Voice itself. Such efforts should also complement the work of intergovernmental institutions such as the South Centre.⁷ The transaction costs of joint research initiatives among several institutions have been greatly reduced through information technology and the potential utilisation of artificial intelligence tools. Moreover, there is a degree of convergence in research topics across these networks, and the promotion of the interests and priorities of the Global South in the framework of that agenda.



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It should be noted that in practice developing countries have also demonstrated their capacity to innovate and to implement global agenda goals in ways that are adapted to their realities, breaking the traditional paradigm of emulating and transplanting practices from developed countries, for example as evidenced in areas including conditional cash transfer programs, tropical agriculture production, school meals utilising local production, community health initiatives, land tenure, gender empowerment, and temporary employment programs.

At a more practical level, there are several repositories of good practices for developing countries, including for example South-South Galaxy, established by UNOSSC and open to all interested partners, and which as of December

4. Established in 2014, the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST) aims to collaboratively generate, systematise, consolidate, and share knowledge on South-South Cooperation (see <https://southernthinktanks.org/en>).

5. The Center for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD) was established in China following an announcement by President Xi Jinping at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, with the aim of coordinating domestic and international development research resources, to study theories and practices of development, and organise events for knowledge exchange on international development topics.

6. The BRICS Academic Forum is a major platform for interaction between experts and scholars from BRICS countries. The forum aims to encourage academic exchanges, strengthen dialogue between experts and scholars, as well as provide policy advice.

7. The Centre was established in 1995 as the “intergovernmental think tank of the Global South”. The South Centre could become another important convening and coordinating centre for the work of Southern think tanks (see <https://www.southcentre.int/about-the-south-centre/>)

2024 included over 950 examples.⁸ These practices can also serve as objects of study for think tanks, both in terms of their impact, and in terms of the mechanics of the collaboration. To enhance the impact of this fledgling network, it would be useful to institutionalise the links between Galaxy and Global South think tank networks, so the practices are adequately reviewed and evaluated, and their potential for replication is properly identified. In addition, more efficient updating of the database will increase its value as a reference repository.

In sum, more direct and systematic engagement of think tanks from the Global South in political negotiations would make a valuable contribution to shaping the global agenda. These institutions—in close coordination with political actors—can bring fresh perspectives to global processes, prioritising the interests of different groups from the Global South. The challenges outlined in the *Pact for the Future* provide an excellent opportunity to formalise this engagement.

Southern Voice, as demonstrated by the high quality and relevance of the contributions of this publication, is uniquely positioned to be a strong leader in this process. The strong track record of the organisation and its commitment to support the implementation of the SDGs make it an essential partner for this type of engagement. In effect, the organisation can leverage the contribution of its 71 member institutions from across the Global South, and in that context take advantage of its membership in the Scientific Advisory Board of the Secretary General of the United Nations to contribute high quality inputs to support global development efforts from a Southern perspective. The articles and reflective pieces that Southern Voice generates are therefore essential inputs for a more representative engagement with the Global South and its people.

References

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8. <https://southsouth-galaxy.org/>. Other examples include the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/home>), the Ibero American Secretariat database of South-South initiatives which documents over 900 exchange initiatives per year among the 22 member countries (<https://www.segib.org/cooperacion-iberoamericana/cooperacion-sur-sur/>), and the Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries, established in Turkey as a direct outcome of the 2030 agenda (target 17.8) (<https://www.un.org/technologybank/>)