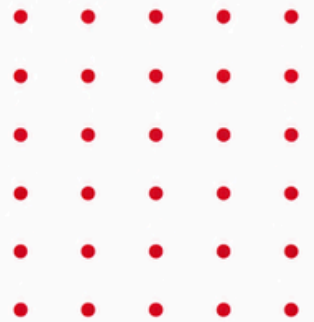




Rethinking UN Leadership

A Global South Perspective



Rethinking United Nations Leadership

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A call to rebuild multilateralism
around legitimacy, inclusion,
and shared influence.



WHY THIS SURVEY MATTERS

It captures how the Global South is rethinking multilateralism and global leadership at a critical moment for the international order.

The findings reveal growing demands for fairer representation, and stronger institutional credibility, including **the kind of leadership they want to see in the next Secretary-General.**



WHO PARTICIPATED

The survey received more than 100 responses from across the Global South, including:

40% from Latin America

34% from Africa

19% from Asia

7% from other regions



Key insight

ONLY 4%

believe the United Nations (UN) currently has sufficient political authority in global governance.

The United Nations continues to be seen as legitimate in areas such as humanitarian response, climate governance, and global norm-setting, even as confidence in its political authority weakens sharply.



Humanitarian
coordination



Climate
governance



Global norm-
setting

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The crisis facing the UN is a political crisis centred on legitimacy, unequal influence, and concentration of power within the multilateral system. Concerns about weak enforcement of international norms and limited Global South influence in decision-making appear far more than issues related to bureaucracy or institutional management: Only 3.8% of respondents believe the UN currently has sufficient political authority in global governance and approximately 30% of respondents do not perceive the UN as playing a strong overall role.



The UN is still necessary and legitimate, especially in humanitarian response (51.9%) and climate governance (35.6%). Confidence drops sharply in peace and security (16.3%) and human rights and democratic governance (14.4%).



The Global South is calling for a transformation in how power works within the UN system, not simply for “better management” of the institution: Nearly half of respondents identify global power asymmetries as the principal risk surrounding UN reform, while 20% express concern that reform efforts remain disconnected from Global South realities.



The concentration of power in the Security Council emerges as a principal obstacle to UN political authority. To restore the UN’s relevance is needed to strengthening Global South influence over agenda-setting, empowering the General Assembly and reinforcing the defense of international norms and human rights.



Only around 10% believe Global South civil society has influence in UN agenda-setting processes. When asked what meaningful engagement with the next Secretary-General should look like, participants emphasised influence over decisions, institutionalised engagement channels, and greater inclusion in agenda-setting.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Political independence, legitimacy, and crisis leadership emerge as central expectations for the next Secretary-General. Also, nearly 30% of respondents expect the next Secretary-General to mobilise global public opinion in defence of multilateral cooperation.



A narrow but important opportunity remains to rebuild trust in multilateral cooperation before deeper institutional disillusionment takes hold.

Introduction

The selection of the next Secretary-General carries significance far beyond leadership succession

Eighty years after its creation, the United Nations faces one of the most significant challenges in its history: mounting doubts about the principles and institutional foundations established after the Second World War to prevent conflict, contain unilateral power, and sustain international cooperation. Rising geopolitical tensions, prolonged wars, institutional paralysis, and declining trust in multilateral institutions have reopened debates many once believed had been settled.

In this context, the selection of the next Secretary-General carries significance far beyond leadership succession. It also represents a historic opportunity to rebuild confidence in one of the world's most emblematic institutions of international cooperation and collective action.



Rethinking UN Leadership: A Global South Perspective offers an important window into how these debates are being understood across regions that now hold increasing geopolitical, demographic, and economic weight within global affairs.

The Global South plays an increasingly important role in debates surrounding development financing, climate governance, global economic restructuring, energy transitions, migration, and the future distribution of power within multilateral institutions. Countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean are also assuming greater prominence in coalition-building and agenda-setting through platforms such as the G77+China, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and partners), G20, regional organisations, and South-South cooperation frameworks.

Yet, this growing geopolitical relevance is not always matched by equivalent influence within the institutions where global priorities and decisions continue to be negotiated. Questions of representation, agenda-setting power, and political authority therefore remain central to ongoing debates about the future of multilateralism and UN reform.

Key Finding 01

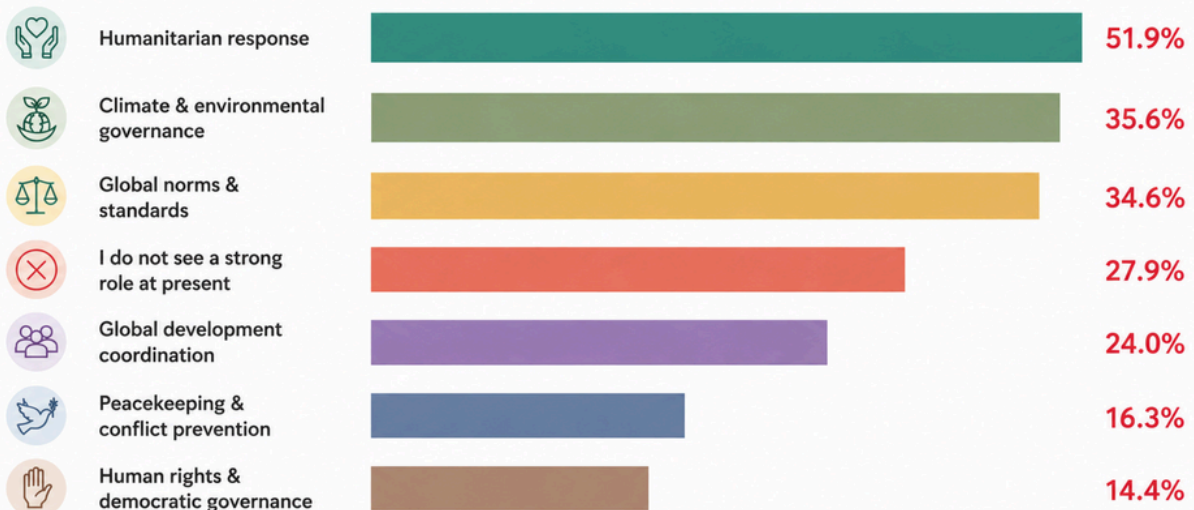
I. The UN still matters, but confidence in its authority is weakening

One of the principal findings of the survey is that the United Nations retains legitimacy in several key areas. Humanitarian response is perceived as the organisation's most important and legitimate role (51.9%), followed by climate and environmental governance (35.6%) and the setting of global norms and standards (34.6%).

Legitimacy appears more robust in areas centred on coordination, norm-setting, and collective governance. In contrast, confidence declines sharply in domains characterised by geopolitical confrontation, enforcement failures, and challenges related to constraining power, upholding norms, and responding to conflict.

This gap becomes revealing because, as the survey shows, peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and human rights emerge among the leading priorities respondents expect the next Secretary-General to address.

Areas where the UN still has an important and legitimate role

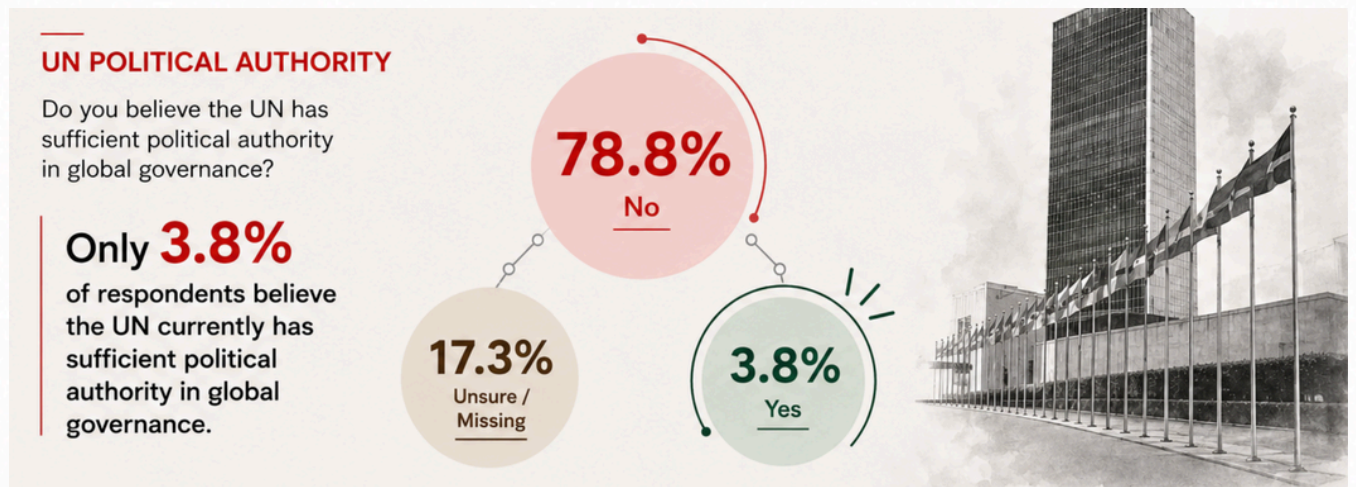


*Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages do not total 100%

Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

Approximately 30% of respondents do not perceive the United Nations as playing a strong overall role. Confidence in the organisation’s political authority remains limited: only 3.8% believe the UN currently possesses sufficient political authority in global governance.

What is at stake is not only the credibility of the organisation itself, but the ability of the international system to produce accepted rules, contain conflicts, and coordinate collective responses in a context of intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

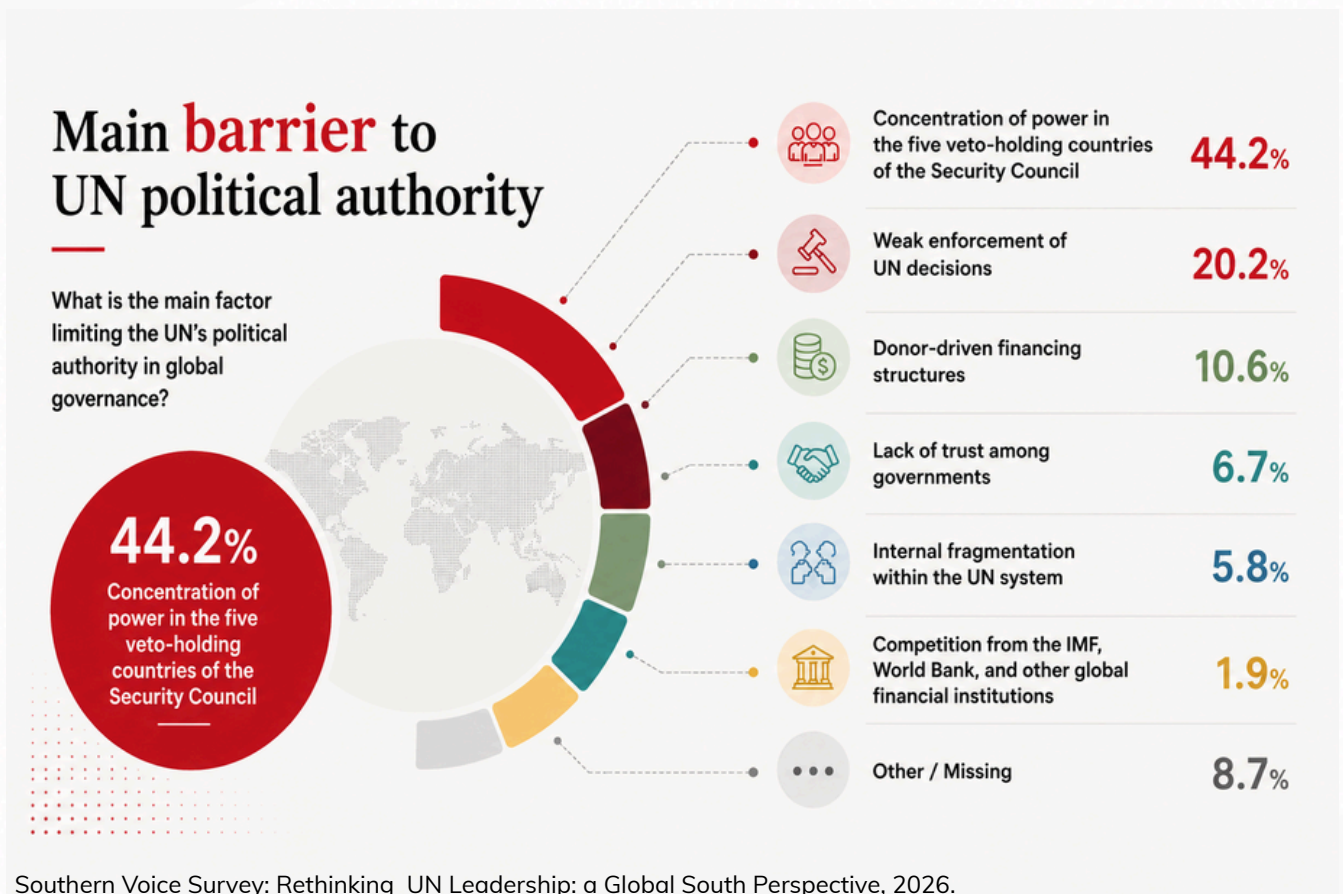


Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

Collective international action continues to be regarded as necessary because many of today’s defining challenges operate across borders and exceed the reach of any single state. Frustration appears directed less at the need for cooperation itself than at the capacity of existing institutions to deliver it effectively and fairly.

Among those who believe the UN does not currently possess sufficient political authority, or remain uncertain about it, nearly half identify the concentration of power in the veto-holding members of the Security Council as the principal barrier to the organisation’s political authority.

The broader distribution of responses points in the same direction. Concerns linked to weak enforcement of UN decisions, donor-driven agendas, and geopolitical fragmentation all rank significantly above explanations associated with bureaucratic inefficiency or institutional complexity.



The relatively limited concern regarding the lack of trust among governments is notable in this context. The findings point instead to growing doubts about the ability of multilateral institutions to act consistently and independently when major geopolitical interests are at stake.

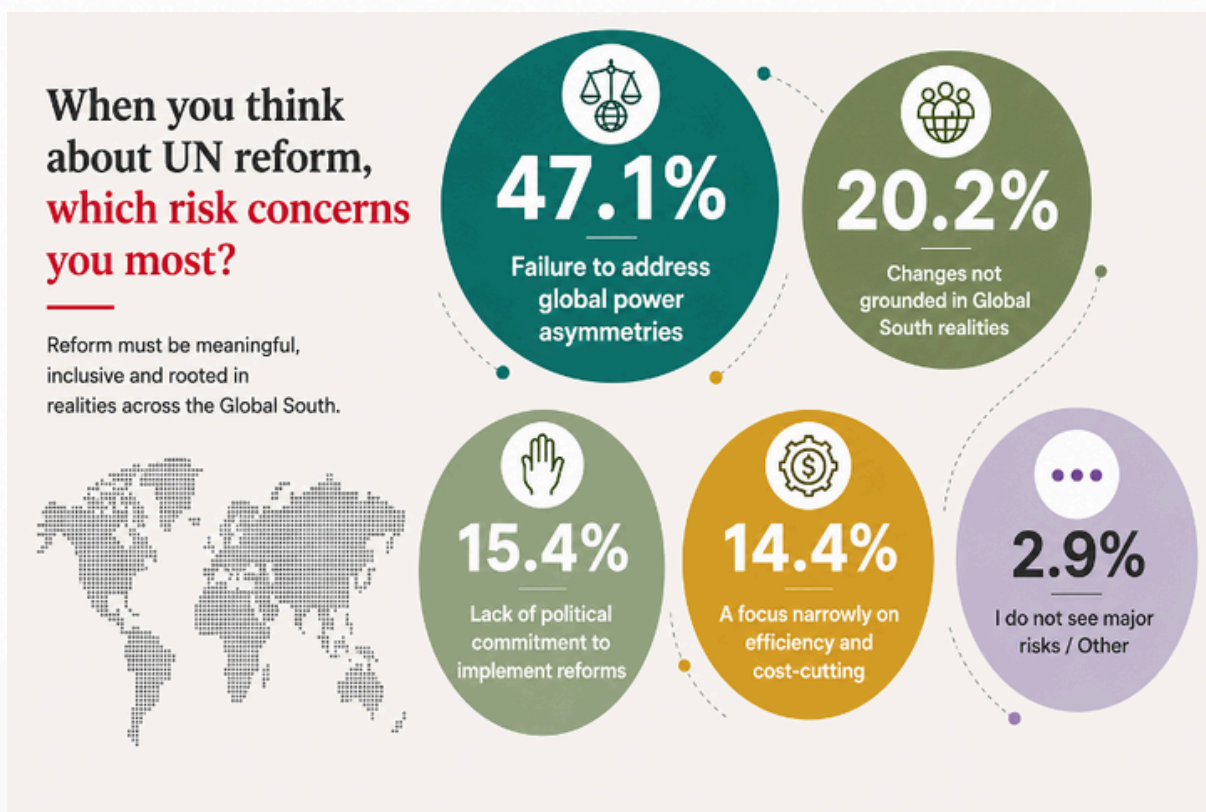
While questions of representation and political inclusion have long been central to UN reform debates, recent reform efforts have increasingly prioritised efficiency, coordination, and institutional performance.

Key Finding 02

II. The demand is not only better management. It is a rebalancing of power

Participants increasingly frame UN reform around questions of political influence and representation rather than by institutional management alone. When asked about the principal risks surrounding UN reform, nearly half of respondents (47.1%) identified the failure to address global power asymmetries as their main concern, far above issues such as efficiency and cost-cutting (14.4%).

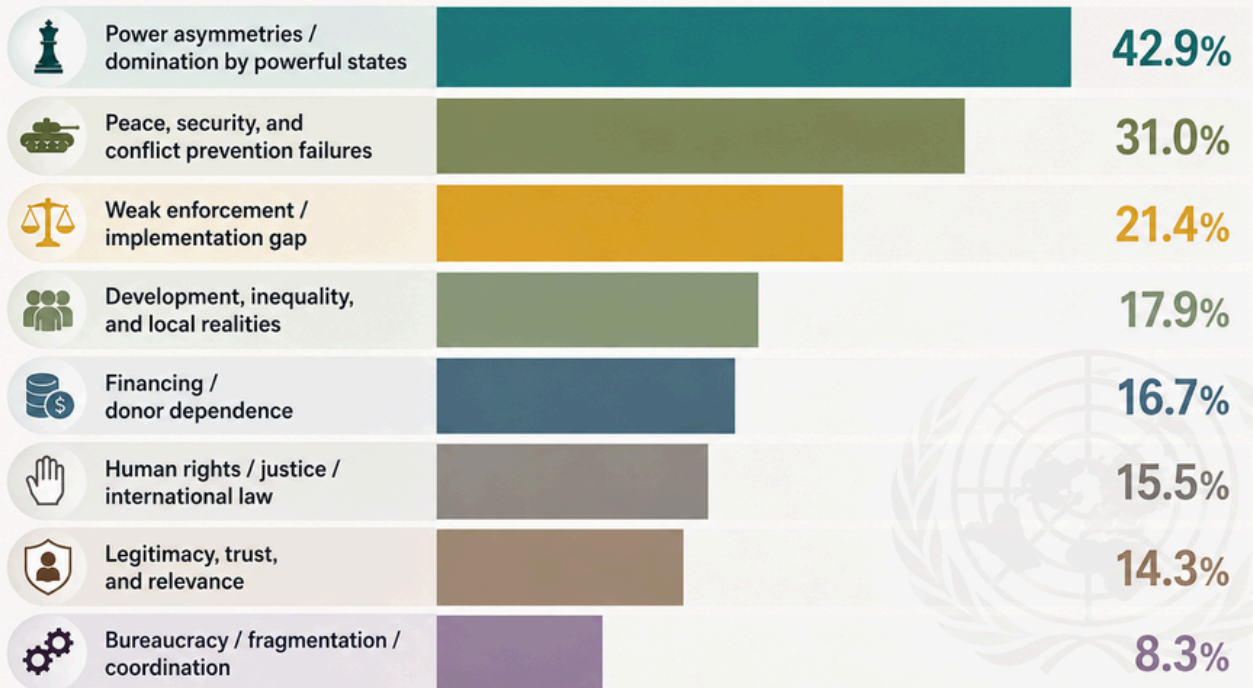
The risk of reforms that do not reflect Global South realities is notable (20.2%). The responses reflect increasing demand for a multilateral system that reflects a wider range of political, economic, and developmental experiences in global decision-making.



A similar pattern emerges in perceptions of the United Nations’ shortcomings. Power asymmetries and the dominance of influential states are regarded as the most significant issues (42.9%). Failures in peace, security, and conflict prevention (31%) and weak enforcement or implementation gaps (21.4%) follow in importance. Concerns about financial dependence (16.7%) and development and inequality (17.9%) are also prioritised above bureaucracy and fragmentation (8.3%).

What stands out in the responses is that participants assess the United Nations more by its perceived effectiveness in situations involving major political interests than by its formal mandates. The prominence of peace and security failures, along with concerns about unequal influence and weak enforcement, highlights broader doubts regarding the organisation’s capacity to exercise authority in contexts where the political costs of inaction are greatest.

Where the UN has fallen short



*Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages do not total 100%
 Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.



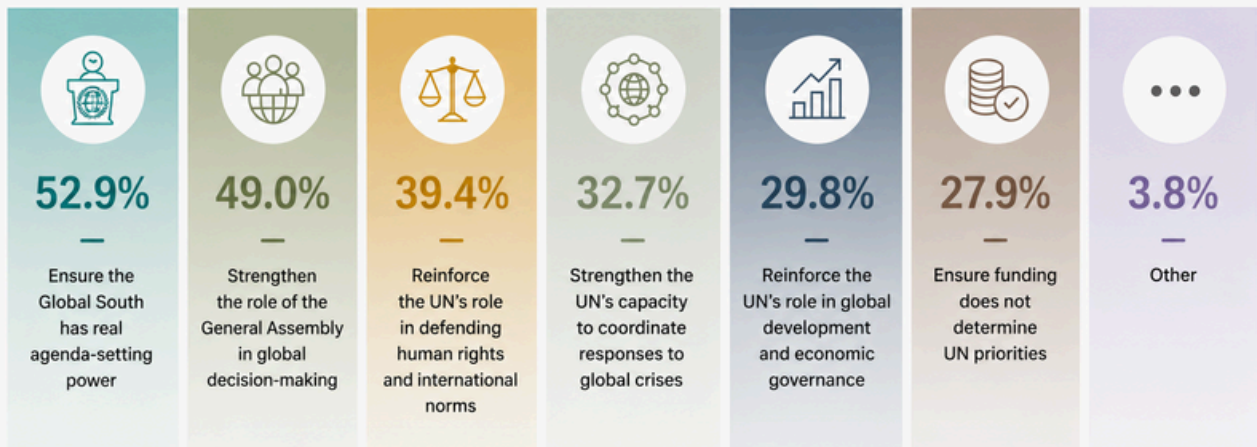
Key insight

Improvements in coordination, efficiency, or institutional performance alone are unlikely to restore confidence in the political credibility of the multilateral system.

A similar pattern is evident in reform priorities. The strongest support for restoring the UN’s relevance is directed toward the following areas:

- Enhancing the agenda-setting power of the Global South.
- Expanding the role of the General Assembly (GA).
- Strengthening the defence of international norms and human rights.

What opportunity is most critical for restoring the UN’s relevance to Global South priorities?



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 Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

Again, development itself does not emerge as a top reform priority, despite the survey drawing heavily on Global South perspectives.

This may suggest growing recognition that many of the barriers shaping development outcomes now lie beyond the UN development agenda alone, particularly in broader financial structures and failures of global governance.

In addition, almost half of respondents identified strengthening the role of the General Assembly in global decision-making as a priority. This finding demonstrates a sustained belief in the GA as one of the few forums where states with varying degrees of power and influence can negotiate common rules on the basis of formal equality. The broader issue is whether multilateralism remains an effective counterbalance to concentrated power.

The Secretary-General selection process exemplifies this debate. Historically, the Security Council exercised primary control over the process in an opaque manner, while the General Assembly typically endorsed the final recommendation.

As the 1 for 8 Billion campaign has shown, this dynamic began to change in 2015-2016, when General Assembly resolution 69/321 introduced informal dialogues in the General Assembly between candidates and the broader UN membership.

Debates regarding additional reforms are ongoing. Proposals have included indicative votes on Secretary-General candidates, the submission of more than one recommendation from the Security Council, and the possibility of rejecting candidates viewed as lacking sufficient legitimacy or broader support.



Key insight

Around **half of respondents** continue to view the General Assembly as one of the few arenas within the UN system where the broader membership can exercise influence beyond major power dynamics.

Key Finding 03

III. The strongest demand from the survey is influence

Growing dissatisfaction is directed at civil society participation mechanisms that fail to translate into meaningful influence within multilateral decision-making.

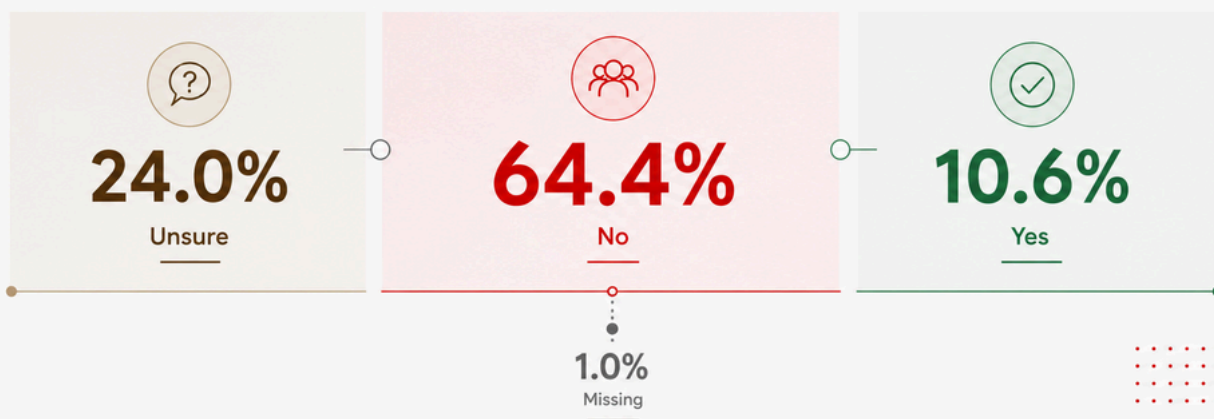


Key insight

Only around **10%** believe Global South civil society has meaningful influence in UN agenda-setting processes.

GLOBAL SOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY INFLUENCE

Do you believe Global South civil society currently has meaningful influence in UN agenda-setting?



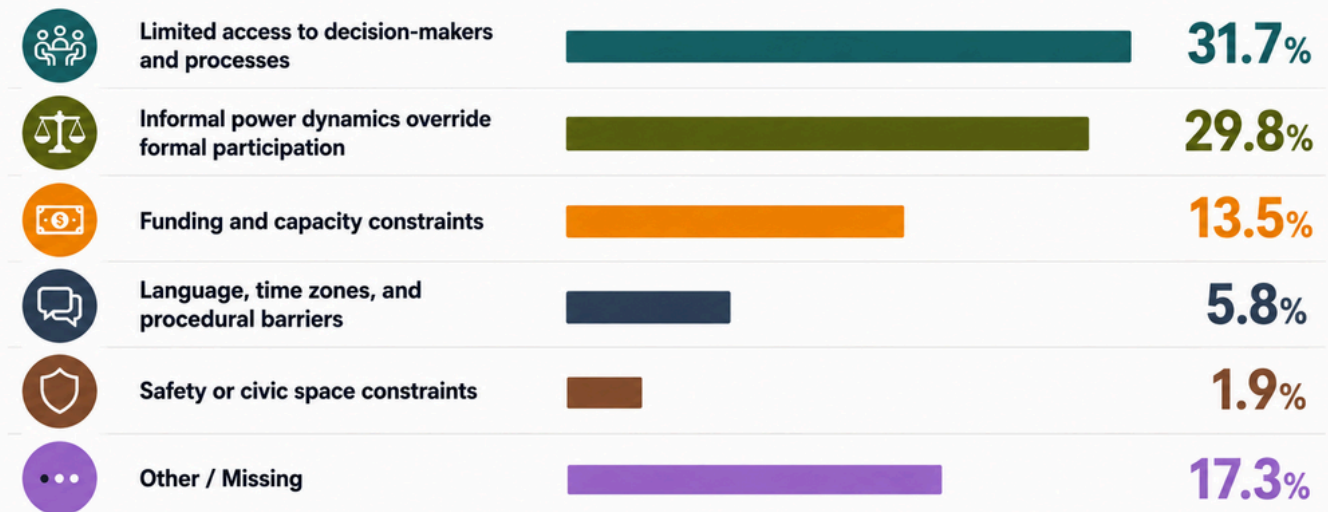
A total of 64.4% of respondents believe that Global South civil society does not currently exercise meaningful influence within multilateral processes, while an additional 24% remain unsure. These results are significant given that many institutions increasingly derive legitimacy from commitments to openness and inclusivity. The findings indicate increasing scepticism toward participation frameworks that broaden consultation without meaningfully altering the actors who shape agendas, priorities, and political outcomes.

The barriers identified by respondents consistently indicate unequal influence over the arenas where international priorities are established before formal negotiations begin. Limited access to decision-makers and diplomatic processes emerges as the principal obstacle (31.7%), closely followed by the perception that informal power dynamics outweigh official participation mechanisms (29.8%). Funding and capacity constraints are considered less significant (13.5%), while procedural barriers such as language and time zones are viewed as marginal (5.8%).



MAIN BARRIERS TO GLOBAL SOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY INFLUENCE

If no or unsure, what is the main barrier?



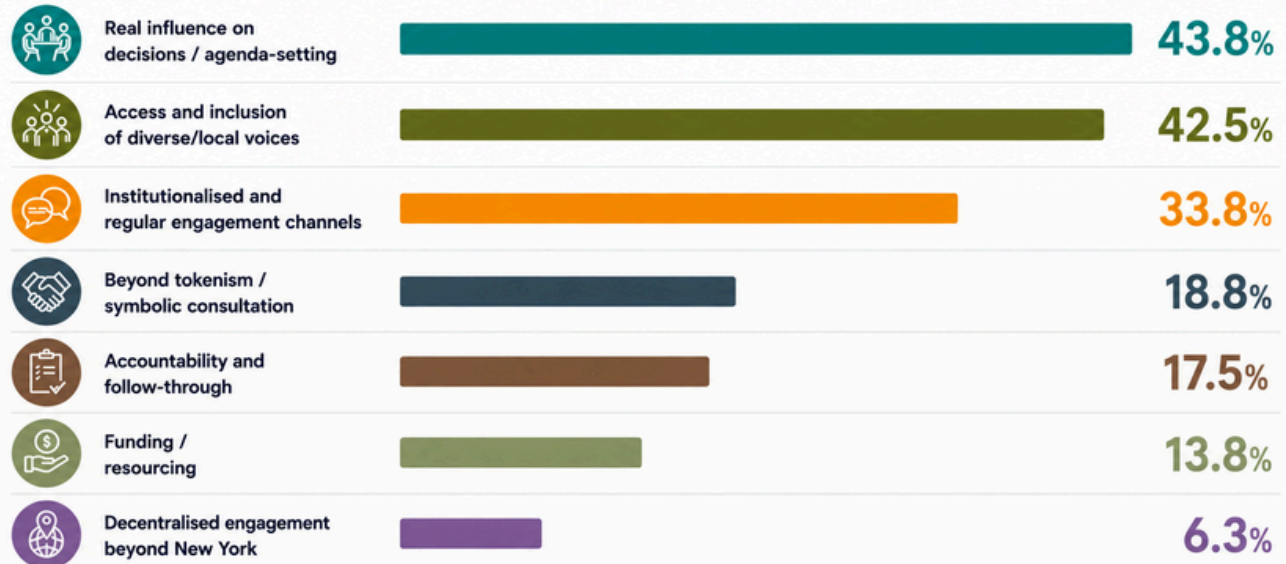
Exclusion is increasingly perceived as a political issue rather than a technical one. Influence is associated not only with participation, but also with sustained engagement within diplomatic networks, proximity to negotiations, and the capacity to shape priorities before formal positions are established.

Comparatively limited emphasis on language barriers, procedural complexity, or funding constraints further reinforces this interpretation. The primary concern is not merely access, but the ways in which influence is structured and exercised within multilateral institutions.

When participants were asked to define meaningful engagement with the next Secretary-General, the predominant expectation was for participation that ensures sustained influence within multilateral decision-making processes, rather than just consultation.



Meaningful engagement between the Secretary-General and Global South



*Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages do not total 100%
 Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

The relatively strong emphasis on institutionalised channels is particularly notable. It reflects interest in more stable and predictable relationships between UN leadership and Global South civil society rather than ad hoc participation tied to specific negotiations or high-level moments.

For the next Secretary-General, these responses signal rising expectations for forms of interaction that are politically meaningful, sustained over time, and connected more directly to institutional decision-making.

They also point to a broader opportunity for the next UN leadership. At a time when the foundations of the multilateral system are facing growing political contestation and pressure to adapt to shifting global power realities, more meaningful and politically grounded engagement with Global South civil society could help strengthen legitimacy, rebuild trust across regions, and reconnect multilateral decision-making with broader public legitimacy.

**Key insight**

Respondents continue to place significant expectations on the office of the Secretary-General as a potential channel for broader engagement.

Key Finding 04

IV. The Global South wants more a General than a Secretary

A longstanding debate within the United Nations concerns whether the Secretary-General functions primarily as a “secretary” or as a “general”.

The survey results indicate a clear expectation for political leadership from the Secretary-General.

The strongest emphasis is placed on political independence (48.1%), the ability to lead institutional transformation (48.1%), and the capacity to navigate interconnected global crises (47.1%). The office is being understood not simply as an administrative role, but as a source of political credibility and leadership in a fragmented international context.



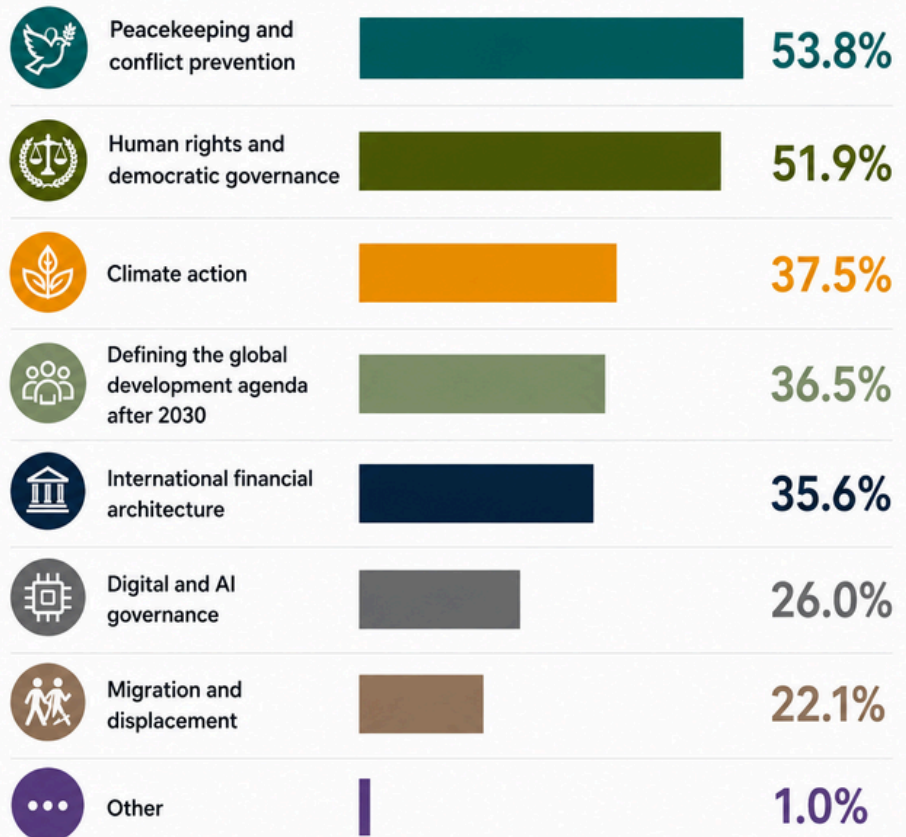
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Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

The emphasis on political independence is particularly notable. Amid increasing geopolitical rivalry and weakening confidence in multilateral institutions, respondents appear to value the capacity of the Secretary-General to exercise independent judgment, uphold institutional autonomy, and preserve the organisation’s credibility across competing political pressures.

This reflects longstanding concerns that the selection process often rewards politically safe candidates. More independent or reform-oriented leadership profiles have historically generated greater resistance among major powers. Demands for independence reflect broader concerns regarding the ability of multilateral leadership to operate beyond narrow geopolitical calculations.

Priorities for UN Leadership

Which areas should UN leadership prioritise in the coming years?
Select up to three



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Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

**Key insight**

Nearly 30% of respondents emphasise the importance of mobilising global public opinion.

This suggests that communicative leadership is increasingly viewed as part of the Secretary-General's political role, particularly at a time when multilateral institutions face growing pressure to sustain public trust and legitimacy.

Transparency, accountability, and gender-responsive leadership are also identified as key expectations for the next Secretary-General. These priorities reflect broader concerns regarding institutional credibility, representation, and public confidence within the multilateral system.

Respondents' leadership expectations become clearer in the policy areas they believe UN leadership should prioritise in the coming years. Peacekeeping and conflict prevention (53.8%) and human rights and democratic governance (51.9%) emerge as the highest priorities identified in the survey.

The contrast points to growing concern about the organisation's ability to respond effectively in areas that remain central to multilateral legitimacy and international stability.

These expectations carry particular weight given that many of the regions most directly affected by conflict and peacekeeping operations are in the Global South itself, with approximately 80% of UN peacekeeping missions deployed in Global South countries.

Climate action presents a notably different pattern. It ranks highly both as a leadership priority and as an area where the UN continues to retain relative legitimacy.

By contrast, confidence appears far weaker in domains such as conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and human rights enforcement, where multilateral action is more visibly constrained by strategic competition among major powers.

Key Finding 05

V. Rethinking Multilateralism: Authority and Inclusion

Multilateralism is increasingly evaluated based on which actors shape international priorities, define legitimacy, and exercise political influence within the international system. Recent survey data indicate a widening gap between the Global South's growing political, economic, and demographic significance and its perceived influence within multilateral governance.

**Key insight**

The Global South is asking for a multilateral system that more fully reflects the core principles of the UN: equality, collective action, cooperation, and the resolution of shared challenges through institutions.

As initiatives such as the Pact for the Future and UN80 renew debates about the future of international cooperation, the central challenge extends beyond institutional effectiveness. The primary question confronting the multilateral system is whether international institutions can remain credible and sustain trust in a context of rising geopolitical rivalry, concentrated power, and growing pressure on collective rules and multilateral norms.

The post-Cold War order was largely predicated on the assumption that major powers had a strategic interest in sustaining multilateral rules and institutions. This assumption is now increasingly under strain.

In recent years, the rise of unilateralism, selective adherence to international norms, attacks on multilateral institutions, and the weakening of collective enforcement mechanisms have revealed the fragility of the system when its most powerful actors no longer feel equally bound by it.

This dynamic helps explain why many countries in the Global South continue to support multilateral cooperation despite increasing frustration with the current system. For many medium-sized and smaller states, multilateral institutions remain among the few mechanisms capable of constraining purely transactional power politics and preserving collective restraint, predictability, and sovereign equality in international affairs.

When respondents were asked to identify a single question for a candidate for Secretary-General, the largest proportion focused on power distribution and Global South influence within the multilateral system (41.3%). Questions concerning peace, conflict, and enforcement followed at a considerable distance (25%), while issues related to development and inequality (16.3%), gender and women’s rights (13.8%), and funding independence (10%) were cited less frequently.

If you could ask **one question to a candidate for UN Secretary-General, **what would it be?****

The world is asking.
Leadership must answer.



*Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages do not total 100%
Southern Voice Survey: Rethinking UN Leadership: a Global South Perspective, 2026.

If you could ask one question to a candidate for UN Secretary-General, what would it be?

Beyond the quantitative findings and thematic patterns, participants' questions clarify their views on the most pressing political challenges facing multilateralism. The following selection sharply illustrates the specific expectations, and priorities that inform perspectives on the next Secretary-General and the future of international cooperation.

1. Power Redistribution

- How will you ensure Global South civil society has a formal, enforceable role in shaping and monitoring UN development policy?
- What reforms will shift agenda-setting power and financing to the Global South, and how will you ensure accountability for these changes?
- How will you ensure civil society in the Global South co-creates solutions with real authority, accountability, and measurable impact?
- How would you address the power asymmetry and dominance of a few giant members to ensure fair participation and decision-making by all (including the global south) during your term?
- How will you guarantee Global South countries and civil society meaningful decision-making power in the UN?

2. Peace, Conflict and Enforcement

- How will you ensure UN decisions are respected by all member states, including powerful countries?
- How will you reform UN institutions to prevent some countries from bypassing international law and imposing their will?

- “How will you face the five countries with veto power, promoting a fairer system?”
- What specific strategies do you propose to achieve a peaceful, developed, and sustainable world?
- How will you strengthen the UN’s capacity to prevent conflicts and ensure accountability for international law violations?

3. UN Reform and Future Vision

1. Do you believe the current UN model is effective and fit for the future, and what changes will you make?
2. How will you restore the UN’s leadership in global multilateral governance?
3. How will you strengthen the UN’s norm-setting role and address overrepresentation linked to earmarked funding?
4. How will you rebalance power to ensure Global South priorities shape global UN decisions?
5. Will you continue existing approaches or introduce new strategies to achieve better results?

4. Development and Inequality

- How can the UN ensure the end of poverty and inequities in the Global South?
- Would you focus on advancing basic political rights in developing countries?
- How will you ensure development financing aligns with the needs of developing countries, not donors?
- What will you do to reduce unequal access to development opportunities between countries?
- How can the UN better support countries facing debt, poverty, and economic challenges?

5. Gender and Women's Rights

- How will you ensure women have meaningful influence in global decision-making?
- What actions will you take to advance women's rights within the UN and globally?
- How will you strengthen gender equality in UN leadership?
- How will gender equality shape your approach to peace and development?
- How can the UN better protect women's rights in conflict and inequality?

6. Values and Leadership Capacity

- Are you independent and genuinely committed to the UN causes?
- How will you rebuild trust in the UN?
- What kind of leadership do you believe the UN needs at this moment?
- How would you ensure transparency and accountability in your leadership?
- How will you maintain independence from powerful countries as UN leader?

7. Funding and Independence

1. Are you utilizing funds appropriately?
2. How will you reduce dependence on earmarked funding and build UN independence?
3. How can the UN uphold financial accountability without weakening its mandates?
4. How will you secure sustainable funding for development priorities?
5. What funding reforms will prevent distortion of UN priorities?

About Southern Voice

Southern Voice is a global organisation that hosts a network of over 70 think tanks from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean working to strengthen Global South perspectives in international development debates and policymaking. Since 2013, it has provided evidence-based research and policy analysis rooted in local realities and expertise.

By amplifying underrepresented voices and promoting more equitable engagement in international decision-making, the network seeks to address persistent knowledge gaps and participation imbalances in global governance. Through collaborative research, convening, and policy engagement, it works to ensure that Global South countries and regions have meaningful influence in shaping global agendas and multilateral discussions. Its research focuses on issues such as climate change, development finance, governance, institutional strengthening, inequalities, technology, artificial intelligence, and the future of sustainable development beyond the 2030 Agenda.

Southern Voice is also a member of the Steering Committee of the 1 for 8 Billion campaign, a global civil society initiative advocating for a fairer, more transparent, inclusive, and merit-based process for selecting the next United Nations Secretary-General.



Southern Voice on LinkedIn



@SVoice2030

Methodological Note

The survey *Rethinking UN Leadership: A Global South Perspective* was conducted by Southern Voice between 25 March and 14 May 2026. 104 responses were collected through Southern Voice's institutional channels and social media outreach, gathering perspectives from participants across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, including representatives from civil society, think tanks, academia, policy, and international cooperation spaces.

The survey included specific closed and open-ended questions designed to clarify perceptions of multilateralism, UN reform, global governance, and the priorities for the next United Nations Secretary-General. The findings in this report reflect data from these direct questions and analysis of participants' written responses.

The findings aim to capture participants' perceptions, concerns, and emerging political narratives rather than provide statistically representative conclusions for the Global South as a whole.



When citing this survey or reproducing data, please use the following reference:

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