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Is the future trapped in today's uncertainties? Taking stock of a week in troubled waters in New York

Auteur

Céline Kauffmann
Chief Programmes Officer

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With the biodiversity COP in Cali (October-November 2024) and the climate COP in Baku (November 2024) just around the corner, and the process of deciding priorities for the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4, Seville, June-July 2025) making slow progress, the Summit of the Future and the Climate Week came to a close in New York, two events caught between adverse geopolitics and uncertain election results.

The Summit of the Future adopted 3 key documents, the last 2 appended to the first: 1) the Pact for the Future; 2) the Global Digital Compact; and 3) the Declaration on Future Generations. The Pact for the Future was adopted by consensus without a vote. Right up to the end, Russia tried to derail the process by introducing an amendment arguing that the United Nations should not interfere in domestic affairs. The document has 65 pages and 56 actions, most of which are more aspirations than concrete commitments, with few proposals for implementation instruments.

The scope of the document is so broad that everyone can find their own priorities in it; in fact, everyone fought hard to obtain a mention of their own area, as not to be included would have been a disavowal–particularly as regards the reiteration of the language of the COP28 Decision on the transition away from fossil fuels. The text of the Pact will also be seen by everyone in the light of their own interests. Of particular note: the emphasis on reform of the international financial architecture and on digital governance (with the launch of the Global Digital Compact to strengthen the governance of data and artificial intelligence); a renewed commitment to reform the United Nations Security Council to make it more inclusive, a reform that has been blocked until now; and, in the environmental field, the desire to finalize the negotiations for the plastics treaty by the end of 2024, and to promote sustainable lifestyles and circular economy approaches. The reform of the international financial architecture is the subject of 6 of the 56 actions, including one specifically dedicated to the climate, which largely reiterate the efforts underway (within the Bretton Woods institutions and the G20) and stress the importance of putting the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs back at the centre of attention, rebalancing global governance and bringing the United Nations closer to the international financial institutions.

With this summit and this pact, the United Nations is pursuing an approach of inclusion and universalism by focusing on youth and civil society, and by attempting to synthesize the issues of climate, digital, development financing and gender, even if this means having very few levers for action in areas that do not fall within its jurisdiction. In the end, it means it means banking on the–hitherto risky–bet that the countries at the heart of the United Nations organizations, as well as its agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) and other international organizations, will ensure the coherence of positions and policies in the various forums.

However, possibly as a sign of changing times, closer ties are being forged, as demonstrated by the first meeting of G20 foreign ministers at the United Nations, at the instigation of and organized by the Brazilian Presidency. Ultimately, it is the outcome of the discussions underway that will give substance to this Pact for the future (and whether or not it will reinforce the credibility of the United Nations and multilateralism), whether they take place at the G20, at the annual meetings of the World Bank and the IMF, or in preparation for FfD4.

Alongside the Summit of the Future, the Climate Week was also held in New York, a heterogeneous gathering combining events focused more on the private sector organized by the Climate Group and an ‘off’ event using the presence of delegates to push forward a number of discussions. These focused on the issues that are due to be addressed at the forthcoming COPs, namely finance (New Collective Quantified Goal) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The issues of critical minerals and industrial policies, which are stirring up the major blocs, were also at the heart of the discussions, as was that of adaptation to climate change, notably via a high-level panel that was particularly well attended. But while this Climate Week was part of the preparations for upcoming events, it was held against a backdrop of great uncertainty about the outcome of the forthcoming US elections, and hostile geopolitics in terms of international cooperation. While it is doubtful that it did lead to any significant diplomatic advances, it demonstrated the dynamism of the communities of experts and the technical exchanges taking place one year before the tenth anniversary of the Paris Climate Agreement.

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