

The 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome: Rescue Plan for 2030 Agenda as a Wake-up Call for the Decision-makers

Bharat H. Desai*

Professor of International Law, Jawaharlal Nehru Chair and Chairperson of the Centre for International Legal Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract. As a plenary organ of the UN, the General Assembly has invoked its principal instrumentality of resolutions to address a variety of global problems. The mirage of being called “recommendations” (Article 11, the UN Charter) has never come in the way of finesse with which the Assembly has invoked its resolutions to zero in on contemporary common concerns. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by resolution 70/1 (September 25, 2015) has been one such major global action plan that became a milestone in a long line of engagements that have also carried the normative halo. Now at the mid-way to the 15-year cycle (2015–2030), the performance assessment on 17 Goals shows that the promise of leaving “no one behind” is in peril. In view of the reality of the world we live in and multiple interconnected planetary scale crisis situations, the UN member states have floundered in giving effect to the promises laid down in the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda. The UN Secretary-General’s report (April 27, 2023) has called for a resolute rescue plan for people and planet. The progress came to be reviewed at the SDG Summit convened by the UNGA President during September 18-19, 2023. The available data (*Revised Zero Draft* of June 8, 2023), underscored the gravity of the peril faced by the humankind since, out of 140 targets, “only about 12 per cent are on track; more than half, although showing some progress, are moderately or severely off track; and some 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline”. The *Political Declaration* adopted at the New York *SDG Summit* coinciding with the meeting of the High-Level Political Forum, sought to work out a rescue plan considering the UNSG’s stimulus plan and taken the “pledge to act now, for present and future generations”. This article examines the process, the promise, the pledge and the rescue plan for the SDGs in peril.

Keywords: UN General Assembly, High-Level Political Forum, SDG Summit, sustainable development goals, Agenda 2030, rescue plan, SDG Stimulus, Political Declaration

1. Introduction

As a plenary organ of the United Nations (UN), the General Assembly (GA) has played a pivotal role in norm-setting, organizing international law-making processes and institution building on a variety of global *problematique*. It has resorted to a remarkable engineering skill to engage a host of actors in contentious issues from the past (colonialism, racial discrimination, slavery, apartheid), existing global problems (climate change, violence against women, conflicts) and future challenges (artificial intelligence, planetary crisis, future generations). Notwithstanding the legal quibbling due to the limits placed by Article 11 of the UN Charter on the GA’s principal instrumentality of resolutions as “recommendations”, it has neither *per se* come in the way of making the resolutions work nor affect their legitimacy.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: desai@jnu.ac.in.

As a corollary to the UNGA's consistent engagements to address some of the global challenges as a “conductor of a grand orchestra”,¹ the President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Csaba Kőrösi, invited² (letter of July 17, 2023) the Heads of State and Government (HoS&G) for the 2023 *High-level political forum on sustainable development*³ (HLPF) under the auspices of the UNGA's 2023 *SDG Summit* (September 18-19, 2023).⁴ It became significant as a mid-point (2015–2030) of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs)⁵ unveiled with a mission for *Transforming Our World*. The SDGs 2030 were adopted *vide* UNGA resolution 70/1 of September 25, 2015.⁶ The 2023 *SDG Summit* could be considered as a last-ditch effort to address the “impact of multiple and interlocking crises facing the world”. The *SDG Summit* coincided with the commencement of the 78th session⁷ of the UNGA (2023-24). It appears the forthcoming *Summit of the Future* (September 22-23, 2024)⁸ will provide yet another chance in quick succession to further review progress and give a push for taking SDGs seriously.

2. 2023 SDG Summit: Global Conferencing Technique

The outcome (“the future we want”) of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) established the HLPF in 2012. The HLPF was assigned the task to follow-up and review implementation of the SDGs. It has become one of the central UN platforms for sustainable development.⁹ The UNGA decided *vide* resolution 67/290¹⁰ that the Forum meets annually under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Forum takes place for two days every four years at the level of the Head of the State or Government under the UNGA. The HLPF adopts duly-negotiated political declarations. The first meeting of the Forum¹¹ was held on September 24, 2013. It ended the two-decades long lackluster era of the Commission on Sustainable Development (set up for follow-up of the Agenda 21 of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit).

The third week of September 2023 witnessed all roads leading to New York for participation in the 78th UNGA. The 2030 *SDGs*, adopted after marathon negotiations mandated by the 2012 Rio+20 Summit,¹² were

- 1 Bharat H. Desai (2014). *Institutionalizing International Environmental Law*, Chapter 5, p. 144. Ardsley, New York: Transnational Publishers.
- 2 UN (2023), Communique by the President of the General Assembly, July 17, 2023; available at: [SDG Summit Programme Letter.pdf](#) (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 3 UN (2023), *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, July 10-19; available at: [High-Level Political Forum 2023](#) (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 4 UN (2023), *Sustainable development Goals Summit*, September 18-19, New York; available at: [SDG Summit 2023 | United Nations](#). Also see UN (2023), *Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, Global Sustainable Development Report 2023: Times of Crisis, Times of Change Science for Accelerating Transformations to Sustainable Development*. New York: UN; FINAL GSDR 2023-Digital -110923.1.pdf (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 5 UN (2023), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*; available at: [The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf](#) (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 6 UN (2015), *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*; General Assembly resolution 70/1 of September 25, 2015 ; available at: [70th Session \(2015-2016\) - UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables - Research Guides at United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library](#) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 7 The 78th regular session of the UN General Assembly commenced at the United Nations Headquarters, New York at 3 pm on Tuesday, September 05, 2023. The provisional agenda is available at: [Provisional agenda of the 78th regular session of the General Assembly, to convene at United Nations Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, September 5, 2023](#) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 8 UN (2022), *Modalities for the Summit of the Future*, the UNGA resolution 76/307 of September 8, 2022; Resolutions of the 76th Session - UN General Assembly (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 9 UN, “High-Level Political Forum”; available at: <https://hlpf.un.org/> (accessed on October 08, 2023)
- 10 UN (2013), *Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development*, the General Assembly resolution 67/290 of July 09, 2013; UN Doc. A/RES/67/290, August 23, 2013; available at: [67th Session \(2012-2013\) - UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables - Research Guides at United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library](#) (accessed on October 08, 2023).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 UN (2012), *Report of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, 20-22 June 2012, Rio de Janeiro; available at: [Etpu](#) (un.org); United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development | United Nations (accessed on 27 September 2023) Also see, UN (2012), General Assembly resolution 66/288 on “The future we want” adopted on 27 July 2012 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/66/L.56)].

built on the previous cycle of 2015 *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs).¹³ It vividly underscored role of the UNGA to diagnose global *problematique*, propound an action plan and exhort the sovereign states to earnestly pursue it. As the plenary organ of the UN, the Assembly has sought to provide both legitimacy and direction to various inter-governmental processes for institutionalized international cooperation. In a way, the SDGs provide an audacity of hope as well as a way of atonement for the CSD Development (1992–2012)¹⁴ that died unsung.

As a part of a series of preparatory processes, on August 01, 2023, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed addressed a meeting on *2030 SDGs* in Brasilia. She stressed on the importance of the *2023 SDG Summit* and observed:

“The Secretary-General is urging leaders to come to the UN General Assembly and the SDG Summit in September ready to contribute to a Rescue Plan for People and Planet. This means arriving with concrete national commitments and action plans to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.”¹⁵

The *2023 SDG Summit*¹⁶ needed to undertake a serious review of prospects for realizing the Goals in the next seven years (2023–30). The SDGs were to be attained in an incremental and persuasive way in consonance with political convenience of the UN member states. The Goals necessitated a major rejig of the global order, economy, societal structures, wasteful consumption patterns, unsustainable lifestyles and pervasive mindsets. At the SDG inauguration in 2015 (70th UNGA), terming the Agenda 2030 as “lofty”, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi observed: “Sustainable development of one-sixth of humanity (India) will be of great consequence to the world and our beautiful planet”.¹⁷ However, the era of a “planetary crisis”¹⁸ calls for a decisive course correction as the galloping human population projected to reach 9.8 billion (2050) and 11.2 billion (2100)¹⁹ will require natural resources equivalent of three planets to sustain current profligate lifestyles. In the face of this challenge, the realization of SDGs seems to be utopian for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.

In a way, the SDGs underscore tragedy of the unfettered human quest for material progress. The usage of prefix *sustainable* provides value to the cherished targets, seeks to circumscribe inherent greed for development and fine tune relevance of sustainability in a rapidly changing world. The SDGs include challenges as diverse as inequality in living standards, infrastructure, water & sanitation, women empowerment, access to modern energy, quality education, healthy lives, poverty and hunger. Its preamble makes an emphatic assertion that “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development”. Does the audacious claim of not leaving anyone behind in that journey conjure up scenario of chasing a mirage in a world that is so unjust, inequitable and full of contradictions? As a result, the Goals inherently face an uphill task of matching grim reality with high expectations. Since 2000,

- 13 UN (2015), *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*; available at: MDG 2015 rev (July 1).pdf (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023). UN (2000), General Assembly resolution 55/2 on “United Nations Millennium Declaration”, 8 September 2000; available at: A/RES/55/2: United Nations Millennium Declaration. Also see, UN (2015), *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*; available at: MDG 2015 rev (July 1).pdf (un.org) (accessed on September 27, 2023).
- 14 Bharat H. Desai et al. (2015), “Quest for International Environmental Institutions: Transition from CSD to HLPF” in Shawkat, A. et al. (2015), *International Environmental Law and the Global South*, Chapter 7). Cambridge University Press, 152-168.
- 15 UN (2023), *Deputy Secretary-General’s remarks on Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs: the 2030 Agenda in Brazil*, Brasilia, 01 August 2023; available at: Deputy Secretary-General’s remarks on Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs: the 2030 Agenda in Brazil | United Nations Secretary-General; In Brazil, UN deputy chief urges greater ambition for Global Goals | UN News (accessed on September 27, 2023).
- 16 UN (2023), *2023 SDG Summit*, 18-19 September 2023; available at: SDG Summit 2023 | United Nations (accessed on September 27, 2023). Also see UN (2023), n.5.
- 17 UN (2023), “Sustainable Development Goals in India”; available at: Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations in India (accessed on September 27, 2023).
- 18 Bharat H Desai (2023), “The Audacity Of Hope For People And Planet: Rescue Plan For 2030 Sustainable Development Goals”, *Green Diplomacy*, September 05, 2023; The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: Rescue Plan for 2030 Sustainable Development Goals — Green Diplomacy; Bharat H. Desai (2023), “The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome and Beyond: Part – II”, EPL Blog, October 18, 2023; The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome and Beyond: Part – II | Environmental Policy and Law.
- 19 UN (2022), *2022 Revision of World Population Prospects*; available at: World Population Prospects - Population Division - United Nations; Population | United Nations; 21June_FINAL PRESS RELEASE_WPP17 (accessed on September 27, 2023)

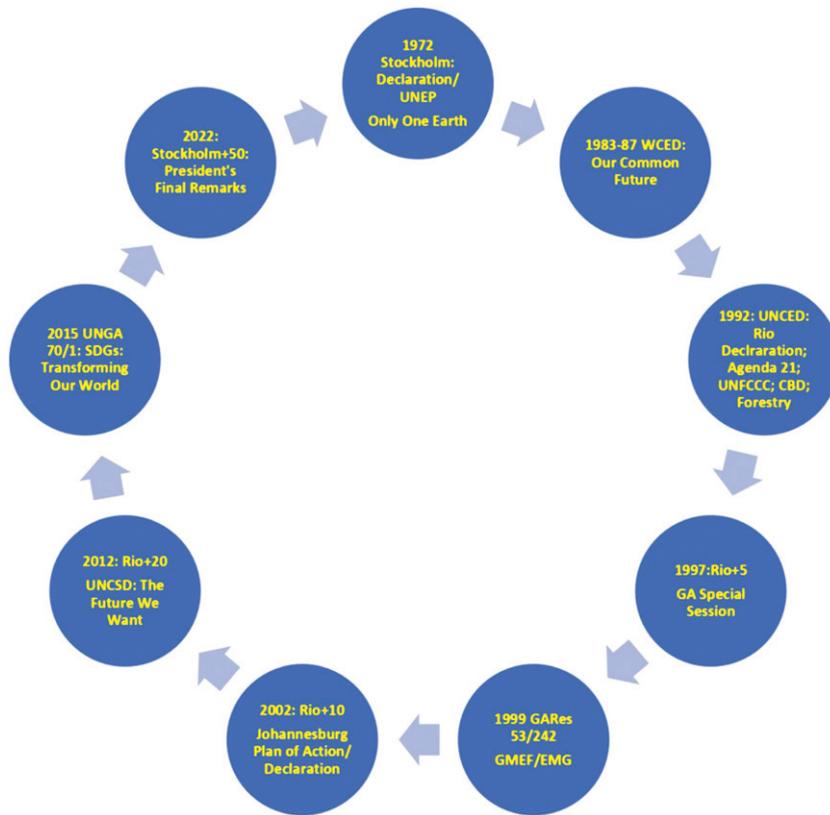


Fig. 1. UNGA's Role in Global Environmental Conferencing, 1972–2022.

two back-to-back global processes for MDGs (2000–2015)²⁰ and SDGs (2015–2030)²¹ underscore that there are *Limits to Growth*²² on this beleaguered planet. There may be legal quibbling over SDGs' normative value. Still the SDGs provide a beacon of hope as sustainability agenda has risen like the proverbial Sphinx from in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio²³ and the 2012 Rio+20²⁴ Summits (see Fig. 1: *UNGA's Role*).

3. SDGs and the Global Disorder

At the 2023 *SDG Summit*, the assembled HoS & G sought to take stock of the global order in a perilous state. Apart from the havoc brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022), there have been grave crisis signals that all the 17 Goals (169 targets) aimed at “leaving no one behind” are likely to go haywire. In that eventuality, there is a danger of SDGs meeting the fate of MDGs. Therefore, it is pertinent – in the scholarly realm – to take cognizance of some of the main contributing factors, events, situations and contingencies that could upturn the SDG appletart. These underscore the grim reality of the world we live in and include:

20 UN (2015) and UN (2000), n.12

21 UN (2023) and UN (2015), n.8

22 The Club of Rome (1972), *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, Universe Books, New York; available at: [The Limits to Growth - Club of Rome](#) (accessed on September 27, 2023).

23 UN (1992), *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992; available at: [N9283655.pdf \(un.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023); UN (1989), General Assembly resolution 44/228 of 22 December 1989 on “United Nations Conference on Environment and Development”; available at: [NR054987.pdf \(un.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

24 UN (2012), n.11

- (i) *World Without Glaciers*: There are warnings about shrinking of the world’s ‘water towers’ (glaciers) that would affect availability of fresh water resources around the world. The UNSG has warned (March 22, 2023)²⁵ that “Human activity is driving our planet’s temperature to dangerous new heights . . . turning glaciers, into the canary in the coalmine . . . Losing these giants would be a giant problem for our world”.
- (ii) *Global Humanitarian Crisis*: According to the UN Global Humanitarian Overview 2023,²⁶ one in 23 people on the planet Earth needs help in order to survive. A record 339 million people need humanitarian assistance.²⁷ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has been under severe stress since never before the humanitarians were called to respond to this level of need and in much more risky environments. The OCHA’s Strategic Plan 2023–2026 has provided warning signs that “By 2026, needs are set to far outpace resources, leaving an inundated humanitarian system struggling to meet a mere fraction of needs”.²⁸ The estimated funding requirement for the UN’s humanitarian projects has been pegged at 50 billion US dollars.
- (iii) *Extreme Climatic Events*: The WMO’s State of Global Climate 2022²⁹ shows the planetary scale changes on land, in the ocean and in the atmosphere caused by record levels of heat-trapping GHGs.³⁰ The last eight years (2015 to 2022) were the warmest on record. In fact, the extreme climatic events alone drove an estimated 16 million people into food crises in 15 countries. It also caused an exacerbated violence against women and children. It is likely to reach 100 million in coming years.
- (iv) *Exacerbated Global Poverty*: The *Multidimensional Poverty Index 2022*³¹ provided estimate of 1.2 billion people in 111 developing countries living in acute multidimensional poverty. The largest number of poor people live in Sub-Saharan Africa (579 million) and South Asia (385 million). It shows that central thrust of the SDGs for “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions” is in serious jeopardy.
- (v) *Violence Against Women (VAW)*: UNWomen data shows an estimated 736 million women – almost one in three – have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their life³². It does not include sexual harassment. In 2021, in the EU alone, the cost of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)³³ was estimated around €366 billion a year, out of which VAW constituted 79 per cent (€289 billion).
- (vi) *Nuclear Weapons Have Grown*: There are nine nuclear-armed states (the USA, Russia, the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and the North Korea). Out of the total inventory of an estimated 12705 warheads³⁴ at the start of 2022, about 9440 were in military stockpiles for potential use.

25 UN (2023), *Guterres warns of ‘catastrophic’ consequences of a world without glaciers*, 22 March 2023; available at: [Guterres warns of ‘catastrophic’ consequences of a world without glaciers | UN News](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

26 UN OCHA (2022), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2023*, 01 December 2022; available at: [Global Humanitarian Overview 2023 | Humanitarian Action](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023).

27 German Federal Foreign Office (2022), *Outlook for 2023: 339 million people need humanitarian assistance*, 01 December 2022; available at: [Outlook for 2023: 339 million people need humanitarian assistance - Federal Foreign Office \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023).

28 UN OCHA (2023); available at: [OCHA’s Strategic Plan 2023-2026: Transforming Humanitarian Coordination | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023).

29 WMO (2023), *State of the Global Climate 2022*; released in Geneva on 21 April 2023; available at: [State of the Global Climate in 2022 | World Meteorological Organization \(wmo.int\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

30 UNEP (2022), *Emissions Gap Report 2022: The Closing Window*; available at: [Emissions Gap Report 2022 \(unep.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023). Also see, UNEP (2022), “*How do greenhouse gases warm the planet?*” available at: [How do greenhouse gases actually warm the planet? \(unep.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

31 OPHI and UNDP (2022), *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index*, released on 17 October 2022; available at: [2022mpireportenpdf.pdf \(undp.org\)](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

32 UNWomen (2023), *Ending violence against women: Facts and Figures*; available at: [Facts and figures: Ending violence against women | What we do | UN Women – Headquarters](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

33 For a detailed study on SGBV see, Bharat H. Desai and Moumita Mandal (2022), *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in International Law: Making International Institutions Work*, Springer Nature: Singapore; available at: [Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in International Law: Making International Institutions Work | SpringerLink \(English edition\)](#). The German language edition (2023) of the book is now available at: [Sexuelle und geschlechtsspezifische Gewalt im internationalen Recht: Internationale Institutionen zum Funktionieren bringen | SpringerLink](#) (accessed on October 08, 2023)

34 SIPRI (2022), “*Global nuclear arsenals are expected to grow as states continue to modernize*”; available at: [Global nuclear arsenals are expected to grow as states continue to modernize–New SIPRI Yearbook out now | SIPRI](#) (accessed on 27 September 2023)

- (vii) *People Living in Conflict Zones*: In a May 19, 2022 address to the UNSC³⁵, the UNSG expressed concern for some 60 percent of the world's undernourished people living in the conflict zones. An estimated one-fourth of global population (2 billion) live in conflicts raging across Africa, Middle East, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Interestingly, the data generated from a study³⁶ – driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) – of all speeches made at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly (in late September 2023) from the assembled 178 world leaders and ministers showed that three of their most prominent concerns comprised climate change, development and peace. These broad categories testify and subsume all the above-mentioned planetary level challenges that could derail the ambitious SDGs in the remainder seven years of the 2015–2030 cycle.

4. The SDG Rescue Plan

Notwithstanding above grim global disorderly scenario, in February 2023, the UNSG launched *SDG Stimulus to Deliver Agenda 2030*. It graphically stated that, as of November 2022:

“The burden of debt overhang is battering the economies of many developing countries. As of November 2022, 37 out of 69 of the world's poorest countries were either at high risk or already in debt distress, while one in four middle-income countries, which host the majority of the extreme poor, were at high risk of fiscal crisis. The number of additional people falling into extreme poverty in countries in or at high risk of entering debt distress is estimated to be 175 million by 2030, including 89 million women and girls.”³⁷

In view of the above, the ostensible rationale for the bold stimulus plan mooted by the UNSG has been explained thus:

“The SDG Stimulus addresses both short-term urgencies and the need for long-term sustainable development finance. It calls for a significant increase in financing for sustainable development, to the tune of at least \$500 billion per year, to be delivered through a combination of concessional and non-concessional finance in a mutually reinforcing way.”³⁸

However, it remains to be seen as to how far the call of the 2023 *SDG Stimulus* call for such a staggering amount of \$500 billion per year materializes in financing for sustainable development. Will the SDGs become an instrument to propel inter-governmental behavioral change, provide a roadmap for our salvation and become a harbinger of a new world bereft of misery? This posits the biggest challenge in the third decade of the 21st century. It calls for walking-the-talk of grappling with the mirage of human development on the bedrock of ‘sustainability’ that connotes divergent perspectives from the Global North and the Global South. In view of the gravity of the crisis, it was expected that the 2023 *SDG Summit* would consider some concrete alternative pathways to meet basic aspirations of people in the disadvantaged parts of the world. It required a radical departure from the current passivity – akin to the popular saga wherein *Nero fiddled while Rome burned*. Now in the aftermath of the 2023 *SDG Summit*, the cardinal credo in the coming years would need to be: walking-the-talk. Will the decision-makers of the UN member states take this seriously?

35 UN (2022), *Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council - on Conflict and Food Security*, statement on 19 May 2022; available at: Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council - on Conflict and Food Security [bilingual as delivered; scroll down for all-English] | United Nations Secretary-General (accessed on 27 September 2023)

36 UN (2023), “AI reveals world's top 3 universal concerns”, *UN News*, October 06, 2023; AI reveals world's top 3 universal concerns | UN News

37 UN (2023), *United Nations Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus to Deliver Agenda 2030*, February 2023, p.1; available at: SDG-Stimulus-to-Deliver-Agenda-2030.pdf (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023)

38 UN (2023), n.37 at p.2.

5. The SDG Summit Outcome

The 2023 *SDG Summit* can be construed as a ‘stitch in time’ to save us from the planetary crisis. It sought to respond to the consequences of multiple and interlocking crises that the world is facing. The deliberations and the resultant outcome document – *Political Declaration* – may yield high-level political guidance on transformative and accelerated actions to usher in a new phase for attaining SDGs in the remaining seven years of the current cycle (2015–2030). As the UNSG underscored, the SDG Summit was “to provide a renewed impetus and accelerated action for reaching the SDGs” and is “expected to reignite a sense of hope, optimism, and enthusiasm for the 2030 Agenda.”³⁹ However, a “great finance divide” threatens the SDG targets since ability of a large number of poorer countries, reeling under mountains of debt, has been sharply curtailed for investment in recovery, climate action, and sustainable development. As a consequence, the *Zero Draft of the Political Declaration* (June 08, 2023), prepared for adoption at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of the General Assembly mandated 2023 *SDG Summit*, underscored the ominous ground reality that:

“The achievement of the SDGs is in peril. At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, we are alarmed that only 12 per cent of the SDGs are on track and 30 per cent remain unchanged or below the 2015 baseline. The progress on most of the SDGs is either moving much too slowly or has regressed. Our world is currently facing numerous crises. Years of sustainable development gains are being reversed. Millions of people have fallen into poverty, hunger and malnutrition are becoming more prevalent, and the impacts of climate change more pronounced. This has led to increased inequality underpinned by weakened international solidarity and a shortfall of trust to jointly overcome these crises.”⁴⁰

Interestingly, the final *Political Declaration*,⁴¹ adopted as an outcome of the 2023 *SDG Summit*, chose to eschew the uncomfortable reality of the “world we live in” contained in the in the chilling figures (in the *Zero Draft*) that “12 per cent of the SDGs are on track and 30 per cent remain unchanged”. As already mentioned, the mounting debt burden due to high borrowing costs is one of the principal factors that cripples fragile economies of most the developing countries. It reflects deep rooted inequitable international financial and monetary system. In the end, the *Political Declaration*, adopted at the 2023 *SDG Summit*, under the auspices of the UNGA’s HLPF, vowed that:

We will act with urgency to realize its vision as a plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, leaving no one behind. We will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.⁴²

As a result, the *Political Declaration* chose to give a priority to implementation of the 2030 Agenda and committed⁴³ to upholding all the principles contained therein.

(i) Shared Commitment

It has been emphasized that eradication of poverty including extreme poverty is the biggest global challenge and one of the indispensable requirements for sustainable development. It was reaffirmed that the 2030 Agenda is universal in nature and comprises three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (see Fig. 2: three dimensions of sustainable development).

The empowerment of women, gender equality and human rights for all are crucial pillars of the SDGs as it emphasized:

39 UN (2023), n. 16.

40 HLPF (2023), *Revised Zero Draft of the Political Declaration to be adopted at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of the General Assembly in September 2023*, paragraph 6 at p. 1 (June 08, 2023); available at: [Zero Final SDG PD Revised.pdf \(un.org\)](#) (accessed on September 27, 2023)

41 UN (2023), *Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development*, High-level political forum on sustainable development Convened under the auspices of the General Assembly 18 and 19 September 2023; UN Doc. A/HLPF/2023/L.1, paragraph 8 at p.1, September 15, 2023; available at: [A HLPF 2023 L1.pdf \(un.org\)](#); UN (2023), *Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly*, General Assembly resolution 78/1 of September 29, 2023; N2330665.pdf (un.org)

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

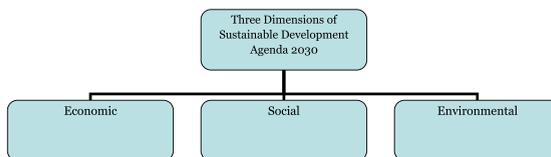


Fig. 2. Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

“We reaffirm that the 2030 Agenda is universal in nature and that its Goals and targets are comprehensive, far-reaching, people-centered, indivisible and interlinked, balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental, in an integrated manner. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.”⁴⁴

It reaffirmed that the 2030 Agenda was guided by the UN Charter including “respect for international law” since it is “grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome. It is informed by other instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development”.⁴⁵ Moreover, climate change has been regarded as one of the “triple planetary crisis”⁴⁶ of our times. As greenhouse gases (GHG) continue to rise globally, and with all countries, the special vulnerability of the developing countries has been addressed. It emphasized that climate change mitigation and adaptation are an immediate priority. Increased inequality due to poverty, hunger and malnutrition have become more prevalent, humanitarian costs are rising (339 million need assistance),⁴⁷ and the impacts of climate change, etc. weaken international solidarity and the trust deficit mars collective efforts to overcome these crises. Cumulatively, it appears that an effective and global cooperation is a *sine qua non* at all levels to realize the 2030 SDGs. It is reflected in a political vow that we “will promote a systemic shift towards a more inclusive, just, peaceful, resilient and sustainable world for people and planet, for present and future generation”.⁴⁸

The *Declaration* has recognized that many countries are facing challenges in pursuing SDGs. They comprise mostly developing countries including African countries, landlocked countries, island countries and least developed countries that are facing special challenges. Most of these countries are middle-income countries and countries in conflict and post-conflict situations. The gender agenda emerging at the top of the list, women’s empowerment and elimination of violence against women and girls would call for policy, legal and institutional responses at global and domestic levels. Hence, the *Declaration* underscored:

“We commit to enhancing global, regional, national and local partnerships for sustainable development, engaging all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, private sector, academia and youth, recognizing the important contribution they can make toward achieving the 2030 Agenda, and the localization of the SDGs. We also reaffirm the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development in addressing regional challenges and scaling up action among countries.”⁴⁹

Some other strands in the global concerns and discourse include discrimination based on race, hate speech, stigmatization, xenophobia and related intolerance etc. These can be addressed only through cooperation, partnership, inclusion and respect for diversity. There are cross-cutting actions comprising quality education, universal health and related issues like food etc. that would provide long-term cohesion, sustenance and

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 Bharat H. Desai (2023), “Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers”, *Green Diplomacy*, February 14, 2023; Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers — Green Diplomacy; Bharat H. Desai (2023), “Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers”, *Environmental Policy and Law Blog*, January 5, 2023; Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers | Environmental Policy and Law

47 Bharat H. Desai (2022), “Use of Weapons of War and the Role of Humanitarians: A Challenge for International Law”, *School of International Studies Blog*, August 23, 2022; Use of Weapons of War and the Role of Humanitarians: A Challenge for International Law (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)

48 UN (2023), n.41.

49 *Ibid*, paragraph 23.

peaceful future. As a corollary to the urgent steps required for planetary level crisis, the *SDG Summit* sought to address several other pillars to conserve and sustainably use oceans and seas, freshwater resources, as well as forests, mountains and drylands and protect biodiversity, ecosystems and wildlife. It would need concerted commitments through global, regional, national and legal partnerships for sustainable development to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

(ii) *Identified Gaps and Challenges*

The challenges and gaps identified and reflected in the 2023 *SDG Summit* and its outcome instrumentality of *Political Declaration*, are mostly based on the world before and after COVID-19. Climate change, poverty, forced displacement, economic issues like cost-of-living, conflicts, gender inequality, the problems relating to migration, increased SDG financing gap, problems of landlocked countries, etc. have been identified as the most important challenges in the implementation of the 2030 SDGs that especially affect developing and least developed countries. Thus, the Declaration has welcomed the UN Development system to implement reforms championed by the UNSG and endorsed by the UNGA to support the countries in realizing the 2030 Agenda. The importance of sustainable funding has given priority to the UN development system and its programmatic activities. Moreover, voluntary national reviews have been regarded as suitable mechanism to monitor progress and integrate the SDGs into national policies and plans.⁵⁰

(iii) *Moving Forward to Achieve Agenda 2030*

The States have renewed their commitment for taking an urgent action at all levels to achieve the goals that would be fundamental and transformative for the planetary future. The *SDG Summit* has identified States that are doing well and to support those who are left behind. The needs of “all children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants” have been duly reflected in the Agenda. In fact, the need for a concrete global partnership has emerged as one of the important tools to achieve the SDG targets by 2030. In this wake, the *Political Declaration* has zeroed in on prioritization of digitalization⁵¹ in the developing countries as:

“the digital economy, including by enhancing their digital infrastructure connectivity, building their capacities and access to technological innovations through stronger partnerships and improving digital literacy . . . We reaffirm that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online. We look forward to the elaboration of a Global Digital Compact to bridge the digital divides and to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.”⁵²

There have been serious concerns for global water scarcity and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all as well as identifying gaps for addressing issues like global pandemic and the global health coverage so that no one is left behind. Similarly, implementation of the ‘New Urban Agenda’, global sustainable consumption patterns and zero-waste initiatives would matter most in the saga of realization of 2030 SDGs. With a focus on renewable energy, full implementation of the *Sendai Framework* for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) has been flagged as one of the important targets. However, it did not call for an international legally binding treaty on disaster management and risk reduction.⁵³

Another urgent issue has been ‘climate action’ for the implementation of the 1992 UNFCCC and the 2015 Paris Agreement for climate mitigation, adaptation and the means of implementation especially finance for the developing countries. It observed that:

“We urge the implementation of the decisions adopted at COP 27 held in Sharm El-Sheikh. We will take concrete steps toward the operationalization of the new funding arrangements for responding to loss and damage by COP 28. We commit to continuing our work to accelerate our action to address climate change. In this regard, we also look forward to the first global stocktake of the Paris Agreement to take place at COP 28”.⁵⁴

50 *Ibid*, paragraph 24 to 35.

51 *Ibid*, paragraph 38.

52 *Ibid*.

53 *Ibid*.

54 *Ibid*.

Implementation of all the provisions of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has also been emphasized especially the three objectives:

We will take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and planet by conserving and sustainably using biodiversity and by ensuring the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the utilization of genetic resources, while providing the sufficient means of implementation to support developing countries.⁵⁵

The participating States in the *SDG Summit* welcomed the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund. It also committed to take urgent efforts to implement the strategic objectives of the 1994 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) because “combating desertification, land degradation, drought and floods, as well as sand and dust storms, and achieving land degradation neutrality are essential and have emerged as a pathway to accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs.”⁵⁶ The sustainable use and conservation of oceans and their resources under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that affirmed by the States and supported the global effects of marine pollution, especially marine plastic pollution. This futuristic thrust came to be articulated thus:

“as recalled in paragraph 158 of The Future We Want. We look forward to the third UN Ocean Conference, to be held in 2025, to scale-up ocean action and accelerate implementation”; “(p) We will support the global efforts to address plastic pollution, and the work of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment by 2024.”⁵⁷

It reiterated “the need to accelerate the transfer of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed”. Similarly, the need for funding SDGs related research and innovation and address the emerging challenges of global regulation of artificial intelligence (AI).⁵⁸ It pledged to act on international, national, and local data systems efforts that should be based on high quality, timely, relevant, disaggregated and reliable data on SDG. The outcome also sought full implementation of the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* and take further actions to scale up financing to sustainable development and provide the means of implementation to the developing countries.⁵⁹

It appears good omen that through the *SDG Summit Declaration*, the UN member states renewed their commitments to multilateralism to find ways of working together and ensure that multilateral institutions deliver results. Similarly, they swore by peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for international law and the principles and purposes of the UN Charter including the right to self-determination, territorial integrity and political independence of the States. As an icing on the cake, the *SDG Summit Declaration* finally vowed that: “We pledge to act now, for present and future generations, turning our world towards a sustainable and resilient path by 2030, and leaving no one behind”.⁶⁰ This final sentence crystallizes the essence of what will it take for the UN member states in the remaining seven years of the current SDG cycle (2015–2030) to pursue. In fact, walking-the-talk would hold the key to the rescue plan for 2030 SDGs.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 For a detailed scholarly analysis of AI and its regulatory challenge, see Bharat H. Desai (2023), “Taming the Beast: On the Global Regulation of Artificial Intelligence for a Safe Future”, *School of International Studies Blog*, July 24, 2023; Blog Special: Taming the Beast: On the Global Regulation of Artificial Intelligence for a Safe Future (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)

59 UN (2023), n.41.

60 UN (2023), *Secretary-General’s remarks to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, September 18, 2023; available at: Secretary-General’s remarks to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development | United Nations Secretary-General; UN (2023), “UN General Assembly adopts declaration to accelerate SDGs,” *UN News*, September 18, 2023; available at: UN General Assembly adopts declaration to accelerate SDGs | UN News; UN (2023), “We all need to step up’ to rescue the SDG’s and fight for a better future: UN chief,” *UN News*, September 16, 2023; available at: ‘We all need to step up’ to rescue the SDG’s and fight for a better future: UN chief | UN News (accessed on October 08, 2023).

6. Conclusion: Audacity of hope

In the midst of a “planetary level crisis” [see Bharat H. Desai, *SIS Blog Special* (March 29, 2023) – I and II⁶¹ and *Green Diplomacy* (Feb. 14, 2023)⁶²], it is audacious to hope that the resolve of the 2023 *New York SDG Summit* (September 18-19, 2023)⁶³ would pay heed to the emergency button pushed by the UNSG (Stockholm+50; June 02, 2022) and ensure that the SDGs do not remain “hot air” and we decisively “end our senseless and suicidal war against nature”.⁶⁴

The 2023 *SDG Summit* outcome would also impinge upon the prospects for the 2024 *Summit of the Future* to be held in New York during September 22-23, 2024⁶⁵. Hopefully, notwithstanding the graphic reality and challenges of the world we live in, the key mantra of the UN member states will resolutely adhere to the solemn declaration of the *SDG Summit’s* outcome document of *Political Declaration* of “leaving no one behind” through their commitments for bold, ambitious, accelerated and transformative actions for a sustainable world for people and planet. It would require an audacity of hope against hope as well as a miracle to realize all the 2030 SDGs in the coming seven years (2023–2030). The countdown as regards how the UN member states behave and earnestly walk-the-talk would provide a litmus test for all the right-thinking peoples and their nations to stand by the planet Earth.

61 Bharat H. Desai (2023), “The Sleepwalking into a Planetary Crisis: Invoking International Law – I (March 29, 2023); available at: Blog Special - I : The Sleepwalking into a Planetary Crisis: Invoking International law (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com); Bharat H. Desai (2023), “The Sleepwalking into a Planetary Crisis: Invoking International Law – II (March 29, 2023); available at: Blog Special- II : The Sleepwalking into a Planetary Crisis: Invoking International Law (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)

62 Bharat H. Desai (2023), n. 46.

63 UN (2023), n. 5 and 6.

64 UN (2022), Secretary-General’s remarks to Stockholm+50 international meeting (June 02, 2022); available at: Secretary-General’s remarks to Stockholm+50 international meeting [as delivered] | United Nations Secretary-General (accessed on October 08, 2023)

65 UN (2022), *Modalities for the Summit of the Future*, General Assembly resolution 76/307 of September 8, 2022; available at: Resolutions of the 76th Session - UN General Assembly (accessed on October 08, 2023). Also see, UN (2021), *Secretary-General’s Report: Our Common Agenda*; available at: Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf (un.org) (accessed on October 08, 2023)