

# THE 2030 SDGS IN PERIL: REFLECTIONS ON THE UNSG'S RESCUE PLAN AND THE 2023 NEW YORK SUMMIT OUTCOME

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## Abstract

*The UN General Assembly (UNGA), as a plenary organ, has invoked its principal instrumentality of resolutions to address a wide variety of global problems. In the 77<sup>th</sup> session (October 7, 2022 to September 1, 2023), the UNGA adopted 338 resolutions whereas the first three months of 78<sup>th</sup> session (September 29, 2023-December 22, 2023) alone witnessed adoption of 258 resolutions. 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 focus 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 of the UNGA with a normative halo. Regarded as “hopes, dreams, rights and expectations of people”, the SDGs are 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 (A/78/80-E/2023/64; April 27, 2023) called for a resolute rescue plan for people and planet. The progress came to be reviewed at the New York 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”. Since 2020, tens of millions have fallen into poverty, over 110 million people forcibly displaced and inequalities have worsened especially for women and girls. 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 2023 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 Plan, Political Declaration.

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## I. 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, international environmental governance, violence against women, conflicts) and future challenges (artificial intelligence, planetary future, living in harmony with nature). Notwithstanding the legal quibbling on the legal character of the UNGA resolutions as a principal instrumentality especially due to the limits placed by Article 11 of the UN Charter, the “recommendations” have never *per se* come in the way of making the resolutions work or their legitimacy. It is reflected in the adoption of a staggering number of resolutions. For instance, during the 77<sup>th</sup> session (October 7, 2022 to September 1, 2023), the UNGA adopted 338 resolutions whereas the first four months of 78<sup>th</sup> session; September 29, 2023-December 22, 2023<sup>1</sup> witnessed adoption of 258 resolutions. On two days of December 19 and December 22 alone the Assembly adopted 97 resolutions (132-229) and 28 resolutions 230-258, respectively (78th Session; 2023-2024). In fact, the UNGA has marshalled its resolutions as a ‘vehicle’ to address contemporary concerns such as climate change. The UNGA resolution 78/153<sup>2</sup> (19 December 2023) continues the agenda item by reaffirming the pioneering resolution 43/53<sup>3</sup> (December 6, 1988). The key formulation contained in the said UNGA resolution has also been reiterated in the preamble to the two-climate change specific treaties (<https://unfccc.int/>), the 1992 UNFCCC and the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The third week of the september 2023 witnessed all roads leading to the UN headquarters in New York for participation in the 78th UNGA. As a corollary to the UNGA’s consistent engagements to address some of the global challenges as a “conductor of a grand orchestra”<sup>4</sup>, the President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Csaba Kőrösi, invited<sup>5</sup> (program; letter of July 17, 2023) the

- 1 UN (2023), *Resolutions of the 78th Session of the General Assembly*, available at: <Resolutions of the 78th Session - UN General Assembly>, accessed on 5 January 2024.
- 2 UN (2023), “Protection of Global Climate for Present and Future Generations of Humankind”, General Assembly resolution 78/153 of December 19, 2023, available at: <78th Session (2023-2024) - UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables - Research Guides at United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library>, accessed on 5 January 2024.
- 3 UN (1988), “Protection of Global Climate for Present and Future Generations of Mankind”, General Assembly resolution 43/53 of December 6, 1988, available at: <UNGA43-53.pdf (ipcc.ch)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.
- 4 Bharat H. Desai, *Institutionalizing International Environmental Law* (Transnational Publishers, Ardsley, New York, 2014), Chapter 5, p. 144.
- 5 UN (2023), Communique by the President of the General Assembly, July 17, 2023, available at: <SDG Summit Programme Letter.pdf (un.org)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

Heads of State and Government (HoS&G) for the 2023 *High-level political forum on sustainable development*<sup>6</sup> under the auspices of the UNGA's 2023 SDG Summit (September 18-19, 2023)<sup>7</sup>. It became significant as a mid-point (2015-2030) of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs)<sup>8</sup> unveiled with a mission for *Transforming Our World*. It was adopted *vide* UNGA resolution 70/1 of September 25, 2015<sup>9</sup>. 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 78<sup>th</sup> session<sup>10</sup> of the UNGA (2023-24). It appears the forthcoming *Summit of the Future* (September 22-23, 2024)<sup>11</sup> will provide yet another chance in quick succession to further review progress and give a push for taking SDGs seriously.

## II. GLOBAL CONFERENCING AT WORK: 2023 NEW YORK SDG SUMMIT

The outcome ("the future we want") of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) established the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2012. The HLPF was assigned the task to follow-up and review implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has become one of the central UN platforms for sustainable development.<sup>12</sup> The

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- 6 UN (2023), *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, July 10-19 2023, available at: <High-Level Political Forum 2023 (un.org)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.
  - 7 UN (2023), *Sustainable development Goals Summit*, September 18-19, New York, available at: <SDG Summit 2023 | United Nations>, accessed on 8 October 2023. 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, available at: <FINAL GSDR 2023-Digital -110923\_1.pdf (un.org)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.
  - 8 UN (2023), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*, available at: <The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf (un.org)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.
  - 9 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 8 October 2023.
  - 10 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 8 October 2023.
  - 11 UN (2022), *Modalities for the Summit of the Future*, the UNGA resolution 76/307 of September 8, 2022, available at: <Resolutions of the 76th Session - UN General Assembly>, accessed on 8 October 2023.
  - 12 UN, "High-Level Political Forum", available at: <<https://hlpf.un.org/>>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

UNGA decided *vide* resolution 67/290<sup>13</sup> that the Forum meets annually under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Forum meets for two days every four years at the level of the head of the State and Head of the Government under the UNGA. The HLPF adopts inter-negotiated governmental political declarations. The first meeting of the Forum<sup>14</sup> was held on September 24, 2013. It ended the two-decades long lackluster era of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD; set up for follow-up of the Agenda 21 of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit).

The *2030 SDGs* were adopted after marathon negotiations mandated by the 2012 Rio+20 Summit<sup>15</sup>. This epoch-making instrument was built on the previous cycle of 2015 *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs)<sup>16</sup>. 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 (1992-2012)<sup>17</sup>.

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

13 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 8 October 2023.

14 *Ibid.*

15 UN (2012), *Report of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, June 20-22, 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 July 27, 2012 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/66/L.56)].

16 UN (2015), *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, available at: <MDG 2015 rev (July 1).pdf (un.org)>, accessed on 8 October 2023; UN (2000), General Assembly resolution 55/2 on “United Nations Millennium Declaration”, September 8, 2000, available at: <A/RES/55/2: United Nations Millennium Declaration>, accessed on 8 October 2023. Also see, UN (2015), *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, available at: <MDG 2015 rev (July 1).pdf (un.org)>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

17 Bharat H. Desai et al., “Quest for International Environmental Institutions: Transition from CSD to HLPF”, in Shawkat, A. et al., *International Environmental Law and the Global South*, Chapter 7). (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 152-168.

Rescue Plan for People and Planet. This means arriving with concrete national commitments and action plans to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.”<sup>18</sup>

The 2023 *SDG Summit*<sup>19</sup> 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 (70<sup>th</sup> 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”<sup>20</sup>. However, the era of a “planetary crisis”<sup>21</sup> calls for a decisive course correction as the galloping human population, projected to reach 9.8 billion (2050) and 11.2 billion (2100)<sup>22</sup>, 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

18 UN (2023), Deputy Secretary-General’s Remarks on Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs: the 2030 Agenda in Brazil, *Brasilia, (August 01, 2023)*, available at: <Deputy Secretary-General’s remarks on Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs: the 2030 Agenda in Brazil| In Brazil, UN deputy chief urges greater ambition for Global Goals | UN News>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

19 UN (2023), *2023 SDG Summit*, (September 18-19, 2023), available at: <SDG Summit 2023 | United Nations>, accessed on 27 September 2023. Also see UN (2023), *note 7*.

20 UN (2023), “Sustainable Development Goals in India”, available at: <Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations in India>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

21 Bharat H Desai, “The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome and Beyond Part – II,” *Green Diplomacy*, (November 08, 2023), available at: <The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome and Beyond: Part – II — Green Diplomacy>, accessed on 8 October 2023. Bharat H Desai (2023), “The Audacity of Hope For People And Planet: Rescue Plan For 2030 Sustainable Development Goals”, *Green Diplomacy*, (September 05, 2023), available at: <The Audacity of Hope for People and Planet: Rescue Plan for 2030 Sustainable Development Goals — Green Diplomacy>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

22 UN (2022), *2022 Revision of World Population Prospects*, available at: <World Population Prospects - United Nations; Population | United Nations; 21 June\_FINAL PRESS RELEASE\_WPP17>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

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, two back-to-back global processes for MDGs (2000-2015)<sup>23</sup> and SDGs (2015-2030)<sup>24</sup> underscore that there are *Limits to Growth*<sup>25</sup> 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 in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio<sup>26</sup> and the 2012 Rio+20<sup>27</sup> Summits (see **Figure – I: UNGA’s Role**).

**Figure – I**

**UNGA’s Role in Global Environmental Conferencing, 1972-2022**



23 UN (2015) and UN (2000), *note 16*

24 UN (2023) and UN (2015), *notes 8 and 9*.

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

26 UN (1992), *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, Rio de Janeiro, June 3-14, 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.

27 UN (2012), *note 15*.



### III. REALIZING THE SDGS AMIDST GLOBAL DISORDER

At the 2023 *SDG Summit*, the assembled HoS&G sought to take stock 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 applet. These underscore the grim reality, as this author has described in a 2023 article wrote before the New York *SDG Summit* and the two Memorial Lectures (Rahmatullah Khan; SLS, November 02, 2023 and R.P. Anand; JGU, August 14, 2023) of the “world we live in.”<sup>28</sup> It includes the following global grim challenges:

(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)<sup>29</sup> 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<sup>30</sup>, one in 23 people on the planet Earth needs help in order to survive. A record 339 million people need humanitarian assistance<sup>31</sup>. The UN Office for the

28 Bharat H. Desai (2023), “Blog Special-II: The Audacity of Hope: 2023 New York SDG Summit Outcome and Beyond”, October 14, 2023, available at: <[https://sisblogjnu.wixsite.com/website/post/blog-special-ii-the-audacity-of-hope-2023-new-york-sdg-summt-outcome-and-beyond?>](https://sisblogjnu.wixsite.com/website/post/blog-special-ii-the-audacity-of-hope-2023-new-york-sdg-summt-outcome-and-beyond?); Bharat H. Desai, “The Rescue Plan for 2030 SDGs: Audacity of Hope for People and Planet”, *SIS Blog Special*, (August 12, 2023), available at: <Blog Special: The Rescue Plan for 2030 SDGs: Audacity of Hope for People and Planet (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)>, accessed on 8 October 2023. Also see Bharat H. Desai, “Revitalizing the United Nations for Our Common Future”, *Professor Dr Rahmatullah Khan Memorial Lecture by Prof Bharat Desai*, (November 02, 2023); Prof Rahmatullah Khan Memorial Lecture by Prof Bharat Desai, (November 02, 2023), available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0prXALapzhA>>; Bharat H. Desai, “The Era of a Planetary Crisis”, *Professor Dr RP Anand Memorial Lecture by Prof. Bharat Desai*, (September 14, 2023); Professor (Dr.) RP Anand Memorial Lecture, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcIN9wZ2GpM>>.

29 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.

30 UN OCHA (2022), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2023*, 01 December 2022, available at: <Global Humanitarian Overview 2023 | Humanitarian Action>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

31 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.

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"<sup>32</sup>. 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 2022<sup>33</sup> shows the planetary scale changes on land, in the ocean and in the atmosphere caused by record levels of heat-trapping GHGs<sup>34</sup>. 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*<sup>35</sup> 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 life<sup>36</sup>. It does not include sexual harassment. In

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32 UN OCHA (2023), available at: <OCHA's Strategic Plan 2023-2026: Transforming Humanitarian Coordination | OCHA (unocha.org)>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

33 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.

34 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.

35 OPHI and UNDP (2022), *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index*, released on October 17, 2022, available at: <2022mpireportenpdf.pdf (undp.org)>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

36 UN Women (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.



2021, in the EU alone, the cost of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>37</sup> 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 warheads<sup>38</sup> at the start of 2022, about 9440 were in military stockpiles for potential use.

(vii) *People Living in Conflict Zones*: In a May 19, 2022 address to the UNSC<sup>39</sup>, 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 study<sup>40</sup> – 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.

#### IV. UNVEILING OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S 2023 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:

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37 For a detailed study on SGBV see, Bharat H. Desai and Moumita Mandal, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in International Law: Making International Institutions Work* (Springer Nature, Singapore, 2022), 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 8 October 2023.

38 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.

39 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.

40 UN (2023), “AI Reveals World's Top 3 Universal Concerns”, UN News, (October 06, 2023), available at: <AI reveals world's top 3 universal concerns | UN News>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

“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.”<sup>41</sup>

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”<sup>42</sup>.

However, it remains to be seen as to how far the 2023 *SDG Stimulus* call for such a staggering amount of \$500 billion per year materializes in financing for sustainable development. The Stimulus Plan received a strong support from all countries for a much-needed reform of the international financial architecture to better reflect today’s global economy.

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 21<sup>st</sup> 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. Notwithstanding this, the UNSG sought to take an optimistic view and observed that “I am deeply encouraged by the detailed and wide-ranging draft political declaration under consideration here today — especially its commitment to improving developing countries’ access to the fuel required for SDG progress: finance. This can be a game-changer in accelerating SDG progress.”

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

41 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 8 October 2023. UN (2023), *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet: Report of the Secretary-General*; UN Doc. A/78/80-E/2023/64, 27 April, 2023; available at: <https://documents-dds-ny-un-org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/120/10/PDF/N2312010.pdf?OpenElement>.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

coming years would need to be: walking-the-talk. Will the decision-makers of the UN member states take this seriously to do so?

### V. THE 2023 NEW YORK SDG SUMMIT OUTCOME

The 2023 *SDG Summit* can be construed as a ‘stitch in time’ to save us from the future 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.”<sup>43</sup> 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”<sup>44</sup>.

Interestingly, the final *Political Declaration*<sup>45</sup>, adopted as an outcome of the 2023 *SDG Summit*, chose to eschew the uncomfortable reality of the “world we

43 UN (2023), *notes 18 and 19*.

44 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 27 September 2023.

45 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, Annex; High-level political forum on sustainable development Convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, September 18-19, 2023, available at: <N2330665.pdf (un.org); 78th Session (2023-2024) - UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables - Research Guides at United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

live in” contained 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.<sup>46</sup>

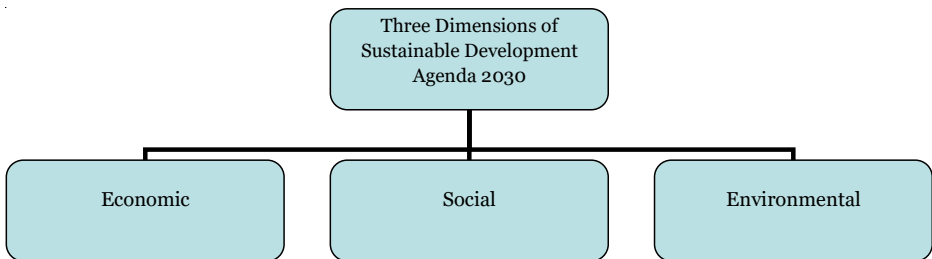
As a result, the *Political Declaration* chose to give a priority to implementation of the 2030 Agenda and committed<sup>47</sup> to upholding all the principles contained therein.

*(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 **Figure – II**: three dimensions of sustainable development).

**Figure II:**

**Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development Agenda 2030**



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

“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.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.”<sup>48</sup>

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”.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, climate change has been regarded as one of the “triple planetary crisis”<sup>50</sup> of our times. As greenhouse gases (GHG) continue to rise globally, and with all countries, the special vulnerability of the developing countries need to be 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)<sup>51</sup>, and the impacts of climate change, etc. weaken international solidarity and the trust deficit mars collective efforts to overcome these crises. Cumulatively, it appeared clear that an effective and global cooperation is a *sine qua non* at all levels to realize the 2030 SDGs. It was, in turn, 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”.<sup>52</sup>

The *Declaration* has recognized that many countries are facing challenges in pursuing sustainable development goals. 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, the elimination

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48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 Bharat H. Desai, “Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers”, *Green Diplomacy*, (February 14, 2023), available at: <Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers — Green Diplomacy>, accessed on 8 October 2023; Bharat H. Desai, “Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers”, *Environmental Policy and Law Blog*, (January 5, 2023), available at: <Global Climate Change as a Planetary Concern: A Wake-Up Call for the Decision-makers | Environmental Policy and Law>, accessed on 27 September 2023.

51 Bharat H. Desai, “Use of Weapons of War and the Role of Humanitarians: A Challenge for International Law”, *School of International Studies Blog*, (August 23, 2022), available at: <Use of Weapons of War and the Role of Humanitarians: A Challenge for International Law (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)>, accessed on 23 September 2023.

52 UN (2023), *note 45*.

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.”<sup>53</sup>

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 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, they 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.<sup>54</sup>

#### (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

53 *Ibid.*, para 23.

54 *Ibid.*, para 24 to 35.



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 digitalization<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup>

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55 *Ibid.*, para 38.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

Implementation of all the provisions of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has also been emphasized including 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.<sup>59</sup>

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.”<sup>60</sup> The sustainable use and conservation of oceans and their resources under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been 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.”<sup>61</sup>

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)<sup>62</sup>. It pledged to act on international, national, and local data systems efforts that should be based on high quality, timely, relevant,

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59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 For a detailed scholarly analysis of AI and its regulatory challenge, see Bharat H. Desai, “Taming the Beast: On the Global Regulation of Artificial Intelligence for a Safe Future”, *School of International Studies Blog*, (July 24, 2023); available at: <Blog Special: Taming the Beast: On the Global Regulation of Artificial Intelligence for a Safe Future (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)>, accessed on 23 September 2023.

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.<sup>63</sup>

It appears good omen that through the 2023 New York *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”.<sup>64</sup> 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.

## VI. CONCLUSION: AUDACITY OF HOPE

In the midst of a “planetary level crisis” [see Bharat H. Desai, *SIS Blog Special* (March 29, 2023) – I and II<sup>65</sup> and *Green Diplomacy* (Feb. 14, 2023)<sup>66</sup>], it is audacious to hope that the resolve of the 2023 *New York SDG Summit* (September 18-19, 2023)<sup>67</sup> would pay heed to the emergency button pushed by the UNSG

63 UN (2023), *note 45*.

64 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>, accessed on 8 October 2023; 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>, accessed on 8 October 2023; 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 8 October 2023).

65 Bharat H. Desai, “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)>, accessed on 8 October 2023; Bharat H. Desai, “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)>, accessed on 8 October 2023.

66 Bharat H. Desai (2023), *note 46*.

67 UN (2023), *notes 5 and 6*.

(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”<sup>68</sup>.

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, 2024<sup>69</sup>. Hopefully, notwithstanding the graphic reality and challenges of the world we live in, 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 necessitates further audacity of hope along with possibility for a miracle to realize all the 2030 SDGs in the next six years (2024-2030). The UN member states shall have to earnestly walk-the-talk to give effect to the solemn promises made, on behalf of their peoples and nations, to stand by the planet Earth.

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68 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 8 October 2023.

69 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 8 October 2023). Also see, UN (2021), *Secretary-General's Report: Our Common Agenda*; available at: <Common\_Agenda\_Report\_English.pdf (un.org)>, (accessed on 8 October 2023).