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High Stakes, Higher Expectations: Africa and the Future of UN Leadership

(Part of the Guidance and Regional Intelligence for the Transition of UN Leadership project)

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Executive summary

The selection of the next UN secretary-general comes at a time when the multilateral system is near collapse, and the UN increasingly faces political constraints. The African region needs to be alive to these realities and articulate an agenda for the next secretary-general and Executive Office that responds to its needs.

This policy briefing captures key insights and findings from a convening of experts held in Johannesburg in July 2026. It shares African views on expectations of, and advice for, the new UN secretary-general, as well as a critical reflection on Africa's role in the UN and what it broadly offers

the system as it navigates a leadership transition and institutional rebuilding amid global uncertainty. The selection of participants was strategic. African diplomats were invited to contribute their first-hand knowledge of UN processes, scholars to share informed analysis of the UN's performance, practitioners to speak from their experiences with the system and youth to foster intergenerational dialogue and meaningful exchange. The experts who participated in the Johannesburg convening represented the five sub-regions (East Africa, Central Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa) and offered expertise on the UN and its processes and issues within the institution's remit, as well as gender representation.

The policy briefing concludes with more detailed recommendations emerging from Africa on what the next secretary-general should do upon assuming office.

Introduction

The selection of the next UN secretary-general in 2026 is a high-stakes process with global consequences. It is important for two main reasons. First, selecting the multilateral body's top job coincides with growing concern about the future of multilateralism. Whoever wins the leadership race will inherit a fragmented institution that must be steered through an international environment that is itself fragmented, contested and hierarchical. Second, although always consequential, the current selection is the first to be conducted under General Assembly Resolution 79/327 of September 2025. This resolution mandates greater transparency in the selection process through public nominations and requires candidates to disclose their funding sources and vision statements on a dedicated UN web page.[1]

To gain regional insights into what UN member states are, and should be, looking for in the new secretary-general, several consultations were hosted under the Guidance and Regional Intelligence for the Transition of the UN Leadership initiative. As part of this initiative, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the United Nations Foundation (UNF), New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional (CEPEI) hosted an African regional convening on 9–10 July 2026. This brought together scholars, former diplomats and practitioners from across the continent, and was preceded by a town hall on 8 July with African youth to gauge their views on the subject.

The Africa convening delivered a stark diagnosis: multilateralism as an operating system is close to collapse because established rules and norms are being disregarded. Respect for international law and the UN itself is eroding, with powerful states increasingly opting for unilateral and bilateral instruments, and war has resurfaced as an ordering fact of

1 UN General Assembly, Resolution 79, A/RES/79/327, September 5, 2025, accessed October 29, 2026, https://docs.un.org/en/A/Res/79/327.

international life. At the same time, mediation is being 'bilateralised' and dispersed among uncoordinated actors, as illustrated in Ukraine, the Middle East, South Sudan, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Sahel.

BOX 1 KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Member states have increasingly come to treat the UN less as a common institution and more as an instrument of national interest.
- The UN is a reflection of its members, and its sustainability directly depends upon them. Reform should focus on member states reflecting on their actions to better support the functioning of the institution.
- The new secretary-general should prioritise completing outstanding tasks rather than introducing new focus areas and mandates.
- The new secretary-general and Executive Office must see Africa as a partner on global issues and not just a recipient of UN programmes.

Laying the ground: Africa's current relationship with the UN system

The greatest irony about the situation in which the UN finds itself is that the very states that built the UN and the multilateral order it was meant to uphold are now the source of some of its greatest constraints (fragmentation, unilateral instruments that undermine multilateralism, disproportionate budget allocation across the UN's three pillars). African states, many of which were under colonial rule at the time it was formed and thus unable to shape it, have now become some of the UN's (and multilateralism's) fiercest defenders. The G7 and G20, while powerful spaces for agenda-setting, are not forums in which African states have an equal voice and vote. By contrast, at the General Assembly they do, and this is where the UN holds value for African states.

This is demonstrated by several factors: the AU maintains observer mission status at the UN General Assembly and the UN reciprocates with a dedicated peace and security office in Addis Ababa. Where other member states have failed to uphold the goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, African states have purposefully aligned the AU's Agenda 2063[2] with its objectives and pushed for the neglected human rights and development pillars to receive more attention. Participants in the convening observed that the organisation's financial constraints mirror the priorities of member states that

2 The AU's Agenda 2063 is Africa's development blueprint: a broad normative and strategic framework capturing "the Africa we want", it articulates the aspirations held by the continent that it seeks to attain by 2063.

have, seemingly, lost touch with the human rights and development pillars on which the UN was also founded, focusing disproportionately on the peace and security pillar. In addition, participants observed that the UN's peace and security budget is a fraction of the global military spending of UN member states. For example, total global military expenditure amounted to $2.7 trillion in 2024, with peacekeeping accounting for less than 1% of this in the same period – a major setback for an organisation that is meant to play a primary role in securing and sustaining peace.[3]

> Over the past three decades member states have increasingly come to treat the UN less as a common institution and more as an instrument of national interest

Most of the participants in the Africa convening agreed that, over the past three decades, member states have increasingly come to treat the UN less as a common institution and more as an instrument of national interest, shaping it to their terms rather than to its purpose. This risks the organisation becoming progressively void of normative content and largely transactional. The UN can therefore be said to be restricted mainly by political factors, not managerial constraints, rooted in the choices made – or not made – by its member states and not the Secretariat. Some examples considered in this context included states withholding funds to express their dissatisfaction, the Permanent Five using their veto in the UN Security Council and states ignoring those General Assembly resolutions not aligned with their national interests. The sentiment on the continent is that relocating the crisis from the 38th floor to the capitals of member states will temper expectations of what the office can deliver, requiring member states to reflect on how their own actions may be inhibiting the institution.

Numerous factors limit African states' ability to engage effectively with and at the UN. Most African states have small diplomatic missions to the UN, which limits their capacity to coordinate within governments, between foreign ministries and with line departments in global negotiations. African states should also assess their inconsistent negotiating culture, which sees Africa formulating common African positions on particular issues without demonstrating the wherewithal to coordinate across all issues at the UN level. The use of a common African position has been one of the continent's most notable mobilisation instruments in support of African interests. Yet Africa has fallen short in employing this effective coordinating instrument consistently across all global issues, especially those not considered immediate priorities. This can be detrimental to its role as an agenda setter in global forums.

3 Vibhu Mishra, "Funding Crisis Forces Deep Cuts to UN Peacekeeping Missions", *UN News*, October 16, 2025.

At the same time, collective commitments and the national conduct of African states are also misaligned. The national interests of states, and the bilateral agreements they enter into, sometimes undercut continental instruments and agendas. For example, participants observed that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) calls for beneficiating the continent's critical minerals at source to enhance Africa's position in global value chains. Yet, in 2025, for example, the DRC, which has ratified this trade instrument, signed an agreement with the US that treats the extraction and export of these minerals as primary commodities, undermining the intentions set out in the AfCFTA. In terms of implementation and compliance, the AU mirrors the rifts between norm entrepreneurship and norm implementation in the UN. Most notable is the reactive architecture of the continent's peace and security frameworks and the invocation of sovereignty as a tactic to mask missteps.

Africa's policy priorities and contribution to the UN

A clear message at the convening was that African states need a UN that is less reactive and more proactive, one that treats development not as an afterthought but as a vital element that can prevent conflict and preserve peace while prioritising good governance. UN reforms should create a system that prioritises planning, action and the identification of antecedents. Development, in other words, should not be viewed exclusively in economic terms or considered separate from human rights and peace and security. Peace enables development, and upholding human rights should be seen as development in itself. In this view, development is the most effective form of conflict prevention. Inadequate development and human rights violations often drive intra-state conflict, so the UN's three pillars need to be rebalanced, with development and human rights becoming the principal instruments of prevention rather than adjuncts to crisis response. Thus, according to participants in the Africa convening, the new secretary-general should ideally focus on prevention rather than reaction.

Second, participants called for a new basis for development finance. They viewed official development assistance as finished and unlikely to return and argued that its passing should be welcomed rather than lamented, since aid built donor institutions more than it built the continent. What Africa seeks from the UN is technical rather than financial capacity, together with a shift from charity to investment, industrialisation and the shared financing of public goods. Relevant elements include blended finance, local green bonds and tax frameworks that enable domestic resource mobilisation, as well as a UN mechanism on sovereign debt. Debt, sovereign risk and development finance have been cast as technical matters; it is a policy priority that the UN return them to questions of equity, rights and political choice. Several participants described this re-politicisation of finance as a distinctively African contribution to the debate. African member states

approach the selection of the new secretary-general with great seriousness,[4] and while they do make certain demands of the institution, participants in the Africa convening highlighted that African states have also carefully evaluated what they offer the UN. The convening identified five primary areas where the region has something of value to offer the institution, and which the new secretary-general should be mindful of:

1 a demographic advantage: its growing young population will make up a significant portion of the global workforce by mid-century;

2 arable land, critical minerals and other resources that will drive major global transitions;

3 experience at an institutional level (AU) in building consensus among a large number of diverse states, vital in an increasingly fragmented world;

4 useful diplomatic positioning – relative non-alignment – that empowers the continent to act as a bridge-builder between the UN states wrapped up in confrontation; and

5 a wealth of experience and practical knowledge of navigating poly-crises, as illustrated by the conflicts, debt distress, climate impacts, digital disruption and rapid urbanisation the continent is living through.

Regional assets, such as a youthful population and mineral wealth, confer bargaining power only when negotiated collectively, and recent bilateral mineral arrangements show how quickly fragmentation dissipates it. This leverage is the reason African priorities carry weight beyond the continent. Converting it into influence is a political task, and that task frames both what Africa asks of the secretary-general and what it brings to the organisation.

What should the next SG do? Policy recommendations from Africa

First, a clear message at the convening was that African states require a UN that is less reactive and more proactive, one that treats development not as an afterthought but as a vital element that can prevent conflict and preserve peace while prioritising good governance. UN reform should create a system that does less to incentivise reaction and

4 One key example to consider here is that, through the chair of the Africa Group, the Permanent Representative of Malawi, African states put six questions to each nominee regarding the following: what they intend to contribute to Security Council reform; their stance on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023), which allows AU-led peace support operations to be financed through mandatory UN assessed contributions; their position on Africa's voice in global financial forums and reform of the global financial architecture; whether they would support access to climate finance; how to go about UN reform that focuses on protection of the development mandate; and whether they support African representation in the organisation's senior leadership and the system broadly. These questions are to be regarded at the same time as an indication of Africa's demands from the new secretary-general and the UN generally, as well as a benchmark against which the successful candidate will be judged.

more to prioritise planning, action and efforts to address structural and intersectional drivers. Development, in other words, should not be viewed exclusively in economic terms or considered separate from human rights and peace and security. Peace enables development, and upholding human rights should be seen as a contribution to development.

Second, relating to the first diagnosis, a rebalancing of the UN's three pillars is sorely needed. According to the participants in the Africa convening, the new secretary-general should ideally lead on prevention rather than reaction and, rather than uncritically taking over an inherited UN80 process, actively shape it through careful guidance of the mandate review by member states. In rebuilding the institution, it is also important to focus on its human capital, especially young staff members, prioritising signature recruitment, genuine entry-level positions and paid internships. The executive office should ultimately be intergenerational and better reflect the organisation's diversity, including through more African representation.

Third, African states would like the next secretary-general's initial period in office to be marked by restraint. The first 1 000 days in office, for example, should see a moratorium on grand new agendas. Instead, the focus should be on small, realistic public priorities (such as the Pact for the Future and the Sevilla Commitment) and completion of long-standing, achievable commitments. Existing policy congestion must be cleared or risk flooding the system more. This could include carefully selecting one or two protracted conflicts on the continent where sustained, coordinated action is lacking and its introduction will make a difference. Sudan, South Sudan and the Great Lakes are good examples.

Fourth, the UN needs an outspoken, visibly leading secretary-general. Such a person would speak up against violations of the UN Charter, regardless of the perpetrator or the political temperature of the moment. This visibility will help to close the trust deficit. A roadmap outlining actions, timelines and envisioned milestones for the first 1 000 days will also bolster the transparency of the process initiated with the new nomination process. All of this should feed into the UN80 process, which should ultimately lead to a stronger UN.

Lastly, rather than viewing itself as an organisation simply delivering programmes on the continent, a reformed UN should partner with the continent. In development finance, the new secretary-general should reposition the organisation as a political actor, communicating clearly what it does and does not do and protecting the sanctity of its impartiality. While Security Council reform has dominated the conversation on UN reform, deeper renewal is needed. Participants stressed that African states want to and can play crucial roles as architects and builders of a more equal, inclusive and proactive system that, despite external crises, remains a beacon for multilateralism.

Conclusion

The insights from the Africa convening offer a balanced reflection on institutional and member state performance, illustrating that the UN is only as strong as its members allow it to be. A multilateral system that was established with three goals in mind – development, peace and universal human rights – is deteriorating, placing the institution at its core, the UN, at risk. Precisely because its strength depends on its member states, insights from experts and practitioners who have studied and experienced the system and what it means for their region are valuable contributions both to the new secretary-general and to the UN more broadly. Discussions about its future are informed not only by those inside the system but also by the objective voices of future generations and current expert observers. African states remain committed to multilateralism. The UN cannot part with multilateralism. African insights make it clear that the strength of multilateralism and the UN's future prospects are grounded in the actions of states and their willingness to put aside national interests for the sustainability of an institution meant to serve all and guide their actions.

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Cover image

NEW YORK - SEPTEMBER 25, 2026: Prime Minister of the Transition Government and Minister of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Niger, Lamine Zeine Ali Mahaman speaks during the 81st session of the UN General Assembly at UN Headquarters. World leaders gathered in New York for the annual session of the UNGA with this year's global issues ranging from the threat of artificial intelligence to the continued wars in Ukraine and Gaza (Ryan Murphy/Getty Images)

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