

**Full Text Speech by Michael D. Higgins, President of
Ireland**

United Nations Summit of the Future

UN, New York

Sunday, 22nd September 2024

- President of the General Assembly,
 - Distinguished Heads of State and Government,
 - Secretary-General,
 - Excellencies,
 - A chairde, friends,
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- We find ourselves in the gravest of circumstances.
Circumstances to which it is not sufficient nor morally acceptable that we offer any passivity in the face of what are existential challenges, ones that question our very definition of humanity.
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- We must not allow ourselves to become desensitised by the daily loss of life, so much of it avoidable, in a discourse that has become dominated by the politics of fear.

- The prospects as to whether International Law can survive, what is a reflection of it or, at best, a conditional commitment to it, and any of the institutions associated with it, means that this United Nations meeting is a crisis meeting.
- The domination in the media discourse by the definition of power as capacity to access weapons of destruction is another indication of the crisis we face.
- The task we have been given by Secretary-General Guterres is to bring into being a United Nations and related institutions that will lead us through what are undeniable interacting crises – political, social, economic and, most importantly, ecological. That urgency requires that what we say must have such authenticity, in matching words to actions, as will recover and facilitate trust.
- To achieve this, we should draw on what were our better, promising moments of achieving trust, such as in 2015 when we agreed collectively to cooperate in recognising and responding to the consequences of climate change and the promise of sustainable living.

- Those agreements released an inter-generational feeling of hope among the people of nation states that we were willing to change our assumptions as to how we saw the connection between society, economy and ecology.
- We are challenged however by the fact that our delivery on commitments made on sustainable development and climate change have been so much less than what was committed.
- Despite our hopes that the United Nations 2030 Agenda would constitute a shared blueprint for peace and human development, founded on ethics and drawing on human rights and dignity, today just 17 percent of the Sustainable Development Goals are currently on track. Half of the 17 goals are showing “minimal or moderate progress”, while over a third are either “stalled or regressing”.
- In 2022, an additional 23 million people were pushed into extreme poverty, and over 100 million more were suffering from hunger compared to 2019. Nearly 60

percent of countries faced abnormally high food prices in 2022, exacerbating hunger and food insecurity.

- On malnourishment, we have regressed 15 years. According to UNICEF, the recent severe drought that has impacted large swathes of Southern Africa has resulted in almost 300,000 children being threatened by severe acute malnutrition in the six drought-affected countries.
- If current trends continue, 582 million people will be chronically undernourished in 2030, half of them in Africa.
- We are living through a pervasive and deepening inequality that scars our world. Never have so many had so little and so few accumulated so much without responsibility.
- What we are wrestling with are the consequences of a globalisation from above, led by the powerful, without transparency, without consideration as to social justice or ecological consequences.

- As a response, it is my strong belief that a new, inclusive globalisation from below can achieve a new invigorated United Nations, one that will include food sufficiency, led by those on the ground, accompanied by, and delivering, universal basic services which will enhance democracy, improve participation and give the leadership we need.
- Our joint commitment to the 2030 Agenda constituted one of the great moments for humanity, yet our hearts darken as it fades ever further away, with a widening gap between ambition and action.
- This Summit must have the courage to recognise what we can agree on as fundamental proposals to guide an effective United Nations of the future. It must be decided at this meeting that we need and will commit to reform of the United Nations and its related multilateral institutions.
- In envisaging a United Nations of the future, a United Nations that can serve the peoples of the planet, we must have the courage to look at not only its current weaknesses, but at those abuses of power

that have consciously undermined the United Nations since its foundation in 1945.

- We need a different, inclusive version of the United Nations that speaks for the possibilities and vulnerabilities of the peoples represented in their diversity by membership of the United Nations.
- Yes, we are dealing with new circumstances, but it must be recorded that it has been the pursuit of narrow interests that has frustrated so much of the normative intentions to which nations were asked to subscribe, sought to support, hoped for, from membership of the United Nations.
- For example, the United Nations of the future cannot afford to have permanent members who continue to abuse what is a veto position.
- The United Nations cannot sustain a regular contradiction of the general value positions taken at the General Assembly by their mitigation and rejection at the Security Council that is not representative of the global community.

- Today I make a strong and urgent appeal for countries to support the United Nations to fulfil its commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals – particularly that of “zero hunger”.

- We look to a continent of the young, Africa, with hope, a continent that has the promise to make a new journey of sufficiency, food sovereignty and resilience. Yet, in our global response, we must acknowledge that there are no single set of circumstances that describe all African countries.

- Our response to assisting Africa in its journey to food sovereignty must be rooted in achieving African agency, breaking dependencies, enabling Africans to decide their future through policies that will include ground-based communal strategies and the prioritising of smallholders. Such an approach, avoiding top-down imposed models and silos, is our best prospect for

achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and a better economics for a future in which Africans will want to participate in good government.

- How are we to honour the commitments made in 2015 to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030?
- We must ensure that our words ring with authenticity, that we redouble our efforts to meet the demands of the present without jeopardising the interests of future generations, that we have the courage to confront the actions of those who seek to accumulate without limit responsibility.
- We must place inclusivity centre-stage, accelerate actions at these times of multiple, interlocking crises – food security, malnutrition and global hunger, climate change and biodiversity loss, rising global poverty and inequality, the pursuit of war over peace and nuclear stockpiling.
- The failure to achieve peace, eliminate acute global poverty, hunger, or the consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss have been accompanied by a return to an arms race. Last year, global military

expenditure increased by 6.8 percent to \$2.44 billion, increasing in all regions, the highest ever recorded.

- Achieving the 2030 Agenda requires that we must address the debt strangulation of the poorest nations and assist the poorest nations in their journey to a flourishing, food-secure and sustainable future. The investment gap to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in developing countries is estimated at \$4 trillion per year. It is therefore crucial to reform the global financial system to unlock investment.
- Achieving food security, an economy of sufficiency, and the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals requires debt sustainability.
- We cannot continue to ignore the debt burden hanging around the necks of the world's poorest who have such little fiscal space to do the things being sought of them, be it in responding to climate change or achieving sustainability.

- Norwegian Church Aid has reported that servicing of debt exceeds total social spending on health, education and social protection combined in 33 countries. The report finds that debt servicing exceeds education spending in 104 countries, health spending in 116 countries, and social protection spending in 107 countries.
- Approximately 3.3 billion people – almost half of humanity – live in countries that spend more on debt interest payments than on the essential basic services of education or health.
- We need to give our fullest support to campaigns such as the much-needed global campaign to end hunger and poverty, launched by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, a campaign to which all members can subscribe.
- In the interests of all, the few must indicate their willingness to change if we are to avoid the horrific consequences of climate change, lose prospects of sustainability, and effectively prevent the conclusion that, as a species, we have failed to

achieve peace, have instead become addicted to war, have rewarded investors in instruments of death rather than promoting sustainability.

- We can achieve the change that is necessary. It is possible, but it is necessary to ask the questions that we have not asked before, structural questions, such as why we will not question the sources of what is an ever-increasing inequality.
- Is it because we have chosen to live with the evolutionist assumptions of inevitable progress of the powerful rather than confronting them to face the consequences of their destructive actions which have spread like a cancer throughout the world.
- We can make a start by agreeing on measures of debt relief and debt sustainability that can be implemented for the poorest nations who face the worst debt crisis in history, where debt payments are stifling investments in health, education, social protection and climate change measures.

- We must consider too how we cooperate, both to achieve agreed goals and to tackle emerging threats and opportunities. We must reinvigorate the structures and the trust necessary for effective global governance.

- The United Nations is our most important shared institution. It belongs to the people of the world and all of the life forms on which the future depends. Our multilateral system is broken. It requires urgent reform so that we may mend the eroded trust, contribute to reforms that will enable cohesion, inclusivity, belief in multilateralism, tackle a democratic and legitimization crisis.

- I suggest that it is useful to revisit those early aspirations of the United Nations, of coming together to achieve peace and end war. The hopes for the future of the UN are best contributed by those who are willing to make themselves aware of the worst of our present circumstances and its horrific prospects for future generations.

- The future of the UN and the future of the planet will be determined by young people in continents like Africa, generations who have contributed the least to climate change, yet are paying the highest price. But how can they respond when they are held back by a necklace of debt?

- The UN cannot return with the same philosophy driving the Bretton Woods Institutions. The UN needs to be remodelled for the future, giving agency to Africa, Asia and Latin America as part of such remodelling. This requires governance reforms, including to the Security Council to make it more representative. It requires, too, an agreed Pact resulting from this Summit that is actionable, practicable, achievable but ambitious.

- What should be proposed regarding food sustainability is linked with reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions who must be brought to serve the needs of humanity, privilege such needs rather than speculative capital

without responsibility or transparency, and with curtailment of the influence of the strongest economies. Such reform gives best prospects of managing migration both within and out of Africa.

- Actions that promote from the earliest years an understanding of the importance of promoting peacebuilding, peacekeeping and nuclear disarmament, that prevent conflict and violence, must be our priority. Ensuring cross-cutting themes, such as gender, human rights, and climate are mainstreamed throughout the Pact, is also a priority for Ireland.
- We have an opportunity at this Summit to decide collectively and resolutely to make this decade the decade in which we tackle, once and for all, the scourge of global hunger, one that will see a shared commitment to a global food-secure family, one based on the firm foundations of respect for each nation's own institutions, traditions, experiences and wisdoms, founded on a recognition of the solidarity that binds us together as humans, and an acknowledgement of the responsibility we share for our vulnerable planet and the fundamental dignity of all those who hold life on it.

- By bolstering our collective efforts to guarantee the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, making an enhanced effort, we can recover that lost authenticity in actions and words we need so that we may play our part in the recovery of an inclusive global multilateral discourse that can offer hope for all.
- Let us take meaningful steps to enable a fruitful re-engagement with *Madre Natura* using the best of tools available to us, including notably anthropology – indeed, all of the tools of social science.
- Fostering a renewal of trust and solidarity, making a new beginning between peoples, countries and generations has the potential to restore faith in a reinvigorated multilateral system that can deliver peace, sustainability and confront so many of our shared challenges for present and future generations.
- Thank you.