



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
*Foresight Africa Podcast***

“What the 80th UN General Assembly means for Africa”

Wednesday, September 3, 2025

Guest:

CRISTINA DUARTE
Undersecretary-General, Special Advisor on Africa
United Nations

Host:

LANDRY SIGNÉ
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development, Africa Growth Initiative
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

As the United Nations General Assembly begins its 80th session this month, host Landry Signé meets with Cristina Duarte, U.N. Undersecretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa, to discuss how her office is supporting African development and what the shifting international order means for Africa and global multilateralism.

[music]

SIGNÉ: Hello. I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to the *Foresight Africa* podcast, where I engage with distinguished leaders in policy, business, academia, and civil society who share their unique insight and innovative solutions to Africa's challenges while highlighting opportunities to advance engagement between Africa, the U.S., and the global community. You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

My guest today is United Nations Undersecretary-General Cristina Duarte, special advisor for Africa to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. USG Duarte has an exemplary record of advancing African agencies in the global multilateral system and coordinating support to Africa at a critical time for the continent. She brings to this position a tremendous understanding of public policy and private sector investment in Africa from her over three decades of experience.

Among her many roles, she serves as minister of finance, planning, and public administration for the Republic of Cabo Verde from 2006 to 2016, director of planning in Cabo Verde's Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, and vice president of Citibank in Angola.

I am happy to say that she's a distinguished graduate of the Thunderbird School of Global Management, where I currently serve as professor and executive director of the school's center in Washington, D.C.

USG Duarte, welcome to the show, and thank you for taking the time to join us just as the UN General Assembly opens its 80th session.

DUARTE: Thank you. Thank you. It's such a pleasure to be here, Landry, and to have an opportunity to talk and discuss Africa's challenges. Thank you very much.

SIGNÉ: Amazing, USG Duarte You have had an incredible career crossing over from the private to public sector and from the national to the international level. What drives you to get so involved in shaping global policy?

[3:38]

DUARTE: Thank you, Landry. This is a quite a pertinent question. I strongly believe that any African policymaker has no option than get involved in shaping global policy. Is not an option. Is more an imperative.

Why I say so Landry? Because globalization is the game. And in this game, African policymakers need to understand the rules of this game, namely the mechanisms in the global arena that transform narratives in allocation of resources. If you as an African policymaker facing on a daily basis debt stress, debt relief, debt suspension, cuts in your ODA, no fiscal space, but at the same time considering debt, global narrative shapes allocation of resources. As I said, you have no alternative than get involved in global policy.

Particularly when you recognize that the international financial system works against Africa. When you recognize that the international trade system works against Africa. So being an African policymaker, you need of course to address all the domestic issues. If you're minister of finance, is the deficit treasury management, you name it. If you are minister of health, is universal coverage.

So besides being in charge of addressing domestics, you'd better understand the game — globalization — the rules of the game, and now how the rules of the game determine how you exercise your function.

SIGNÉ: Amazing, USG Duarte. And across your many prestigious role, what are you most proud of as your greatest impact?

[5:55]

DUARTE: The one that I could excel, my need, my necessity to serve was when I was minister of finance and planning of my country for 10 years. Definitely. That was the function that my serving needs out of my soul as being exercised. Yes.

SIGNÉ: And why excellency?

DUARTE: Because, In my case, I was appointed 2006. And from 2008, we start one of the deepest financial crisis since the Great Depression. I was minister of finance, and at that time of course together with all government team but in this crisis situation, the minister of finance has additional responsibilities to help the civil society be more resilient and ready to cope with external shocks and try to make sure that despite the external shocks, you are able to maintain your macroeconomic stability while you keep delivering what you promised to deliver to your people. And in any position that I play in my professional life, I had such tough but interesting challenges and the clear notion that I was there to serve.

SIGNÉ: Amazing, Excellency! The Office of the Special Advisor for Africa, OSAA, was established in 2003 to advise, advocate, coordinate, and monitor the UN's commitments and policies relating to Africa's development and security. Since its creation, how has the OSAA's work across these four functional roles impacted the United Nations and its global partners supporting Africa?

[8:17]

DUARTE: Thank you. You are right. Advisory, advocacy, coordination, and monitoring. To understand these four functions, you need to apply a value chain approach. It's the only way to understand how these four functions are all placed in the same value chain to deliver what the mandate has request or has been requested also to deliver.

So first, advisory, I would say is the first function in this value chain. And advisory function basically leverages all this knowledge production capabilities and positions OSAA as a knowledge broker within UN system. I'm sure you know, Landry, that UN system is the best data hub in the world. UN system is the best knowledge hub in the world. Both are intangible assets of UN system.

So OSAA doesn't need to reinvent the wheel from an African perspective. OSAA need just to play a broker, a knowledge broker role, and using that knowledge and that data to develop analytical work to feed its advisory function: advisor to the Secretary-General, to the Deputy Secretary-General, but to the 54 member states based based in Europe. This is the advisory.

Once the advisory produce its output, which is essentially knowledge — and in the past five years we managed to develop a new narrative about Africa within UN system, but above all from Africa — once the advisory function based on this knowledge production process delivers value, that value feeds the advocacy function. Then we take the knowledge, and we spread it out. We disseminate. To do what with the dissemination? Because at the end of the day, we want to use the UN knowledge asset, UN data asset to support the qualification of policymaking in Africa.

[10:53]

Allow me to give you a very concrete example.

Today, it's clear to everybody that Africa loses more or less \$78 billion in efficient public spending. At the same time, we know that Africa is facing debt distress and lack of fiscal space. So this specific situation of Africa from a financing for development standpoint should make UN system look inside which data I have, which knowledge I have to support policy advisory services to help Africa address that macroeconomic challenge.

So you have the advisory function based on knowledge. Feeds the advocacy function. The advocacy function craft space for the policy advisory function to enter and to deliver. And carrying with that process, carrying data and knowledge.

Then comes coordination. If you have the advisory function and advocacy function, that positions you with comparative advantage to play the coordination role of what? Coordination role at UN entities that intervene in Africa. It comes naturally from the advisory and the advocacy function.

The monitoring function — OSAA plays a broker role. Leverage, as I said, data. We have SDG agenda, and the two commitments are the Sustainable Development Goals. So monitoring is an additional responsibility given by the General Assembly, say, okay, you are the Office of the Special Advisor, please help the system, UN system, monitor all commitments towards Africa's development, leveraging our knowledge and leveraging our data.

So this is more or less the value chain approach, or the theory of change approach of OSAA's four functions.

SIGNÉ: USG Duarte, I really like the comprehensive, sophisticated, response provided and with the theory of change, so it's really fantastic. Thank you so much. As we begin this 80th session of UNGA, what are the organization's top priority when it comes to Africa?

[13:27]

DUARTE: Yes, we'll be delivering our 80th session. 2025 is a historical year, so we'll be commemorating 80 years, our anniversary. Of course, to talk about UN systems, position, and priorities towards Africa, I think we need to recognize that the multilateral system is going through quite tough times, Professor Landry, quite tough times.

We are facing a, a liquidity situation. I do believe that the liquidity crisis, if we can say so, is not only because many donors of the system decide to change their funding policies. But I do believe that we need to go beyond that, or we need to go deeper of these short-term explanation and goals.

I do believe that the fact that ODA is decreasing and UN business model as ODA broker is directly affected. We need to recognize that. How this impacts on the ability of UN system serving Africa? We Africans, our mindset is to approach crisis as opportunities. You have no alternative, Professor Landry, do we have? No, we have not. So,

SIGNÉ: No, not at all.

DUARTE: Now, as Africans, life has taught us you'd better process any problem, any challenge as an opportunity. So we have been configured historically in this way. And I do believe that we might be facing a huge opportunity from a UN system standpoint to stop, analyze our business model, reset, and restart.

I do feel as an African, also as a UN officer, let's start what are the priorities? First, the priority is to implement the SDG agenda, Professor Landry, my dear friend, which means is to help Africa finally enjoy sustainable development. Not that economic growth that goes as bumps, bumps, bumps in a very bad African road, no. Sustainable development.

But everybody knows that for a country, a region, a continent to enjoy sustainable development, that country needs to address much before sustainable financing. We all know that ODA is not predictable. We all know that foreign direct investment is not predictable. So the only predictable source of funding that can feed sustainable financing and then sustainable development is domestic resource mobilization. It's the only way.

So I believe that sustainable financing, sustainable development is a precondition of durable peace. And sustainable financing is a precondition of sustainable development. And these are UN priorities towards Africa. These are the priorities.

SIGNÉ: I really love this, Excellency. And what tools do the OSAA and other UN bodies that you work with have at your disposal to achieve these priorities?

[17:11]

DUARTE: So first, to help Africa enter in this journey of first seeking sustainable financing to deliver sustainable development and then to deliver durable peace, how can we help that? Again, allow me first to go back to UN system knowledge. And I will give you a precise example. Knowledge, data, expertise, trust, and footprint.

In Africa, there are zones and regions where the state is not there, but UN system is there. Footprint. So these are the four intangible assets that the system has to help Africa go through that journey: sustainable finance, sustainable development, durable peace.

For that we need to understand that we need to go beyond delivering project and programs. We need to go beyond that. And you need to become the preferred partner from a policy advisor standpoint. Because at the end of the day, Africa needs to own its development agenda and the associated implementation. We are there to support, to facilitate, to catalyze.

SIGNÉ: Again, I already love the sophisticated responses and how you connect the dots, Excellency. And what would you like to see from specific actors, either within the UN system or its partners during this session of UNGA that will show progress — improving development outcomes for Africa?

[19:13]

DUARTE: The General Assembly is always a mutual accountability moment. Member states, they need to prove that indeed they still engage with the multilateral system. And UN system, the secretariat and agencies, they need to prove that they still be fit for the purpose.

So I do believe that everybody's waiting to see what have we been doing internally to prove to member states and world that indeed we acknowledge the crisis that is going on and we are ready to address it by, first, going through a reform process that will be launched, officially launched in September, UN80, led by the Secretary-General, and UN 2.0, the [Quintet of Change](#).

The combination of these, UN 2.0 and UN80 that will be, I believe, one of the main items in the debates and conversations during September, will help the system say we acknowledge the crisis, we have been identifying the root cause of the crisis going beyond the tip of iceberg, and these are the measures.

And the measures are of different dimensions. UN 2.0 is just recognizing that UN system needs to reconfigure a set of skills: data, innovation, foresighting, culture — you name it. UN80 is to recognize that maybe there is a quantitative and a qualitative downsizing and streamlining that needs to be undertaken so that we keep being an organization driven by value for money. And I hope that the conversations will be around this.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic, Excellency! And we were honored to have your incredibly powerful and timely contribution in our 2025 issue of AGI's *Foresight Africa*. And of course, our 2025 issue highlighted the top priorities for the continent from 2025 to 2030 in the areas of economics, demographic, technology, governance, and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as global partnerships.

Your essay in particular identified key updates for the UN and other international bodies to promote African agency in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. For the benefit of our listeners, could you kindly explain what changes are needed?

[22:28]

DUARTE: Yes. Thank you. Thank you. Allow me to take this opportunity to pass a couple of ideas that even the Secretary-General has been saying, allow me to amplify. Today's UN business model was created in 1945. At that time, when the UN business model was created, at that time that business model reflected the correlation of forces of that time, 1945, and also reflected the geopolitical reality of 1945. Professor Landry, we are no longer in 1945.

That reality, the 1945 reality, has gone, it's gone. It's no longer around. So this makes today's business model completely outdated. Completely outdated. So the multilateral system cannot serve the world with effectiveness, efficiency, strategic focus with an outdated business model. With all my due respect, this sentence applies to any organization, not only to the multilateral system, yeah, but it applies to banks, it applies to education institutions, you name it.

And we need to be aware that that there is an historical process underway. We cannot just keep ourselves in a bubble and ignore that there is an historical process.

So I used to say that the geopolitical tectonic plates are moving, have been moving. And this is an unstoppable movement. And this movement of the geopolitical tectonic plates carries a power reshuffle globally. And of course, history has already proven that every time there is a reshuffle in power, that reshuffle is combined by instability, conflict, human suffering, everybody, everybody knows that. So whoever gets more power don't want to meet the opportunity to grab it. Whoever loses power is not willing to give up. So this is the history.

And basically, we need to be aware of that, and we need to be aware that we are in a transition period from point A to point B. And that transition needs to be managed from a multilateral system, first to keep it together, to keep it meaningful, and try to push back any attempt to craft a smaller perimeter. Because from an African standpoint, African countries being in a marginalized position, they need a balanced and fair multilateral system, Professor Landry. They need it. So there are countries or members states in the world that, as we speak, they need the multilateral system because they are in a disadvantaged position. So we need just to keep that in mind.

And recognizing that, the management of this transition period is not easy. And I believe that we need to have an open mindset and acknowledge that we'll be changing at a fast pace, and sometimes so fast that before we reach the consolidation of a previous step, we have been pushed to build the new one.

SIGNÉ: Absolutely!

DUARTE: Then you need to be agile, Professor Landry. If you are not agile, you cannot do that. Are we agile?

SIGNÉ: Literally, Excellency, that was how I was thinking about the transition that I will make by using the term "agile." So you were ahead of my thinking, so thank you again. That's why I really all the time love engaging with you and your powerful thinking.

On the issues of greater African representation within the UN, one recurring question has been on whether and how to reform the Security Council, which has not added new permanent members since 1945, as you mentioned, and has not increased the number of non-permanent seats since 1965. A resolution to equitably increase Security Council membership to address the lack of permanent representation for Africa was included in the Pact For the Future during last year's assembly. Might the General Assembly advance this objective in this year's session?

[27:35]

DUARTE: I don't think so. But this is a personal opinion. I don't think so because if we look around the international environment is not an environment that is feeding convergence. It's an environment that is feeding fragmentation. It's an environment that is feeling divergence. To get these resolutions, these outliners, these inception point resolutions, you need to be not in this step of the transition period, but in the phase of the transition period where consensus starts landing on fertile ground, which is not the case at all.

So, what I strongly believe, as I said at the beginning of the previous question, Professor Landry, the correlations of force are unstoppable. They don't put themselves on hold waiting for one resolution. The correlations of force are permanent, dynamic, historical dynamics, and they are unstoppable. I do believe that we'll be facing in the next couple of years more instability, more fragmentation before everyone starts landing at a different level, but ready to build consensus. That is my personal perception, let's say in this way.

SIGNÉ: Insightful, Excellency. And as the global order has gone through major challenges in recent years, some powers have increasingly turned to unilateral or bilateral arrangements to achieve their priorities. We have also seen the rise of circumstantial or ad hoc coalitions worldwide, alongside regional bodies including those in Africa, taking on a greater role in peace, security, trade, and development. In your view, what do these evolving forms of cooperation mean for global multilateral organizations such as the United Nations?

[30:00]

DUARTE: I used to say that multilateral systems are above all bottom-up dynamics. Multilateral systems are made of strong and effective states. So if you have a quite number of member states that are facing huge challenge — 54 countries in Africa, but not only in Africa, Latin America, huge challenge, in Asia — when you have millions of people in extreme poverty, and we are we are today, this year we end the first quarter at the 21st century and we are still dealing with millions of people in poverty, without accessing electricity, millions of children outside school.

So this means that at the state level, there is a quite huge number of states that are not delivering. States that are not delivering are not effective states. Sorry, you cannot have a strong multilateral system made of ineffective states. It doesn't work. So I do believe that.

And you mentioned, some players are much less committed to multilateral and going back to bilateral, this is the fragmentation that I mentioned. Exactly. So fragmentation

is a feature of the transition period. Going back to bilateral agreements, or going back to sub-regional agreements, are concrete examples of that fragmentation, which is, as I said, a feature of the transition period needs to be managed. Needs to be managed.

SIGNÉ: Absolutely. And I was thinking as you were speaking, Excellency, what should African countries seeking to serve their own development agendas consider when deciding between unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral action?

[32:18]

DUARTE: I do believe that African countries should seek to serve their own development agenda first. We need to put as a driver the 2063. And understand the ins and outs of this transition period, the fragmentation, the instability, the movement of the geopolitical tectonic plates, again, as an opportunity.

Having said that, if we want to transform all this challenge and opportunities for Africa, we need to recognize that our African Union needs to be made stronger, effective by each African country. Because these opportunities that we are assisting now, they come more or less every 150 years. I hope Africa will not miss this one. I hope.

And for that Africa needs to have strong, continental, regional, and subregional organizations, all based in effective states. States that do not lose \$70 billion in efficient public spending. States that do not lose \$65 billion in trade mispricing. States that do not lose \$500 billion on an annual basis.

The challenge is huge. The challenge is huge.

SIGNÉ: That is a really fabulous, Excellency, and I really like how you are connecting the state effectiveness and the strength of state with the strength of multilateral organization or continental organization, so a continental organization or a global multilateral institution could be as strong as the member state or as effective as the member state will be. So I really like how you connect those dot.

Excellency, I always like to end each interview by asking the guest two questions. First, building on your work and experience, what is one piece of advice you'll give to African or global policymakers to ensure the best outcomes on the continent?

[34:52]

DUARTE: Very simple. Very simple. Stop losing money. Control your flows and break the finance paradox. We can say that Africa survive until now, losing \$500 billion, but at the same time begging for ODA. Professor Landry, we'll not survive for the next 50 years with this business model. We need to control our own flows,

channel them to Africa's development driven by human capital development. The only way to build resilient societies and be ready to any and every external shock.

SIGNÉ: Powerful! Second, given your successful career and impact, Excellency, what advice will you give to youth and also young girls hoping to follow in your footsteps?

[36:02]

DUARTE: Please connect with ICT here, connect with technology and innovation. Do not wait for state to get the skills. And use the power of technology to get the skills, to get information. Make science, technology, engineering, and mathematics your flag, and you will succeed.

[music]

SIGNÉ: Powerful, Excellency, USG Duarte, thank you so much for joining me today.

DUARTE: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity. And it is always a pleasure to have a conversation with you, Professor Landry. It's always a pleasure.

SIGNÉ: I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. Thank you, listeners, for joining me today.

The *Foresight Africa* podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Send your feedback and questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu. My special thanks to the production team including Fred Dews, producer; Nichole Grossman, Dafe Oputu, and Nicole Ntungire, associate producers; Gastón Reboredo, audio engineer; and Izzy Taylor, senior communications coordinator in Brookings Global.

The show's art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis. Additional promotional support for this podcast comes from my colleagues in Brookings Global and the Office of Communications at Brookings.