

Restoring hope

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Where do we look for hope?

The global development landscape is at a crossroads. As political fragmentation grows and the effectiveness of international aid comes into question, the future of the SDGs appears increasingly uncertain



◀ Moroccan soldiers from the UN peacekeeping force (MONUSCO) patrol in the Kanyaruchinya camp for displaced persons in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2025

One of their vote explanations went like this: “this resolution is a reaffirmation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [...] Agenda 2030 and the SDGs advance a program of soft global governance that is inconsistent with U.S. sovereignty and adverse to the

SDGs’ primary value as a unifying framework for development: a clear set of priorities that allows governments to coordinate to multiply their impact and private sector actors to plan their corporate social responsibility projects strategically.

For the SDGs to work in this manner, they must be uncontentious. The US (with the occasional support of Argentina) might only be one (or two) albeit large state(s), but one state is enough to make this politically contested territory. Where once there was universality, now there is discourse. Consensus doesn’t require unanimity, of course. Had the SDGs had momentum behind them, then

// Where once there was universality, now there is discourse. Consensus doesn’t require unanimity, of course. Had the SDGs had momentum behind them, then even the politics-averse private and state development sectors might have stayed the course

rights and interests of Americans... Put simply, globalist endeavors like Agenda 2030 and the SDGs lost at the ballot box. Therefore, the United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals.”

It is easy to roll one’s eyes at this, in particular the conflation of the US with the world. While Argentina has also expressed hostility to the SDGs, and while they and Israel joined with the USA in voting against peace (no one else voted against hope), this is a fairly lonely position. Very few states reject the legitimacy of the SDGs. But very few is still very different to none.

One criticism of the SDGs, like the Millennium Development Goals before them, is that they constitute a “rainman scam.” Development will happen – or not – with or without the SDGs taking credit. This misses the

even the politics-averse private and state development sectors might have stayed the course. Unfortunately, these ructions happened while delivery of the SDGs stalled.

Having never quite got out of second gear post-COVID, delivery was hit by [official development assistance \(ODA\) falling by around a quarter over 18 months](#). ODA used to have an inbuilt buffer system: no one funds development out of altruism and so when one state stepped back, others would smell the discounted diplomatic clout and step up. This is different – this is a systemic shift.

In the long run, prevention might be cheaper than cure, but it’s not always possible to afford what’s cheaper in the long run. Europe, in particular, has collectively (and probably misguidedly) decided it can no longer afford to invest in preventing the “polycrisis,” and must instead take the more

By [Fred Carver](#), Consulting Editor, SDG Action

The USA recently voted against hope. On March 4, 2025, the UN General Assembly adopted a slew of resolutions proclaiming a series of international days, one for Hope and another for Peaceful Coexistence. This sort of thing does not normally come to a vote, but the USA insisted – and voted against all of them.

expensive path of bulking up its military and security to mitigate for that failure.

Aid ambivalence: crisis or opportunity?

So where does that leave us? This is what the articles in this edition of SDG Action explore.

It's instructive to observe reactions to the pivot away from ODA. While there has been a lot of dismay, particularly at the speed of withdrawal and the harm that will inevitably occur as a result, there has also been some jubilation – and not always from expected sources. A significant minority even considers the situation a “crisitunity”: a moment of rupture from which something better could emerge.

It is worth the development community reflecting upon how it has become the subject of such ambivalence. [US President Donald Trump's popularity is highest in Africa](#), and it seems likely that this is because of, not despite, his promise to cut US aid to Africa. There is a widespread belief, by no means unfounded, that western development assistance is a tool to advance political control over developing societies, and also a means for the governments of those societies to shirk their obligations to their own citizens.

Such a perspective requires a belief that ODA wealth transfers are replaceable – either by South–South mutual aid, domestic governments stepping up, or no-string (or fewer-string) loans and technical assistance from the likes of Russia and China. That belief is now being stress tested, with mixed results.

States like Mali and Burkina Faso, who enthusiastically replaced French intrusion with Russian, are starting to discover that while the strings may have been better hidden, they are by no means absent, as [mercenary groups commit massacres and plunder resources](#).

Meanwhile, [as China loses its coltan mines in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) to Rwandan proxy forces, it may reflect that the

western insistence that a certain degree of political stability and good governance accompany its investment was as much about safeguarding that investment as for any ideological reason.

Cautious optimism – but not for the poorest

On the other hand, readouts from the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, held in sweltering Seville in late June 2025, give grounds for cautious optimism with respect to how low and middle-income countries can make better use of affordable finance to invest in their own futures.

Meanwhile, the idea of reimagining development as global public investment – a long-term bet on shared prosperity – is becoming

The localization “[grand bargain](#)” risks being sidelined, with the effect that while agency may be moving geographically from north to south, economically it is moving upward: further away from local communities and back toward elite capital.

Hope is limited while inequality prevails

One of the greatest challenges to building a sustainable future comes from the fact that our world is so unequal. The holders of power and capital are sufficiently insulated from loss that it becomes rational for them to act recklessly, and to sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term gain.

Cooperation between the rest of us can help to mitigate some of the consequences of those actions, but

One of the greatest challenges to building a sustainable future comes from the fact that our world is so unequal. The holders of power and capital are sufficiently insulated from loss that it becomes rational for them to... sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term gain

increasingly mainstream. (Readers of our predecessor publication Sustainable Development Goals may remember that [we were among the first places to give the idea of global public investment an airing](#)).

Hope therefore exists for some. But there is precious little for least developed countries or those in the throes of conflict, where risk is too high for loans or investment. And while the downsizing of large parts of the “development industry” has thinned out the ranks of middlemen and vested interests (as well as costing some very effective and principled people their jobs), it has also led to a broader pivot away from civil society – including local civil society – and toward a much narrower coalition of actors centered around finance.

there is a limit to how much can be achieved without a redistribution of power and resources. The model of development whereby resources, but not power, were transferred may have run out of road. But there is not much hope for a model where no resources are transferred either.

As the SDGs reach the end of their lifespan, and the international community considers what was achieved, who was left behind, and what will come next, the hardest parts of the reckoning will be the most political: the “soft global governance” that caused the US to turn its back on hope. Because while much can be done without confronting elite power, there is little sustainable about a future where that power is not – at the very least – held to account. ■



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Can the G20 bridge a fractured world?

As global power becomes more diffuse and traditional institutions lose traction, the G20 stands out as a forum with the potential to reconnect a divided international system. Its success will depend on whether member states can find common cause – and act decisively when others won't

By [Adriana E. Abdenur](#), Co-President, Global Fund for a New Economy; former Special Advisor on international affairs, Brazilian Presidency; member, G20 Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality

Uncertainty generates anxiety, but turbulence can sometimes sow the seeds of innovation – even reinvention. The world is experiencing rapid political and geopolitical shifts, compounded by the far-reaching impacts of the digital revolution.

With increasing tensions between global powers, rising multipolarity,

and a weakened UN system, the G20 remains one of the few platforms where major economies – both developed and emerging – can find common ground. Its role in fostering cooperation on key issues of global governance has become more, rather than less, vital.

South Africa, currently holding the G20 presidency, is navigating a delicate balance, advocating for African and developing country priorities while maintaining constructive engagement with Western economies. Its success hinges on two factors. First, it must identify and promote initiatives that appeal to all members – north and

south, east and west – without watering down its core mission of “Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability.” Second, it must ensure that decisions are followed through by established organizations like UN bodies, multilateral development banks (MDBs), and other international finance institutions. If those ideas aren't anchored within established structures or concrete initiatives, they remain nothing more than words on paper.

▲ Brazil's President Lula Da Silva and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa at the handover ceremony during the close of the G20 Leaders' Summit, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

On the downside, South Africa faces a global context of heightened tensions, trade wars and rising neo-mercantilism. On the other hand, the broad scope of South Africa's priorities, its bold diplomacy, and vibrant civil society provide opportunities to craft solutions that address global gaps and imbalances while promoting inclusive prosperity: win-win ideas.

The burden is not South Africa's alone – it is shared by all of the grouping's members. The G20 is more than the sum of its parts. Although communiqués are set through consensus, the momentum generated around specific topics is difficult to torpedo by any single member, especially when backed by robust engagement by the associated non-state groups (T20, B20, Y20, etc).

Therefore, the agenda can be shaped by coalitions of members willing to lead on critical global issues. Countries with the capacity and political will to bridge vastly different economic and geopolitical interests will have to prepare for a broad range of scenarios and seize windows that may open up.

Moreover, the importance of the G20 over time extends beyond any single presidency. Following South Africa, the United States is set to take the helm of the grouping. Washington's approach – whether collaborative, confrontational, or disengaged – will influence whether the G20 remains a viable forum for global cooperation in the short to mid-term or fractures along geopolitical lines.

Financing for development, climate action, governance of artificial intelligence (AI), and global inequality are among the critical areas where the G20's leadership is urgently needed – not only to ensure shared prosperity, but also global stability. All these issues demand both immediate responses and long-term paradigm shifts – as well as action at scale, which a grouping of the world's 20 largest economies can catalyze.

Moreover, progress can gain momentum from the sequence of major global events on these topics this year – not only major AI conferences,

but also the midyear Finance for Development summit in Seville, and COP30 in Belém.

Financing for development

On finance for development, the G20 must move beyond vague commitments to “unlocking trillions” in private finance and instead implement concrete mechanisms to direct capital flows effectively – including for addressing poverty, hunger, and critical needs in infrastructure and productive capacity.

// The move toward a new economy... will benefit not only developing countries, but advanced economies as well

MDBs must reform their lending models to support sustainable development, green infrastructure, and manufacturing – not just climate mitigation – without burdening developing countries with (even more) unpayable debt. They must play a countercyclical role for all countries, not just advanced economies. In many of the member countries, national development banks can play a catalytic role by providing long-term financing and coordinating public and private stakeholders to drive projects (including infrastructure) that align with social inclusion, sustainability, and economic growth.

This requires reaching beyond the list of Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs remain crucial for setting measurable targets and fostering international cooperation, but they do not fully capture the broader objective of promoting structural transformation. Achieving sustainable development requires not just incremental progress toward individual goals, but also a comprehensive overhaul of economic systems, power relations, and governance structures. Structural

transformation of economies, including through green industrial policy, will not only reduce reliance on foreign aid but also foster job creation, sustainable growth, and economic and political stability.

Ultimately, the move toward a new economy – one that is more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient – will benefit not only developing countries, but advanced economies as well.

This shift cannot be achieved without addressing fiscal constraints in developing economies. Without additional fiscal space, those countries will lack the ability to implement long-term development strategies, address climate and biodiversity challenges, or transform their economic structures. Dozens will remain mired in unpayable debt. The G20 should support member states in designing their own fiscal strategies – whether through progressive taxation, sovereign wealth funds, tailored financial sector reforms, or repurposing of public procurement budgets for strategic investments.

One aspect of this transformation involves strengthening domestic resource mobilization as a complement to grants, and without imposing externally driven or outdated models that fail to reflect local realities or to respond to concrete demands. By supporting policies that strengthen domestic resource mobilization based on national priorities and local voices, the G20 can help ensure that development finance drives sustainable growth and economic resilience, creating local opportunities rather than reinforcing financial dependencies.

Additionally, the G20 must address external factors that drive up the cost of capital disproportionately for developing countries, including specific practices by credit rating agencies that need updating. It can mandate the Financial Stability Board to undertake a comprehensive review of the policies and norms implemented in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Many of these measures, while well-intentioned, have had unintended

consequences that are now hindering economic growth and resilience.

Developing countries, in particular, continue to face disproportionately high costs of capital, not solely due to their domestic conditions, but also because of global financial regulations and practices that overly penalize perceived risk rather than incentivize productive investment.

This is not only a pressing concern for developing nations striving for sustainable growth, but also for the private sector, which suffers from constrained investment opportunities and inefficient capital allocation. Advanced economies, too, have a vested interest in such a review, as distorted capital flows and market fragmentation can undermine global financial stability and exacerbate systemic risks.

South Africa can also build on the leadership of the African Union, civil society groups, and the Brazilian presidency of the G20 to advance international cooperation on taxation. This can include measures to curb illicit financial flows and ensure fair taxation of the super rich and of multinational corporations.

By ensuring that all businesses, regardless of nationality, contribute their fair share, tax justice can prevent harmful tax avoidance strategies that channel resources away from sustainable development and distort competition. At the same time, cracking down on these flows will

enhance economic and political stability by reducing corruption, weakening criminal networks, and closing loopholes that allow illicit actors to exploit the financial system.

Climate action

Second, the G20 can help bring about a paradigm shift in climate action. This entails not only boosting adaptation and mitigation, but also broadening the opportunities – including social and economic ones – generated by the just transition. The March 2025 [letter from the Brazilian presidency of COP30](#) reaffirms that a transition is needed from negotiation to implementation.

The G20 can accelerate this process through a common commitment to deliver on the United Arab Emirates dialogue on implementing the Global Stocktake outcomes and advance the Just Transition Work Programme. Especially within the current global scenario, it will have to harness the full scope of stakeholders – not just states – in the mission to carry out the resolutions from the negotiations.

Enhanced coordination among governments, subnational governments, the private sector, and civil society can facilitate resource mobilization, technology transfer and innovation, and capacity-building, especially for those countries most in need. In the face of reluctance or opposition from individual member states, which makes G20 consensus

more difficult, leading states may have to resort to new coalitions for leadership, including through renewed engagement of subnational actors, such as provincial and municipal governments – many of which are eager to benefit from the just transition and climate adaptation and mitigation.

For change to acquire scale and assure continuity, more effective governance is required in the climate field. The Conference of the Parties (COP) model, while historically significant as the central forum for global climate governance, is increasingly ill-suited to the current phase of the climate challenge: implementation. Most of the major topics – such as mitigation targets, adaptation strategies, finance commitments, and loss and damage mechanisms – have already been negotiated over decades of COPs. The persistent problem is not a lack of frameworks or pledges, but the consistent failure to translate them into concrete, scalable action.

The consensus-driven nature of COPs, involving nearly 200 countries with diverse and often conflicting interests, makes it difficult to move beyond negotiation toward effective implementation. Procedural rigidity, voluntary commitments, and the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms further undermine progress. As the urgency for real-world transformation intensifies, it is clear that the COP process, by itself, cannot adequately drive the operationalization of previously agreed-upon goals.

A new structure is needed: one focused on monitoring, funding, and facilitating the execution of commitments, rather than perpetually renegotiating their terms. Such a framework must prioritize accountability, resource mobilization, and practical collaboration across

◀ Informal housing in Manila, Philippines. As G20 Chair, President Cyril Ramaphosa has established a committee of renowned, independent experts to report on global inequality



sectors to accelerate tangible progress. But this innovation in global governance is not just about accountability and responsibility. For the private sector, accelerated implementation could also open up a plethora of business opportunities, from circular economy to clean energy innovation and development. Countries that fail to engage would miss out and fall behind on major new possibilities.

The G20 can be the incubator of a new global governance for climate change. At the 2024 G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's President Lula proposed the creation of a UN Climate Change Council. The CCC could be created as a nimble coordinating body to streamline climate action and coordinate implementation. Unlike the COP process, which has become unwieldy, expensive, and often chaotic, and in contrast to a UN Charter review process that could take years or even decades, the CCC offers a more immediate pathway to overcoming fragmentation in climate governance and deliver on implementation.

AI governance

Finally, the G20 has a critical opportunity to shape the future of AI, addressing not only disinformation and human rights risks but also the broader economic and political distortions AI is reinforcing. As AI technologies advance, they tend to exacerbate misinformation, throw political processes into disorder, and deepen economic inequalities. Left unchecked, AI-driven automation threatens labor markets and livelihoods. The excessive centralization of AI capabilities within a few dominant tech firms risks concentrating economic and political power in newly disruptive ways. Ultimately, everyone loses.

The G20 must foster more widespread and inclusive innovation ecosystems, supporting AI capacity-building in developing economies. By engaging in AI dialogue across geographies, social segments, and sectors, the G20 can promote frameworks that protect economic

and political stability, ensuring that AI benefits all countries and societies rather than reinforcing existing disparities and turbulence.

Global inequality

In late August 2025, President Cyril Ramaphosa launched an Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality, chaired by economist Joseph Stiglitz. The committee's mandate is to deliver the first-ever report on global inequality to G20 leaders.

The initiative reflects growing concern that inequality will continue to deepen in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the regressive dynamics of international financial architecture and debt crises, persistent trade imbalances, climate and ecological stresses, weakening multilateralism, and rising inflation. At the same time, it is motivated by a determination to keep the theme of inequality high on the international agenda – ensuring it is treated as a structural priority rather than a passing concern.

The effort builds on recent precedents at the multilateral level, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goal “SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities”. This includes initiatives under Brazil's G20 presidency, which integrated inequality into the G20 Framework Working Group, advanced cooperation on taxing the super-rich, and launched the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty. Brazil's presidency also issued a strong political statement through a ministerial declaration explicitly committing to reducing inequalities, while reinforcing momentum for initiatives beyond the G20, such as the UN Framework Convention on Tax Cooperation.

The Committee's forthcoming report will not only assess the state of global inequality but also identify its root causes and set out policy options at both domestic and international levels. For South Africa, this may represent a critical window of opportunity to sustain momentum and strengthen global cooperation toward reducing inequality via the G20.

Creating stability in turbulent times

Discussions on AI, finance, climate action, and global inequality cannot be detached from the broader need for more effective global governance. This is not only a question of justice, but also of effectiveness – efficiency, even. The international system remains outdated and ill-equipped to address today's complex challenges, and this is costly in more than one sense.

Reforming institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the UN Security Council is more urgent than ever. Had these institutions adapted earlier to reflect the growing influence of developing nations, they might have been more effective in managing global crises, fostering trust, and navigating the current turbulence.

The world cannot afford to miss another opportunity to make these organizations more effective. A more representative IMF and World Bank, for instance, could provide fairer lending conditions, alleviating debt distress and strengthening economic resilience in the Global South – contributing more directly toward the maintenance of global economic stability in a time of heightened uncertainty. And they could help the world transition into a post-aid world – driven primarily not by the reduction in the supply of official development assistance resulting from increased geopolitical tensions, but rather by a reduced need for aid in the first place.

In a fragmented geopolitical environment, where multilateral cooperation is increasingly difficult, the G20 remains a rare platform capable of aligning diverse interests for collective financial stability. Without it, financial fragmentation, protectionism, and uncoordinated crisis responses would grow, heightening instability.

Leadership comes in many forms, and across many spaces. Now more than ever, reinforcing the G20's role is essential to ensuring a stable and prosperous global economy, with benefits for all. ■



Why demography drives global development

Demographic change is reshaping our world in profound and unequal ways. By planning for population shifts rather than reacting to them, we can seize opportunities to drive progress in areas like education, health, sustainability, and reproductive rights – and build a fairer future for all

By [Julia Bunting](#), Director, Programme Division, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

The world is at a turning point. As we get closer to 2030, many of the global goals we set ourselves to build a better world – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – are not on track. Global crises like COVID-19,

conflicts, and climate change, coupled with insufficient financing, are hindering progress. Challenges in governance, rising inequalities, and a lack of data and accountability are further derailing efforts, making the Agenda 2030 targets increasingly unattainable.

But behind the scenes, an often underrated force quietly shapes the success or failure of our global

development ambitions: demographic change. From the bustling megacities of Asia to the depopulating rural regions of Europe and the burgeoning youthful

▲ Ilha do Cabo beach in Luanda, Angola. Most of the countries with high population growth rates are in sub-Saharan Africa. Angola, with a growth rate of over 3% pa, is among the highest

populations of Africa, demographic shifts are not just the concern of social scientists or a statistical curiosity. They are fundamental trends reshaping our capacity to build a sustainable and equitable world for all.

A demographically diverse world

The global population, currently standing at 8.2 billion, is projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, peak at around 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s and decline to 10.2 billion by the end of the century. Yet, this global picture conceals stark differences.

Over the next 30 years, 90% of global population growth will be concentrated in just 26 countries – mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – while 76 countries and areas will see their populations decline due to negative natural population growth (the balance between births and deaths), negative net migration, or both. Fertility decline, paired with rising life expectancy, is

driving rapid population aging, which is most advanced in high-income countries, but is occurring at the fastest pace in middle-income countries.

Meanwhile, an unprecedented urban shift continues: by 2050, 70% of humanity will live in cities. Although international migrants make up less than 4% of the global population, forced migration and displacement are increasing and acute in some countries and regions due to conflict, disasters, political instability, environmental degradation, and/or economic crises. These trends are not isolated. Their impacts are deeply interwoven with every facet of the 2030 Agenda, and present both pressing challenges and transformative opportunities.

Too fast for some, too slow for others

In the poorest countries, economic growth and development often struggle to keep pace with population growth,

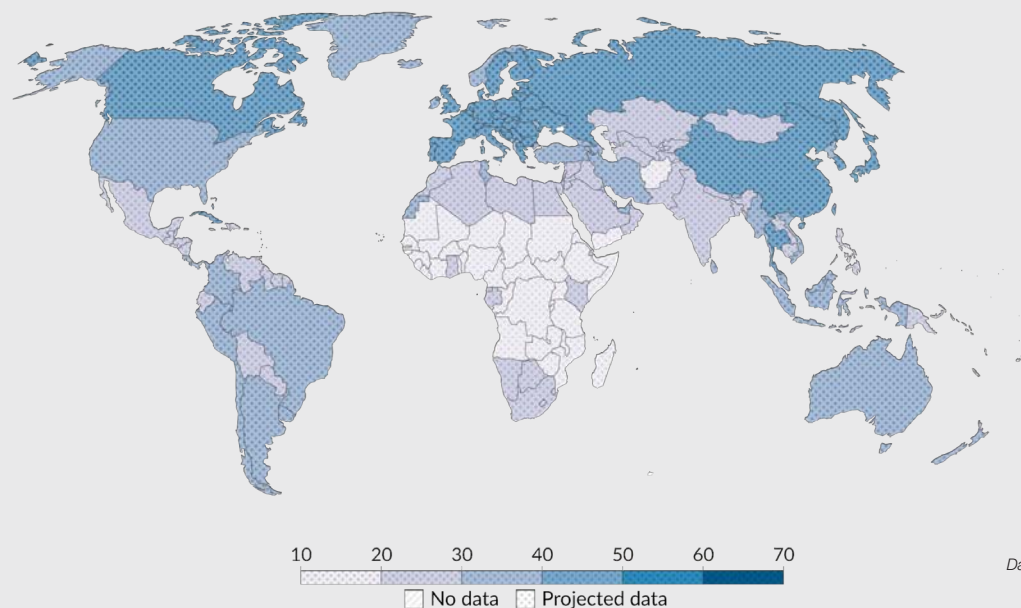
perpetuating cycles of extreme poverty and hunger. Projections warn that by 2030 (if current trends continue), 590 million people could remain in extreme poverty. It is estimated that 600 million people will suffer chronic undernourishment five years from now – representing a global failure to progress from 2019 levels.

Over two billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and 3.5 billion lack access to sanitation. Global waste is projected to increase by 73% by 2050, driven largely by rapid urbanization and rising per capita consumption in middle-income countries. At current rates, child marriage will not be eradicated until 2092, limiting the life chances of millions of girls every year.

Today, more than 230 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation – a 30 million increase over the past eight years alone. The global maternal mortality ratio remains nearly three times higher than the SDG target

FIGURE 1: Median age, 2025

The median age splits the population into two equal groups, with as many people older than it as people younger than it. Future projections are based on the UN medium scenario¹



1. UN projection scenarios The UN's World Population Prospects provides a range of projected scenarios of population change. These rely on different assumptions in fertility, mortality and/or migration patterns to explore different demographic futures.

Data source: UN, World Population Prospects (2024)
OurWorldinData.org/age-structure | CC BY

(at 197 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2023 versus the 2030 SDG target of 70). About 70% of these deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa – the region with the fastest growing population and increasing demands on already strained health systems.

While fewer countries now face the challenges of rapid population growth, a growing number are grappling with the implications of slow, stagnant, or negative population growth and rapid population aging. Fewer workers paying taxes and more people drawing pensions and requiring care in old age are resulting in strain on public finances and the sustainability of health and welfare systems.

In countries lacking robust social protection, population aging often leads to rising poverty among older people – especially women, who face lifelong disparities and a disproportionate burden of informal caregiving. There are also concerns that aging workforces can also reduce productivity, curbing economic output and driving up public deficits.

Rather than anticipating and planning for demographic change – and adapting social systems, infrastructure, economies, and societies accordingly – many governments are pushing back these necessary structural reforms to the next generation of decision-makers. Indeed, rather than contending with long-term planning, some have resorted to short-term fiscal incentives, such as cash bonuses to encourage couples to have more children, in an attempt to reverse fertility declines and stimulate economic growth.

These measures have shown only limited and temporary success. Worse still, some policymakers have proposed or implemented restrictions of reproductive health and rights, hoping to shift fertility trends. Regressive actions against individual rights and choices undermine reproductive agency – as highlighted in [UNFPA's 2025 State of the World Population Report](#) – while failing to achieve their demographic aims, with detrimental consequences for progress toward the SDGs.

Seizing demographic opportunities

Yet, demographic change also presents powerful opportunities for transformation. The 2030s will see the largest generation of young people in history – close to 1.4 billion people aged 15 to 24, almost 90% of whom will live in low and middle-income countries.

Youthful populations, if empowered, can drive innovation, power economies, harness digital technologies, help build peace, and combat the climate crisis. Countries with a large share of their populations in the working age range can reap the benefits of a “demographic dividend” by investing in lifelong education, health across the life course, and decent jobs, boosting economic growth and development.

// Demographic change is not a passive backdrop to global development – it is an active, dynamic force, interacting with other global megatrends

As lifespans expand and populations age, the active participation of older people in the labor market, along with their engagement in communities and families, can yield significant social and economic benefits. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that healthy aging could add 0.4 percentage points to gross domestic product (GDP) growth, on average, between 2025 and 2050. Migration, when governed fairly and effectively, can also yield broad benefits, improving livelihoods for migrants, generating remittances for countries of origin, and easing labor shortages in host countries.

And the interlinked issues of gender and reproductive rights cannot be

overemphasized in this conversation. At all levels, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality are critical enablers of sustainable development. Achieving gender parity in the workforce would unlock enormous economic potential in countries with aging populations, for example.

Enabling all people to exercise their reproductive rights – including the agreed human right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children – also enables them to invest scarce resources in their own human capital and that of future generations.

Adapting to the new realities

Demographic change is not a passive backdrop to global development – it is an active, dynamic force, interacting with other global megatrends like digital transformation and climate change. Global development success will require a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics and a proactive, integrated, forward-looking policy response guided by fundamental approaches that apply across all demographic contexts.

The solution to demographic challenges is not to manipulate population dynamics but to adapt institutions and systems to new demographic realities. That means investing in human capital across the life course, and building inclusive societies where young people, women, migrants, older people, and other marginalized groups can all participate fully in social and economic life.

It also means fostering intergenerational trust and solidarity, strengthening global cooperation, and embedding data and foresight into policymaking. Demographic change is inevitable – but is also predictable. With the right policies and a long-term vision, the world can navigate the demographic shifts of the 21st century and realize the promise of a sustainable and equitable future for current and future generations. ■

30 years on, keeping the promises of Beijing alive

Thirty years after the landmark Beijing Declaration, progress on gender equality is stalling – and in some cases reversing. Rekindling its vision demands urgent, united action to confront rising inequality, authoritarianism, and backlash against women's rights

By [Laura Turquet](#), Policy Advisor and Deputy Chief, Research and Data team, UN Women

Thirty years ago, thousands of feminist activists and representatives of 189 governments gathered in Beijing and unanimously adopted a revolutionary agenda for gender equality: the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#). It remains the most visionary, comprehensive, and globally endorsed framework to advance the rights of women and girls. It identified the challenges of its era with clarity and ambition, and its principles remain as urgent and relevant today as they were three decades ago.

But as we mark the 30th anniversary of this historic commitment, we must confront an uncomfortable truth: progress is stalling, even reversing, in too many corners of the world. Violent conflict is growing, and the climate crisis is worsening. The same forces that the Beijing Platform for Action sought to dismantle – patriarchy, poverty, violence, inequality – have not only endured but strengthened. They are now weaponized by regressive politics, bolstered by rising authoritarianism and growing inequality.

The clock is ticking: less than five years remain until 2030, the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). [Gender equality is not only a standalone goal](#) but a precondition for

achieving all the others. And right now, the world is failing.

With the SDGs at risk, the women's movement is asking: will we rise to meet the promises made in Beijing, or will we consign them to a mere footnote to past ambition?

From global consensus to today: taking stock

The Beijing Platform for Action was more than a conference outcome. It was a global consensus for change that called for governments to act decisively. It outlined 12 critical areas of concern: from education and health to violence and poverty; from governance and political voice to conflict and environmental destruction. Since 1995, feminists have used the Beijing Platform for Action to take gender equality from the margins to the center of policymaking. It is a universal agenda, for all countries, underpinned by an unwavering commitment to human rights.

Thirty years later, even as faith in multilateralism is waning, that call still resonates. More than 150 countries reported [progress in implementing the Beijing Platform](#), proof of its continued relevance. Significant efforts have been made by governments in every region:

- 90% reported passing or strengthening laws to end violence against women and nearly 80% said they have action plans to implement those laws
- to reduce women's poverty, 79%

of countries reported efforts to strengthen social protection systems, up from 70% in 2019

- two-thirds of governments reported strengthening care services for older people, up from 46% in 2019, vital in the context of aging societies the world over

Despite these efforts, results have fallen short:

- extreme poverty is still the destiny of nearly one in ten of all women and girls worldwide
- one-third of women continue to face physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes, and the misuse of digital technology is worsening it
- women's opportunities in paid employment have not improved for two decades, with the majority trapped in low paid, informal work with few rights
- while parliaments have become more gender-balanced, women are still largely excluded from peace talks and climate negotiations, even though their presence makes them more effective

Most alarmingly, we are witnessing a dangerous global backlash against women's rights, weaponizing misogyny as a political tool and choking the civic space where feminist voices once flourished. [One in four governments say that backlash against gender equality](#) is a barrier to their progress on implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.



◀ The 2015 International Istanbul Marathon adopted the slogan “Say No to Violence Against Women”. Turkey was the first country to ratify the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe human rights treaty to protect women from violence. In 2021, Turkey denounced the convention and withdrew

measures to accelerate women’s leadership.

5. Peace and security: fund women-led peacebuilding and crisis response.

6. Climate justice: center women’s rights in environmental and biodiversity initiatives.

A call to action: all hands on deck

We cannot afford to look away. As inequality grows, authoritarianism rises, and anti-rights rhetoric spreads, the international community must act with courage, unity, and urgency:

- governments can recommit to the Beijing Platform for Action and fully fund its implementation
- the United Nations must lead with courage, strengthening multilateralism and supporting national accountability
- feminist movements should be protected and funded, recognized as key drivers of change
- men and boys can step up as allies, challenging patriarchal masculinities that have become resurgent
- the private sector must be part of the solution – not just with words, but through resources and policy alignment

We are not starting from scratch. We have the frameworks, the data, the evidence, and the people power. The next five years are critical. Let us seize this moment to finish what the previous generation of feminists started in Beijing. We must reignite our collective commitment – and sustain it – to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, everywhere. ■

This is no accident. It is a calculated strategy by some actors – in both governments and civil society – to undermine gender equality and erode democratic institutions. Traditionalist policies are being rebranded as “family values.” Women’s autonomy over their choices, bodies, and voice in both public and private spaces is under attack.

An economic system on track to create [five trillionaires in the next decade](#) is a major part of the problem. While billions of people in low and middle-income countries lack access to health, education, social benefits, and protection from the escalating climate emergency, a handful of individuals live in unimaginable opulence.

[Achieving the gender-related SDGs targets would cost USD 420 billion annually](#) – a small price to pay for a more just and equitable world. Mobilizing these resources means canceling unsustainable debt for poor countries, [strengthening tax systems](#) so the wealthiest people and corporations pay their fair share, and increasing development aid. Public resources

need to be spent on fighting poverty, not fighting wars.

Beijing+30: a rallying cry, not a retrospective

The 30th anniversary must not become a nostalgic celebration. It is a rallying cry for urgent recommitment and bold acceleration. It needs to be relevant for new generations of young feminists and activists. Fortunately, the tools for change already exist. We have an opportunity to build on the lessons of the past three decades. [The Beijing+30 Action Agenda](#), defined through global consultation and based on evidence of what works, outlines six powerful levers to drive real progress:

1. A digital revolution: close the gender digital divide and empower women in the digital economy.
2. Freedom from poverty: invest in public services and social protection to lift women and girls out of poverty.
3. Zero violence: enforce and fund national action plans to end violence against women and girls.
4. Full and equal decision-making power: use quotas and special



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Reproductive health: the bedrock of healthy societies and economies

People's rights to decide freely about sex, contraception, and parenthood are central to human dignity, economic growth, and gender equality – yet they remain under attack worldwide. Without urgent action to protect and expand these rights, decades of progress risk being undone, with young people bearing the greatest cost

By [Emebet Wuhib-Mutungi](#), Global SRHR Programme Lead, and [Kathleen Sherwin](#), Chief Strategy and Engagement Officer, Plan International

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are essential to the overall wellbeing, dignity, and futures of adolescents and young people. These rights form the foundation of healthy communities and thriving economies. Yet today, SRHR remains under attack, with progress stagnating or reversing in many countries.

Recent data reveals some gains: births to girls aged 15 to 19 have fallen by a third since 2000, largely due to improved access to contraception, safe abortion, and comprehensive sexuality education.

But alongside these gains, the United Nations Population Fund's 2025 [State of World Population Report](#) warns of a global crisis in bodily autonomy. Too many young people still cannot make free, informed choices about sex, contraception, or their futures.

◀ Girls play football in Santa Tecla, El Salvador, during a UN-sponsored festival raising awareness about violence against women and girls. El Salvador has some of the most draconian reproductive rights laws in the world, with abortion criminalized in all circumstances

Discriminatory laws, harmful social norms, underfunded services, and rising anti-rights movements all continue to act as barriers to SRHR. These efforts are bolstered by disinformation, reduced freedom for public participation, climate-driven displacement, and conflict.

Girls and young women face these intersecting crises most acutely. In humanitarian contexts, where services are overstretched and protection systems are failing, SRHR are often sidelined as non-essential. This could not be further from the truth. In emergencies, the risks of sexual violence, unintended pregnancy, and early marriage all increase – making access to quality, age-and-gender-responsive sexual reproductive health services a lifesaving necessity.

A rollback with global consequences

The rollback on rights is global. Between 2019 and 2022, gender equality declined or stagnated in 40% of countries, according to the [2024 SDG Gender Index](#). At current rates, full equality remains more than a century away. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are clear: we cannot achieve SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), or SDG 5 (gender equality) without protecting and expanding access to SRHR. Indeed, three-quarters of the SDGs are unachievable without gender equality and access to SRHR.

Evidence points to what works. Comprehensive sexuality education improves sexual and reproductive health outcomes when paired with youth-friendly services. Legal reforms that remove age and marital status restrictions are key. Respectful, non-discriminatory care – including in crisis settings – is vital. Yet these proven

interventions remain under-prioritized and underfunded, despite being a human right for all individuals.

Meanwhile, public and political will is faltering. The global funding gap is stark. [Since 2023, official development assistance \(ODA\) has been slashed by an estimated USD 60 billion](#). This includes gender-focused aid, already a small share of global funds. [Only 4% of ODA goes to programs with gender equality as the primary objective](#). And just 0.34% reaches women's rights organizations – with even less funding flowing to girl-led and youth-led groups.

The cost of starving movements

This matters. These movements are often the first to respond to backlash and the strongest voices for change. Yet they face chronic barriers in navigating adult-centric, rigid donor systems. The result: transformative, localized work is under threat, and young leaders are being forced to scale back or shut down.

In Peru, [17-year-old Luisana – a Venezuelan migrant](#) – is one of many who has experienced exclusion and now feels empowered. Initially faced with xenophobia and isolation, she found belonging through peer-led SRHR education sessions in her community. “I feel quite empowered on issues such as sexual and reproductive rights,” she shared. “If my friends ask me a question, I can answer with confidence because the information is verified and reliable.”

Luisana's story is not unique. It reflects a global truth: when adolescents have access to knowledge, supportive networks, and inclusive services, they are better equipped to navigate challenges, advocate for their rights, and shape their futures. These outcomes are measurable. Investing in girls' education and SRHR reduces poverty, improves health, delays marriage and unintended pregnancy, and boosts economic growth. [Every dollar invested in SRHR generates over 8 dollars in social and economic returns](#).

// Comprehensive SRHR programs... are cost-effective public health interventions and essential, rights-based commitments

The price of inaction

But without sustained investment, this progress could unravel. Foreign aid cuts, combined with the deliberate spread of misinformation and political regression, put decades of gains at risk. Comprehensive SRHR programs are not luxuries. They are cost-effective public health interventions and essential, rights-based commitments.

The path forward requires bold, urgent, and context-specific action. Governments must repeal discriminatory laws, expand legal entitlements, and enshrine bodily autonomy as a non-negotiable right. Donors must increase direct, flexible funding to youth-led and feminist organizations, and simplify funding mechanisms. Schools, hospitals, clinics, and other medical services should provide accurate, clear, positive sex education and welcoming healthcare tailored to a person's gender, age, and developmental stage. Humanitarian systems must fully integrate SRHR as lifesaving, alongside food, water, and shelter.

Most importantly, young people must be seen not only as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of policy, services, and accountability systems. Their lived realities, leadership, and solutions must shape how we move forward.

We have the tools, evidence, and urgency. What is needed now is the political courage to prioritize adolescent SRHR in global and national agendas. Without it, we risk leaving a generation behind – not just in health, but in hope.

Sexual and reproductive health is not a side issue. It is the foundation of equality, prosperity, and peace. The moment to protect it is now. ■

Countering the global war on women

Across the world, women's rights are increasingly under attack from conservative and populist forces. Defending these rights – through broad democratic alliances and institutional resilience – is critical to safeguarding democracy itself

By [Georgina Waylen](#), WJM MacKenzie Chair in Government, University of Manchester

Around the world we see many right-wing conservative and populist governments adopting similar policies about gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. These measures erode women's rights as well as human rights more broadly, attempting to impose a certain vision of society on their polities, often using undemocratic means.

This shared pattern is not a coincidence. The erosion of women's rights can provide a litmus test for the extent of the wider erosion of democracy. Indeed, the two often go hand in hand, as part of wider trends toward "autocratization" (the process by which democracies become more autocratic or authoritarian). As such, wider attacks on "gender" and "gender ideology" have been growing globally for several decades and particularly since 2010. In fact, some analysts argue that these "anti-gender" sentiments have become the "symbolic glue" that can unite what otherwise would be disparate groupings of conservatives and right-wing populists together with various religious and anti-democratic forces.

The anti-gender movement and its narratives

What unites these actors is their antipathy to feminism, women's rights, and the rights of LGBTQ+

people. They see gender ideology (and "gender theory"), through its support of gender rights and freedoms, as attacking "natural" gender roles. They argue that gender ideology negates sexual difference and denies the natural complementarity between biologically defined men and women, thereby threatening the institution of the (heterosexual) family. These actors share a belief in the immutability of sex assigned at birth that cannot be changed or altered. As such, they oppose LGBTQ+ rights, same-sex marriage, and trans rights.

They also have highly conservative views on women's rights, including reproductive rights and particularly abortion rights, often seeing women's primary roles as in the home raising children. As politicians, they see it as their task to defend the family from feminism, LGBTQ+ activism, the Left, the UN, and human rights NGOs who support women's rights and those of sexual and gender minorities. Many of these conservative and right-wing populist governments combine their anti-gender beliefs with xenophobia and nativism. They argue they're acting for the "pure" people against the corrupt elites, migrants, and anti-gender activists who seek to undermine their societies.

As a result, some seemingly disparate governments and movements, like President Trump's MAGA movement in the US and President Putin's government in

Russia, share an opposition to gender ideology alongside their other socially conservative and xenophobic views. At the same time, the ways that gender ideology is framed varies in different contexts. For example, it's been described as:

- "Ebola from Brussels" in East Central Europe
- a Western colonial import in parts of Africa
- evidence of Western decadence in Russia

These conservative and right-wing populist governments share both rhetorical repertoires and political strategies. Rhetorically they use affect and fear – for example, around women's safety – weaponizing narratives of threat and danger. The right-wing populist "complex" – comprising this diverse collection of actors, often mobilizing around a shared emotional appeal (for example, as "concerned citizens") – frequently includes a racialized sexual politics. It often, for example, frames migrants as a sexual threat (as seen around the New Year's Eve events in Cologne in Germany in 2015/16, when about 80 women reported sexual assaults and muggings by men). This highlights how the dynamics of xenophobia, race, and gender can intersect.

Once in government, conservative and right-wing populist politicians often try to capture state institutions such as the legislature and judiciary. They



© Olaf Schuelke/Alamy

then incrementally undermine these institutions' capacities, curbing the independence of courts, and reducing freedom of speech and the right to protest. Their programs frequently include dismantling or reframing gender equality and other equality institutions and policies within the state. We saw this happen in Hungary under Prime Minister Orbán and Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), as well as more recently in the US after Donald Trump was re-elected and federal diversity, equity, and inclusion programs were abolished. University gender studies courses, too, are often banned (again, in Hungary and now in the US).

At the same time, restrictions on sex education in schools are frequently

introduced, preventing any discussion of gender identities and sometimes even of contraception. This is often combined with new restrictions on reproductive services, including the virtually total bans on abortion as seen in Poland and in some US states.

The Istanbul Convention: a battleground for gender rights

One issue that became a cause célèbre for many conservative and right-wing populist governments was the 2011 Istanbul Convention. This international agreement to prevent and combat violence against women has been seen as a litmus test for a government's commitment to gender equality. (The UK government only ratified it in

▲ The death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of the Iranian 'morality police' triggered global protests under the banner of "woman, life, freedom" – pictured here is a protest of tens of thousands in Berlin, Germany

2022, 10 years after first signing the convention, and even then excluding migrant women from any services around gender-based violence).

The convention has been fiercely opposed by some conservative and religious actors for supposedly promoting gender ideology as it defined gender as a social construct and so is seen as threatening traditional family structures and national values. As a result, the Hungarian and

Slovakian governments refused to ratify it. In Turkey, President Erdoğan's government withdrew from it in 2021.

Alongside the implementation of policies that erode women's rights, these governments often introduce measures to bolster the heterosexual family, to encourage the "right kind of families" to have more children – for example, through increased maternity leave and child allowances.

As such, struggles over women's rights, gender, sexuality, and the family – alongside exclusionary ideas about who is entitled to rights – are closely intertwined with the erosion of democracy by populist and conservative forces, as they try to limit various rights and freedoms that are central to any well-functioning democracy.

Building democratic resilience

What can be done? As democratic backsliding by right-wing populist and conservative governments has become more evident, political scientists have started thinking more about how to foster democratic resilience. Strengthening the ability of democratic actors and institutions to counter attempts to undermine democratic norms and practices – and prevent the erosion of rights and democracy – is a critical step in defending women's rights.

In addition to ensuring strong, effective, and well-functioning institutional guardrails to prevent the misuse of power and the undermining of key institutions of democracy, attention is increasingly focusing on the central role of broad-based alliances. These alliances include a range of democratic civil society actors who overcome any internal differences to counter democratic erosion.

Activism around women's issues can play a crucial part in this. The "Women in Black" mass protests of 2016 and again in 2020/21, against PiS plans to further limit abortion rights in Poland, are often seen as an important example of action that both defends democracy and women's rights. ■

Protecting human rights and democracy



Democracy is a core principle of the United Nations, primarily due to the symbiotic relationship between democracy and human rights. In 2002, the former Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution on "Further measures to promote and consolidate democracy". In its preamble it states "democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing". It lists the essential elements required to protect democracy and rights as:

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations
- The separation of powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent and pluralistic media

Populist movements worldwide have been systematically undermining all areas simultaneously. To preserve democracy and a rights-based system, the response must be equally comprehensive and co-ordinated. Civil society groups need to look beyond their immediate causes and form alliances to protect all the pillars on which democracy depends. The global war on women is part of a wider war, and can only be won by preserving the ecosystem that protects rights.

Eleanor Roosevelt, chair of the Drafting Committee on International Bill of Rights, addresses delegates. The final outcome was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948. © CC

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Conflicting ideas of peace

Donald Trump's vision of the UN as a great-power forum clashes with decades of evolution in global peacebuilding. How can UN members continue to advance peace as envisioned by the SDGs?

By [Richard Gowan](#), UN Director, International Crisis Group

US President Donald J. Trump has said that he wants the United Nations to focus on its “founding mission” of promoting peace and security. This has offered a glimmer of hope for UN officials and diplomats in New York who have been shocked by the new US administration’s aggressively negative approach to most other fields of multilateral cooperation.

But it is not clear whether Trump’s understanding of global security is compatible with the UN system’s conception of peace.

When Trump talks about the UN as a peacemaker, he seems to be casting back to the organization’s original role as a mechanism for great power coordination. President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and the other architects of the UN in the 1940s hoped that America, the British Empire, and the Soviet Union would work through

the new body to police the world. During the Cold War, the veto powers in the Security Council often argued, but did regularly turn to the UN to resolve crises – especially in Middle East – that could otherwise have spun out of control.

This sort of geopolitical thinking seems to appeal to Trump, who has talked about the need to avoid a war between the nuclear powers since the 1980s, and has prioritized relations with Russia this year.

◀ **Rescue workers, hospital staff and volunteers clear rubble and search for people trapped under debris after an attack that hit Okhmatdyt hospital, Kyiv, Ukraine's largest children's medical centre**

Changing concepts of peace

But if Trump may hanker after greater stability between the big powers, thinking at the UN about peace and security has evolved a great deal since the 1940s. In the decades after the Cold War, the Security Council and wider UN system focused less on cross-border disputes, and more on solving civil wars and building sustainable peace in cases from Liberia to Timor-Leste. UN mediators and peacekeepers have focused less on geopolitics and more on the local drivers of violence – such as ethnic disputes and economic disparities – and addressed issues like empowering women in peace talks that most signatories of the UN Charter in San Francisco did not think of. Through discussions of these issues, the UN system has helped expand and refine definitions of “peace.”

In 2015, the drafters of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) captured this line of thinking in SDG 16, which emphasized the need for “peace, justice, and strong institutions.” This embraced an expansive view of peaceful societies, underlining the need not only to reduce violence, but also to promote inclusion, human rights, and political representation. In the decade since the adoption of the SDGs, UN officials have often aimed to frame much of their peace work – in addition to parallel work on disarmament – in terms of development, which seemed fairly uncontroversial.

Climate change and security

The UN has also been a platform for governments, international officials, and non-governmental organizations to flag new threats to peace and security,

such as the security effects of climate change. The UN has acted as a space where scientists and policymakers can build a better shared understanding of these unconventional challenges.

In 2021, Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution calling on the UN system to work more systematically on climate-security questions, but over 100 nations endorsed the draft. Such exercises are not entirely theoretical. UN peacekeepers in South Sudan have, for example, been heavily involved in supporting communities and refugee camps threatened by patterns of flooding linked to climate change in recent years.

Some UN officials have nonetheless worried that the institution has grown less effective at handling more traditional security issues. The Security Council, hamstrung by big power tensions, has not launched a large-scale blue helmet peacekeeping operation since 2014. It has performed poorly – and sometimes done nothing at all – in response to the outbreak of intense hostilities in cases including Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza in the last five years.

A clash of worldviews

As I noted in SDG Action last year, these unhappy experiences have left some UN officials convinced that the organization should now downplay narrowly defined peace and security issues, and go all in on topics like development and global warming instead.

This debate is growing more acute as many of the wealthier nations that pay a large part of the UN budget – including not only the US, but also European players like the UK and the Netherlands – have reduced their aid spending. Diplomats from the Global South working in New York grumble that their Western counterparts are now obsessed with geopolitical questions and hard security, and are not listening to the rest of the world's worries about resurgent poverty, debt, and climate adaptation – which are arguably as pertinent to peace in their

regions as diplomatic and military matters.

The Trump administration is likely to make these disagreements more acute. The US seems to be focusing (as far as its intentions can be assessed) on big power diplomacy, largely ignoring the concerns of smaller and poorer countries in UN forums. Western powers frightened of losing US security support will concentrate on building up their defenses, again to the detriment of helping non-Western countries handle other problems. States from the Global South will push back, and try to keep the UN focused on their own challenges and definitions of peace. In a gloomy scenario, UN diplomacy will turn into a global shouting match over whose security and interest matter.

Leveraging shared interests

A better way out of this looming mess may be available. While it is hard for UN members to put aside their immediate concerns – let alone get a grip on US policy under Trump – representatives from all regions know that they have a shared, long-term interest in mitigating threats like climate change and disease. Even if the Trump administration refuses to engage, there is a window for Western and non-Western officials to enter into hard-headed discussions about how to keep working together on these challenges in an era when resources will be limited. It may even be possible for UN members to get the US to participate in collaborative crisis management on problems – such as addressing the collapse of law and order in Haiti – that trouble Washington.

True optimists at the UN (admittedly a small and shrinking breed) wonder if President Trump may even reduce the overall levels of global tensions swirling about the institution by establishing better big power ties with China and Russia. It is just possible that Trump could help the UN regain some credibility as a big power coordination mechanism. For the time being, however, smaller and middle powers should look for ways to preserve the UN's broader contributions to peace. ■

Raising visibility, respect, and protection for non-combatants

Civilian protection in armed conflict remains more aspiration than reality, as recent crises expose deep flaws in the international system. To restore credibility, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – a global pledge to prevent mass atrocities – must evolve and be backed by bold reform, regional initiative, and political will

By [Samira Rashwan](#), Founder, The Strategic Priorities Hub, and Peace and Security Expert and Youth Advocate, UN Women

From the agonizing refrain of “never again” to the reality of “again, and again, and again,” the [Responsibility to Protect \(R2P\)](#) doctrine faces profound challenges. R2P, established in 2005, aims to reconcile state sovereignty with the need to prevent mass atrocities, but its implementation has faced significant issues. R2P posits that each state has the primary duty to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. If a state fails in this duty, the international community assumes a residual responsibility to intervene, including through Security Council-authorized coercive measures.

Despite its critical aspiration, R2P’s practical application has been hampered by complex crises, entrenched power politics, and evolving warfare dynamics. Conflicts today are increasingly urbanized and asymmetric, with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven and cyber warfare introducing new risks for civilian populations. Protracted violence and proxy involvement in conflicts – particularly in the Arab region (Sudan, Palestine, Syria, Yemen) – often result in blatant disregard for civilian life and ongoing atrocities. The civil war

in Sudan, ongoing since April 2023, exemplifies a severe humanitarian crisis where proxy support erodes a state’s responsibility to protect its population.

In 2023, civilian casualties worldwide in armed conflicts dramatically surged by 72%, totaling over 33,400, with a shocking 70% of recorded deaths occurring in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. By mid-2024, UNHCR estimated that there were almost 123 million people forcibly displaced due to war, persecution, violence and human rights violations, including 6 million Palestinian refugees under UNWRA’s mandate. Despite numerous reports documenting grave crimes in Gaza, a decisive R2P intervention was never implemented, illustrating a global failure to protect civilians and hindering progress on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The sheer scale of immense suffering, the loss of lives, and the lasting trauma inflicted on survivors paint a horrifying picture of what happens when the world stands by.

Why R2P has faltered

The initial promise of R2P has been undermined by compromises made during its adoption. These include:

- limiting specific trigger crimes
- raising intervention thresholds
- vesting authority solely in the UN Security Council without alternative actions in cases of deadlock

Moreover, the lack of parallel development between the principle of non-interference and R2P has further hindered its effectiveness. Genuine concerns about R2P’s potential misuse by powerful nations and its selective application have led to accusations of bias. There has been a disproportionate emphasis on R2P’s pillar three (timely and decisive response), overshadowing pillar one (state responsibility and prevention) and pillar two (international assistance and capacity building).

This has skewed public understanding and hindered preventive approaches. Interventions, such as those in Iraq and Libya, initially framed in R2P terms, have been widely criticized for contributing to prolonged instability. This, in turn, has fostered a reluctance to engage in future interventions, posing a significant threat to R2P’s future. As a result, the manipulation of pillar three by powerful nations for national or proxy interests has severely discredited R2P – particularly among states in the Global South.

UN limitations undermine R2P

A critical issue is the muted public presence of the UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisers on Genocide Prevention and R2P regarding the situation in Gaza, raising questions about the efficacy of the UN’s early warning system and suggesting



a lack of immediate and unified condemnation.

One contributing factor to the challenges in implementing R2P is the internal dynamics within the UN itself. The disconnect between the UN's Geneva and New York operations, often described as a fragmentation between human rights (Geneva) and security (New York) remits, further exacerbates this problem, leading to procedural inertia. Warnings from Geneva-based bodies such as the UN's Human Rights Council and High Commissioner often fail to translate into structured escalation within the UN's political bodies in New York, where security considerations dominate. This disconnect directly impacts the UN's ability to provide timely and effective protection to civilians, undermining the goals of R2P.

While changing the UN Security Council structure is exceptionally challenging, other avenues exist to prevent large-scale conflicts. The

[UN80 Initiative](#), commemorating the UN's 80th anniversary, focuses on reinvigorating multilateralism and addressing global challenges.

The [Pact for the Future](#), adopted at the Summit of the Future, aims to enhance global cooperation on critical issues. While not explicitly mentioning R2P, the pact echoes its core principles of international peace, civilian protection, and strengthened multilateralism. It also emphasizes prevention and the need to address the root causes of conflict, and calls for urgent Security Council reform.

The UN80 Initiative and/or the Pact for the Future can be leveraged to implement suggestions such as:

- promoting data-driven early warning systems
- strengthening diplomatic mediation
- enhancing support for civil society organizations

These ideas in turn align with R2P's pillar two by focusing on prevention and capacity building.

▲ Newly arrived Sudanese refugees wait for food at a UNHCR site in Chad. Sudan, with 14.3 million refugees and internally displaced people, is the most extreme case of displacement due to conflict

Regional pathways for protection

Given the frequent paralysis of the UN Security Council due to competing interests and veto power, exploring alternative mechanisms, especially regional systems, is crucial. Regional organizations like the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Organization of American States, and the European Union possess unique insights and are often better positioned to address conflicts both within their respective regions and beyond.

These organizations can facilitate dialogue, mediate disputes, and deploy peacekeeping forces, potentially circumventing Security Council deadlocks. Enhancing the capacity and

mandate of regional organizations to intervene in cases of mass atrocities provides a valuable alternative pathway when the UN Security Council is unable to act. This too aligns with pillar two of R2P by building capacity for protection outside of direct UN intervention. It also reinforces the idea that R2P is not solely a UN Security Council tool.

Immediate reforms for civilian protection

To enhance atrocity prevention, an immediate recalibration of tools is needed. This includes:

- establishing a rapid atrocity alert mechanism to bridge the Geneva–New York divide, transforming real-time warnings into structured escalation within the UN Secretariat, Security Council, and General Assembly
- the Secretary-General assertively invoking Article 99 of the UN Charter (allowing them to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security”); in cases of Security Council deadlock, the General Assembly must also

utilize the “Uniting for Peace” resolution

- urgently convening a multi-actor early warning mechanism for genocide and grave crimes to assess warnings and transmit alerts, ensuring decisions are grounded in expert-led assessments
- establishing a dedicated working group to specifically confront and mitigate the risks to civilians posed by AI and other emerging technologies in armed conflict – particularly given the notable deficiency in the Global Digital Compact to clearly and explicitly address these risks (the latest agreement among Member States to outline shared principles for an open, free, and secure digital future)

Building longer-term protective capacity

In the longer term, comprehensive solutions must address root causes and strengthen preventive capabilities. These include:

- promoting universal jurisdiction for core crimes
- advancing a “responsibility not to enable atrocities” doctrine

- undertaking more in-depth normative work to redefine and harmonize the non-interference principle in the context of R2P, enabling a clear, internationally agreed-upon framework for protective action that addresses mass atrocities without violating legitimate sovereignty
- developing specific mechanisms to measure and highlight R2P’s overall effectiveness in prevention, beyond reactive interventions

Conclusion

Transforming R2P from rhetoric to reality hinges on political will, streamlined institutional design, and decisive action. The current fragmented system is insufficient, and incremental reform is no longer viable. Bold institutional courage is needed to safeguard human dignity, fulfilling the UN’s most sacred promise to protect populations from the gravest crimes. The time for tentative steps has passed; only decisive action will suffice. ■

▼ The UN Security Council meeting on the situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo



© United Nations Photo/Manuel Elias



Malnutrition is undermining development – ending it requires cooperation

From stunted growth to rising obesity, malnutrition is costing lives and futures on a massive scale. Lasting progress will only come through stronger partnerships, smarter investment, and action that cuts across sectors

▲ A community worker monitors infant malnutrition at a shelter in Goma, North Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo

By [Joanne Raisin](#), Director, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Secretariat

Good nutrition is foundational for human development. It's essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 (zero hunger) and 12 more of the 17

SDGs. Conversely, if we neglect it, the evidence is clear: we erode human capital and wellbeing both now and in the future, as the impact of poor nutrition is intergenerational.

Nutrition – especially during pregnancy and the first years of life – shapes human capital, fuels economic

growth, and plays an important role in future-proofing societies against the impact of global challenges, from climate shocks to conflict. Malnutrition, in all its forms, has the opposite effect: stunting children's physical and cognitive development, deepening inequality, and – in the worst case – undermining stability and fueling conflict.

The evidence is stark. The World Health Organization reports that anemia, affecting nearly one-third of women of reproductive age, impairs learning, productivity, and quality of life. The World Bank estimates show that just a 1% loss in adult height due to childhood stunting (low height for age) is linked to 20% lower earnings later in life. Childhood obesity – on the rise

acute malnutrition, with insufficient focus on prevention, driven largely by the firewall between humanitarian and development interventions. A review of humanitarian spending over the last eight years shows:

- only 12% of humanitarian food-sector aid has gone to nutrition
- just 10% of development food-sector funding (itself only 3% of total development spending) has gone to nutrition

This shows how interventions are saving lives, but the medium and longer-term impact of malnutrition on individuals, communities, and countries goes untreated.

Overweight and obesity are rising worldwide and are major drivers of

nutrients. The crisis is compounded by misinformation. In an age where social media shapes diets more than public health campaigns, only 2% of nutrition content on platforms like TikTok is scientifically sound. Marketing of breast milk substitutes continues to undermine breastfeeding, despite overwhelming evidence of its benefits.

The evidence is there – but money and know-how often aren't

We know what works. Evidence-based, “nutrition-specific” interventions like ready-to-use therapeutic foods, six months of exclusive breastfeeding, and micronutrient supplementation in pregnancy are tested and proven examples of interventions that save lives and build healthy populations.

We need to work better together across sectors. Integration of nutrition into other sectors is key. Nutrition-sensitive policies across agriculture, health, education, and social protection – when coordinated – could transform outcomes. For example, malnourished children are more likely to miss vaccines, and under-immunized children are more likely to be malnourished. Yet nutrition and immunization services are still delivered in silos. Closing the evidence gap on the benefits of joint delivery could unlock major efficiencies and save countless lives.

In general, however, more support needs to be in place for countries to identify and emulate best practice around nutrition integration. The “how” still needs unpacking, especially in relation to cross-cutting areas like climate – critical to long-term food and nutrition security. Here, more needs to happen to establish the co-benefits of linking climate and nutrition, and to identify practical program options, which remain too few on the ground.

The challenge is not always knowledge – it is also political will, scale, and money. Official development assistance (ODA) for nutrition is less than 1% of total aid – and it is shrinking. A projected

// We cannot rest on our laurels. We need to work with other sectors and stakeholders to build the evidence and show how cross-sector collaboration delivers shared benefits

globally – affects school performance, increases the risk of early-onset chronic diseases, and shortens lives.

Yet in 2025, despite decades of progress (mostly on breastfeeding targets) and an increasing evidence base linking good nutrition with better health and socio-economic outcomes, hundreds of millions of people are experiencing malnutrition. The numbers should shock us. Globally, 150 million children under five are stunted, and 43 million are wasted (low weight for their height). Many face catastrophic levels of malnutrition. In 2024, over 295 million people in 53 countries and territories experienced acute malnutrition, an increase of almost 14 million from 2023.

In fragile states where climate change, conflict, and economic instability come together to create persistent crises of food insecurity, malnutrition is most severe and most overlooked. Interventions here are geared toward the management of

disease. Nearly half of all adults globally are overweight or obese, along with 35.5 million children. Obesity greatly increases the risk of non-communicable diseases, which account for 74% of all deaths annually (41 million). Around 85% of these occur in low and middle-income countries, which are least equipped to manage the burden.

A significant driver of malnutrition is the dysfunction of our food systems. Globally, nutritious food is becoming less affordable, putting healthy diets increasingly out of reach for vulnerable communities. At every stage – production, storage, transportation, marketing, and retail – systemic issues limit access to nutritious diets.

For example, ultra-processed, nutrient-poor foods are often cheaper and more accessible than fresh, healthy options. For a street vendor, a long-shelf-life packaged snack is a safer investment than produce that spoils in days. The result is a system skewed toward calories rather than

44% drop in aid to nutrition in 2025 could mean 2.3 million children losing access to treatment for severe acute malnutrition, resulting in hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths. Some countries may be able to make up for ODA cuts through increases in domestic spending and by accessing other financing. Again, the fragile states, those most in need, often lack the fiscal space to increase domestic financing and do not meet the criteria for lending.

But overall, investing in nutrition remains one of the world's best development buys – because it drives progress across many of the SDGs. Investing in nutrition offers substantial returns, with World Bank projections showing an estimated USD 2.4 trillion in

economic benefits over a decade from scaling up interventions, and a return of USD 23 for every USD 1 invested in reducing undernutrition. Compare this with the costs of neglect: the total economic impact of malnutrition – undernutrition, overweight, and obesity – is estimated to be as high as USD 3.5 trillion per year. The longer the neglect, the greater the impact on nutrition, health, education, productivity, and resilience.

In a world of competing and dwindling resources, we need to work together to keep nutrition high on global, regional, and national agendas. To end on a positive note, the [Nutrition for Growth \(N4G\) Summit](#) in Paris (March 2025) was a success in several ways. It:

- secured USD 29 billion in nutrition commitments
- gained support for nutrition integration through a compact between 80 countries and organizations
- brought philanthropies to the table at

a time of declining ODA

- reinvigorated the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement as a strong multi-stakeholder convening platform

The challenge is to turn these commitments into action on the ground and sustain the momentum created by N4G. As a nutrition community, we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to work with other sectors and stakeholders to build the evidence and show how cross-sector collaboration delivers shared benefits. A win for nutrition can be a win for climate change. A win for health can be a win for nutrition, and for education too.

At a time of declining aid, outright famine, and increasing levels of malnutrition and health crises, cooperation – not competition – is the key to progress. We need to broaden the tent of stakeholders, bringing in new financiers and the private sector, while elevating country voices, if we are to rise to the challenge. ■

▼ A new mother is given breastfeeding advice by a pediatrician at a health center in Damascus, Syria. Breastfeeding plays a crucial role in preventing childhood malnutrition



Why ocean action is the litmus test for sustainable development

The ocean is not just a victim of environmental decline – it is a foundation of global development. From climate resilience to food security to poverty reduction, ocean health now stands as a critical barometer of our capacity to achieve the SDGs

By [Susan Gardner](#), Director, Ecosystems Division, UN Environment Programme

In June this year, something shifted. The third UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) was not a typical gathering of marine scientists and environmentalists. Finance ministers sat alongside fisheries officials. Development agencies shared tables with conservation groups. The message was unmistakable: the ocean is now a cornerstone of the global agenda.

This broad presence reflects a new reality. If the ocean supports everything from nutrition to jobs, from climate stability to cultural heritage, why do we still treat it as optional in our development strategies? The answer matters more than we might think. Because what we do for the ocean now will determine whether we can deliver on the promises we have made to end poverty, feed the world, and build a sustainable future for all.

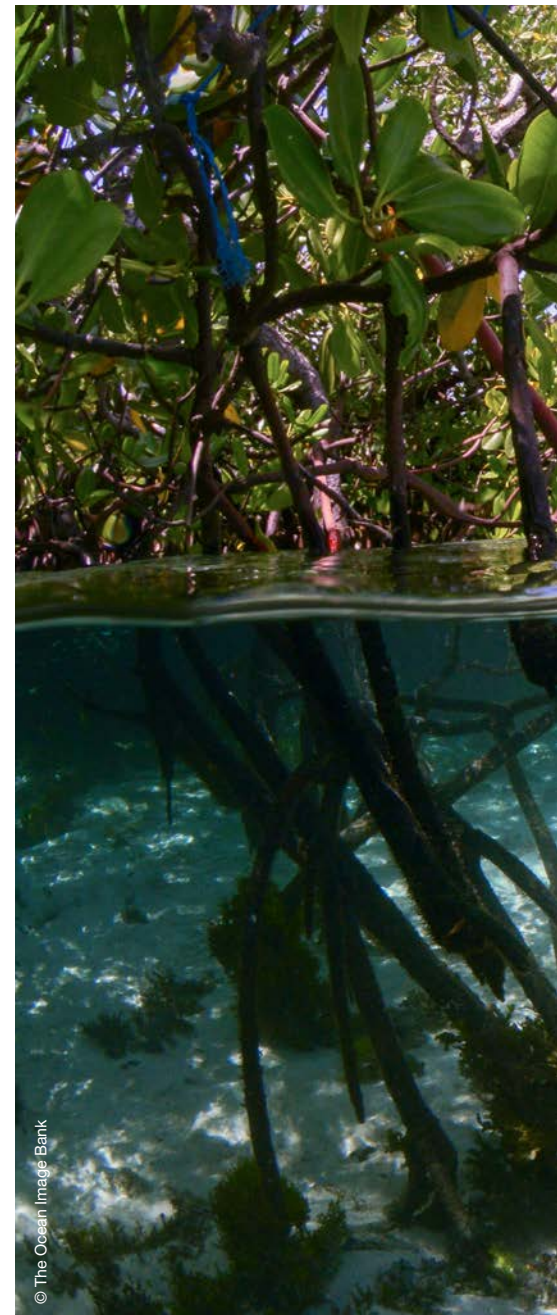
The ocean is development

The numbers tell a story that should reshape how we think about the ocean. The ocean economy generates

between USD 3 and 6 trillion in annual value – if it were a country, it would be the fifth largest economy in the world. It provides more than 260 million jobs and sustains 600 million livelihoods. These are not abstract statistics. They represent families in coastal Kenya who depend on mangrove restoration for their income, fisherfolk in Thailand managing community-led crab banks, and women across the Caribbean processing fish that feeds their families.

The ocean's role in food security runs deeper than most people realize. Globally, aquatic foods supply 17% of the world's animal protein, serving as the primary protein source for more than 3.2 billion people. Small-scale fisheries, often led by women, contribute 40% of the global catch while providing 90% of employment in the fisheries sector. When we talk about ending hunger, we talk about the ocean.

The ocean is also our largest natural carbon sink. It absorbs about 30% of global CO₂ emissions and over 90% of the excess heat from greenhouse gas emissions. It stabilizes global weather and precipitation patterns. Blue carbon ecosystems like mangroves and



seagrasses sequester carbon up to 35 times faster than tropical forests, while also protecting coastlines and supporting fisheries.

The ocean can also drive gender equity. In many coastal regions, women are the backbone of the fisheries sector, leading small-scale enterprises, preserving traditional marine knowledge, and are central to processing and marketing. Ocean action that invests in women and removes systemic barriers to finance,



**// The ocean's
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markets, and leadership strengthens entire communities.

We are undermining our own foundation

If the ocean is essential to sustainable development, protecting it must be a top priority. Yet we are doing the opposite. Overfishing, pollution, acidification, and destructive fishing practices are unraveling the ocean's ability to support human wellbeing. Only 8.6% of the ocean is designated

▲ Mangroves and seagrass in Raja Ampat, Indonesia. These plants are a major component of blue carbon ecosystems, which sequester carbon up to 35 times faster than tropical forests

as protected areas, and less than 3% is fully protected. We keep demanding more from the ocean while giving it less space, less time, and fewer resources to recover.

The human cost is staggering. Every day, 20,000 children, most from coastal communities, are displaced by floods and storms. Their schools are flooded. Health clinics shut down. Food sources are lost. These children are more likely to drop out of school, face malnutrition, and suffer from diseases like cholera and dengue. And in Tuvalu, which scientists warn could be the first country to be submerged by rising seas, one-third of the population has already applied for climate visas to Australia.

The economic consequences are equally stark. When sargassum blooms choke Caribbean beaches, schools evacuate due to toxic gases, tourism operators struggle, and fishing communities lose their livelihoods. What begins as an environmental problem quickly becomes a public health crisis, an economic collapse, and a development emergency.

// We tend to think of SDG 14 (life below water) as one goal among many. But in truth, it underpins them all. The ocean connects every other goal – just as it connects every part of our planet

As Sir David Attenborough put it recently: “After almost 100 years on the planet, I now understand the most important place on Earth is not on land, but at sea.” And he is right. We cannot end poverty, ensure food security, or fight climate change while degrading the ocean. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are interconnected aspirations that rise or fall together.

What is working and what needs to scale now

The good news? We are not starting from zero. We already know what works.

Indigenous peoples and local communities are leading the way. In Colombia, the Raizal Afro-Caribbean

community is working with the [Global Fund for Coral Reefs](#), co-founded by UNEP, to invest in sustainable aquaculture, organic farming, and ecotourism while protecting one of the Caribbean’s most biodiverse marine regions. They are not just beneficiaries of conservation; they are its architects, bringing centuries of traditional knowledge to bear on modern challenges.

Finance is beginning to follow. [The Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles](#), developed through UNEP, now guide more than 70 global banks and insurers toward investments that support both ocean health and economic returns. At the recent Blue Economy and Finance Forum, in the run-up to UNOC3, new finance commitments totaled 8.7 billion euros. And the UNEP-supported [One Ocean Finance Facility](#) is now being co-designed with the aim of unlocking

billions more from ocean-dependent industries.

Around the world, marine challenges are turned into opportunities. In the Caribbean, local companies are converting sargassum into biofuel, fertilizer, and even skincare products, creating jobs while easing environmental pressure. In the United Arab Emirates, restoration of seagrass beds is bringing back habitat for the world’s second-largest population of dugong, a large, marine mammal, also known as “sea cow”. These efforts, supported by the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#), are also boosting sustainable tourism and fisheries, showing how ocean recovery can support both biodiversity and economic growth.

A new global agreement on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) – now fewer than a dozen ratifications away from entering into force – will make protecting biodiversity in international waters far easier. Combined with growing momentum toward the target of protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030, as part of the Global Biodiversity Framework, we are building ambitious ocean governance that matches the scale of the challenge.

The real choice before us

This is not about the ocean in isolation. It is about whether we will meet the SDGs. You cannot fight the climate crisis while losing the ecosystems that absorb carbon and buffer storms. You cannot end poverty while degrading the ocean ecosystems that support 600 million livelihoods. You cannot ensure food security while destroying the fisheries that feed 3.2 billion people. And you cannot empower women while excluding them from decisions about the marine resources they depend on.

We tend to think of SDG 14 (life below water) as one goal among many. But in truth, it underpins them all. The ocean connects every other goal – just as it connects every part of our planet.

We have the knowledge, the tools, and, increasingly, the financial mechanisms to make this work. What we need now is the political will to treat ocean action as development action, to invest in marine protection as economic policy, and to recognize that healthy seas are prerequisites for healthy societies.

Momentum is building. Civil society is leading. Business is stepping up, from compliance to co-leadership. Indigenous knowledge is being centered, not sidelined. Countries are ratifying treaties, committing finance, and rolling out marine protected areas.

What we do for the ocean now will shape the world we hand to future generations. Because in the end, we are all connected by one blue planet, sustained by the same life-giving seas, and bound by a shared responsibility to protect them. ■

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Women and technology: a catalyst for equality and development

Denying women and girls access to technology is not a gap – it's a systemic injustice with global consequences. Urgent action to expand digital access, education, and agency, especially in the world's poorest countries, is essential to ensure that half the population can shape – not be shut out of – our digital future



◀ Women learning graphic design and coding at a technology centre in Herat, Afghanistan, in 2020. A year later the Taliban banned secondary and higher education for girls and women

it also reflects my personal journey. My own path, which led to becoming Afghanistan's first female tech CEO in 2010, began when I first sat down in front of a computer in Herat.

The immense potential for technology to empower, which I personally experienced, is tragically being withheld from most girls in Afghanistan today. Banned from secondary education beyond grade six, girls are denied basic digital literacy, effectively shutting them off from a world of opportunity.

Even beyond the extreme cases of gender apartheid, like that experienced in Afghanistan, access to technology – and connectivity for the 2.6 billion people who remain offline, particularly the many more who are poorly connected – is a predominantly gendered phenomenon. Globally, women and girls, especially in rural communities and the least developed countries (LDCs) where technology could yield the greatest developmental impact, are disproportionately excluded from the digital revolution that has structurally transformed economies and societies elsewhere for decades.

While the overall digital gender gap has shown signs of narrowing, these specific demographics remain critically underserved due to barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, affordability issues, and gaps in digital literacy that preclude leveraging access to technology in the first place. Overcoming these fundamental barriers is key to unlocking vast potential for inclusive development and overcoming the exclusion of women and girls from the spaces where tomorrow is being built.

However, access and education in themselves remain insufficient. In the global tech sector, women constitute just over a quarter of the workforce. In countries facing conflict or repression,

By **Roya Mahboob**, CEO,
Digital Citizen Fund

Who is afraid of girls who code? Whenever a girl in Herat, Afghanistan, sits down in front of a computer, there is much more at play than simply learning how to use it. The experience transforms her relationship with the outside world and, consequently, her perception of the boundaries and limitations she may face offline.

These offline limitations previously defined the horizon of her ambitions, her ability to apply her talents, and her capacity to contribute to her community and the world at large. Technology enables her to envision

a different life, overcome contextual limitations, access education, expand social networks, and even find work or business opportunities.

The impact of technology is not confined to the economic sphere. Equality and development are increasingly shaped by technology and connectivity, as evidenced by:

- how movements like #MeToo reverberate across countries
- how social media influences conflict zones, from the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar to Ethiopia
- how civil society mobilizes for change, often facing repression in turn

While this transformative power is well documented in academic literature,

that figure often approaches zero. This disparity relegates even women in developed countries to being mere end-users at best, while largely excluding women and girls from the global majority from access to economic, social, and cultural advantages.

Technology continues to reshape relations between citizens, businesses, and governments. Expanding connectivity, innovative digital services, and technology-driven industries are fueling economic opportunities, boosting productivity, and reshaping entire sectors. Yet, those designing the digital infrastructure and its applications for much of the world are all too often far removed from local needs and the practical uses for technological innovation.

Whatever barriers exist, the wave of young girls and women entering the tech sector means that conservative attitudes are being challenged gradually, as women prove their worth

This exclusion has consequences far beyond individual opportunity. When women are shut out of technology, communities lose out on their ideas, skills, and leadership. Development slows, inequality deepens, and the gap between those who shape the digital world and those left behind grows ever wider.

What we built and what was lost

Before the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Afghan women and girls who had received training in digital literacy and skills had started to build momentum for progress in education, economic development, and civil society activism.

Through the [Digital Citizen Fund](#) (DCF), my team and I opened training centers across Afghanistan where girls could learn to use computers, access the internet, and understand

the basics of online communication and digital safety. Remote education was also critical: by distributing devices and SIM cards to access e-learning platforms, we were able to reach populations otherwise cut off from such opportunities. We trained tens of thousands of girls in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects and supported the creation of over 100 startups across the country. These skills opened a door, sometimes for the first time, to the outside world.

One of the most powerful examples of this shift was the [Afghan Girls Robotics Team](#). For the first time, Afghan girls – many from conservative communities – gained international recognition by competing in global robotics competitions. They stood

shoulder to shoulder with peers from countries with far more resources, and yet they won competitions.

Their most significant achievement, however, was changing minds back home. Families who once questioned the value of girls' education began to see things differently. Girls became local heroes, not just students. Their ideas were taken seriously, and their contributions to finding local solutions through applying STEM skills became undeniable. Societal progress and economic development should go hand in hand. For these Afghan communities, technology became the link between equity and development.

Other countries equally demonstrate how digital literacy can reshape communities. In Pakistan, initiatives like [Tech Karo](#) have helped young women from low-income neighborhoods gain training in web development and digital

marketing. Investment in rural “smart” villages, where digital transformation connects those furthest behind to technology, can benefit education, healthcare, and rural economies. In Kenya, [AkiraChix](#) provides advanced programming and design courses for women from underserved areas. Many graduates go on to work in the country's growing tech sector or start their own ventures.

Whatever barriers exist, the wave of young girls and women entering the tech sector means that conservative attitudes are being challenged gradually, as women prove their worth. This is despite them all too often facing sexism, harassment, and doubts about their ability to deliver results. The challenges seen in developed economies around workplace culture, bias, and advancement are magnified in LDCs, whose economies face additional fundamental challenges such as infrastructure roll-out, access, education, and cultural restrictions. All these factors matter and require serious engagement with the accompanying social, political, and engineering challenges.

In Afghanistan, despite the momentum DCF and others were building, progress remained fragile. Girls continued to face threats, harassment, and social pressure as change, fostered through and with communities, took time to solidify. Ultimately, technology reconfigures both social and economic life, and those aware and wary of this pay close attention to how it is wielded.

When the Taliban returned, most of our programs had to shut down. Students were sent home, buildings were locked, and just like that, a generation of girls saw their futures slip out of reach after having proven themselves on both national and international stages. Communities were denied their contributions, and their talents and minds are now left to wither.

Skills alone aren't enough

Teaching digital skills is essential, but it is not the whole answer. A girl can

learn to code, but if she cannot access job opportunities or open a bank account – let alone run a business or speak freely – then her knowledge has nowhere to go. Education means very little without basic freedoms.

We also need to think beyond basic access. In Afghanistan, as in many other LDCs and developing countries, the affordability of smartphones and data is often a major hurdle for individuals. A widely accepted affordability measure is the “1 for 2” – 1GB of mobile prepaid broadband for 2% or less of average monthly income – which the Alliance for Affordable Internet calculated would make internet accessible to the lowest income quintile in more unequal economies. However, 2.5 billion people pay more than 30% of their monthly income for the cheapest smartphone in their market and the average cost as a proportion of income for LDCs is 46%. Even where access is facilitated, the issue persists of women and girls (especially those from the global

A girl can learn to code, but if she cannot access job opportunities or open a bank account – let alone run a business or speak freely – then her knowledge has nowhere to go. Education means very little without basic freedoms

majority) being reduced to end-users of foreign or decontextualized “solutions.”

Even in developed countries, women and girls remain significantly underrepresented in creating, using, and regulating technology. They are less likely to use digital services or work in tech, and face more online harassment. A 2021 McKinsey report found that only 52 women were promoted to managerial positions for every 100 men in the tech industry, with talent pipelines severely restricted: only 32% of entry-level hardware roles and 43% of software roles were held by women. These are generational

challenges that should concern us all as we reflect on the compound effects of these disparities.

These straightforward and more complex layers of exclusion hinder women’s empowerment and diminish technology’s overall transformative potential. It has cost low and middle-income countries USD 1 trillion in GDP over the last decade, according to UN Women. This cost of excluding women from technology roles and their innovations is projected to expand to USD 1.5 trillion by the end of 2025. If anything, there should be a great self-interest for all stakeholders to

FIGURE 1:
Internet use gender parity score

Note: The gender parity score is calculated as the proportion of women who use the Internet divided by the proportion of men. A score of less than one indicates that men are more likely to use the Internet than women, while a score greater than one indicates the opposite. Gender parity is considered to be achieved when the score lies between 0.98 and 1.02.



Source: ITU

facilitate women's education and support their efforts in transforming STEM knowledge into tech products that contribute to greater returns on investment.

As we accept the deepening impact of technology on our present and future, the urgency of creating pathways for girls to become the creators, builders, and decision-makers within their own contexts and lived realities grows. In Afghanistan, this has led us to run underground schools and work with local communities who see the value of girls' education and the potential of STEM and technology generally. We teach unbanked women how to leverage crypto wallets to gain control over their own finances for the first time. We have seen how these simple interventions often create ripple effects across families, communities, and – ultimately – generations.

Most countries may be further ahead on the basics, but all require political, civil society, and private sector collaboration on the journey ahead. Gender-blind and context-blind technology “solutions” are at best agnostic to local realities but often create unintended negative impacts. Social media disinformation in conflict zones has become a weapon of war, just as the same technology allows for organizing volunteers in humanitarian emergencies. DCF has been both a victim of the former and a beneficiary of the latter. As artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and automation reshape the global job market and many traditional roles disappear, their impact on the social sphere will be equally important to track.

The World Economic Forum estimated that [85 million jobs could be displaced in the five years to 2025 due to automation](#), yet women remain underrepresented in alternative fields with high job growth potential. The International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that since women are predominantly employed in roles requiring low STEM skills, they are far more vulnerable to losing their jobs to automation. In ILO research of the

Philippines labour market, 49% of employment was at risk but the risk for women was 140% higher than for men. The digital gender has its origins in childhood. According to UNICEF, in [low and middle-income countries, adolescent boys are twice as likely to have the digital skills needed for future work compared with girls](#). In LDCs, this becomes not just a skills gap, but a future denied to countless talented girls who are not growing into educated women able to participate in and contribute to forces reordering society, economies, and entire countries and regions.

In Afghanistan in 2022, about 25% of men had access to the internet, compared with only 6% of women. Some provinces saw rates as low as

often broadening the subjects and implications under consideration.

Encouragingly, these ambitions are recognized as a priority for action in [UN Women's recent Beijing +30 Action Agenda](#) and strongly reflected in the [Political Declaration](#) adopted by governments at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2025.

To close the digital gender gap, we must support models that work under the pressures faced by those furthest left behind. In places where schools are closed or unsafe, remote and low-tech solutions, offline apps, solar-powered devices, and mobile training units can keep learning alive. These tools already exist. Critically, they must be linked to community-based structures, such as technology hubs with peer-to-peer

// As we accept the deepening impact of technology on our present and future, the urgency of creating pathways for girls to become the creators, builders, and decision-makers within their own contexts and lived realities grows

2%, meaning rural areas often had 0% of women with any access, let alone the digital skills to make use of it. Yet, these challenges affect all countries. Once again, even women in developed countries face exclusion.

What needs to happen

Women everywhere must be part of the industries that are redefining our lived realities, not as an afterthought, but from the start. This is critical, as we face technological changes accelerating beyond what states are able to regulate. This means teaching AI, cybersecurity, data science, and robotics alongside digital literacy. It means that, besides recognizing that the future is being built now, it is not enough to just give women a seat at the table: active efforts are required to enable women to lead and contribute to the discussions,

learning models that train local women and girls as multipliers for their fully offline sisters. They also need to be integrated with or linked to existing wider community structures, such as women's support groups, that allow for scaling such programs at acceptable risk levels. Working with and through communities grants a necessary level of protection and legitimacy against what can be perceived and rejected as foreign influence. Although such solutions and approaches have been deployed by DCF and others, predictable and continuous funding remains a key challenge to what is likely to be a sustained effort for generations to come.

For my homeland, the Afghan diaspora plays a vital role. Across the world, Afghan women in exile are mentoring and supporting students

still inside the country. They share resources, teach remotely, and fund small programs that fly under the radar. This is slow, quiet work, but it is saving and enabling futures, providing a minimum safety net without which even fewer girls would be able to access basic education and digital literacy. It deserves more recognition and support, as the impact of each investment creates a multiple in returns. It also requires us to face the scale of the challenge, moving beyond celebrating individual initiatives to considering how we can scale up solutions that are proving effective or have the potential to be.

Funding should not be seen as limited to charity. Worldwide, women-led startups receive less than 2% of venture capital. For women in conflict zones, access to funding is even harder. We need new funding pathways: grants, seed funds, micro-investment platforms, and solutions tailored to local challenges, designed for the women at the frontlines of deploying technology for equity and development.

We also cannot ignore the role of big tech. Many companies promote equality and inclusion in their marketing while doing business in places that restrict women's rights. This contradiction must end. Governments and development agencies should make gender equity in digital access a condition of partnerships, licensing, and infrastructure deals. If we can create rules for trade, we can create rules for fairness.

The path forward

Despite the odds, Afghan girls are still learning. Some study in secret. Others use virtual private networks (VPNs) to access online courses after the Taliban banned vast numbers (23 million, according to their own claims) of websites, although they likewise announced the rollout of 4G across the country. Some girls have left their homeland and are continuing their education in exile. Their commitment has not faded. As much as education



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and training around digital literacy is critical, so are enabling and sustaining networks for building capacity to organize and support each other for a future free of restrictions.

Until that future arrives, what they need most right now is for the world to stop turning away. Each year, hundreds of thousands of girls are banned from continuing their education and developing their talents in Afghanistan. Beyond requiring international pressure on the de facto authorities, support for local organizations such as ours proves there are ways to at least arrest the total cessation of education for, and contributions from, Afghan girls and women.

We have the technology. We have community support. We know what works. And even beyond Afghanistan, thousands of women across Africa, Latin America, and South Asia are ready to enable and implement tailored solutions that use technology for driving equality and development, if given the chance.

I have seen it myself. I have watched girls go from never having touched a computer to speaking and competing at international conferences. I have

▲ Syrian refugee women taking part in ICT training at a UN Women center in the Azraq refugee camp, Jordan

seen what can happen when one girl learns a new skill and teaches it to ten others, when they win scholarships to the most prestigious universities in the world and return to create businesses and initiatives that transform communities and industries. I have seen how quickly change can spread when we enable and allow for it.

Technology can close the distance between isolation and opportunity, but only if we ensure it's open to everyone. It requires all stakeholders – all of society, but particularly those most affected and furthest left behind – to collaborate on leveraging technology for equity and development. This path is inextricably linked to girls' and women's education, training in digital literacy, and how we enable it. Girls should not be fighting alone to be part of the future.

They should be leading the way in building it. ■

Education is the most cost-effective health intervention

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of preventable health issues and premature deaths worldwide. Tackling them requires long-term thinking, including investing in adolescents – the next generation of parents, citizens, and leaders

By [Jacquie Bay](#), Senior Lecturer, Liggins Institute, University of Auckland

NCDs account for 74% of deaths worldwide, with 41% being premature, occurring between the ages of 30 and 70. Alarming, 80% of these premature deaths happen in low and middle-income countries, and 80% of all NCDs are deemed preventable.

Despite efforts, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 target to reduce premature NCD mortality by one third by 2030 remains elusive. What impact could school-based education exploring NCDs have on global health outcomes? What social and economic benefits would arise from investing in such education and how might that education be implemented?

The first UN High Level Meeting on NCDs held in 2011 highlighted the complexity of the challenge and the urgent need for governments and civil society to engage in integrated interventions involving multi-stakeholder partnerships. The potential of school-based education to contribute to this matrix of actions is associated with intersecting opportunities linking:

- key modifiable risk factors for NCDs, including unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, smoking and vaping, stress, and the use of drugs and alcohol
- the formation of health-related behaviors during adolescence that endure into adulthood
- the impact of environmental exposures during early life (even before birth) on later-life risk of NCDs
- helping students develop skills in science, health, and critical thinking that support informed, active participation in society

The opportunity of adolescence

Empowering the next generation to question, investigate, and take action is a vital contribution to a better future. The period of adolescence, spanning ages 10 to 19, is a pivotal stage of life characterized by substantial transformation and potential. During this transition to adulthood, formal education is essential in promoting positive growth.

The main modifiable risk factors for NCDs involve health-related behaviors that are influenced by broader socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. In childhood,

the formation of these behaviors is shaped by the examples set by parents and family. Adolescents encounter experiences beyond their family circle, develop deeper understanding of their environment, and gain increased autonomy. Through these experiences, they form habits that shape their own health as adults – and influence the health of their future children.

The first 1,000 days of life, spanning from conception to a child's second birthday, are also important for shaping long-term health. During this period, the brain undergoes rapid development, the immune system is programmed, and the body learns to regulate its metabolism. Nutrition, environment, and care significantly influence these processes. Poor nutrition or exposure





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to harmful substances during this time can elevate the risk of developing obesity and cardiometabolic NCDs such as diabetes, and heart disease later in life. Stress can also affect future learning and mental health.

Investing in the first 1,000 days fosters healthy growth patterns and builds resilience against disease. Therefore, the environment before conception for both parents, as well as during pregnancy and early childhood, is of paramount importance. However, to fully capitalize on the first 1,000 days of a child's life, efforts should begin during the parents' adolescent years. Over time, investment in adolescence and early life through a matrix of educational, socio-economic, political, and health initiatives can contribute to

interrupting intergenerational cycles of poor health and reduce the burden of NCDs for future generations.

Equipping adolescents with the ability to comprehend how one generation's health affects the next, while also exploring the complexity of sociocultural, economic, and political factors influencing community health, can guide them to question the status quo, take action and make healthier choices.

The competencies required for this are connected to fundamental educational objectives related to health and scientific literacy, understanding risk and complexity, and critically evaluating complex social issues by considering diverse perspectives and societal changes over time.

▲ Students at Araura College in Aitutaki, Cook Islands. Over the past decade, the Ora'anga Tūmanava project in the Cook Islands has used context embedded learning to teach teenagers about NCDs and how to improve their risk profiles

Cumulatively, these competencies contribute to the development of 'critically engaged citizenship'. This refers to a way of being that is associated with:

- asking questions
- seeking evidence and understanding
- assessing multiple perspectives
- taking considered actions that are mindful of the complexity of the challenges and opportunities facing modern societies

The opportunity of education: developing critically engaged citizenship

While the role of education in promoting health is widely acknowledged, its potential is often underutilized, its outcomes are inconsistent, and maintaining sustained engagement proves challenging. A critical barrier is the lack of alignment with the core mission of schools, indicating the need for more effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Across the globe, school curricula focus on the development of competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values) that promote individual and collective wellbeing, and equip young people to navigate complex and unfamiliar contexts and thrive into the future. The [OECD Learning Compass](#) offers a globally informed framework of foundational and transformative competencies that contribute toward these goals.

In the context of the NCD challenge, learning that contributes to the development of critically engaged citizenship will interact with exploration of the issues of NCD risk, burden, and impact. Opportunities to explore evidence promote questioning of the status quo, particularly where this is associated with inequities.

When students see how these concepts relate to their own lives, they're more likely to take meaningful action. Through the process of investigating evidence, students develop competencies linked to scientific and health literacy, numeracy, and data literacy as well as concepts of social justice. Opportunities to develop and test actions and communicate learning promote agency and action.

An example of this process is found in the Pacific Science for Health Literacy Project (PSHLP), recently renamed [Ora'anga Tūmanava](#). This education–health–science partnership in the Cook Islands has over the past decade developed and sustained learning opportunities for year 7 to 11 students (ages 10 to 16). The project

has explored NCDs and their impacts on the community across the subjects of science, health, physical education, social studies, geography, Cook Island Māori and English.

Using an established framework for [context embedded learning](#) (learning that connects directly to students' real-life environments and experiences), programs support teenagers to develop competencies that allow them to investigate NCDs and related issues, and take actions to improve their risk profile.

Factors recognized as important in the sustainability of this initiative include:

- educator-led development of learning modules that enable access to evidence while building essential skills within the national curriculum
- the use of collaborative narratives to enable exploration of evidence through stories, starting with students' own, and building to local,

access for students to personal health data and enable tracking of levels of metabolic health factors (such as blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol) in the adolescent population

The Cook Islands is extremely small, with a population of just 17,000 spread over 12 inhabited islands. While this presents enormous challenges, it also offers an opportunity for multi-stakeholder partnerships that are likely much harder to achieve in larger contexts.

Measuring the social and economic benefits of interventions of this kind requires long-term commitment. Educators and health professionals in this extremely small nation judged the impact strong enough to extend the program beyond the initial pilot island to national scale. Scaling this in larger settings is entirely possible, but would need globally informed

// Harnessing education to help drive an intergenerational reduction in premature NCD deaths is a long-term but vital goal. Teachers embedded in school systems offer enormous potential as partners in NCD risk reduction

regional, and global evidence from health, social and local histories, culture, and science

- the use of 'appreciative inquiry' (an approach that focuses on identifying and building on what's working well to create positive change), acknowledging the challenge while emphasizing strengths and opportunities
- the integration of exploration of age-appropriate aspects of the issue, ranging from food environments to social histories, physical activity, diabetes, and health services over multiple years
- development of a program for metabolic health checks (requested by participating students) to promote

resources that have the potential to be locally contextualized, as achieved by resources such as the OECD Learning Compass.

Harnessing education to help drive an intergenerational reduction in premature NCD deaths is a long-term but vital goal. Teachers embedded in school systems offer enormous potential as partners in NCD risk reduction as well as climate change and related SDGs. They meet daily with students and can facilitate meaningful in-depth exploration of issues alongside the development of competencies. The cost of not partnering with education to empower the next generation to question, investigate, and take action will be enormous. ■

Empowering farmers

Digital tools are enabling Irish farmers to achieve sustainability goals

By **Mick Houlihan**, Acting Director of Origin Green and Sustainable Quality Assurance, Bord Bia

AgNav is a free digital platform for Irish farmers, developed through a partnership between Teagasc, Bord Bia and ICBF, and supported by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It provides reliable, science-based insights to support farmers' environmental and economic goals.

Using AgNav, farmers can create customised farm sustainability action plans helping to reduce emissions, improve water quality, and enhance farmland biodiversity. AgNav is currently available to all beef, dairy, and tillage farmers, including members of Bord Bia's Origin Green programme – Ireland's food and drink sustainability programme, which operates on a national scale, uniting government, the private sector and the full supply chain from farmers to food producers and right through to the foodservice and retail sectors. These businesses account for 90 per cent of exports and 70 per cent of domestic retail in Ireland.

Assess

AgNav shows an assessment of current farm performance using data from Origin Green farm audits, ICBF,

Teagasc (Ireland's farm and research development authority) and farmer-completed surveys. For beef and dairy farms, this data is automatically entered into AgNav, which removes the need for farmers to do it themselves. Scientific models developed by Teagasc then use this data to calculate the individual farm's performance under key sustainability metrics:

- Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions
- Ammonia emissions
- Production
- Nutrient balance
- Soil carbon

Soil carbon will only be calculated if a farmer chooses to complete an AgNav-hosted survey on their farm's soils. If they do, AgNav will calculate how much carbon is captured in their soil and can adjust the farm's GHG emissions accordingly.

Analyse

The AgNav Forecaster is a core feature of the AgNav platform, and is currently available for dairy and beef enterprises. Farmers, or their advisers, can use the forecaster to analyse how changes in farming practices and management can impact each sustainability metric.

Act

Based on the forecaster analysis, beef and dairy farmers can identify which actions are most appropriate for their farm, allowing them to create a personalised farm sustainability action plan. Farmers can choose actions to address water quality, gaseous farm emissions, and biodiversity.

Irish farmers are responding positively through using the platform and as a result AgNav is being recognised. It was awarded Sustainability Initiative of the Year at the Grocer Gold Awards in

London this summer, beating six other finalists in the sustainable products and services category.

This win marks AgNav's second UK award this year, following earlier success in winning the Sustainability Award at the British Culinary Federation Awards. In addition to these two UK awards, AgNav was also highly commended in the Best Dairy Sustainability Initiative at the Irish National Dairy Awards.

Winning both these awards is a strong endorsement from our industry peers, and helps to increase the visibility and credibility of AgNav as a leading sustainability platform. On behalf of our AgNav partners, Teagasc and ICBF, I'd like to thank the thousands of Irish farmers who are using AgNav and implementing important sustainability actions on their farms.

While AgNav is principally a tool for farmers, it is also a useful platform in conversations with key retail and foodservice operators, who are placing increasing value on verifiable sustainability action at farm level. With over 16,000 farmers signed-up to AgNav, it helps us to demonstrate Ireland's ambitions and ongoing efforts in agricultural sustainability under Origin Green internationally. ■

For more information, visit:

www.origingreen.ie



SDG Action thanks Bord Bia for its generous support for this publication





Bridging the divide: using technology and AI to close the development gap

Digital innovation can drive progress toward the SDGs – yet the countries that stand to gain the most often face the highest barriers to adoption. We need a more inclusive model of technology transfer to close, not widen, the global development gap



◀ A CTCN-supported project on St Kitts and Nevis, which transmits weather forecasts to farmers on the islands to help them optimize planting and harvests, and protect against extreme weather events

but because they are out of sync with local realities.

Take drone technology in agriculture. While drones can optimize crop monitoring, their utility hinges on stable internet, reliable electricity, skilled operators, and policies that regulate airspace. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, these preconditions are uneven at best.

Moreover, importing technology without domestic capacity-building risks entrenching dependency rather than fostering resilience. The challenge is not merely to disseminate technology, but to enable countries to adapt, govern, and eventually generate their own innovations.

Examples where we see technology such as AI making an enormous difference in the daily lives of vulnerable communities include processing large volumes of climate data. This can both predict hazards (saving lives) and help to fully understand climate risk (so that insurance companies feel more comfortable to provide coverage).

Digitized technology and AI can also be used to understand exactly when crops need to be watered (to ensure that water is not wasted) or analyze energy use and traffic patterns to avoid congestion (and therefore reduce pollution).

The list goes on, but here are three pilots that CTCN is supporting right now where technology is making a difference:

- [blockchain technology for real-time climate risk insurance for farmers in Thailand](#)
- [real-time traffic information to reduce congestion in Dhaka, Bangladesh](#)
- supporting efforts to boost climate resilience by enabling [low-cost, real-time collection of rainfall and river level data via mobile reporting in Malawi](#) – giving governments vital information for stronger early warning systems

By [Ariesta Ningrum](#), Director, Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN) and [Isabel Hagbrink](#), Communication Specialist, CTCN

The promise of technology as a great equalizer between nations has long held global imagination. From agriculture driven by artificial intelligence (AI) to satellite-enabled health services, digital innovations offer tantalizing potential to transform economies and societies in the Global South.

But if technology is the answer, why does the development gap persist – and in some cases widen?

The short answer is that technology alone is never enough. Tools, no matter how advanced, cannot substitute for the systemic ingredients

that underpin successful adoption: education, infrastructure, finance, human capital, and (above all) political will. The paradox is that the countries standing to benefit the most from transformative technologies are often the least equipped to absorb them at scale. This is where the conversation about technology transfer becomes urgent.

The mirage of “plug and play” progress

Talk of rapid tech deployment often assumes a “plug and play” model: innovations developed in the Global North seamlessly applied in the South. But development is not a software update. High-tech solutions parachuted into low-capacity contexts often fail, not because they are poorly designed,

What makes technology transfer work?

Effective technology transfer requires more than bilateral agreements or donor funding. In our work at the CTCN, we see technology transfers working when the following are in place:

1. Local engagement

The solution is requested by the community, and the community is truly invested.

We clearly see this in [northern Nigeria, where we are supporting an aquaponics \(water\) project](#). In this area, farmers are being driven from their lands due to drought and violent, armed groups. The community relies almost completely on farming, so this project set up a greenhouse for vegetables using aquaponics

Central African Republic to [train students at the University of Bangui to design and manufacture solar thermal cookers](#). Currently, women and girls can spend hours collecting firewood, putting them at risk of violence. Families, meanwhile, rely on expensive and inefficient cooking fuels. The locally made solar ovens are helping to reduce the reliance on using unsustainable wood and charcoal, as well bringing tangible benefits in terms of health and economic opportunity.

For this to happen on a greater scale, countries must invest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, vocational training, and digital literacy – not just for the elite, but for the broader population. Without local engineers, technicians, and data analysts, technology becomes a foreign language.

[circular economy strategy related to construction and demolition](#).

4. Infrastructure

Obviously, without electricity, internet, reliable data, and transport networks, any project is difficult, and scaling up digital technologies is challenging. For example, we support [drought forecasting technology in Saint Kitts and Nevis](#), but this requires reliable internet not only to collect data but also to disseminate information to farmers about weather hazards. A cloud-based climate platform is only as effective as the mobile coverage it needs to transmit information in rural areas.

5. Financing mechanisms

Access to capital, particularly for local entrepreneurs, is essential. Microfinancing, blended finance, and public-private partnerships can help de-risk innovation in fragile markets.

At CTCN, we can only finance pilots up to USD 250,000, which is very small for what these countries need in terms of scaled-up technology investment. We all need to work hard to ensure that financial institutions – local and global – are ready to take investment risks in developing countries to support large-scale and high-risk technology projects.

6. Cultural and contextual alignment

Solutions must be tailored to the social and cultural norms of the communities they serve. Failure to localize leads to low uptake and mistrust.

At CTCN, all pilots we support start as country requests. We work closely with NDEs to identify priorities and opportunities for climate technology support. Through regular meetings, capacity-building events, and knowledge sharing with other countries, we brief stakeholders on the financing opportunities, and help them shape effective project proposals. A recent training, for example, focused on AI, to help our counterparts better understand how AI can support climate action.

Technology is not destiny. It is a tool – a powerful one – but its effectiveness depends on the hands that wield it and the systems that support it

technology in the middle of the village – so women in particular don't have to walk to fields and risk being attacked.

The project has been so successful in terms of produce that the community is now asking to scale it up and add cooling facilities – so they can store their produce and sell it on the market, adding a revenue source. This is an example of a clear, demand-driven project which is also sustainable long term.

2. Human capital

Education is the foundation for progress. When we have the option of working with strong academic institutions and universities who act as champions of a technology, we see progress. When universities are centers of excellence, they can produce the human capital needed for a technology shift. One example of this is a CTCN project in the

3. Institutions

Our national counterparts are climate experts, called nationally designated entities (NDEs), who coordinate a country's engagement on climate technology. These are essential in coordinating climate action in an effective way. In general, solid, transparent, and accountable governance creates the enabling environment for innovation to flourish. Weak institutions mean weak enforcement of intellectual property rights, unstable regulatory frameworks, and limited incentives for private sector engagement or start-ups.

This is why, at CTCN, we support pilots that strengthen institutions, like one in Mozambique where we work to strengthen [national systems of innovation for low carbon and climate resilient economic development](#), or working with the [Mexico City government for an analysis of its](#)

The contested terrain of “leapfrogging”

One of the most persistent narratives in development discourse is the idea that low-income countries can “leapfrog” traditional stages of industrialization through digital innovation. There is some truth to this. Mobile banking in Kenya, off-grid solar in Bangladesh, and digital IDs in India show how countries can bypass legacy systems.

But leapfrogging is not the same as free-floating. Even mobile money, often held up as a leapfrogging success, required years of regulatory reform, public trust-building, and telecom investment.

Leapfrogging can also obscure deeper structural problems. A country may have an app to report an impending climate hazard, but no resources to evacuate or protect people. The temptation to digitize dysfunction – to build shiny tools atop broken systems – is real. But it’s not development.

The politics of technology transfer

Technology transfer is not merely a technical transaction – it is political. The flow of innovations from North to South is shaped by issues of power, ownership, and control. In addition, AI requires enormous volumes of electricity for processing plants – many of which are placed in developing countries, which barely have enough electricity to keep the lights on in poor communities.

The UN has called for a [Global Digital Compact](#) to ensure that technology benefits all of humanity, not just a few. Achieving this will require rebalancing incentives, loosening monopolies, and foregrounding the agency of recipient countries. It also means redefining success – not in terms of hardware deployed, but in capabilities built.

So what now? Toward inclusive innovation

If we are serious about narrowing the development gap through technology, we must prioritize inclusive innovation.

That means:

- supporting locally led solutions requested by local partners that support capacity-building and retain and reward excellence
- identifying sustainable funding for high-risk and innovative technology investments, which help sustain projects and deploy technologies over the longer term. As the world races toward the deadline for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the pressure to scale up successful technologies is mounting – but seed funding is still missing
- measuring success by long-term impact, not short-term metrics
- ensuring ethical use, particularly in areas such as AI and surveillance

- facilitating South–South cooperation, where countries share solutions tailored to similar contexts, whether within or across continents

Above all, we must acknowledge that technology is not destiny. It is a tool – a powerful one – but its effectiveness depends on the hands that wield it and the systems that support it. Bridging the development divide is not just about transferring tools. It is about transferring trust, knowledge, and control.

In the end, the goal is not a world where everyone uses the same technologies, but one where every country can choose, adapt, and build the tools it needs to thrive. That is a future worth investing in. ■

Other CTCN projects to support developing countries



In coastal areas of Panama, CTCN is helping the country to develop a [high-resolution marine dynamics database](#), applying advanced data techniques, including machine learning, to assess coastal vulnerability to sea-level rise and flooding. The data will support risk assessments, guide adaptation planning, and help inform vulnerable coastal communities.

In Tunisia, CTCN supported a [feasibility study on integrating AI into smart agriculture](#) to help farmers respond to changing climate conditions, in particular helping farmers better understand the use of biosolids to broaden the adoption of anaerobic digestion technologies.

In Vietnam, [management of transboundary water resources is key](#), and CTCN supports improved data availability and accuracy of river levels for water resource planning, including advanced technologies to monitor and forecast transboundary water flow into Vietnam from China.

Fishing in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. © An Bui via Flickr

Taking forward the Sevilla Commitment

The world is far off track to meet the SDGs, with declining aid, rising debt burdens, and a global financial system that often works against the countries that need it most. The recent Seville conference offers a chance to reset – producing a new global commitment and a platform for action to reform how development is financed



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By [Shari Spiegel](#), Director, Financing for Sustainable Development Office, UN-DESA, United Nations

The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development – in Seville, Spain in July 2025 – took place against a challenging global backdrop of geopolitical tensions, dramatically falling aid, rising protectionism, and macroeconomic uncertainty.

This is a far cry from 2015, when world leaders last met to agree to a global financing framework for development, in Ethiopia. That year

was a banner year for multilateralism, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda reflecting a shared sense of optimism about what multilateral action can achieve.

Today, we live in a very different world.

The global economy is decelerating, with significant downside risks, particularly if trade tensions further escalate. Donors are retreating from aid commitments: official development assistance fell by more than 9% in 2024 in real terms, and if current predictions for 2025 are accurate, global aid levels

unite to tackle global challenges.

It did just that.

The outcome document, the [Sevilla Commitment](#), which sets out a renewed global framework for financing for development, was adopted by consensus on day one of the conference. While the United States neither joined this consensus nor attended, other countries viewed the conference not as a conclusion, but rather a starting point for implementation. This was reflected in the 130 initiatives that coalitions of countries, international organizations, and other partners put forward in the

Macroeconomic uncertainty, fiscal constraints, and a retreat from global cooperation by some will continue to cloud prospects for development financing and the Sustainable Development Goals

may fall by an additional 17% or more, with dire consequences in the poorest countries. Many developing countries are weighed down by heavy debt service burdens: in 2024, more than 1.1 billion people lived in countries that dedicated a fifth or more of their government revenue to servicing external debt. Unless we change course, more than 600 million people will still live in extreme poverty in 2030.

One international meeting alone cannot overcome such profound challenges. Macroeconomic uncertainty, fiscal constraints, and a retreat from global cooperation by some will continue to cloud prospects for development financing and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But the Seville conference presented an opportunity to chart a way forward, and generate hope that the international community can still

[Sevilla Platform for Action](#) (SPA). These initiatives include concrete actions to implement the Sevilla Commitment across three strategic areas:

- to catalyze investment
- to address debt challenges
- to reform financial system architecture to create a fairer and more effective system

Catalyzing investment

To close the USD 4 trillion SDG financing gap in developing countries, the commitment aims to:

- triple multilateral development banks (MDBs) lending
- double support to countries to achieve at least a 15% tax-to-GDP ratio
- leverage private investment

But rather than repeating empty slogans of “turning billions to trillions,” the commitment focuses on both the quantity and quality of finance. Investment should align SDG impact with country needs, priorities, and industrialization strategies. Blended



◀ **Campaigners advocating for debt cancellation and tax reform during the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) in Seville, Spain**

With around 15,000 people in attendance, including around 50 heads of state and government... the conference sent a strong signal that multilateralism can still bring countries and stakeholders together to advance shared solutions to global challenges

finance deals, which use public funds to leverage private investment, should be structured so that risks and returns are shared fairly between the public and private sector, with public resources benefiting proportionately from successful projects.

In support of these goals, coalitions of countries and institutions announced SPA initiatives to expand blended finance using new modalities that strengthen SDG impact and tally with national priorities.

Other SPA initiatives to increase financing for development include:

- capacity support to countries to mobilize tax revenue
- a “solidarity levy” on premium flyers (first and business-class tickets, and private jets)
- mechanisms to increase local currency lending by MDBs
- new instruments to finance crisis responses

Addressing debt challenges

The commitment includes a package of actions to address the sustainable development debt crisis across four areas:

- debt management and crisis prevention
- lowering the cost of borrowing
- the debt restructuring architecture
- debt sustainability and credit analysis

To support crisis prevention, the commitment calls for:

- the UN Secretary-General to convene a working group to create new guiding principles on responsible borrowing and lending

- a single, global debt data registry, housed in the World Bank
- promotion of state-contingent clauses in official lending, along with solutions to help incorporate state-contingent clauses into commercial debt contracts, including through instruments like re-insurance

In support of the commitment to promote state-contingent clauses, a coalition of countries and MDBs launched a “debt pause clause alliance” SPA initiative, whose proponents commit to include such state-contingent clauses (to suspend debt service payments during crises) in their lending.

To lower the cost of borrowing, the Sevilla Commitment calls for a debt facility, to be housed at an international financial institution, to help countries manage debt service burdens, offer credit enhancements and facilitate debt swaps to help lower the cost of borrowing. This would be supported by a “Debt Swaps for Development Hub” SPA initiative led by Spain and the World Bank.

The commitment also calls for inclusive discussions on debt architecture to strengthen the voices of debtor countries, most of whom are currently excluded from decision-making. This includes establishing a platform for borrowing countries, supported by an SPA initiative, and launching an intergovernmental process on debt at the United Nations. The Sevilla Commitment also establishes a recurring high-level dialogue between governments, regulators, and credit rating agencies.

Creating a fairer and more effective financial system

Commitments to support reform of the international financial and development cooperation architecture include:

- enhancing developing countries’ voice in international financial institutions – for example, by aiming to increase basic votes in the International Monetary Fund
- increasing access to emergency funding to better protect countries during shocks and crises – for example, through a new Special Drawing Rights playbook
- reforming the development cooperation architecture:
 - at the national level (through inclusive, country-led, national coordination platforms that build on national plans and engage all relevant actors, including national development banks, to strengthen country ownership)
 - at the global level (with a coordinating role for the United Nations)

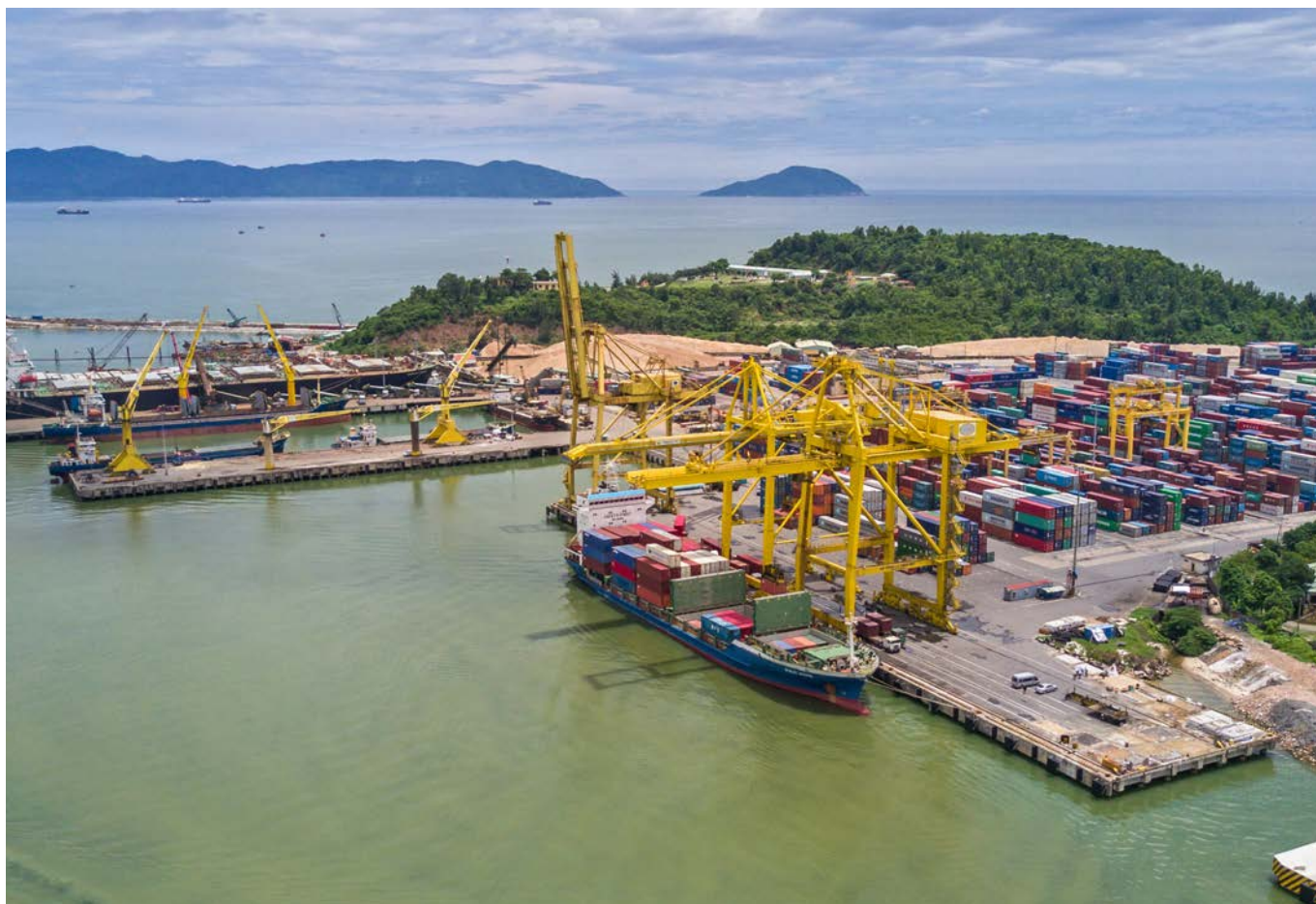
SPA initiatives to support these aims include:

- a coalition of countries and institutions to launch a new generation of country-led and owned platforms to bring together ongoing efforts
- a coalition of countries to include measures of vulnerability beyond GDP in all financing operations

Cautious optimism

With around 15,000 people in attendance, including around 50 heads of state and government, and more than 200 ministers, the conference sent a strong signal that multilateralism can still bring countries and stakeholders together to advance shared solutions to global challenges.

Many of the discussions across the conference’s various meetings, forums, and side events were characterized by a sense of hope and cautious optimism – that global aspirations are still worth pursuing, and that the time to mobilize financing for the SDGs is now. ■



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We must get trade right for sustainable development

Trade has the power to drive sustainable development – but only if the global system is fair. As rising tariffs and unequal rules threaten progress, countries must seize the chance to reimagine trade in support of people and planet

By [Ruth Bergan](#), Head of Policy and Advocacy, Transform Trade

Trump's tariff wars have put trade in the headlines far more than we are used to. In April, some of the world's most marginalized countries were threatened with tariffs of up to 50%. After protracted vacillation and theatrics, most have been burdened with rates ranging from 15% to 40%. To

put this in perspective: the international development community has been rightly exercised by the loss of funding to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), but the sums involved are dwarfed by the value of trade with the US.

[Bangladesh's total trade with the US is worth around USD 8.4 billion](#), compared with (at its peak) the [USD 447 million that Bangladesh gets in US](#)

[aid](#). Similarly, [Cambodia's trade with the US totals USD 12.7 billion](#), while [Cambodia's US aid receipts are USD 102.5 million](#).

▲ Danang Port in Vietnam, which lies at the eastern end of an economic corridor connecting Vietnam with Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. These countries were threatened with some of the highest import duties under the “Liberation Day” tariffs

Trade is recognized in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda as having an important role in achieving the SDGs. However, the tariff story highlights both trade's potential to generate much-needed income and government revenue and its vulnerability to global power imbalances and failure to address longstanding inequities.

There was a moment in the 1970s when the trade system stood at a crossroads: would global leaders respond to Global South calls to proactively redress colonial injustice or put their faith in the free market? There was a 1971 United Nations Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO – updated as recently as 2024 with a new set of proposals). However,

in the face of influential voices in favor of what came to be called the neoliberal agenda, the free market and free trade prevailed.

Fast forward to the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994 and tensions between the Global South and richer nations remained. [The 1999 United Nations Human Development report](#) warned that globalization was concentrating wealth in the hands of a powerful few and that poorer countries were at risk of being marginalized. Despite this, WTO negotiations in the same year were skewed against the Global South. This sparked global protest – dubbed the “Battle in Seattle” – and Global South countries walked away from talks.

As a result of the collapse of the Seattle round, countries were promised that the 2001 Doha talks would be

a “round for development.” Positive commitments were made – for example, to phase out agricultural export subsidies. But rich countries’ record on delivery has been poor: commitments on things like special and differential treatment were so watered down as to become almost meaningless.

Rich countries have found ways around the commitments such as moving subsidies between WTO “boxes” so that total amounts remain high. Meanwhile, critical demands for action in areas such as agricultural import surges have remained largely unanswered. When [Nelson Mandela](#)

▼ A garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Imbalance of power in global trade makes it prone to exploitation. The Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013 revealed the reality of the garment trade



© ILO/ Naymuzzaman Khan Prince

[addressed the 2005 Make Poverty History rally](#), trade justice was still top of his list of things that rich countries should aim for to address global poverty.

From trade justice to trade retrenchment

In 2025, it is clear that communities in the Global South are not the only ones who feel they have been left behind. The consensus on globalization, with trade liberalization as one of its engines, is crumbling. Trump's electoral successes can in part be attributed to the fact that too many people in the US did not benefit.

Unfortunately, measures taken to address historic global inequities have been caught in the crosshairs. For over 50 years, the trade system has allowed for "preferential treatment" of countries in the Global South. The US used to offer preferential tariffs to 119 countries and clearly considered trade as an important tool in achieving development goals:

"US trade preference programs such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) provide opportunities for many of the world's poorest countries to use trade to grow their economies and climb out of poverty." ([Source: GSP, Office of the US Trade Representative](#)).

Trump's tariff announcement upended this approach. Probably driven by his objections to Chinese investment in Global South industries, some of the world's smallest economies were faced with eyewatering tariffs. This has already created a huge impact, particularly for countries that rely heavily on a small number of industries that export to the US. Lesotho has declared a two-year state of disaster as a result of the tariff debacle. The mostly female workforce employed in the Global-South garment industries is especially vulnerable.

Global South countries will struggle to respond. It will be difficult to find alternative export markets or buy more from the US to address the "trade deficit" that Trump is so

exercised about. Bangladesh has been considering importing more US cotton, but the higher price could lead to increased downward pressure on working conditions in the industry. Meanwhile, many supply chains are highly mobile, and companies are likely to shift their sourcing to countries with lower tariffs.

A window for reform

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that there is nothing the rest of the world can do. The US accounts for

// There has already been some movement in the right direction. For years, it was impossible to discuss trade and climate change together. Today there is a regular trade day at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

13% of global trade, which means there is another 87% to play for. The erratic behavior of the Trump administration and its withdrawal from the WTO and trade negotiations could reopen the space for serious discussion about how the trade system can work for the SDGs, for people, and for the planet. There is the opportunity for a serious overhaul, learning from NIEO, led by the Global South.

There has already been some movement in the right direction. For years, it was impossible to discuss trade and climate change together. Today there is a regular trade day at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and four countries recently signed the Agreement on Climate Change Trade and Sustainability (ACCTS). Governments are working to regulate supply chains to ensure better climate and environmental outcomes, including deforestation measures and carbon border adjustment mechanisms.

However, to ensure past mistakes are not repeated and Global South priorities are addressed, principles such as just transition, special and

differential treatment, and common but differentiated responsibilities must be applied.

What can high-income countries do?

There are some obvious things that the high-income countries could do to make a start on this agenda. The combination of tariffs, aid cuts, and global economic instability means that taking steps to address the problems in their own international supply chains is more important than ever.

To reduce the impacts on the workers and small producers who will bear the brunt of trade wars, the Global North must:

- convene and cooperate on reinventing the trade system
- put workers and small producers at the heart of their trade strategy
- introduce business, human rights, and environmental legislation so that companies cannot get away with practices that drive human rights abuses and environmental destruction
- introduce garment trading adjudication to ensure international companies treat suppliers fairly – just paying on time will be so important
- ensure that workers and small producers do not pay the price for new trade-related climate measures

Getting trade right won't solve every development challenge, but without a fairer global trade system, sustainable development will remain out of reach for many. Now is the moment for high-income countries, particularly the more politically-powerful G7 members, to step up and lead reform. ■



Gender-responsive social protection

Social protection is a powerful – but underused – lever for gender equality and sustainable development. To get the SDGs back on track and close widening global gaps, governments must invest in inclusive systems that support women's rights and needs at every stage of life



By **Silke Staab**, Senior Research Specialist, UN Women

As the world approaches the 2030 finish line for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress remains uneven – and in many areas, alarmingly off track. Amid the turbulence of global crises – from climate shocks to conflict and economic uncertainty – there’s a policy tool with significant transformative potential: gender-responsive and inclusive social protection. This raft of policies includes unemployment protection, maternity benefits, and access to affordable healthcare.

◀ A vaccinator in Sokoto State, north-west Nigeria, marks a girl’s finger to indicate that she has been vaccinated against polio. Investment in the care economy – education, health, childcare, and elder care – could generate 300 million jobs globally by 2035, predominately for women

The promise: realizing women’s rights, transforming societies

According to UN Women’s new report [Harnessing social protection for gender equality, resilience and transformation](#), greater investments in gender-responsive social protection could help put the global goals back on track by:

- providing basic income security across the life course (SDG 1)
- stabilizing access to food and nutrition (SDG 2)
- contributing to universal health coverage, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and reduced maternal mortality (SDG 3)
- promoting girls’ education and lifelong learning (SDG 4)
- recognizing unpaid care and domestic work and supporting more equal sharing of responsibilities for its provision (SDG 5)
- realizing the promise of decent work, particularly for women and youth (SDG 8)
- fostering solidarity and redistribution to reduce inequalities within and between countries (SDG 10)
- cushioning the impact of climate-related disasters and bolstering adaptation and mitigation efforts (SDG 13)
- reinvigorating broken social contracts for more peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16)

In other words, inclusive, gender-responsive social protection systems don’t just prevent poverty – they have positive ripple effects for a range of social and economic outcomes. When combined with gender-responsive employment policies and access to public services like education, health, childcare, and long-term care, social protection can provide women with

sustainable pathways out of poverty and help transform societies toward sustainability, equality, and social justice.

The reality: persistent gender gaps and biases

Despite rising global social protection coverage, however, large gender gaps persist. In 2023, for the first time, more than half of the global population was covered by at least one form of social protection, with significantly higher rates among men (54.6%) compared with women (50.1%). What is more, gender gaps in social protection coverage have widened in most developing regions, suggesting that recent gains have benefited men more than women. As a result, an estimated [2 billion women and girls remain entirely unprotected](#) – without access to basic income support when they become mothers, fall ill, lose their jobs, or grow old.

Even where women have some coverage, benefits are often inadequate, and fail to respect their rights and meet their needs. Take the wave of social protection measures that many countries adopted in the wake of the 2022 [cost-of-living crisis](#): of the nearly 1,000 policy actions introduced across 171 countries, only 18% targeted women’s economic security, and just 3% addressed unpaid care.

The path forward: five priorities for action

Centering the dignity, agency, and empowerment of women and girls at every stage – from policy and program design to delivery and implementation – is critical to harnessing the transformative potential of social protection. UN Women’s [new report](#) provides key insights and promising examples of how this can be done.

1. Close gender gaps in routine systems

A first critical step is making routine social protection systems more inclusive of the world’s 740 million women in informal employment

// At the global level, we need urgent reforms to ensure that social spending is not crowded out by spiraling debt interest payments, tax evasion, and avoidance

– including those in feminized occupations such as domestic services or market trading.

In Mexico, a 2018 Supreme Court ruling mandated social security for domestic workers. Between 2020 and 2022, registered workers doubled, giving them access to healthcare, unemployment benefits, pensions, childcare services, and more.

Social protection policies also must do more to recognize and support women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work across the life course. In Mongolia, maternity benefits now cover all women, regardless of their employment status or nationality – including herders and informal workers. Paternity leave was expanded too, promoting shared caregiving.

2. Make crisis responses work for women

Social protection becomes particularly urgent in times of crisis. As the climate emergency intensifies, some countries are taking promising steps.

[In Northern Senegal, women farmers whose livelihoods have been profoundly impacted by climate change raised the need for health insurance](#) and paid sick leave to reduce the income losses they incur when spending time away from work to care for themselves or sick family members. In response, the national health insurance scheme has extended and adapted its services, resulting in over 1,300 rural women gaining access to health insurance for the first time, covering themselves and nearly 7,000 household members.

Linking humanitarian aid and social protection systems – especially by partnering with women-led organizations – can improve reach,

relevance, and resilience during conflict and crisis.

3. Integrate with public services and employment policies

Social protection doesn't work in isolation. To be truly transformative, it must be linked to quality public services and decent employment – especially in the care economy.

In the Dominican Republic, the Supérate cash transfer now includes community-based care services as well as extra support for survivors of gender-based violence through cash, skills, and jobs.

Gender-responsive school feeding programs can also yield triple dividends: improving girls' education and nutrition, while creating decent jobs for women. In Cambodia, women now serve as formalized food suppliers and school cooks.

[Investment in the care economy](#) – education, health, childcare, and elder care – could generate 300 million jobs globally by 2035. These are low-carbon jobs, predominantly held by women, and essential for a just, inclusive transition. Countries like Cape Verde, Kenya, Singapore, and Uruguay are leading the way in developing integrated care systems.

4. Prioritize women's agency in delivery systems

The design of social protection means little without effective delivery. Unfortunately, women face significant barriers here too – from digital exclusion to discriminatory norms.

Digital payments may seem efficient, but many women lack access to phones, internet, or digital literacy. That's where frontline workers and community organizations play a crucial role. In Argentina, during COVID-19,

local workers ensured women received digital family emergency income support – reaching nearly nine million informal workers.

But those delivering benefits also need support. In Uganda, cash and in-kind transfers helped women health workers cope with risks in conflict zones. In Brazil, universal health reforms improved conditions and wages for community health workers – many of them women.

Empowering women as both recipients and providers of social protection builds trust and accountability from the ground up.

5. Fill the USD 1.4 trillion financing gap

The current [global shortfall for basic social protection in low and middle-income countries is USD 1.4 trillion annually](#) – or 3.3% of their combined GDP. But the returns far outweigh the costs. This year, the [Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development](#) and the [Second World Summit for Social Development](#) are two pivotal moments to agree on policies that will help close both financing and coverage gaps.

At the national level, a new generation of fiscal pacts is needed to deliver long-term, sustainable financing for gender equality, sustainability, and social justice by increasing both tax revenue and the progressivity of social security and tax systems.

At the global level, we need urgent reforms to ensure that social spending is not crowded out by spiraling debt interest payments, tax evasion, and avoidance. Official Development Assistance to support social protection system strengthening also needs to be increased – or at least protected against ongoing cuts.

Conclusion

Gender-responsive social protection isn't charity – it's an investment in shared prosperity. With only five years left to achieve the SDGs, it offers a clear, evidence-backed pathway to accelerate progress. ■



The elusive goal of equality

“Leave no one behind,” the central tenet of the SDGs, underlines the importance of tackling inequality across all the Global Goals. Slow progress is bound up with setbacks in other areas, from democratic backsliding and the weakening rule of law to sluggish action on climate

By [Grayson Fuller](#), Senior Manager, SDG Index, Data, and Statistics, Sustainable Development Solutions Network

In 2015, all UN Member States committed to reducing inequalities as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 10 calls on countries to reduce inequalities within their borders and across countries.

On the 10th anniversary of the SDGs, data from the [Sustainable Development Report](#) (SDR) 2025 shows that progress on SDG 10 has been mixed: while some countries are on track, most are stagnating or displaying limited progress, and some countries even show increasing levels of inequality. [As millions face rising hunger and](#)

[food insecurity](#) while the [number of billionaires reaches record highs](#), combating inequality remains as urgent a priority as ever.

The state of inequality – 10 years on from the SDGs

The SDR 2025 uses the Gini coefficient as one of the leading indicators for measuring inequality in countries. Gini measures the degree to which economies deviate from perfect equality, with higher values representing greater inequality. While it tends to underestimate inequality in countries due to [underrepresentation of top incomes in household surveys](#), it is a useful tool for gauging how inequality differs across countries and how it evolves over time.

As Figure 1 (overleaf) shows, among the 78 countries for which sufficient time series data was available from the World Bank to calculate trend evaluations since the start of the SDGs:

- one-third are on track for meeting the target
- 52% are showing limited progress or stagnating
- 15% are moving in the wrong direction

This last category of worsening inequality includes some major

▲ Denmark is one of the most egalitarian economies and is always among the highest-ranked for overall SDG progress, democracy, rule of law, human development, and happiness

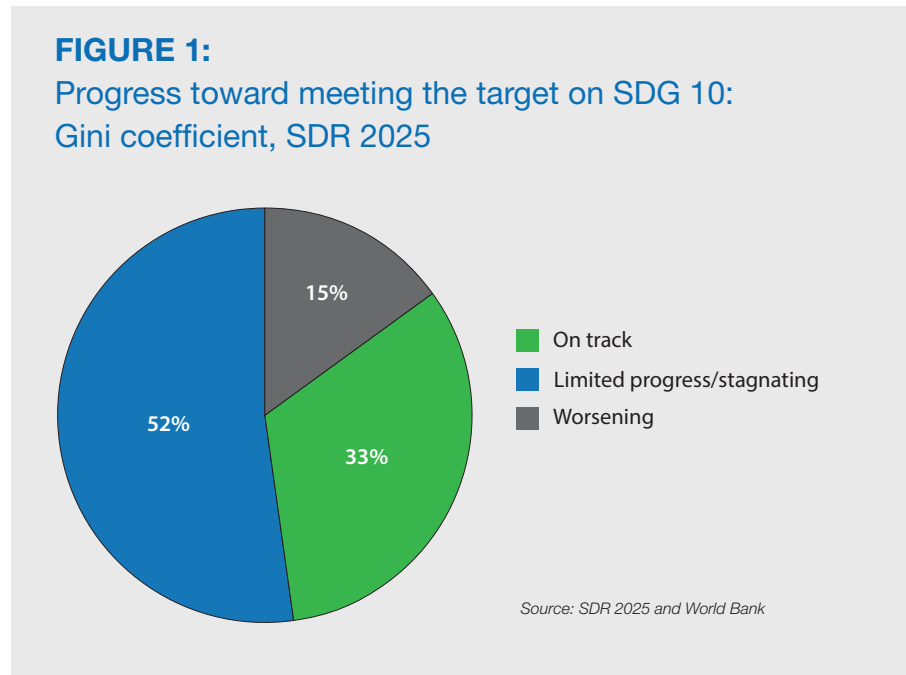
economies such as Brazil, Colombia, and the United States.

It is difficult to generalize about global trends, as progress varies widely across countries. Figure 2 offers a deep dive into the distribution of the series, restricting the observations to G20 countries.

Among G20 countries, there is a significant degree of dispersion. On the one hand, none of the G20 countries have Gini coefficients on a par with those of the Nordic countries (historically among the most egalitarian economies, with Gini coefficients all below 30). Most of the G20 countries fall between the 30 and 40 range, but Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States all have high degrees of inequality, defined here as a [Gini coefficient above 40](#), with no signs of improvement (apart from Mexico, whose Gini has decreased). Globally, 30% of the 163 countries with available data have economies marked by high inequality. The verdict is clear: 10 years after the adoption of the SDGs, too many countries around the world continue to face high or rising rates of inequality.

Inequality is deeply linked with climate action, democracy, and rule of law

Rising inequality, and economic injustice more broadly, is not only a



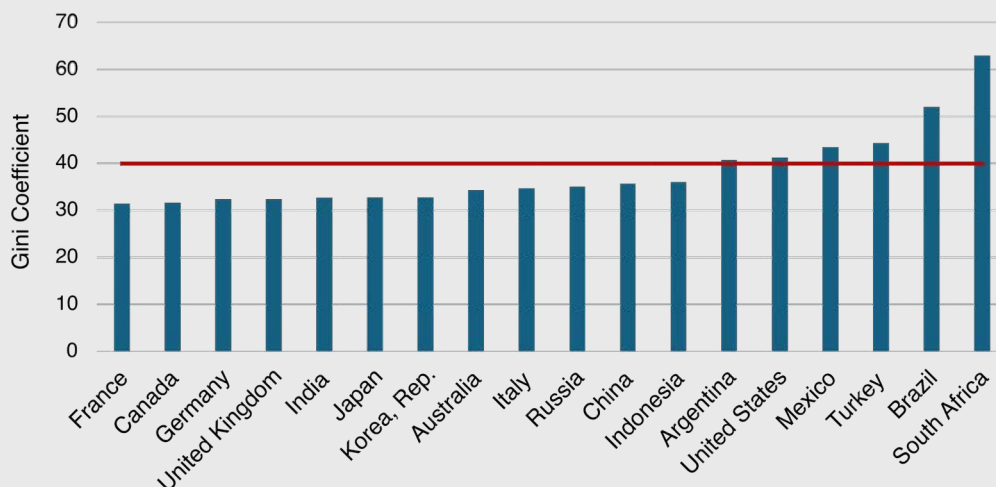
problem in itself. Addressing economic inequality across and within countries is also necessary for addressing climate change. The largest emitters of CO₂ tend to be high-income countries. Within high-income countries, [the wealthiest sections of the population account for far more emissions than the national average](#).

For example, in France, a person in the highest income decile will emit at least four times more CO₂ than the 10% poorest decile of the population.

Meanwhile, those most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation also tend to be the poorest: small island developing states (SIDS) face disproportionately more impacts from climate change despite little historical responsibility for causing climate change. Within countries, the poor also tend to be disproportionately exposed to the risk of air pollution mortality.

In addition to climate change, researchers have studied the link

FIGURE 2: Gini coefficient in G20 countries, latest available year



Source: World Bank
(note: data missing for Saudi Arabia)

between inequality and democracy. In the context of democratic backsliding in the 21st century, researchers at the University of Chicago found that the [biggest predictor among possible risks of democratic erosion was income inequality](#). The authors suggest this relationship may stem from the way in which inequality increases polarization and perceptions of unfairness in the way economic opportunity is distributed.

While inequality alone cannot determine the strength of a democracy, it is worth noting that among the countries scoring highest on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Electoral Democracy Index, all have low Gini coefficients (see Table 1).

Similarly, the rule of law, enshrined in SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), also appears to be connected to countries' levels of inequality. There is a negative correlation between inequality and the rule of law, as measured by the World Justice Project (WJP) [Rule of](#)

[Law Index](#). Table 2 shows the top and bottom 5 countries in the index and their associated Gini. Countries with the most effective rule of law also tend to display lower levels of inequality.

Closing the gap through policy

Legislative action and government policy play a major role in how inequality evolves over time. To measure how effectively governments tackle inequalities, the [Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index](#), compiled by Oxfam, evaluates government action on three primary policy levers:

- spending on public services, such as health, education, and social protection
- the progressivity of the tax system (whether the rich pay their fair share in taxes)
- labor rights and wages (whether the government protects against precarious employment)

It is no surprise that Norway tops this

assessment, followed by Canada – both countries with low levels of inequality and Gini coefficients below 30. Looking at trends over time, the report identifies countries that have improved the most by changing or introducing policies to reduce inequality.

These include:

- Burkina Faso, for increasing its minimum wage and making value-added tax more progressive
- Croatia, for increasing public health expenditure and health coverage
- Paraguay, which has increased the share of formal employment, doubled the minimum wage, and raised health expenditure

These success stories underline that inequality is not inevitable but shaped by government choices and policies. That so many countries face rampant disparities is a stark reminder that governments are falling short on their SDG commitments and must act decisively to close the gap. ■

TABLE 1: Countries scoring highest in the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index

INDEX SCORE	COUNTRY	GINI COEFFICIENT
0.92	DENMARK	28.3
0.90	ESTONIA	31.8
0.90	IRELAND	30.1
0.89	SWITZERLAND	33.7
0.89	BELGIUM	26.6
0.88	NORWAY	27.7
0.88	SWEDEN	29.8
0.87	CZECHIA	26.2
0.87	LUXEMBOURG	32.7
0.87	FRANCE	31.5

Source: [V-Dem Dataset](#)

TABLE 2: Top 5 and bottom 5 countries in the WJP Rule of Law Index

OVERALL SCORE	COUNTRY	GINI COEFFICIENT
0.90	DENMARK	28.3
0.89	NORWAY	27.7
0.87	FINLAND	27.7
0.86	SWEDEN	29.8
0.83	NETHERLANDS	25.7
0.26	VENEZUELA	44.7
0.33	HAITI	41.1
0.34	MYANMAR	30.7
0.34	CONGO, DRC	44.7
0.34	NICARAGUA	46.2

Source: [WJP Rule of Law Index](#)

How carbon trading can deliver cross-border investment

The Paris Agreement's long-debated Article 6 is now in place, opening the door to trade in carbon between nations. Could this finally turn carbon trading into a tool for sustainable development as well as decarbonization?



By [Jodie Keane](#), Principal Research Fellow and [Bernardo Arce](#), Research Officer, International Economic Development Group, ODI Global

With conventional development assistance in decline, innovative sources of finance are urgently needed to keep climate goals on track. Meanwhile, [tariffs and cuts in development assistance are inflicting severe harm](#) on poor and extremely climate vulnerable economies. Within this context, this article explores how sovereign carbon markets (carbon traded between countries) could become more development friendly and provide new innovative sources of finance. This includes between likeminded countries and through new linkages to different types of carbon

border, taxation, and emissions trading schemes (ETs).

Carbon markets go mainstream

Most national carbon action plans under the Paris Agreement that have been submitted to date – the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – now integrate carbon markets. This signifies widespread recognition of [carbon markets' instrumental role](#) to advance domestic climate change ambitions and international commitments. Since the international framework to support international carbon markets – [Article 6 of the Paris Agreement](#) – was finalized at [COP29 in Baku](#) in November 2024, there have been new moves to utilize the new agreement to secure international climate change goals through leveraging high-integrity carbon markets.

▲ Maputo, Mozambique – the country is one of the most exposed to the EU's carbon border adjustment due to its reliance on coal-generated power from South Africa

For example, discussions within the European Union have recently signaled an intention to consider the role of the carbon credits obtained through Article 6 provisions to support the [EU's ambitious climate change targets](#). New flexibilities could include:

- a possible limited role for high-quality international carbon credits in the second half of the 2030 to 2040 decade
- the use of domestic permanent removals (for example, carbon captured and stored within the EU permanently) in the EU Emissions

- Trading System (EU ETS)
- enhanced flexibilities across sectors

Re-establishing green leadership

These flexibilities come at a time of continued controversy regarding the EU's application of carbon border adjustments (CBAs). Due to be imposed by 2026, CBAs impose costs on selected imports according to their embedded carbon intensity and are intended to level the playing field between EU firms and importers.

[CBAs are expected to raise more than USD 80 billion per year in potential revenue by 2039](#), depending on price and emission intensity. However, at the time of writing, there is no provision for revenue recycling, where revenues are recycled into green investments in adversely affected countries, particularly those making only minimal contributions to global greenhouse gas emissions.

This inequity continues to fuel controversy regarding the application of CBAs, especially given the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibility (which states that while all countries must act on climate change, wealthier and historically higher-emitting nations are expected to do more).

Given this, the new moves to include Article 6 credits, whether internationally transferred mitigation outcomes (ITMOs), government to government credits under the Paris Agreement, or emission reductions (credits traded under a centralized body), in the context of CBAs could provide much needed [green leadership](#), as well as [channel new sources of finance to the most climate vulnerable economies](#).

New finance through Article 6

Under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, carbon credits allow countries to trade emission reductions with one another. [Singapore's carbon tax](#), for example, permits firms to use ITMOs to offset up to 5% of their taxable emissions. Switzerland employs a similar approach,

requiring motor oil importers to retire ITMOs to fulfil domestic carbon tax obligations, effectively treating them as a form of carbon tax payment. (See [Article 6 Piloting: state of play and stakeholder experiences](#)).

Many developing countries have expressed their intentions to develop carbon markets to achieve the ambitions specified within their NDCs submitted as part of UNFCCC processes. [India, for example, will implement its own ETS in 2026](#), known as the carbon credit trading scheme, to support its climate change goals. Developing carbon markets, including through ETSS, may therefore not only be a route to adjusting to CBAs but also to incentivize broader green transition and sustainable development aspirations enshrined within countries' NDCs.

Who bears the burden?

In principle, [ETSs can produce the same carbon price effect as carbon taxes](#). However, carbon taxes can be politically more challenging to implement. ETSS can be more politically palatable because the burden is perceived to fall less on voters. Equity and fairness are important considerations, both within and between countries, as carbon pricing schemes expand and CBAs become more widespread. Within this context, the international trade dimension of sovereign carbon markets plays a vital role in cost-effectively reducing emissions and supporting cap-and-trade systems.

Without access to climate finance at scale, developing countries cannot afford to decarbonize. [Carbon trading not only generates economic benefits](#), but if the resulting savings are re-invested, climate ambition can be further enhanced. There are now several proposals to ensure Article 6 channels and supports green investment and global decarbonization efforts (such as a [proposal for border carbon adjustments to increase global climate finance](#)).

For example, Mozambique – consistently highlighted as one of the

most exposed countries to the EU's CBA based on its current scope – has a strong interest in carbon markets but does not yet have a carbon price. [Mozambique is also seeking to increase the share of renewables](#) in energy consumption (driven by hydropower); this could boost its future green competitiveness in the future, assuming indirect emissions will be under the CBA's scope at a later date. This is because, currently, the energy supply for aluminum production comes from the South African grid.

To overcome the challenges of CBAs, one obvious route is to ensure production is powered by Mozambique's own grid, reducing embedded carbon and enhancing green competitiveness – which provides an obvious entry point for new resources channeled via Article 6.

A race against time

International carbon markets aim to cut emissions where costs are lowest. But more than this, carbon markets as conceived within Article 6 of the Paris Agreement are intended to incentivize nature-based solutions, as well as carbon capture and storage. There is an urgency in not only putting a price on carbon and supporting its removal from the atmosphere, but also profoundly shifting how we perceive and value nature-based ecosystem support services. Last year was the hottest on record, with average global temperatures exceeding those of any previous year.

A larger share of resources raised through Article 6 will be channeled into an adaptation fund compared with the previous international carbon trading mechanism – the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Indeed, many of the lessons learned from the CDM have been encompassed within the design of Article 6. Moving to operationalize Article 6 within the current global context now assumes a particular urgency, given the need to keep climate change goals on track and to secure green investment within a challenging geopolitical landscape. ■



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Resourcing Africa's future: fairness at the core

Africa holds some of the world's richest reserves of transition minerals, from cobalt and copper to lithium and platinum. To prevent the green revolution from becoming just another chapter of exploitation, African leaders and global partners must insist on value creation at home

By [Francisca Conejeros Martínez](#) and [Angela Kariuki](#), Law Division, UN Environment Programme

In the copper belt of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, people work 12-hour shifts in sweltering heat, prying cobalt from the ground – cobalt that will power electric vehicles in Oslo, San Francisco, and Shanghai. The profits travel swiftly across borders, enriching multinational firms and distant treasuries. In nearby villages, there is no electricity.

Africa holds nearly a third of the world's mineral reserves. From the platinum of South Africa to the bauxite of Guinea and the lithium of Zimbabwe, these critical resources are the foundation of the global clean energy transition. Yet too often, the countries that own them remain at the margins of the value chain. Contracts are opaque, royalties are low, and environmental and social protections are inconsistently enforced. This imbalance isn't accidental – it is the legacy of a deeply unequal global system.

Unless African leaders insist on more equitable terms, the clean, or green,

transition risks becoming yet another extractive chapter in a long history of external exploitation. The minerals may have changed – from gold and diamonds to cobalt and lithium – but the structural dynamics of extraction remain stubbornly familiar. Raw materials are shipped abroad, profits are captured elsewhere, while environmental and social costs stay in Africa.

From extraction to value creation

To address this, a paradigm shift is needed. African countries must move from being raw material exporters to value creators. Domestic beneficiation, fair taxation, and investment in local processing industries are essential. Transparent contracts, enforceable environmental obligations, and revenue-sharing models that benefit local communities must become non-negotiable. Without safeguards, sustainability in the Global North risks embedding unsustainable structures in the Global South.

Whenever contracts are hidden from public oversight, the risk of corruption increases sharply. The International Energy Agency's [Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2025](#) warns these resources have become a frontline issue for global energy and economic

◀ [Artisanal cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#)

security. As competition intensifies, transparency and balance are often sacrificed, leaving little space for oversight or long-term planning.

Consider the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which the Cobalt Institute estimates supplied about three-quarters of global cobalt in 2024 (see [Cobalt Market Report 2024](#)). You might expect the country to be wealthy. Yet, as the Natural Resource Governance Institute notes in its [Sustainable Drive, Sustainable Supply report](#), most Congolese copper-cobalt output is processed only to cobalt hydroxide before being exported, with profits captured abroad.

Zimbabwe shows a similar pattern. Between January and June 2025, according to Reuters, [Zimbabwe exported about 586,000 tonnes of lithium concentrate, 30% more than in the same period of 2024](#). In response, the Ministry of Mines announced that from 2027, exports of unprocessed lithium will be banned, with major processing facilities planned so more value stays at home.

Namibia and South Africa illustrate the same challenge differently. Namibia produces about 11% of the world's uranium, exporting it as yellowcake, while conversion and enrichment occur abroad. South Africa does refine its platinum group metals domestically, but most downstream manufacturing, such as catalysts for hydrogen fuel cells, still happens overseas, meaning the highest-value activities are captured elsewhere.

Attempts to remedy the resource curse

Across Africa, the problem is not a shortage of resources but a shortage of processing infrastructure. Too often, minerals are exported in raw form rather than leaving the continent with added value. Economists describe this paradox as the “resource curse,” a term coined in the 1990s to capture how nations with abundant wealth often grow more slowly, struggle with inequality, and face governance challenges, while countries with fewer

resources frequently prosper. For the Global North, securing supply is not enough – sustainability must be shared, not outsourced.

In response, several frameworks have emerged. At the continental level, the African Union's [African Mining Vision](#) (2009) urged that mineral wealth drive industrialization. The [African Continental Free Trade Area](#) (AfCFTA, 2021) seeks to harmonize standards and strengthen bargaining power. The international community also has a role to play. Transition minerals are not just commodities – they are conduits for global sustainability.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's [Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#) and the UN's [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) encourage more responsible corporate behavior. And in 2024, the UN Secretary-General convened a [Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals](#) to build trust and ensure equity, transparency, and sustainability.

These initiatives mark progress toward fairer partnerships, but their voluntary nature can limit impact. To be truly transformative, they must go beyond signaling and deliver binding, equitable outcomes.

Four priorities for a just transition

So, what is needed? Four priorities stand out:

1. Transparency

Corruption thrives when mining contracts are hidden, with benefits captured by elites. Making contracts public allows citizens to scrutinize terms and hold leaders accountable. Civil society organizations are central to this effort. Countries like Ghana and Liberia are leading by example through the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#), demonstrating how openness can build trust and set the stage for sustainable, equitable growth.

2. Value addition

Minerals should not leave the continent unprocessed. Value must be created at

home through industries, infrastructure, and skills. This increases revenues and generates jobs. Chile offers a precedent: it exports lithium carbonate rather than raw ore. Zimbabwe could pursue a similar path.

3. Collective bargaining

Acting collectively, African states wield far more leverage than in isolation. Through AfCFTA and regional solidarity, they could demand fairer prices, establish continent-wide royalties, and enforce common standards for labor and environmental protection.

4. Community benefits

Mineral wealth must translate into tangible benefits: schools, clean water, roads, and sustainable livelihoods. Companies have a responsibility to share profits, restore the environment, and train local workers with skills that outlast the mines themselves.

Aligning with the Global Goals

These strategies directly support multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Local processing advances SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). Revenue-sharing and community investment contribute to SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 1 (no poverty). Responsible resource management reinforces SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (climate action). At the foundation is SDG 17, which calls for fair, transparent, and mutually beneficial international cooperation.

Ultimately, a just transition in Africa will not be delivered by development assistance or climate finance alone. It requires a fundamental rethinking of global economic rules and a recognition that Africa is not merely a source of raw materials but a partner in shaping the world's sustainable future. The path from extraction to equity begins with a new generation of fair, transparent, and future-facing partnerships. ■

The authors have submitted this article in their personal capacities.



SDG Action was launched in 2021 by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to support the UN's Decade of Action.

A resource for sustainability practitioners in all sectors, it brings timely analysis of the most pressing challenges. Its emphasis is on identifying opportunities and providing tangible ways to accelerate progress.

The website (www.sdg-action.org) features articles from world-leading experts on all aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate action.

A print edition is published to coincide with the UN General Assembly. It provides a framework to understand the complex interdependencies between the SDGs, highlights priorities and dilemmas, and suggests ways to make the greatest impact.

The print edition is carbon-neutral and sustainably produced. The carbon emissions generated in manufacturing the paper, and printing and distributing the publications are offset. The paper used is FSC®-certified from sustainable sources. The Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) is a global, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of responsible forest management worldwide. FSC defines standards based on agreed principles for responsible forest stewardship that are supported by environmental, social, and economic stakeholders. To learn more, visit www.fsc.org

Please contact us at info@sdg-action.org if you would like to share feedback and ideas or would like to be involved.



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Science for climate policy

The Global Climate Hub (GCH) provides science-based solutions for combating the climate crisis. As an offshoot of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, it harnesses a global network of experts.

The GCH, an international research-led initiative for tackling complex sustainability challenges, works with all relevant stakeholders to design country-specific action plans.

It functions through 9 interlinked units that reflect the stages a country will transition through until it achieves climate neutrality and resilience.

The coordinated work of these 9 units provides a unique approach to holistically addressing all levels of the human-environmental interface, offering truly sustainable solutions tailored to each case study or region.



Located at the ReSEES Laboratory of the Athens University of Economics and Business and the Sustainable Development Unit of the ATHENA Research Center, both of which are part of the Alliance of Excellence for Research and Innovation on Aephoria (AE4RIA), the GCH is also supported by the Atmospheric Physics Department of the Academy of Athens.

The Hub is chaired by the world-renowned natural resource economist, Professor Phoebe Koundouri.

