



Joint workshop for the development of the Strategic Plans 2026-2029 of UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women

Tomorrow's landscape: strategic foresight and major trends

13 December 2024

Overview



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Multilateralism in flux



The world is becoming more multipolar and fluid. New and shifting alliances (whose members don't necessarily act in concert) and the growing influence of emerging for-profit, non-state actors challenge international relations. Traditional multilateral fora are weakening. As borderless threats and opportunities grow, so does the need for multilateral action.

Key messages

- Power shifts among the world's states are [reshaping](#) the global system. Competing blocs and the [rising influence](#) of emerging powers makes it harder to predict how countries will lean in crises.
- There is increasing [scepticism](#) about the institutions of the post-WWII international order, whose interests they serve and [whether the rules are applied fairly](#).
- [Growing relevance of non-state actors](#) presents both threats and opportunities for the future of multilateralism.
- Emerging challenges and technologies are reinforcing the [importance of multilateralism](#), as a space to pursue [collective solutions](#)- as in the [Pact for the Future](#)

Conflict and crisis deepen



Conflicts are proliferating and forced migration is at record highs. Methods of warfare are changing, with artificially intelligent automated weapons and the growing importance of information warfare, deepfakes and disinformation campaigns. Climate, water stress and competition for natural resources are growing drivers of conflict. Young people and social movements across the world are demanding their governments provide a safer future for all.

Key messages

- [10% of the world](#) live in countries affected by conflict, over half of them women and children. 2023 saw a record number of [59 conflicts](#). Yet women remain underrepresented in peace and disarmament negotiations; of 31 peace & ceasefire agreements signed in 2023, [none](#) were signed by women's organizations.
- Climate change and [environmental degradation](#) are increasing tensions - [making the most vulnerable even more vulnerable](#)
- Concerns are growing around [autonomous weapons](#) and the [ethics](#) of [AI in military decision-making](#). Information warfare is growing. 2021-2023 saw [more conflict-related deaths](#) than in the last 30 years.
- One in 4 young people has been [affected by violence](#). Young people are [protesting](#) against wars and conflict, and many are [losing faith](#) in human rights laws and institutions.

Triple planetary crisis



Loss of nature endangers people, accelerates climate change and threatens progress towards the SDGs. Yet despite growing awareness and technological capabilities, the world's response to the triple planetary crisis remains dangerously insufficient as we breach 6 of 9 planetary boundaries. 2023 was the hottest year ever, yet decarbonisation efforts are slowing. Investments in fossil fuel infrastructure and fossil fuel subsidies continue. The widening gap between pledges and action threatens to push past irreversible tipping points in biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution.

Key messages

- The [nexus between poverty, climate and inequality](#) is intensifying. Climate change cost 12,000 [lives](#) and [\\$200bn in damages](#) in 2023. By 2050, 8 times more children will be exposed to extreme heatwaves compared to the 2000s.
- Vulnerable communities who have contributed the least to climate change are [disproportionately affected](#). The adaptation finance gap for developing countries is [\\$187-359 bn/year](#). One-third of the world's food is produced by small farmers (mostly women), but adoption of [climate-resilient agriculture is held back](#) by lack of finance and insecure land rights.
- [2 million species](#) at risk of extinction and [a staggering decrease](#) in biodiversity. Yet nature-positive transitions [could unlock \\$10 trillion](#) for business by 2030.
- Investment in clean energy is set to [double that of fossil fuels](#) in 2025. Yet [41 of 42 indicators of progress](#) towards decarbonisation are off-track.

Sustainable finance

Environmental, social & governance (ESG) criteria are becoming mandatory in investment decisions, as regulators step up efforts to make the rules clear and consistent. But this may pose challenges to developing countries: tougher ESG standards that their companies may not be ready to meet, and more focus on risk, could make it harder, especially for the climate-vulnerable, to attract investment. ODA flows are under pressure and the cost of borrowing is increasing, further challenging financing for development.

Key messages

- Sustainable finance is [attracting significant public and private capital](#). Global sustainable debt issued in the first half of 2024 [reached \\$800 billion](#).
- Shortfalls to finance the global development agenda persist. An extra [\\$360 billion annually](#) is required to realize gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment in developing nations alone.
- There is a [growing focus on transparency and quality](#) of ESG initiatives. New [regulations \(EU Taxonomy and US SEC climate disclosure rules\)](#) make ESG disclosures compulsory, although [with some pushback](#). Advanced economies are pressing to [harmonise carbon compliance standards](#). Yet new standards could be [costly](#) for developing countries to comply with.
- For LDCs and those furthest behind, access to international public finance remains crucial. Private investment can support delivery of public services but will not be the primary funder or [provider of social safety](#) nets for the poorest. The [“solidarity economy”](#) has emerged as a promising strategy to bridge social, environmental and gender disparities.

Debt or development



Debt is crowding out the development prospects of many developing economies, as they are forced to trade off critical investments in health, education, social assistance and climate action to service an increasing debt burden. These high levels of debt are undermining trust in governments and IFIs, as debt repayments cut into service delivery and citizens struggle to meet basic needs. Climate-vulnerable countries face an additional risk premium: a vicious circle, as higher costs of borrowing restrict their ability to invest in climate mitigation and adaptation.

Key messages

- Global public debt is expected to reach [100% of GDP](#) by 2030. Projections for [economic growth](#) are the lowest for decades. Climate vulnerability [raises borrowing costs](#), making it harder for countries to fund climate action: a negative [feedback loop](#).
- The [poorest countries are forced to choose](#) between debt and development. Over 1 in 5 [developing countries](#) spend more than 20% of GDP on servicing public debt. Developing countries pay [\\$50 bn more in debt repayments](#) than they receive in loans and ODA.
- 2 billion women and girls lack social protection, with [94% of nations](#) with World Bank and IMF loans having cut investments in public education, health and social protection since 2022.
- Fiscal distress weakens [social cohesion](#). Already squeezed by inflated living costs, people are protesting proposed tax hikes.

Uneven progress on poverty

The global economy is recovering from the pandemic, but at varying speeds. A quarter of countries are growing at only 0.7%, while even moderate growth countries are forecast to make only minimal inroads into poverty reduction. Inflation erodes the spending power of the poorest most. Stubborn intergenerational poverty is hard to shift. At current rates, even ending extreme poverty could take three decades. Inclusive, sustainable growth is needed, including access to clean energy and digital connection, opportunities that are increasingly important for prosperity.

Key messages

- Global economic growth, at [3.5% per annum](#) in 2024, masks significant differences. [Low growth and high debt](#) affect poorest countries with the [steepest debt/development tradeoffs](#) most. At current rates, it could take [a century](#) to eliminate poverty for half of humanity living on less than \$6.85/day.
- [Of the 1.1 billion people](#) living in acute multidimensional poverty, 40% live in conflict.
- Roughly 1 billion children experience multidimensional poverty – lacking food, water, shelter, education and health care. Around 333 million children live in extreme poverty.
- [Only 7% of people](#) live in low inequality countries. Women's share of total income remains [below 35%](#), a mere 5% increase since 1990. Persistent inequalities [reinforce the gender pay gap](#).

Digital development

Digital tech and AI are reshaping our lives in ways we don't fully understand. From digital public infrastructure to new drivers of economic growth to changing human behaviours, digital tech could transform development and help developing countries leapfrog to inclusive growth. AI holds even more radical (if contested) potential. Governance is vital to ensure an equitable, human-rights centered approach, especially given the disruptive power of "big tech" and the speed of change. That includes the environmental impact of digital, accelerating fast with data centres' appetite for water and energy.

Key messages

- Digital tech and AI are essential to prosperity. Bringing the whole world online could lift [7% of the world](#) out of poverty and add \$6.7 trillion to GDP. Growth in [Digital Financial Services](#) has translated into opportunities and resilience for the poor, particularly women. But [2.6 billion people](#) remain offline, most [in low-income countries](#). Current digital access gaps result in unequal access to and representation in data sets.
- The [skills/resources gap](#) has widened, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Gender gaps in the AI talent pool reflect broader [gender gaps in STEM studies](#).
- The environmental [impact of digital](#): the cloud has a [bigger carbon footprint](#) than the airline industry, data centers use more electricity than [France](#).
- Disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and anti-gender content [inciting harm](#) are more widely disseminated through digital platforms, contributing to [social polarization](#), mental health issues, and posing risks to peace and democratic stability. Governments are considering [age restrictions](#) and stricter content controls for social platforms.
- Safety and ethical threats exist with digitalization, if safeguards and regulations are not put in place.

Human mobility intensifies

Population mobility is intensifying, driven by intersecting causes including conflict, climate change and lack of economic opportunity at home. Without progress towards poverty eradication and other SDGs, more people may decide to migrate in search of a better life, with unpredictable consequences for societies and economies. Conversations around migration focus on the challenges of host countries, but migration has positive impacts too.

Key messages

- [Migration is increasing](#) and international routes are [changing and multiplying](#), driven by [intersecting](#) causes.
- The global "double speed" economy is draining talent from slow growth to richer markets. There is a high gender imbalance of migrant workers in some regions, while migratory limitations in many countries [restrict women's mobility](#). [Some countries](#) with declining birth rates are increasing [legal immigration](#).
- While most human migration is driven by [economic considerations](#), climate and conflict are growing causes. By 2050, [216 million people](#) could be displaced by climate-related events. By April 2024, over 120 million people were forcibly displaced by conflict and violence. The number of refugees exceeded 43 million in 2023, [a record](#). At least [63,350 people died](#) while migrating internationally (2014-2023).
- Remittances ([\\$831 bn in 2022](#)) far exceed ODA and recently overtook foreign direct investment.

Demographic change & diversity



Demographic change is a megatrend with far-reaching implications for sustainable development. Growing concerns about demographic change are undermining the acceleration of the 2030 Agenda. The Pact for the Future pledged to “Strengthen cooperation among States in their response to demographic trends and realities, such as rapid population growth, declining birth rates and ageing populations, as well as in addressing the interlinkages between population issues and development across all regions.”

Key messages

- The world population reached 8.1 billion in 2024 and will continue to grow. This masks growing demographic diversity: Almost 70% of people live in countries with a fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1.
- Declining birth rates and increasing life expectancy that results in rapid population ageing. Women tend to live longer, so [comprise most older persons](#) (and receive [lower pensions](#)), while young women care for the young and elderly.
- Demographic change affects the demand for health, education, work and social protection, with implications for reaching the SDGs. Yet not many countries account for demographic change in a timely and comprehensive manner.
- The idea of a “Population Crisis” has led to a new generation of pro-natalist policies. There is a need to help countries build resilience to and take advantage of demographic change through [rights-based](#) population policies.

Enduring struggles in human rights

Global human rights face unprecedented pressures from converging forces, rising authoritarianism and shrinking civic spaces, and technological advances, creating both opportunities and threats. Support for parties with anti-immigration, nationalist or anti-women's rights policies is growing. As discrimination and prejudice are increasingly legitimized, ideals of solidarity, diversity and pluralism are being [put to the test](#). These challenges are amplified by inequalities and ideological divides, particularly among youth, requiring new approaches to safeguard universal values.

Key messages

- Global freedom declined for the [18th consecutive year in 2023](#). Political rights and civil liberties diminished in 52 countries, for one-fifth of global citizens. Progress in advancing human rights and gender equality is being [jeopardized](#).
- The withdrawal of countries from [established international legal frameworks and mechanisms](#) threatens the legitimacy of the post-World War II human rights architecture and endangers the global capacity to solve collective challenges, including setting and implementing norms and standards for gender equality and advancing human rights. [Feminist Foreign Policies](#) in some countries offer some optimism.
- Polarisation is growing, fueled by [mis/disinformation](#), ranked the highest short-term risk for the [first time in 2024](#). A growing [gender-ideological gap](#) threatens social cohesion and progress on equality.
- [Empowered by digital technologies](#), social movements are amplifying their message and reach on the [environment](#), [racial justice and equity](#), [indigenous rights](#), [youth representation](#), [peace](#) and [women's rights](#).

Women's rights – the foundation of sustainable development



Translation of commitments to gender equality into action is failing, and is further threatened by polarization, **pushback**, threats to multilateralism and eroding democracy. Decreasing financing for development, along with constrained public finances and debt distress, mean less investment in gender equality. Women remain deprived of their rights, and the world is missing out on their potential. It is more important than ever to achieve gender equality through the broader transformations of development and structural change, not only to tackle individual inequalities.

Key messages

- Only two SDG5 indicators or sub-indicators are close to target. Despite [improvements](#), at current pace, [the global gender gap](#) will take 100 years to close – costing the world [\\$10 trillion](#) p/a in lost economic potential. Unpaid [care work](#) keeps 708 million women out of the labour market.
- Withdrawal from international conventions and reversal of legal [frameworks crucial for women's rights](#) is cause for concern and expansion of anti-rights movements; at an individual level, [9 out of 10 men and women](#) hold biases against women.
- Women are not physically secure: [one woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes](#) by their partner or relative. In conflict zones, the proportion of women [killed doubled](#) from 2022 to 2023; [the incidence of child marriage can be over 16% higher](#).
- Gaps in sex- and age-disaggregated data render women's and girls' needs and contributions invisible, and [undermine financing for gender equality and women's rights](#).

No development without health



Health is both a key driver of development outcomes and an early indicator of progress or backsliding. Yet financing for health services, already strained by Covid, is often first to be cut, particularly in countries burdened by debt. Some basic health indicators have stalled, even regressed, in the last two decades. Reproductive and sexual health is fundamental to individuals and families and to social and economic development. Scientific advances offer promise, but will they deliver better health for all?

Key messages

- Increase in the number of people pushed into poverty due to out-of-pocket health expenditure. 3.3 billion people live in countries where interest on government debt exceeds spending on health or education.
- Where population growth is most rapid, health systems remain fragile, with inadequate financing, infrastructure and workforces. Diverse population dynamics across the world will lead to differentiated service demand, including for Assisted Reproductive Technology.
- [1 in 5](#) children worldwide are still stunted. Vaccination numbers and progress in reducing maternal mortality have stalled, despite expanded knowledge of its causes and prevention. Just [10 countries account for 60%](#) of global maternal and newborn deaths. Noncommunicable diseases are [on the rise](#), while communicable diseases like HIV are declining.
- On current trends, some 35 million children will die before turning 5 from 2023 to 2030 - about half among neonates, and 60% in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Climate, [pandemics](#), crisis and inequalities intersect with health. [Climate change](#) is expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths a year, 2030-2050. Women and girls in conflict urgently need sexual and reproductive healthcare

Children and youth



Despite progress over the last two decades, children and young people face interconnected crises that threaten the progress made since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child nearly 35 years ago. Their living contexts are complex and diverse; their rights are often misunderstood or disregarded.

Key messages

- Malnutrition leaves [one in three](#) children under 5, or 200 million children, not growing well, while at least two in three children aged 6 to 23 months are not fed the minimum diet they need to grow, develop and learn to their full potential.
- [214 million](#) schoolchildren missed more than three-quarters of in-person instruction due to school closures in the pandemic
- Every year nearly [a billion children](#) worldwide are regularly subjected to physical punishment by their caregivers. Approximately one in 10 girls under the age of 20 have experienced sexual violence.
- Nearly 1.7 billion children live in countries with complex emergencies driven by inequality and fragility. 655 million live in areas where heatwaves have increased by 200% since the 1960s.
- High rates of youth unemployment, lack of access to quality education and barriers to accessing health services
- While HIV is declining, [adolescent girls](#) represent [over 80% of new infections in Sub-Saharan Africa and over 61% in Eastern Europe and Central Asia](#).



Thank you



Breakout group work: guiding questions

1. From your perspective, do these trends resonate with the evolving international development landscape?
2. What, if anything, is missing?
3. What are the implications of these trends for our shared objectives and the work of the UN Funds and Programmes?