

# VOICE

— UN DESA —

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## Giving young people a platform at the United Nations

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In the recent 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, a remarkable 63 UN Youth Delegates from 37 Member States lent their voices to discussions on pressing global development challenges. But what exactly is the UN Youth Delegate (UNYD) Programme? Why is it important to prioritize meaningful youth engagement in UN processes, and how does UN DESA champion this cause?

Let's delve into six main takeaways:

- 1. Youth inclusion drives better policies:** All issues are youth issues! With their unique perspectives and experiences, young people help shape policies that more effectively and inclusively address important challenges of our time.
- 2. Meaningful youth engagement is key:** Managed at a global level by UN DESA, the UNYD Programme is a critical pathway for young people to engage in the UN's work. By joining their national delegations on equal footing to other delegates, young voices actively shape global discussions.

3. **Moving in the right direction:** Since the General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995, calling for youth representation in national delegations, an increasing number of Member States have appointed Youth Delegates to participate in UN meetings. However, regional balance, inclusivity, and diversity among the Youth Delegates remains an area for improvement.

4. **Youth Delegates in action:** Youth Delegates don't just sit on the sidelines. They participate in numerous UN meetings, including the General Assembly and the Commission for Social Development. Their roles vary from country to country, but often include providing inputs to negotiations, organizing side events on youth-related topics, and making statements on behalf of their Member State.

5. **Member States take the lead:** The decision to have Youth Delegates and to establish a national Youth Delegate programme is made by each Member State. Member States independently select their delegates and determine the scope and length of their mandates.

6. **Working together is essential:** Simultaneously, UN DESA leverages its expertise in intergovernmental affairs to help Member States set up and strengthen their national YD programmes. UN DESA supplements Member States efforts, including by organizing meetings and sharing relevant resources, information, and invitations with Youth Delegates.

Eager to know more? Dive deeper [here](#) or reach out to [youth@un.org](mailto:youth@un.org).



## EXPERT VOICES



### Artificial Intelligence – a blessing or a curse for sustainable development

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In recent years, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has grown rapidly, affecting many industries and areas of human life. But should we view AI as a blessing or curse? How about its impact on social development and the global goals? We spoke with **Professor Daron Acemoglu** of the Department of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who shared his take.

**A blessing or a curse? How do we ensure that AI is used for the greater good for people and planet?**

"AI could be either a blessing or a curse. The future of AI remains unwritten, and it will depend on the choices we make in the current generation. There is no doubt that advances in generative AI tools, such as large language models, have been impressive. But these could be used for the greater good or for enriching a narrow elite, with all of the costs that this entails. To ensure we are on a socially beneficial path, we must start with a broader

discussion, encompassing many more stakeholders than just the most powerful tech leaders, on what we can achieve with these new tools and what we want from them.

My view is that it is both technically feasible and highly socially desirable to have pro-worker and pro-citizen AI – meaning AI tools that increase worker expertise and contribution to the production process and empower workers and citizens. This is a critical first step because the current development path of the industry is centered on automation and control of information by a few large players. Moreover, I do not believe that we can escape this path unless voices from workers, civil society and the developing world are heard.”

### **What opportunities could AI bring towards advancing social development, reducing inequalities and protecting vulnerable groups? What are the pitfalls to look out for?**

“The digital technologies so far have been a major source of inequality. [My work with Pascual Restrepo](#) estimates that between 50% and 70% of all between-group inequality increase in the United States since 1980 is accounted for by the use of these technologies for automation. The danger is that we will continue the same path with AI. If we pursue this path, we will get even more inequality, both between different types of workers in the labor market and between capital and labor.

It is possible to use AI tools to increase the expertise of different types of workers in tasks that range from production to office work and creative activities. It is also possible to use AI tools to enable better democratic participation and civil society activity. But these more hopeful possibilities require a major redirection of how we are using AI and how we are developing AI.”

### **Can AI bring us closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?**

“This is one of the promises that boosters of AI make. I am not as optimistic on this. I see a path of how AI can be used for helping workers, as I explained in response to the previous two questions. But when it comes to central issues of sustainable development, such as combating extreme poverty in the developing world, fighting climate change, delivering better healthcare to billions of people around the world, and sustaining peace, the most important decisions are human decisions. AI could be a small help, but it would be misleading and counterproductive to think that technologies can by themselves solve these human problems.”

### **AI also raises some ethical concerns. What are the important ethical considerations and practical ways to deal with challenges when using AI?**

“There are many ethical issues with AI. To me the most important one is that the current path of development is likely to disempower people as workers and citizens. We see this with the focus on automation; we see this with the way in which the gains from previous digital technologies are distributed (mostly to the already very rich); and worse of all, we see this in who controls information. AI is entangled with data and information. In my opinion, the biggest ethical problem arises when we allow the utilization of AI tools to monopolize information. This enables manipulation of both the economic landscape and politics according to their own agendas.”

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A new UN Advisory Body on AI was launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on 26 October 2023. The new body gathers experts with deep experience across government, the private sector, technology, civil society, and academia, to support the UN in its efforts to ensure that AI is used for the greater good of humanity. Learn more from UN News [here](#).





## 7 ways UN DESA supports a rescue plan for people and planet

The latest [UN DESA Annual Highlights Report](#) showcases seven ways UN DESA supported Member States to advance the 2030 Agenda throughout the 77th Session

of the General Assembly, despite a challenging global context and significant setbacks to SDG progress. Here's what you need to know about UN DESA's efforts.

### 1. Accelerating action for the SDGs at the national and international level

UN DESA helped to organize the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2023 and the SDG Summit in September. This year also saw major progress in mobilizing SDG localization through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), which total more than 200 since its launch in 2018.

### 2. Reducing poverty and inequality

To give meaning to "leaving no one behind", UN DESA supported key UN processes in a fully inclusive manner, to amplify the voices of older persons, youth, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. It also provided capacity-building support for vulnerable groups, including small-scale farmers and women entrepreneurs, as key agents of SDG transformation. It also called for the principle of "inclusion by design" to tackle the digital divide.

### 3. Ensuring sustainable financing

To overcome the 'great finance divide', UN DESA called for scaling up SDG financing and investment to countries most in need or those under heavy debt distress, including through promotion of the SDG Stimulus and reforms to the international financial architecture.

### 4. Making data count

UN DESA continued to support countries to collect official data to "make the invisible visible" and develop new measures that "value what counts" for people, planet and the future. For example, the number of indicators included in the global SDG database has increased steadily from 115 in 2016 to 225 in 2023.

### 5. Strengthening national institutions and accountability

UN DESA supported progress towards the achievement of SDG 16 as a key enabler for the 2030 Agenda. Throughout the year, the Department provided knowledge-sharing and capacity-building support and tools to Governments and institutions to effectively deliver on the SDGs in an effective, inclusive and accountable manner.

## 6. Ending the war on nature

UN DESA continued to stand up to the triple planetary crisis by supporting a synergistic implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and forging stakeholder commitments, pledges and partnerships.

## 7. Framing the future of development

UN DESA continued to enhance its strategic foresight and address socioeconomic challenges not only to meet the SDGs, but also future-proof sustainable development beyond 2030. The Department provided analytical advice and capacity-building opportunities, offering policy options for countries to enhance their resilience to future shocks and crises, especially for the most vulnerable.

*Read more about these achievements in the UN DESA Annual Highlights Report available [here](#).*

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## The Urgent Case for Information Integrity

*By Melissa Fleming, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Global Communications*

The case for information integrity has rarely been more compelling, or more urgent.

In all my years in communications, I can't say I ever worked in such a troubled environment – an information ecosystem so polluted that voices for positive change are struggling to make themselves heard.

The potential impacts of this – on democracy, human rights and progress on the Sustainable Development Goals are devastating.

It wasn't meant to be like this. When digital platforms first arrived, we communicators were so excited. For the UN, they held great potential to engage people directly with our advocacy and move them to act to improve the world.

And it's true these tools have brought many benefits – revolutionizing communications for everyone, everywhere, connecting those crying out for change, bringing together the isolated, and reuniting the displaced.

But we've also seen a darker side. Digital platforms have enabled the massive proliferation of lies and hate on an industrial scale, enabling malicious actors to pump lies and hate into our public sphere, day in, day out, over many years.

We've all seen them: Snake oil salesmen persuading people to refuse life-saving vaccinations or cancer treatments. Fossil fuel companies undermining climate action for profit. Malicious actors stirring up old fears and hatreds for nefarious and violent ends.

Now, the fog of war is driving the spread of hate and lies online – resulting in dangerous errors with real-time, real-world consequences. Just as in the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, demand for information is sky-high. Minute by minute, we're glued to social media, checking for updates on the violence in Gaza and Israel. Horrified and anxious, we can't look away.

Related hate speech, mis- and disinformation – already rampant – is flooding social media feeds, warping perceptions, and risking further violence. In this context especially, hate lands on fertile ground.

These voices aren't new. But the global power of social media has meant harmful content can be instantly transmitted across the world, infecting millions of minds, eroding trust in science, and seeding hatred potent enough to spark bloodshed.

UN peacekeeping operations themselves are under attack. Targeted with false allegations at a scale and speed they are not equipped to address, mis- and disinformation is threatening staff safety and hampering life-saving operations in conflict areas.

This has happened against a wider backdrop of rising online hate. Across the board, algorithms that prioritize engagement above all else have driven polarizing views into the mainstream, normalizing antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, and other hate speech in the process.

Now, rapid developments in generative AI are already taking online hate speech, mis- and disinformation to new levels. Disinformation actors have been given a potent technology with low production cost, to create high quality, but fake image, audio and video content at scale. AI also makes targeting and personalizing that content easier, and often leaves no fingerprints behind.

The UN has long been working on multiple fronts to tackle this crisis – stepping up our online communications to elevate facts and science and working with the platforms to reduce the spread of harmful content.

We've had successes – teaming up with large platforms to highlight reliable information on COVID-19 and the climate, amplifying trusted messengers and educating users on how to slow the spread.

But now the time has come to massively ramp up our response and tackle this crisis as a global priority.

The Secretary-General has made it crystal clear: we cannot go on like this.

Published in June, his policy brief 8 lays out nine principles and recommendations that serve as a potential basis for a UN code of conduct that is firmly rooted in human rights.

Social media platforms are often compared to digital town squares. If that's true, then we want them to be welcoming spaces that enable dialogue and debate, where hate and lies are no longer artificially amplified by algorithms, and where guardrails are enforced to safeguard vulnerable groups.

The UN is seeking action on a range of fronts to achieve this – I'll highlight just a few.

First, we want to disincentivize online harms. Too many business models rely on algorithms that win attention by pushing extreme content to users, prioritizing engagement over human rights, privacy, and safety.

Instead, we want to encourage alternative revenue streams and models and a new culture of innovation that embraces safety and privacy by design for all internet users, everywhere.

Second, we want meaningful transparency from digital platforms.

Researchers need access to hard data to quantitatively measure the true spread of hate speech, mis- and disinformation, and assess how well current efforts to counter online harms are working – or not. Sober solutions require sober analysis.

There are reasons for hope. We are looking to the implementation of regulatory efforts such as the EU Digital Services Act in the hope this will lead to more transparency in other jurisdictions.

Yet it will be important, from a global perspective, that the interests of all communities are served. We must be careful to guard against a transparency divide.

Third, we want to empower internet users by equipping them with skills to think critically about the content they see and algorithmic awareness to understand why platforms are

pushing it to them, giving them a more accurate view of the world beyond the reality created for them by social media.

We have no illusions here – we know that tech changes faster than policy. It's happening in front of our eyes, with the huge leaps in generative AI. We will continue to demand these tools are designed safely, responsibly, and ethically as we go forward.

We are now engaged in a broad and inclusive consultation process on the development of the code, with the nine principles and recommendations in the policy brief as an entry point. We aim to finalize the code by mid-2024 and hope that Member States will acknowledge it at the Summit of the Future.

It's vital we keep this momentum going. Together, we can sow the seeds of a hopeful digital future, restore balance to our information ecosystem, and integrity to our online public sphere.



## SDG 12 IN NUMBERS



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- [Eradication of poverty and other social development issues in focus as the General Assembly's Third Committee convenes for its 78th session](#)
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