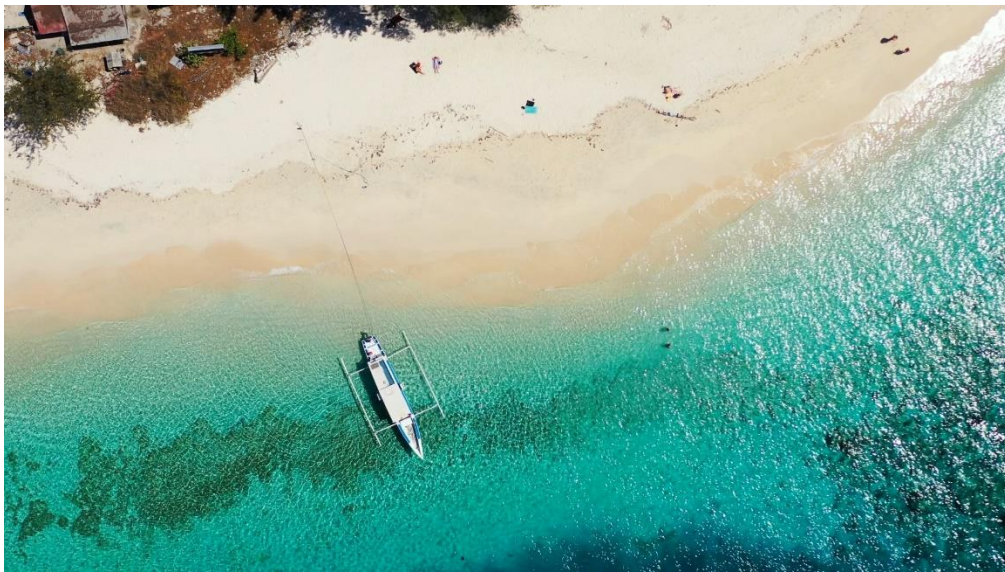


VOICE

— UN DESA —

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Partnering with small islands for a resilient future

When the last International Conference on Small Island Developing States was held in 2014, there was no COVID-19 pandemic and no global economic recession and much fewer geopolitical tensions. The climate emergency, while present, had not reached the heights it has today.

This year, as the world prepares to meet in Antigua and Barbuda in May for the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States ([SIDS4](#)), things are different. While SIDS have made some progress towards sustainable development, their small size, geographical remoteness and the limited scale of their economies have left them particularly vulnerable amid a raging storm of acute external shocks.

Even with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change now in place as clear target-driven global agreements to make the world better for everyone everywhere, SIDS are being left behind. The time for a new programme of action for SIDS is now.

“SIDS are the stewards of our ocean and bastions of environmental justice. Amid today’s turmoil, they are both facing the fire and fuelling the change,” said UN DESA Head Li Junhua, also serving as Secretary-General of the SIDS4 Conference. “Building their resilience ensures a sustainable future for us all.”

He added: “We must craft an ambitious programme of action that is robust and achievable. Not a wish list, but an *action* list.”

Countries took a big step in developing that action list last month in New York during the first Preparatory Committee session for the Conference. Delegates met for the first round of discussions about the [zero draft outcome document](#). It outlines a development plan aimed at bolstering more resilient societies in SIDS including by improving their access to finance—including climate finance—strengthening data collection, accelerating innovation and digitalization, and enabling partnerships. Special attention has also been placed on improving education and employment opportunities for children and youth, and other vulnerable groups.

“As co-chairs, we are happy to note the strong showing we saw from member states and the UN system and civil society,” said Ali Naseer Mohamed, Permanent Representative of Maldives to the UN and co-chair of the Preparatory Committee with New Zealand. “We heard strong commitments for a more sharply focused and action-oriented programme of action.”

Ambassador Mohamed noted: “SIDS are not seeking charity. SIDS are looking for genuine partnerships.”

The SIDS4 Conference comes at a critical time for small islands, which face rising sea levels and a rising debt burden.

“The cumulative effects of weather, climate and water-related hazards in SIDS, which caused a staggering US\$153 billion dollars of losses in the last 50 years continue to pose existential threats to the 39 small island states,” said Rabab Fatima, UN High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, and Special Adviser for the SIDS4 Conference.

Good ideas for how to build resilience in SIDS are coming from the people living on small islands in addition to their development partners. The upcoming conference in Antigua and Barbuda will provide opportunities for all stakeholder groups to learn from each other and create new partnerships to benefit all.

“We believe this Conference is going to put down a marker for transformation,” said Walton A. Webson, Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda.

Together, we are charting the course for resilient islands!

Bookmark the SIDS4 Conference website at un.org/smallislands to stay informed of the latest updates.





“Data and statistics inform every decision we make”

Data plays a key role in global efforts to improve people’s lives on a healthy planet. UN DESA’s Statistics Division is leading efforts, working together with statisticians and data experts from across the world. Ahead of the annual UN Statistical Commission this month, UN

DESA’s Linda Hooper tells us more about this important work.

Can you give our readers some insights into how data plays a role in global efforts to improve our world?

“Data and statistics inform every decision we make. The more you know about a situation, the better informed that decision will be. Great strides have been made in the availability of data for measuring achievement in the SDGs. [The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition](#) is a good example of using data to make a candid assessment of the SDGs. The report coupled with the [Global SDG Data Platform](#) provides the latest insights by compiling numerical evidence across the full agenda.”

Later this month, statisticians from across the globe will come together for the 55th session of the UN Statistical Commission. What are some of the main topics in the formal meetings?

“The Statistical Commission is at the apex of the global statistical system. It plays a fundamental role in setting statistical standards and methodologies for national statistical systems. The annual session of the Commission brings together the chief statisticians to deliberate on topics to help guide the Commission’s work.

The Commission will consider how future standards will be set. Some of the topics that will be covered this year include the System of National Accounts, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, a resolution on representation in the Commission, social statistics, climate change statistics, population and housing statistics, climate change statistics, and many more. One important celebration this year is the 30th anniversary of the Fundamental Principles of official statistics and the 10th anniversary of its GA adoption.”

What happens alongside the formal meetings? What kind of side events should one look out for?

“The Commission is not only about the formal, intergovernmental meetings. A well curated set of side events is planned, both virtually in the weeks leading up to the Commission, as well as during the Commission week. This year’s side events calendar includes 30 virtual events, including three high-level ones on [Beyond GDP](#), [representation in the Commission](#) and the [future of population data systems](#).

At a [side event on 17 January](#), attendees received updates on efforts to go “Beyond GDP” and the importance of the statistical community playing a pivotal role in the development of any metrics that build on existing statistical work.

There are also 51 in-person events, including two high-level events. Emerging issues are brought into the discussions through the Friday Seminar on Emerging Issues. This year’s

event focuses on [data governance](#). To mark this anniversary, a [high-level forum on official statistics](#) is planned for the afternoon on Monday, 26 February, to bring together some of the key voices as well as examine the continued importance these fundamental principles.

At this year's session, the Commission will consider a draft resolution which proposes ways for the Commission to be representative and inclusive, and to be fit for purposes in future years."

For more information: [55th Session of the UN Statistical Commission](#)



THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW



3 ways to foster societies where everyone is included

In today's globalized world, it is crucial to promote social justice alongside digital transformation to create more inclusive and equitable societies. Both social justice and digital transformation can improve access to essential services for vulnerable communities,

creating opportunities which include everyone. Here are three things you should know:

- 1. Leave no one behind:** Everyone, regardless of their social or economic background, should have equal access to opportunities, resources, and rights. Social justice requires healthcare, education, food, water, housing, employment, social protection, and digital technologies that leave no-one behind. It aims to address the underlying causes of poverty and inequality, in a world where, it is estimated that [more than 600 million people still live in extreme poverty](#).
- 2. Promote global collaboration:** Fostering social justice is a collective responsibility. We must implement comprehensive and inclusive policies, change our way of thinking, and prioritize efforts to eliminate poverty and bridge the digital divide. It is crucial for governments to integrate social, economic, and environmental policies to promote social justice.
- 3. Foster inclusive digital transformation:** Digital technologies – including artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things have the potential to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. However, it is crucial that people possess the necessary skills to utilize these technologies effectively. Today, [around 2.6 billion people, or one-third of the global population, remain offline](#). Digital transformation involves changing the way we live, work, and interact with each other, but to have positive effects on societies and economies, this transformation must be inclusive.

Join us at UN Headquarters in New York from 5 to 14 February for the 62nd session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD62). During this session, we will be discussing the important role of social justice, social policies, and digital transformation. Our main focus will be on efforts to eliminate poverty and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

For more information: [Commission for Social Development](#)



SDG BLOG



Elizabeth Sidiropoulos
Chief Executive of the South African Institute
of International Affairs



Development Prospects for Africa in the Context of the Global South

By Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Chief Executive of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), Member of the United Nations High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs

At the most recent BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August 2023, one point that was made regularly by policy makers and commentators alike was that the BRICS now contributed more to global GDP than the G7 nations (31.5% of global GDP versus 30%),

with their share expected to grow to over 50% by 2030 – before factoring in the expanded membership. Clearly the Global South is no longer a spectator at the main dining hall.

The rise of the Global South, of which the pre-eminent economy is China's which is now the second largest in the world, has also created new opportunities for Africa. The continent is still the poorest with 24 of the world's 28 low-income countries; yet, the ability to diversify trading and investment partners, roll-out infrastructure projects, and explore different development paradigms from the traditional western precepts has brought some benefits to the continent, although the much-needed structural transformation has been slow.

Since the start of the XXI century [Africa's average economic growth rate](#) has been second only to that of developing Asia, realising positive growth for nearly a quarter of a century until the Covid-19 pandemic halted that in 2020. Growth has since rebounded but these positive economic growth rates have not translated into structural transformation. The [2022 Africa report](#) by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) notes that 83% of African countries (45 of 54 countries) are commodity dependent, accounting for 45% of the commodity-dependent countries worldwide.

With the world's youngest population (over 60% are below the age of 25), Africa can be the next frontier of investment and growth, taking advantage of the demographic dividend. By 2050 one in three people aged 15-24 years will be African and one in four will be in the 25-34 age group. However, prerequisites for such a dividend are education and skills and the ability to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital revolution. Failing that, the demographic dividend can become a liability leading to social unrest, as young people become disillusioned with their political and economic systems.

The [2023 UN SDG Summit](#) was sobering in its assessment of progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 across the world, and Africa faces some of the greatest challenges in that regard. Indeed, a report by the African Union Commission (AUC), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Africa's progress in implementing Agenda 2030 found that without deliberate policies to accelerate SDG implementation, at least 492 million people would still be in extreme poverty in 2030. Equally concerning was that 288 million children of school-going age were not in school, especially in conflict-affected parts of the continent.

Africa's development trajectory faces a number of headwinds. The most significant of these is the instability that is defining large parts of the continent – from the Great Lakes and the Horn to the Sahel and Libya. The resurgence of coups and ordinary citizens' disaffection with "elected" political elites, coupled with the growing involvement of a variety of external actors (from the traditional former colonial powers to ostensibly private military companies such as the Wagner group, or emerging players such as Turkey and the Gulf states) have exacerbated already existing developmental and governance challenges. The institutions created by Africans to address these challenges – the AU, its Peace and Security Council, the African Peer Review Mechanism to name a few – have seen their authority or their efficacy recede in parts of the continent.

The Covid pandemics and the Ukraine war have also compounded Africa's debt problems. In 2022, Africa's public debt amounted to [\\$1.8 trillion](#). This was small compared to the overall outstanding debt of other developing countries, but Africa's debt grew by [183% from 2010 to 2022](#), a rate four times higher than its growth rate of GDP in dollar terms. In 2022, 24 African countries still had debt-to-GDP ratios above 60%, and they have found it more difficult to reduce their debt levels compared to other parts of the world. This has also placed further pressure on constrained public finances, further exacerbating the ability of states to provide public goods to their citizens. High levels of [corruption](#) have also not helped.

Constrained public finances are also impacted by the low levels of domestic revenue. In the assessment of the [first ten years of Agenda 2063](#), it was found that the continent had only managed 31% total tax revenue as a proportion of GDP, compared to the target set for 2021 of 63%.

Agenda 2063, adopted in 2013, is the continent's long-term development vision to transform Africa into the global powerhouse of the future. Its intent is for Africans to take control of their development trajectory by addressing economic, social, governance, peace and security issues, as well as Africa's voice in the world and is an affirmation of African agency in that regard.

In the context of a discussion on Africa's development trajectory, the most important initiative is the agreement signed in 2018 that established the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). It injected renewed energy into Africa regarding its development prospects. AfCFTA is premised on developmental regionalism, building regional value chains across the continent which deepen integration and industrialisation and remove barriers to trade enabling intra-African trade. It is regarded as a game changer for Africa's development prospects as its successful implementation would be a catalyst for the structural economic transformation of African economies.

The AfCFTA's focus is not just on trade in goods, but includes services too, both of which protocols have already been concluded. The harmonisation of investment, intellectual property rights, competition policy, and e-commerce are also on the table for negotiation. To help facilitate intra-regional trade, the African Export-Import Bank in collaboration with the AfCFTA Secretariat and the AU has also launched the Pan African Payment Settlement System. It is a cross-border financial market infrastructure that enables payment transactions across Africa. It allows for payments and settlements in local currencies. An adjustment fund is also being set up to support African states to adjust to the new liberalised trade environment. These all point to a strong desire by Africa to become economically independent and to industrialise rather than to rely on external development assistance to finance its development.

However, the objective to industrialise must also be seen in the context of the green transition. Many African countries have shown great political commitment to embrace green growth and the opportunities it presents. For one, the continent has [60% of the best solar resources](#) globally. At the first Africa Climate Summit in September 2023, President Ruto of Kenya launched the Accelerated Partnership for Renewables in Africa, and committed Kenya to achieve 100% renewable power by 2030 and to fuel the green industries of the future by 2040. Such initiatives and commitments are not only contributing to fighting climate change but also helping to achieve "[green structural transformation](#)".

Africa's development journey has a long way to go still. The institutional capacity of many states to effectively deliver on the economic, social and environmental challenges that face them, often in the face of political instability, is limited. These deficits are compounded by an international system whose rules often do not support the specific circumstances facing developing economies; however, over the last few years African countries, both collectively and individually, have sought to take ownership of their development trajectory. The results may take longer than the UN SDG timeframe, and they will require significant political will and often hard decisions around trade-offs, but these are possible. And indeed imperative if Africa's youth bulge is to be optimised.

This article was first published in the [Annual Trends Report – The Rise of Global South: New Consensus Wanted](#) by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, the Observer Research Foundation and the Policy Center for the New South.

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SDG 10 IN NUMBERS



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