



Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



Building
Our Future
Together

Advancing Together

Eight decades of progress
towards sustainable
development for all

October 2025



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Eight decades of progress towards
sustainable development for all



**United
Nations**

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Executive Summary



As the United Nations marks its 80th anniversary in 2025, this report by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) traces the evolution of sustainable development within the UN system. It highlights the organization's role in shaping both the understanding and the practical application of sustainable development.

The journey toward integration

The UN approach to development has evolved from focusing on separate economic, social, and environmental concerns to recognizing these as deeply interconnected dimensions of a single challenge. The economic dimension progressed from post-war growth strategies to today's emphasis on inclusive prosperity. The social dimension advanced from basic needs provision to comprehensive frameworks for achieving social inclusion, social justice and equality. The environmental dimension evolved from initial awareness-building efforts to landmark agreements,

such as the Montreal Protocol and the Paris Agreement, establishing the foundation for planetary health. These related evolutionary tracks converged in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – a universal, integrated framework encompassing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that apply to all countries and recognize the indivisible nature of economic, social, and environmental progress.

Collaboration as the engine of progress

The unique convening power of the UN has enabled transformative multilateral cooperation. Major global conferences from Stockholm (1972) to Paris (2015) served as policy accelerators, generating political momentum and establishing international norms. The UN system's analytical leadership—through groundbreaking reports that anticipated major crises and challenged conventional

thinking—provided the intellectual foundation for these achievements. From early post-colonial economic analyses to prescient warnings about inequality and financial vulnerabilities, UN research has consistently shaped global development discourse.

Contemporary challenges and resilience

Despite significant achievements, multilateral collaboration faces unprecedented turbulence. Rising geopolitical tensions, persistent financing gaps, digital divides, and the COVID-19 pandemic have tested global solidarity. Yet the international community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, as evidenced by recent achievements such as the successful conclusion of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, the Third United Nations Ocean Conference, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, the Third United Nations Conference on Land-Locked Developing Countries and the WHO Pandemic Agreement.

Lessons for the future

Eight decades of experience have yielded five critical lessons:

- 1 *Collective action is crucial* to addressing interconnected global challenges that transcend national borders.
- 2 *Inclusive multilateralism remains indispensable*, though it must continuously adapt to remain effective and legitimate.

- 3 *Norms and frameworks catalyse change* by providing benchmarks for national action and empowering advocacy for progress.
- 4 *Foresight, adaptation, and innovation are vital* for institutional impact in a rapidly changing world.
- 5 *Intergenerational equity is essential*, requiring decisions today that secure opportunities for future generations.

The path forward

Demonstrating the value of multilateral cooperation and investment in sustainable development has become increasingly important. The choice is clear: the global community must advance together through genuine solidarity and cooperation. If we retreat into fragmentation, we risk collective failure. The 80-year journey of the UN demonstrates that despite inherent complexities, multilateral action through the United Nations can yield transformative results, improve lives, and expand opportunities for all.

Success in achieving the 2030 Agenda and addressing longer-term global challenges requires strengthening international cooperation mechanisms, ensuring predictable financing, investing in robust analytical capacity, and fostering the political conditions necessary for effective collective action. It also requires building strong, accountable, and adaptive institutions capable of translating global commitments into concrete national and local actions. The UN must continue to adapt and reform if we are to realize a sustainable, equitable, and resilient future.



Introduction: Eight decades of collective endeavour



In 2025, the United Nations commemorates its 80th anniversary since its founding in 1945. Born from global conflict, the UN embodies humanity's enduring aspiration for peace, dignity, and well-being on a healthy planet. For eight decades, the UN has served as the central arena for international cooperation across its foundational pillars: peace and security, development, and human rights. This milestone invites us to celebrate the progress achieved, acknowledge the obstacles surmounted, and learn from the experiences gained.

This report, prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), marks this anniversary by charting the evolution of sustainable development within the UN system. It details the role of the UN in shaping both the understanding and the practical application of sustainable development. It traces the path from early post-war reconstruction efforts to the comprehensive and integrated vision of the 2030 Agenda, highlighting how the international community has recognized the links between economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental integrity.

Pursuing shared values in a new development paradigm

The commemoration of this milestone takes place at a pivotal juncture, as the landscape of global development cooperation is undergoing a transformation. In recent decades, the paradigm has shifted, not only toward greater emphasis on accountability and demonstrable results, but also toward deeper recognition of long-term structural trends, institutional and cultural dynamics, and the need for systemic approaches. This evolution presents both challenges and opportunities for the UN system as it seeks to remain at the forefront of advancing inclusive and sustainable development.

This evolution reflects broader shifts in global governance, where near-universal multilateral collaboration, grounded in broadly shared values, is being replaced by strategic bilateral and small-group partnerships that emphasize more narrowly defined mutual benefits, quantifiable outcomes, and economic justifications. To advance sustainable development in this evolving environment, it is essential to make a case that goes beyond the moral imperative: one that demonstrates how investments in human capital, environmental protection, and inclusive institutions generate

trust, strengthen resilience, foster social cohesion, and support just transitions, ultimately delivering substantial dividends for all actors over the medium and long term. The importance of multilateral collaboration through the UN in pursuit of leaving no one behind must be articulated with renewed clarity and emphasis. This means demonstrating how coordinated action on climate change, pandemic prevention, digital transformation, and other international challenges delivers benefits that far outweigh the costs of fragmented approaches. From the principles enshrined in the UN Charter to the ambition of the SDGs and the longer-term vision of the Pact for the Future, the United Nations has provided the essential platform for dialogue, norm-setting, negotiation, and collaborative action on development that benefits present and future generations.

To support this need, this report demonstrates how the global community, working through the UN, has addressed humanity's most complex development challenges. It examines not only the substance of what has been achieved – the landmark agreements, the shifting paradigms, and the tangible improvements in people's lives – but also the process: how multilateralism, despite its inherent complexities, made these advancements possible. Ultimately, it highlights the enduring importance of multilateralism, as embodied by the United Nations, in driving progress and advancing sustainable development globally.

The pursuit of development has been integral to the mission of the United Nations since its inception. The Charter itself, in Article 55, commits the organization to promoting “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development.” The primary institutional home for advancing the pursuit of development is the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), established as a principal organ to coordinate the economic and social work of the entire UN system.

ECOSOC, including its functional commissions and expert bodies, has provided the framework for global dialogue, policy formulation, and coordination on development issues. ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies have served as incubators for new ideas, platforms for negotiating international norms and agreements, and mechanisms for monitoring progress and accountability. Together with the broader United Nations development system, which comprises UN funds and programmes, specialized agencies, and Secretariat entities, they have supported Member States in advancing sustainable development.

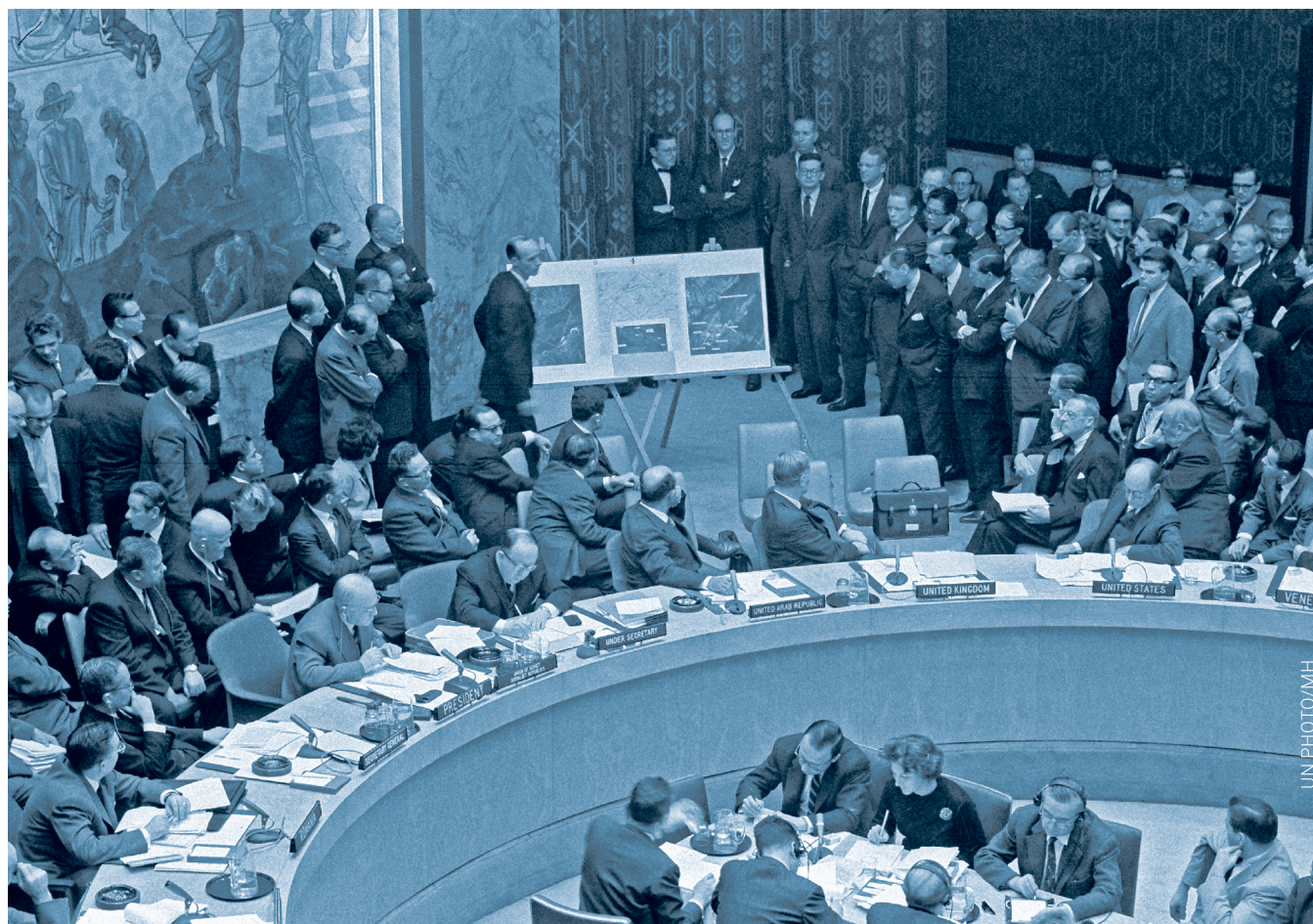
UN DESA¹ within the UN development system, has played a vital role in providing research, data, policy analysis, and capacity-building support, helping Member States navigate the evolving landscape of development challenges and opportunities. It also plays a leading role in the analytical and intergovernmental support functions of the whole UN development system, helping to ensure coherence and evidence-based policy dialogue.

This report highlights pivotal moments where the UN system forged consensus on complex issues, shaping groundbreaking policy frameworks, and fostering the international cooperation necessary to translate aspirations into actions. It underscores the unique capacity of the UN to convene diverse actors, facilitate dialogue across geopolitical divides, and build common ground.

It traces the journey spearheaded within the UN—the shift from viewing development through narrow economic lenses towards recognizing that lasting progress requires balancing economic, social, and environmental

dimensions. This evolution reflects the growing understanding that global challenges—from poverty and inequality to climate change and pandemics—are deeply interconnected and demand holistic, coordinated responses achieved through multilateralism.

The report showcases the substantive progress made in defining and advancing sustainable development; the collaboration that underpinned these achievements; and the vital lessons learned that must inform future efforts. The trajectory of development thinking and action within the UN has been one of continuous learning, adaptation, and expanding ambition, exemplified by the evolution of global frameworks such as the MDGs and SDGs, each defined by clear goals, targets, and indicators to measure progress. Today's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development takes a holistic view of sustainable development with three indivisible and integrated dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. The following section explains this evolution.



1 In 1997, UN DESA was reconstituted into its current form following the consolidation of several predecessor departments.

Section A: Progress towards an integrated vision of sustainable development



The economic dimension: from growth to inclusive prosperity, sustainably financed

The pursuit of economic progress has been a cornerstone of the UN mandate since its inception. Guided primarily by ECOSOC and supported by the analytical expertise of UN DESA and other entities, the UN system has provided the framework for global dialogue and policy formulation on economic development. Over time, this approach has evolved significantly—from an initial focus on aggregate growth to a more nuanced understanding that emphasizes inclusivity, sustainability, and the critical role of effective financing mechanisms.

Early decades: growth, reconstruction, and decolonization

Shaped by the aftermath of global conflict and the dawn of widespread decolonization, the UN was initially firmly focused on post-war reconstruction and supporting the

emerging economies of newly independent nations. This pursuit heavily influenced the first UN “Decade of Development,” launched in the 1960s. This initiative sought to galvanize international action and resources to accelerate economic growth—such as by setting an initial 5 per cent growth rate target—particularly in the developing world. It emphasized growth as fundamental to stability and improved living standards, as already demonstrated by the rapid industrialization in Europe and East Asia. During this era, the UN system became a crucial incubator for economic thought relevant to developing nations. Influential analyses emerged, challenging conventional wisdom and highlighting the specific structural obstacles faced by many post-colonial economies.²

This period also witnessed the establishment of crucial operational parts of the UN, focused on providing development support that could underpin economic progress. UNICEF, established in 1946 to provide emergency relief to children in the aftermath of World War II, has become one of the earliest and most enduring development agencies of the UN. The World Food Programme (WFP) was founded



² A prime example is the “Prebisch-Singer hypothesis,” described in section B.

in 1961 to combat hunger and provide food aid, while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was created in 1966, consolidating technical assistance efforts and becoming a central coordinating body for development projects on the ground. These institutions translated the UN development mandate into concrete actions, providing vital support across various sectors.

Recognizing vulnerability and the need for differentiated support

Experience during the initial Development Decades revealed a critical limitation of the growth-centric model: aggregate economic expansion did not automatically translate into poverty reduction or equitable benefits across or within nations. It became increasingly clear that some groups of countries faced unique and profound structural disadvantages that hampered their development prospects, regardless of global growth trends.

In response, the UN facilitated a move towards more differentiated approaches. A landmark step was the formal creation of the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in 1971, during the Second Development Decade.³ This classification identified nations facing severe structural impediments to growth, based on criteria such as low income, human capital weaknesses, and economic vulnerability.

Recognizing LDCs ensured focused international attention, eligibility for specific concessional support—including preferential market access and targeted development assistance—and dedicated programmes of action tailored to their needs. These include successive Programmes of Action for the LDCs (1981–2030), each building on previous lessons to address evolving development challenges.

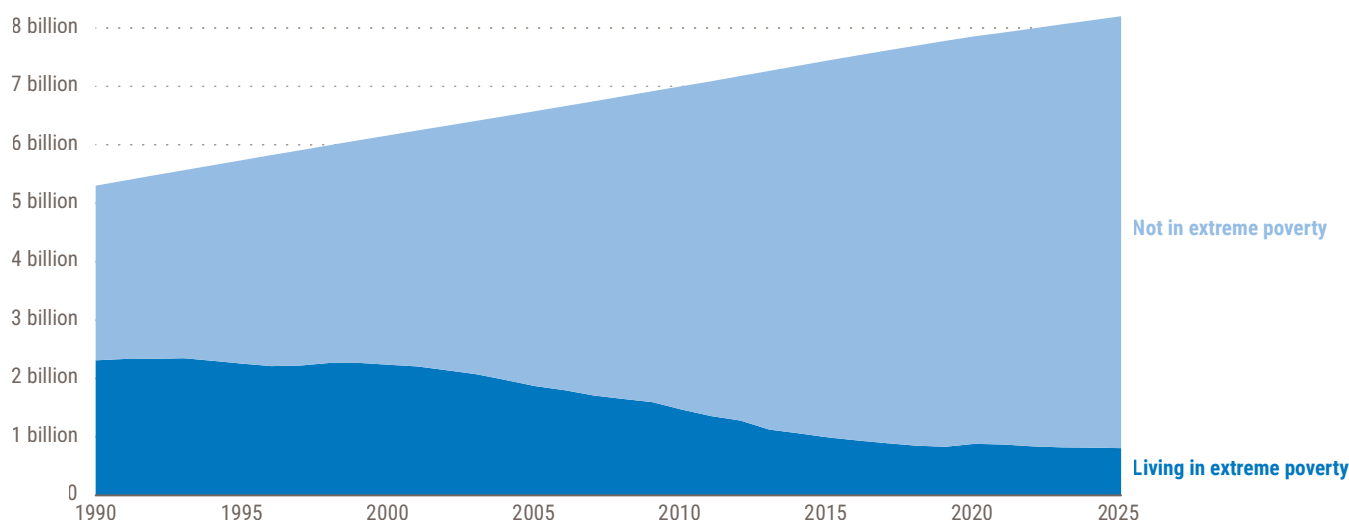
Similarly, the international community, working through the UN, acknowledged the distinct challenges confronting Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and small island developing States (SIDS). LLDCs face obstacles related to transportation, transportation costs, and remoteness from global markets. At the same time, SIDS contend with vulnerabilities driven by their small size, susceptibility to natural disasters and climate change impacts, and narrow resource bases. While these groups (LLDCs and SIDS) were not formally classified as distinct categories until the 1990s, their vulnerabilities began to be increasingly recognized in international development discourse in the 1980s. The UN System, through the Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), highlighted the constraints faced by landlocked and geographically disadvantaged states, laying the groundwork for their future recognition and protection. Since then, the distinct concerns of SIDS were first collectively discussed at the 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in Barbados, resulting in the



³ LDC Category | Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY, WORLD, 1990 TO 2025

Extreme poverty is defined as living below the International Poverty Line of \$3 per day. This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



Source: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (2025). Our World in Data: [OurWorldinData.org/poverty](https://ourworldindata.org/poverty).

Note: This data is expressed in international-\$¹ at 2021 prices. Depending on the country and year, it relates to income (measured after taxes and benefits) or to consumption, per capita².

¹ International dollars are a hypothetical currency that is used to make meaningful comparisons of monetary indicators of living standards.

Figures expressed in constant international dollars are adjusted for inflation within countries over time, and for differences in the cost of living between countries.

The goal of such adjustments is to provide a unit whose purchasing power is held fixed over time and across countries, such that one international dollar can buy the same quantity and quality of goods and services no matter where or when it is spent. Read more in our article: "What are international dollars?"

² Per capita (income) "Per capita" here means that each person (including children) is attributed an equal share of the total income received by all members of their household.

Barbados Programme of Action. LLDCs received focused attention with the adoption of the Almaty Programme of Action in 2003, the first comprehensive global framework to address their unique transit and trade challenges. Over time, these early frameworks were refined into more targeted and sustained approaches through collaborative efforts within the UN system. The SAMOA Pathway, adopted in 2014, and the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS), agreed upon in 2024, are notable examples that recognize the escalating impacts of climate change, such as sea-level rise and extreme weather events, affecting small island nations. For LLDCs, the Awaza Programme of Action (2024-2034) presents a unified vision for enhancing transit connectivity, digital transformation, and climate resilience.

The 1990s: a decade of change

The 1990s marked a transformative period in development approaches, characterized by a series of landmark global conferences. Taken together, they reframed global priorities and laid the groundwork for what would become the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The decade began—following the end of the Cold War—with the World

Summit for Children (1990), then the Earth Summit in Rio (1992), which established sustainable development as the guiding global policy framework, integrating environmental protection with economic and social development. Subsequent conferences addressed human rights (Vienna, 1993), population and development (Cairo, 1994), social development (Copenhagen, 1995), women's rights (Beijing, 1995), human settlements (Istanbul, 1996), and food security (Rome, 1996). Each conference produced comprehensive declarations and platforms for action, generating specific goals and targets. Crucially, these forums also expanded participation beyond governments to include civil society.

The millennium shift to goal-oriented development

The turn of the millennium marked a pivotal moment in global development cooperation with the adoption of the MDGs in 2000, following the Millennium Summit. While building on targets discussed at previous global conferences, the MDGs represented a new paradigm. For the first

time, the international community coalesced around a set of clear, measurable, and time-bound goals (with a target date of 2015) primarily focused on tackling the most tangible dimensions of poverty and deprivation. These included halving extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating major diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, ensuring environmental sustainability (although this was initially less emphasized), and developing a global partnership for development.

The MDGs proved remarkably effective in mobilizing political will, focusing development assistance, and improving data collection and monitoring.⁴ They provided a common language and framework that resonated with policymakers, civil society, and the public alike. In the following years, significant progress was achieved in several areas, most notably a dramatic reduction in the global rate of extreme poverty (MDG 1), a decline in child mortality (MDG 4), and improvements in maternal health (MDG 5). The UN played a central role in coordinating efforts, monitoring progress, and supporting countries in implementing the MDGs.

The MDG framework also spurred essential initiatives, including global vaccination campaigns against polio and measles. While criticized for overlooking inequality within countries, the complexity of structural transformation, and the full scope of environmental challenges, among other reasons, the MDGs undeniably demonstrated the power of globally agreed goals in driving progress. They served as a foundational step towards the more comprehensive and integrated approach of the 2030 Agenda.

The financing for development (FfD) process and holistic resource mobilization

The experience of the MDGs, alongside broader development challenges, underscored a critical prerequisite for success: adequate and predictable financing. Recognizing that ambitious goals required commensurate resources, the UN convened a series of major intergovernmental conferences explicitly dedicated to Financing for Development (FfD). This process aimed to establish a comprehensive framework for mobilizing the financial resources needed to achieve internationally agreed development goals.

The landmark First International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002, led to the Monterrey Consensus—a global framework for mobilizing resources, enhancing international cooperation, and promoting sustainable development, particularly in developing countries. This agreement was groundbreaking in its broad scope, addressing not only traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA) but also encompassing domestic resource mobilization (improving tax systems, combating corruption), international trade as an engine for development, private investment flows (both domestic and foreign), external debt sustainability, and above all systemic issues. The Monterrey Consensus established a multi-faceted approach, acknowledging that financing development required action across a wide range of interconnected policy areas and involved diverse actors. It also emphasized the need to reform the architecture under the rubric of systemic issues, including governance of international financial institutions, to reflect new economic realities and make it fit for a globalized world.

Subsequent FfD conferences built upon this foundation. The Doha Declaration on Financing for Development (2008) reviewed the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus and addressed emerging challenges, including the global financial crisis unfolding at the time. This momentum carried forward to the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2015, which was a pivotal moment in shaping the global development agenda. Taking place just months before the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) was explicitly designed to provide the financial framework necessary to support the ambitious scale of the forthcoming 2030 Agenda. It reaffirmed Monterrey's holistic approach while strengthening commitments across all action areas, including ODA targets—and the long-standing 0.7 per cent ODA/GNI target—promoting international cooperation on tax matters, addressing illicit financial flows, systemic issues and emphasizing the importance of science, technology, innovation, and capacity-building, as well as encouraging the mobilization of private and blended finance.

The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4), held in Sevilla, Spain, in 2025, marked a significant milestone in the evolving agenda. Taking place in the context of multiple global crises, the Sevilla Commitment emphasized the urgent need to scale up concessional and

4 For example: [Own the Goals: What the Millennium Development Goals Have Accomplished](#)

innovative financing, deepen debt relief measures for vulnerable economies, and accelerate reform of the international financial architecture to make it more inclusive and resilient.

One essential element of FFD4—and a significant point of convergence in Sevilla—was the call for stronger international cooperation on taxation. This builds on momentum generated in earlier years, including the 2022 launch of formal negotiations on a Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation. This process aims to create a globally inclusive and equitable tax architecture for a globalized and digital economy. The Convention is being developed through a structured negotiation process, which includes two initial protocols: one on the taxation of digital services and another on the prevention and resolution of cross-border tax disputes. These developments represent a critical shift toward ensuring that countries have a fair and transparent international environment in mobilizing revenue and financing their sustainable development ambitions. The UN, as an inclusive and universal forum, will serve as the critical umbrella platform for advancing global tax cooperation.

The social dimension: advancing inclusion, equality, and human dignity

While economic development was a primary focus of the UN in the early decades, the organization simultaneously championed the crucial social dimensions of progress. From its inception, particularly through the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions, such as the Commission for Social Development and the Commission on the Status of Women, the UN has recognized that development must be inclusive, promote and respect human rights, and enhance human dignity for all; that social progress should be the central aim of development and that it is positively associated with economic progress as well. This dimension of the UN work has been characterized by the establishment of landmark normative frameworks, a growing focus on the rights of specific groups, and major global convenings that have shifted paradigms and solidified international consensus on social priorities.



UN PHOTO/SOPHIA PARIS

Shifting paradigms on population, social integration, and rights-based approaches

Over the decades, several other UN conferences have progressively broadened the understanding of the social dimension of development, moving beyond a narrow focus on the provision of basic needs toward more comprehensive, rights-based, and people-centred approaches. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo marked a significant paradigm shift. Moving away from previous approaches that often emphasized demographic targets, the ICPD Programme of Action prioritized the rights, dignity, and well-being of individuals—particularly women and girls—at the heart of population and development strategies. It affirmed that reproductive health and rights, including access to family planning, maternal health care, and education, are essential to achieving sustainable development. It fundamentally reshaped the global discourse and policy landscape related to population issues. It advanced the understanding that individual well-being is a cornerstone of collective development and must be addressed through shared responsibility and international cooperation.

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen cemented this people-centred approach to development, outlining a clear framework for placing human dignity, well-being, and social justice at the heart of global policy. The international community acknowledged social development as more than a byproduct of economic growth. It acknowledged social development as a central and indispensable goal. This Summit placed a clear emphasis on the need to address poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion to advance sustainable development. The Copenhagen Declaration emphasized that sustainable development must be rooted in democratic governance, respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the active participation of all people. It affirmed the interdependence of economic growth, social progress, and environmental stewardship, declaring them mutually reinforcing pillars of a higher quality of life for all. Equitable social development, particularly the empowerment of marginalized groups to fully participate in society and utilize resources sustainably, was identified as a necessary foundation for peace, security, and long-term prosperity.

The Second World Summit for Social Development, taking place from 4 to 6 November 2025 in Qatar, marks a critical opportunity to renew and elevate the global commitment

to inclusive, people-centred development. Grounded in the principles of the Copenhagen Declaration and adapted to today's complex and interconnected challenges, the Doha Political Declaration places strong emphasis on reducing poverty and inequality, rebuilding social cohesion, and ensuring universal access to quality education, healthcare, housing, and social protection.

Establishing norms for gender equality

A central thread throughout UN history has been the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. A pivotal achievement was the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Often described as the international bill of rights for women, CEDAW provides a comprehensive framework defining discrimination against women and setting agendas for national action to end such discrimination. It addresses rights in political, economic, social, cultural, and civic fields, establishing a powerful legal and normative basis for gender equality worldwide.

The momentum generated by CEDAW was significantly amplified by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in 1995. This Conference, along with the resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, marked a defining moment for the global women's rights movement. The Platform for Action identified 12 critical areas of concern and outlined strategic objectives and actions for governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. It remains a vital touchstone and blueprint for gender equality efforts globally, shaping policies and advocacy to this day. The increased focus and coordinated action stemming from Beijing ultimately contributed to the creation of UN Women in 2010, consolidating several smaller UN bodies into a single, dedicated entity to accelerate progress in meeting the needs of women and girls worldwide.

Focusing on specific groups, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, youth, older persons, international migrants and refugees

Building on the universal human rights framework, the UN has also facilitated the development of specific international instruments to address the rights and needs of groups that often face marginalization and discrimination. These



instruments and programmes represent important progress in acknowledging diversity and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups. They have been central to the 2030 Agenda's imperative of "leaving no one behind", and to the recognition that effective implementation requires tackling deeply entrenched discrimination. This means also addressing the way different forms of discrimination intersect – based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity and other factors.

The World Programme of Action for Youth, adopted in 1995, provides a policy framework and practical guidelines for national action and international support to improve the situation of young people. Similarly, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted in 2002, aims to ensure that people everywhere can age with security and dignity, and participate fully in their societies as citizens with full rights.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006, was groundbreaking for its active involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in the drafting process, embodying the principle of "nothing about us without us." The CRPD marked a crucial shift from perceiving disability through a medical or charity-based lens to embracing the social model of disability. This model recognizes that disability arises from the interaction between persons with impairments and the attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in society. The Convention clarifies the obligations of states to ensure that persons with disabilities can enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others. Additionally, the CRPD serves as a development framework that promotes

inclusive development for all persons with disabilities. Today, the Convention has been universally ratified by 193 States Parties, and the annual Conference of States Parties to the CRPD has become the most important UN meeting on disabilities, where States Parties work jointly with non-State partners, including organizations of persons with disabilities, to advance implementation.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, acknowledges the historical and continued injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples and affirms their collective and individual rights, including the right to self-determination, culture, lands and territories, education, health, employment, language, and others. The Declaration is the most comprehensive statement of the rights of Indigenous Peoples ever developed, influencing national legislation and policies. Complementing this normative framework, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), established by ECOSOC in 2000, serves as a significant advisory body to the UN system on Indigenous matters and provides a global platform for dialogue between Indigenous peoples and Member States.

In 2018, two global compacts related to international migration—the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees—were adopted by a large majority of United Nations Member States. These two global compacts provide a framework for governments and stakeholders to promote more effective, cooperative, and coherent responses to migration governance, ensuring that refugees and host communities receive the necessary support.

The environmental dimension: from awareness to action on planetary health

United Nations engagement with environmental issues represented a critical evolution. While the initial focus of the organization was primarily on peace, security, and post-war economic and social recovery, the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a growing awareness of the profound impacts of human activity on the natural world, as well as the links between human well-being and a healthy planet. This realization spurred the development of a distinct environmental dimension within the work of the UN, which fostered global change, transitioning from initial efforts to raise awareness towards the establishment of international legal frameworks, dedicated institutions, and global commitments aimed at safeguarding planetary health for present and future generations.

Emerging environmental consciousness

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, Sweden, was the first major international gathering to place environmental issues firmly on the global agenda. It brought together nations to discuss the complex relationship between development and the environment, acknowledging that environmental degradation posed risks to human well-being and economic progress.

The Stockholm Conference resulted in the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration, which outlines principles for environmental preservation, and an Action Plan containing recommendations for international environmental action. Critically, it led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), creating a dedicated institutional anchor within the UN system tasked with coordinating environmental activities, supporting environmental science, and assisting countries in implementing effective environmental policies.

Defining sustainable development

While Stockholm raised awareness on the topic, the conceptual framework linking environment and development explicitly gained prominence through the work of the World

Commission on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Brundtland Commission. Mandated by the General Assembly, the Commission published its seminal report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987.⁵

This report popularized the concept of “sustainable development,” defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It argued that environmental protection and economic development were not inherently contradictory but instead inextricably linked. It emphasized the need for integrated approaches that considered social equity, economic viability, and environmental sustainability together, profoundly influencing the subsequent global policy discourse and setting the stage for major multilateral efforts.

The Earth Summit

This shift in perspective was codified at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Earth Summit marked a watershed moment, as it introduced a bold new vision that recognized the interdependence of social, economic, and environmental systems.

The Summit adopted Agenda 21, a comprehensive global plan of action for sustainable development, outlining sector-specific strategies, policies and programmes across a vast range of social, economic, and environmental issues, designed to integrate environmental and developmental goals. The Summit also established the 27 Rio Principles, which provide guiding norms for sustainable development, including the precautionary principle, polluter-pays principle, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

Finally, the Earth Summit resulted in the adoption of three legally binding international conventions addressing major global environmental challenges:

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) aimed to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous human-caused interference with the climate system.

⁵ [Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development](#)

- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) focused on the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.
- The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) sought to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels.

Targeted action and implementation from Montreal to Paris

Alongside the broad frameworks established at Rio, the UN also facilitated targeted action on specific environmental threats, including the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. This treaty, designed to phase out the production and consumption of ozone-depleting chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons

(CFCs), is widely regarded as one of the most successful international environmental agreements ever concluded. Its success stemmed from strong scientific consensus, adaptable regulatory mechanisms, dedicated financial support for developing countries (through the so-called Multilateral Fund), and near-universal ratification.⁶ The Montreal Protocol demonstrated that concerted global action, backed by science and cooperation, could effectively address complex global environmental threats.

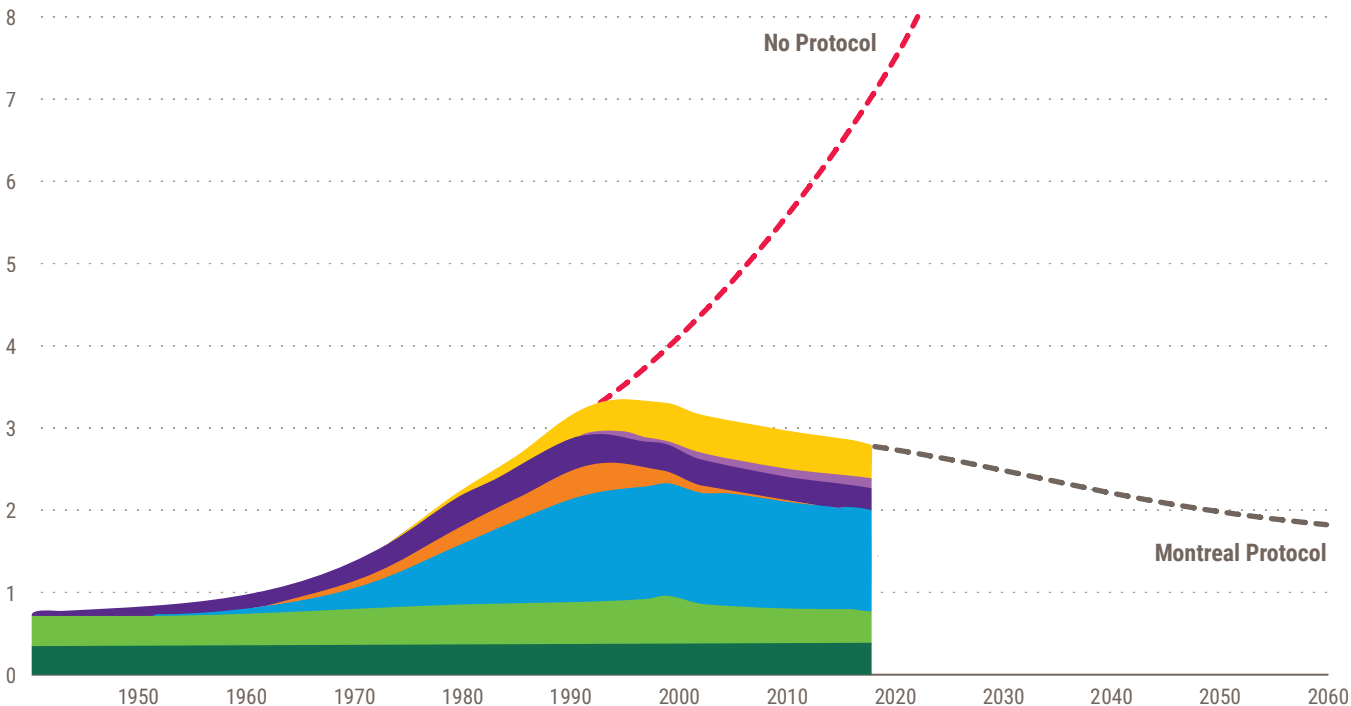
Subsequent major UN summits focused increasingly on the implementation of commitments made in Rio and fostering partnerships. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10), held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002, reviewed progress since the Earth Summit. While reaffirming the Rio principles, it placed a significant emphasis on implementation mechanisms. It highlighted the importance of partnerships among governments, the private sector, and civil society in achieving sustainable development efforts.

EFFECTIVE CHLORINE AND THE MONTREAL PROTOCOL

Effective chlorine (all substances) in the atmosphere and the scenario with and without the montreal protocol

halons HCFCs CCl₄ CH₃CCl₃ CFCs CH₃Br CH₃Cl

Effective chlorine concentration (ppb molar)



Source: CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere (updated September 2019).

6 [Ozone layer recovery is on track, helping avoid global warming by 0.5°C.](#)

Similarly, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) was convened again in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. Its outcome document, “The Future We Want,” reaffirmed foundational principles and, most importantly, launched the intergovernmental process that led directly to the formulation of the SDGs, which integrated climate-related targets with social and economic goals.

The culmination of decades of climate negotiations under the UNFCCC framework was the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. This legally binding international treaty represents a landmark achievement in the global response to climate change. Its primary goal is to keep the global average temperature increase this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, while pursuing efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The Agreement provides a universal framework applicable to all nations, covering mitigation (reducing emissions), adaptation (adjusting to climate impacts), and finance (supporting climate action, particularly in developing countries). It operates on a system of nationally determined contributions (NDCs), where countries set their targets, coupled with a process to increase ambition over time.

Integration in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond

The economic, social, and environmental dimensions of United Nations development work converged with the realization that these dimensions are not separate domains but deeply interconnected facets of a single, indivisible whole. Decades of focused efforts, landmark conferences, scientific evidence, and evolving conceptual understanding culminated in the recognition that lasting progress requires an integrated approach. This understanding found its most comprehensive and ambitious expression in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, representing a paradigm shift towards universality, integration, and a commitment to leaving no one behind.

Building blocks towards integration

While the 2030 Agenda marked a watershed moment, as outlined above, the concept of integrating the different dimensions of sustainable development had been gradually gaining traction within the UN system for years. Early efforts began to explicitly link economic, social, and

“We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.”

Kofi Annan, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*, United Nations, 2005

environmental concerns, moving beyond siloed approaches, which had already been initiated at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Moreover, the 1997 Agenda for Development, adopted by the General Assembly, represented another step towards a more holistic view, attempting to provide a framework that encompassed the multifaceted nature of development challenges.

The 2000 Millennium Summit, which led to the endorsement of the MDGs, primarily focused on specific social and economic targets but implicitly acknowledged linkages among the three dimensions, particularly through MDG 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability) and MDG 8 (Develop a global partnership for development). The experience gained during the MDG era, paired with science-based evidence, highlighted both the power of focused goals and the need for a more comprehensive framework that explicitly addressed root causes and interdependencies. The 2005 World Summit Outcome document also reinforced the interconnectedness of development, security, and human rights, further emphasizing the need for integrated strategies.

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals: a universal, integrated framework

Adopted unanimously by all UN Member States in September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, titled “Transforming our World,” represented the culmination of these efforts, with the 17 SDGs and their 169 associated targets. This Agenda marked a fundamental shift in several key aspects.

Unlike the MDGs, which were primarily seen as targets for developing countries with donors assisting, the 2030

Agenda is explicitly universal. It applies to all countries—both developed and developing—recognizing that sustainable development challenges are global and require collective action from everyone. All nations are called upon to implement the Agenda domestically and contribute to its achievement globally. Linked to this, a core principle woven throughout the Agenda is the commitment to “leave no one behind.” This means a pledge to reach the furthest behind first, ensuring that progress benefits all people, including the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalized groups, and addresses inequalities within and among countries.

Box 1

The modernization of data and statistical systems

The growing emphasis on evidence-based policymaking has elevated the importance of robust statistical systems and of quality, open and disaggregated data. From the foundational work of the UN Statistical Commission to the creation of the global indicator framework for the SDGs, the UN has played a pivotal role in shaping international statistical norms. The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data (2017) and the Medellín Framework of Action on Data for Sustainable Development (2024) have catalysed a global effort to modernize national statistical systems, strengthen data governance, promote data interoperability, and leverage innovative data sources and digital technologies. Continued support from the UN system, including through capacity-building and training initiatives, has helped countries strengthen their statistical infrastructure and close data gaps. Reliable, timely and inclusive data remain indispensable for measuring progress, fostering accountability, and enabling evidence-based development planning to leave no one behind. UN DESA remains the global centre for data on international trade, national accounts, energy, industry, the environment, and demographic and social statistics, gathered from national and international sources.

The Agenda also explicitly recognizes that the 17 SDGs are integrated and indivisible. Progress across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions is fundamentally interconnected. Success in one area can catalyse progress in others, while neglecting one can undermine advances elsewhere. The Agenda also marked a critical milestone with the inclusion of SDG 16, explicitly linking peace,

justice, and effective institutions to sustainable development outcomes. It also establishes that sustainable development is about transforming systems and not just pursuing goals individually. It is systems thinking that needs to shape the policy design in every country. The Agenda emphasized breaking down silos and calls for a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (SDG 17), recognizing that achieving the ambitious goals requires collaboration not only among governments but also with civil society, the private sector, academia, local authorities, and individuals. Importantly, it has also prompted Decades of Action to nurture multilateralism, speed up implementation, and advance science-based knowledge.

Box 2

Strengthening governance for sustainable development

While the 2030 Agenda emphasizes integration across sectors, its practical implementation relies fundamentally on the quality of governance at all levels. Over the decades, the UN system has supported Member States in building transparent, accountable, and participatory institutions. The adoption of SDG 16 marked a critical milestone, explicitly linking peace, justice, and effective institutions to sustainable development outcomes. International frameworks, such as the UN Convention against Corruption and the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2003), illustrate the most significant normative contributions of the UN. Additionally, capacity-building efforts by UNDP, UN DESA, and others have supported national governance reforms, including public sector modernization, anti-corruption strategies, and inclusive decision-making processes. These efforts remain central to ensuring that development gains are sustained and equitably distributed.

Monitoring progress and fostering accountability

To track progress, promote accountability, and facilitate shared learning, the 2030 Agenda designated the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as the central UN platform for follow-up and review. Meeting annually under the auspices of ECOSOC and every four years at the level of Heads of State and Government under the General Assembly, the HLPF provides political leadership, guidance, and recommendations.



A key feature of the HLPF process has been the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). These allow Member States to present their national efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, sharing successes, challenges, and lessons learned. VNRs foster peer learning, identify gaps and good practices, and mobilize partnerships. The period from 2015 to 2025 marked the first decade of the HLPF and the VNR mechanism, providing a crucial opportunity for stocktaking on the effectiveness of this review architecture. It also extends to the local level, with local and regional governments developing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR). Since 2016, over 400 VNRs have been submitted by more than 190 countries.

In parallel, thematic UN conferences, such as the UN Ocean Conference and the UN Water Conference, provide complementary platforms for reviewing and accelerating progress on specific goals, notably SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Beyond 2030: renewing multilateralism and addressing emerging challenges

Even as the international community works towards the 2030 target date, efforts are underway within the UN system to adapt multilateralism to current and future challenges and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. The Pact for the Future, adopted in 2024, aimed to

strengthen cooperation, address critical challenges, and reinvigorate the multilateral system. Key areas included calls for reform of the international financial architecture—closely linked to the FfD process—to ensure greater consideration for future generations in decision-making, as well as promoting effective global governance for emerging domains, such as digital technology, through the Global Digital Compact. In addition, ongoing efforts, particularly since 2022, to promote inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the UN directly support SDG implementation by strengthening domestic resource mobilization capabilities.

These initiatives demonstrate how the UN continuously adapts, seeking to ensure that an integrated vision of sustainable development remains achievable in a rapidly changing world. For example, UN collaboration with Member States, civil society, and the private sector enabled a rapid response to the COVID-19 crisis, including calls for vaccine equity, support for low-income countries, and efforts to promote recovery. However, in the face of today's complexities, this is being increasingly challenged, with many SDG targets currently off track. It is time to demonstrate the unique capacity of the UN to foster global consensus and collective action towards a future where economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental sustainability advance in tandem, benefiting all (see Section C).

Section B: Collaboration as the engine of progress



The advancements in sustainable development outlined above have been achieved through structured international cooperation, largely enabled by the institutional frameworks and processes of the United Nations. Progress resulted from deliberate collaboration, negotiation, and knowledge-sharing, leveraging the UN system as a unique platform for multilateral engagement.

The convening power of the UN

A core function enabling this progress has been the capacity of the UN to convene relevant actors. Its principal organs, particularly the General Assembly, ECOSOC, along with its functional commissions and subsidiary bodies, as well as the HLPF, provide the architecture for intergovernmental deliberation. Critically, these bodies and processes extend beyond Member States, incorporating inputs from international organizations, civil society representatives, the private sector, the scientific and academic communities, women, youth, and other stakeholders. UN DESA plays a vital role in supporting these bodies and processes through substantive preparation and logistical facilitation.

Global conferences as policy accelerators

Major UN conferences have repeatedly served as crucial catalysts, concentrating international attention and political capital to accelerate policy development and norm-setting. Stockholm (1972) placed the environment on the global agenda, leading to the creation of UNEP. Rio (1992) institutionalized the three dimensions of sustainable development, establishing Agenda 21 and the landmark Rio Conventions on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification. Cairo (1994) shifted the paradigm on population towards a rights-based approach, while Beijing (1995) produced a comprehensive Platform for Action for gender equality. Copenhagen (1995) addressed social development, emphasizing the importance of eradicating poverty, promoting employment, and fostering social integration. Monterrey (2002) and Addis Ababa (2015) established holistic frameworks for Financing for Development. Paris (2015) delivered the legally binding universal agreement

on climate change. These events served as focal points for intensive negotiation, resulting in agreed frameworks that guided subsequent national and international action.

The foundation of UN system analysis and expertise

The political momentum generated at these summits was consistently underpinned by the substantive analytical and normative work flowing from the UN system itself. With foundational data, research, policy analysis, and technical expertise, the UN has been at the forefront of generating ideas and epoch-defining analytical work for inclusive and sustainable development over the past eight decades.

From the 1940s onward, the UN system established itself as a centre of development thinking that challenged prevailing economic orthodoxies. Early economic analyses within the UN system, for instance, contributed to theories addressing the specific challenges of developing countries. The “Prebisch-Singer hypothesis,” presented in a groundbreaking UN survey in 1949, identified the challenges faced by countries emerging from colonization, lending weight to calls for industrialization in developing countries.⁷ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the UN continued to advance alternative frameworks, contributing to debates around the “New International Economic Order” and a basic-needs approach to development. Building on these foundations, Lawrence Klein pioneered Project LINK. This global initiative integrated national economic models into a consistent worldwide framework, which forms the basis for UN DESA global economic forecasting and policy analysis.

Building on decades of analytical work, the Brundtland Commission report mandated by the UN General Assembly provided the foundational definition of sustainable development. Similarly, the UNICEF report *Adjustment with a Human Face* (1987), led by then-Deputy Director Richard Jolly, brought global attention to the social consequences of austerity policies in the 1980s. The UNDP *Human Development Reports*, inspired by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen’s work, pioneered a shift from income-based measures of development to a broader understanding of development grounded in human well-being and capabilities.

⁷ Sir Hans Singer worked in UN DESA in 1949, while Raúl Prebisch worked in ECLAC and became the founding Secretary-General of UNCTAD. More specifically, they contended that developing countries heavily reliant on exporting primary commodities faced deteriorating terms of trade relative to industrialized nations importing manufactured goods. This analysis provided intellectual backing for development strategies focused on import substitution and industrialization, fueling demands within the UN for policies that would support such transitions. For more, see: [Toye and Toye, 2003, The Origins and Interpretation of the Prebisch-Singer Thesis](#)



UN PHOTO

From UN DESA, flagship publications such as the *World Economic and Social Survey (WESS)*, the *World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP)*, and the *Report on the World Social Situation (RWSS)* have provided forward-looking analyses, often anticipating or challenging dominant policy paradigms. The 2006 WESP, for example, specifically highlighted unsustainable trends in the US housing market ahead of the 2008 global financial crisis, warning of potential systemic risks from overvalued real estate prices and loose lending standards.⁸ The 2005 RWSS was one of the first major international reports to highlight inequality as a growing constraint on development, providing evidence that high and rising income disparities threatened sustainable growth and democratic governance.⁹ These analytical insights, produced before mainstream consensus recognized these risks, demonstrate the capacity of the UN to identify structural vulnerabilities.

The *UN E-Government Survey*, first published in 2001, has become a leading global benchmark for assessing digital government development, tracking how countries harness ICTs to improve service delivery, transparency, and participation. By highlighting innovations, gaps, and trends in digital transformation, the Survey has guided policymakers in aligning e-government strategies with sustainable development objectives and citizen needs.

The intellectual leadership of the UN was particularly evident in reshaping the global narrative around development financing. In the lead-up to the Monterrey Conference (2002), the UN Secretary-General and the broader UN system challenged existing paradigms dominated by the international financial institutions, bringing developing country perspectives on aid, debt, trade, and private capital flows to the forefront of discussions. The financing for development deliberations later came to rely heavily on an “inter-agency task force”, established in 2015, to structure discussions on mobilizing diverse funding streams.¹⁰

Similarly, the effectiveness of the HLPF Voluntary National Review process is enhanced by common reporting guidelines developed with the support of the UN. This flow of evidence and analysis provides a substantive basis for policy negotiation. The UN has also increasingly emphasized that its normative policy guidance and operational support to Member States operate at all levels—global, regional, national, and local—as they implement the 2030 Agenda. These analytical efforts have not only informed UN policy guidance but have also shaped international debates and influenced national strategies, thereby reinforcing the role of the UN as a platform for inclusive and forward-looking development discourse.

⁸ WESP 2006

⁹ RWSS 2005

¹⁰ Home | Financing for Sustainable Development Office

Negotiation, consensus-building, and global norms

The UN provides the primary venue for the complex process of negotiating consensus among its diverse Member States. Reaching universally agreed objectives and outcomes, such as the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, or the Paris Agreement, requires extensive negotiation and compromise. While gradual and incremental, this process fosters broad ownership and confers legitimacy upon the resulting norms and frameworks, which in turn shape national policies and provide benchmarks for accountability.

Recognizing the limitations of purely state-led action, the UN has increasingly promoted multi-stakeholder partnerships, a trend emphasized at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10). This approach, formally embedded in SDG 17, leverages the distinct capacities, resources, and expertise of civil society, the private sector, academia, and other actors alongside governments to achieve shared objectives and support implementation

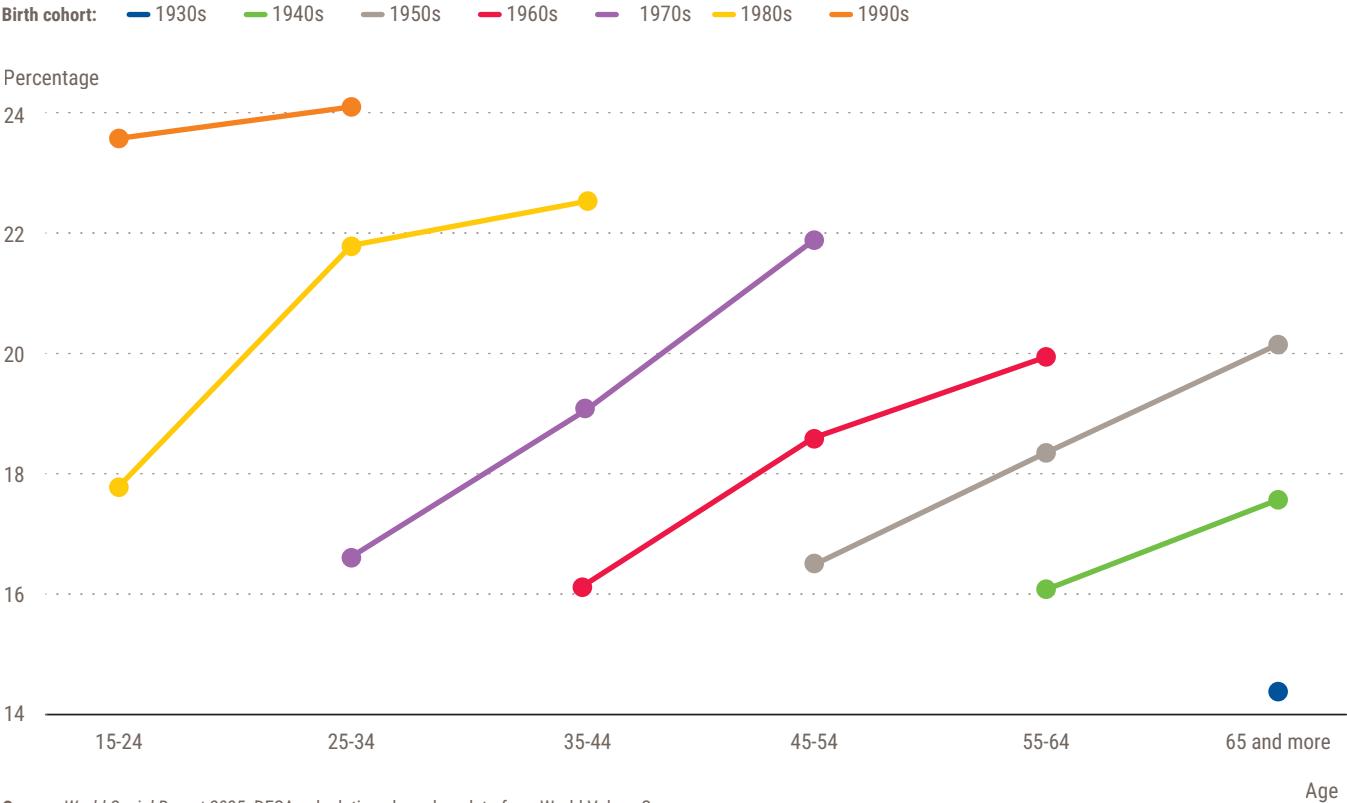
efforts. The active engagement of Major Groups and other stakeholders in sustainable development-related processes, including their contributions to the Commission on Sustainable Development and later the HLPF, served as a successful example of effective collaboration and inclusivity. They played a crucial role in shaping sustainable development over the decades, providing momentum, advocacy, and technical input.

Contemporary challenges to multilateral collaboration

However, the spirit of multilateral collaboration that yielded the landmark agreements of 2015 has encountered significant turbulence in the subsequent decade. Rising geopolitical tensions and a decline in trust have complicated consensus-building efforts. A resurgence of nationalism has led some actors to question the value of shared commitments, as persistent financing gaps, unmet official development assistance (ODA) commitments, and

SHARE OF PEOPLE WHO DO NOT TRUST THEIR GOVERNMENT AT ALL, BY BIRTH COHORT AND AGE

Younger generations increasingly lack trust in their government



Source: World Social Report 2025. DESA calculations based on data from World Values Surveys.
Note: Based on data for 28 countries, using World Values Survey wave 5 (2005-2009), wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 7 (2017-2022).



overwhelming debt burdens in developing countries undermine SDG progress. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed weaknesses in global solidarity, particularly in terms of equitable access to essential health technologies. Meanwhile, the digital divide and the proliferation of disinformation create new barriers to cooperation and trust.

Finally, significant implementation gaps and active political pushback against agreed agendas in some national contexts further illustrate the challenges. These headwinds demonstrate forcefully that multilateralism is not self-sustaining; it requires constant investment, adaptation, and political commitment to navigate complexity.

Geopolitical friction, sovereignty concerns and eroding trust

Heightened tensions between major powers, regional conflicts, and a decline in adherence to international law pose significant challenges to cooperation, making it increasingly difficult to reach consensus on development

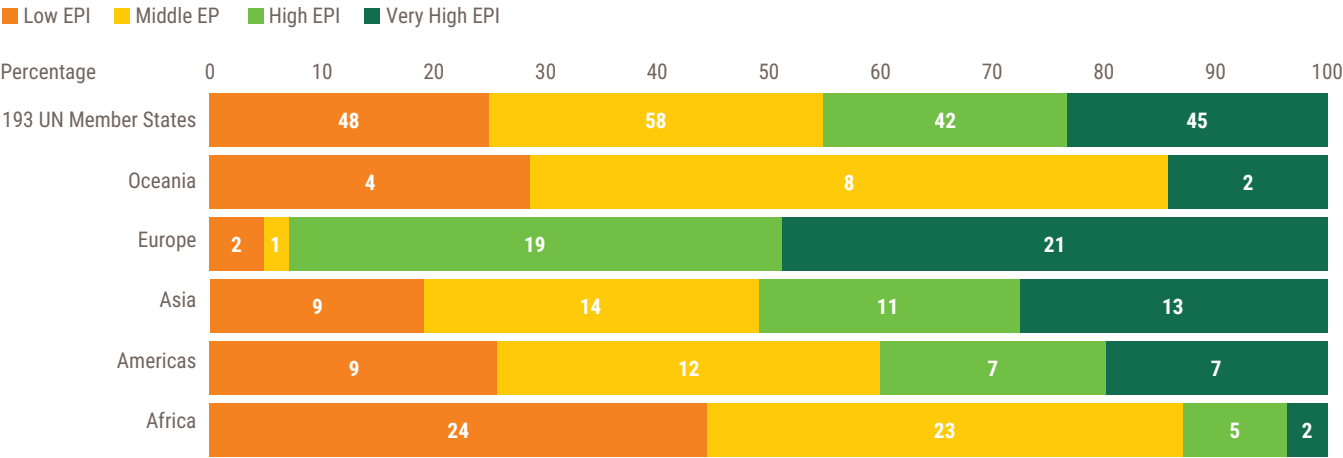
issues. Assertions of national sovereignty, often accompanied by populist rhetoric, have led some Member States to question the value of certain international agreements, withdraw from others, and resist external scrutiny, thereby directly challenging the premises of multilateralism. Even where agreements exist, translating them into effective national action faces significant obstacles, including a lack of capacity, distrust of public institutions, and active pushback against agendas such as climate action and gender equality, in various national contexts.

Persistent financing gaps

Despite the commitments in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, mobilizing adequate financing for the SDGs has been a persistent challenge. ODA levels have often fallen short of targets. At the same time, developing countries face mounting debt burdens, which global economic shocks, including the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated. The pandemic exposed deep inequalities and weaknesses in global solidarity, notably around access to vaccines and medical supplies. The

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTRIES BY EPI LEVEL, 2024

The E-Participation Index (EPI) is an indicator of citizen engagement in governance via digital methods. The percentage scoring “very high” ranges from nearly 50 percent in Europe to less than 5 percent in Africa



Source: United Nations E-Government Survey 2024.

need for fundamental reform of the international financial architecture and more effective global mechanisms for debt relief and tax cooperation are issues the Addis Ababa Action Agenda addressed but did not fully resolve. These concerns were revisited and further emphasized at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Sevilla in 2025. Yet, translating these renewed commitments into concrete systemic change remains one of the most pressing and unresolved challenges in the global effort to finance sustainable development.

Digital divide, misinformation, disinformation, and contested narratives

The rise of digital technologies has been accompanied by the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which can erode trust in science, exacerbate societal polarization, and undermine support for international cooperation. In addition, while digital technologies offer immense potential for sustainable development, the gap in access and

skills between and within countries risks exacerbating existing inequalities if not addressed through international cooperation.

Silver linings

Despite these formidable challenges, the international community has demonstrated remarkable determination and commitment to finding multilateral solutions to shared global problems. The successful conclusion of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Sevilla (2025), the entry into force of the Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) and the adoption of the WHO Pandemic Agreement represent concrete examples of this resolve to act together in the face of adversity. These achievements underscore that while multilateralism faces unprecedented pressures, the fundamental recognition of our interconnectedness and shared destiny continues to drive collective action on the most pressing challenges of our time.

Section C: Lessons for the future



The eight-decade journey of pursuing development through the United Nations offers vital lessons, particularly relevant in the face of the complex challenges of the current era. As the UN navigates this complex environment, demonstrating the value of investing in sustainable development has become increasingly crucial.

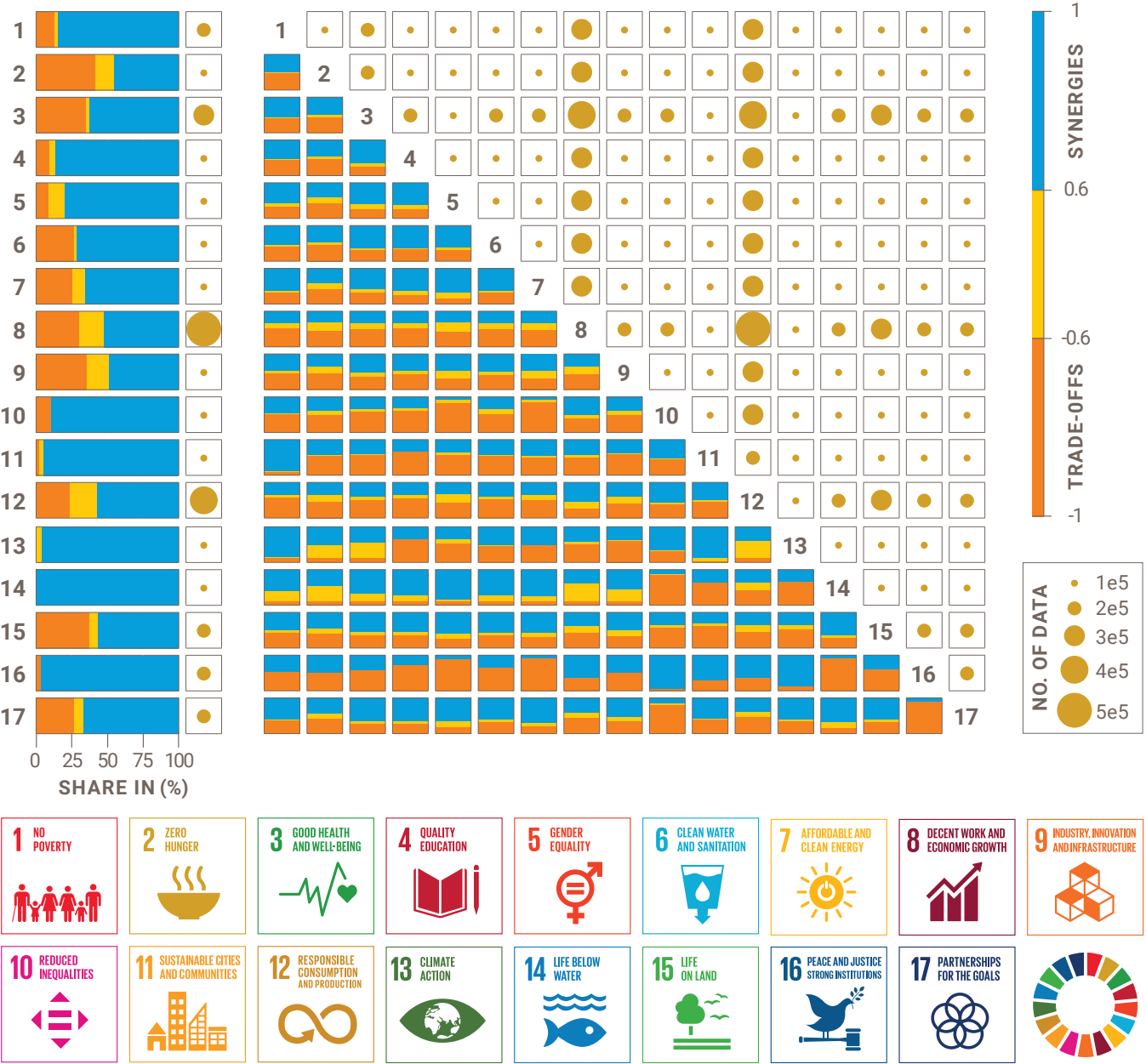
Lesson 1

Collective action is crucial

The evolution from focusing on separate economic, social, and environmental tracks to the integrated framework of the 2030 Agenda reflected the hard-won recognition that

INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS CREATE SYNERGIES AND TRADE-OFFS

Interlinkages within the 17 SDGs, and among pairs of SDGs



Source: Global Sustainable Development Report 2023. Anderson, C.C., Denich, M., Warchold, A. and others, 2022.

Note: Results from an illustrative study of interlinkages between the Sustainable Development Goals. Note: Interactions within the 17 Goals (left) and among 136 pairs of Goals (right) based on data from 2018 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division 2019). The shares of synergies (light blue), non-classifieds (yellow), and trade-offs (orange) are represented by the colour bars. The number of data pairs of Sustainable Development Goal indicators is depicted by the areas of the circle in the boxes. Here, 1e5, 2e5, 3e5, 4e5, and 5e5 are 100, 1,000, 10,000, 100,000, and 500,000, respectively.



development challenges are deeply interconnected. Climate change impacts food security, drives migration, and affects health; health crises devastate economies; and inequality fuels political instability and hinders growth. Addressing these complex overlapping issues demands comprehensive approaches that break down policy silos and consider the indivisibility of economic prosperity, equity, and environmental integrity.

The SDGs provide a universal framework, explicitly recognizing that the 17 Goals are integrated and indivisible. Progress in one area, such as investing in clean energy (SDG 7) or quality education (SDG 4), can create positive spillover effects for decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), improved health (SDG 3), and climate action (SDG 13). Conversely, neglecting one dimension, like environmental protection, can undermine long-term economic stability and social well-being.

Integrated, multi-sectoral responses are fundamental for navigating the complexity and potential conflicts inherent in the interdependent nature of the SDGs.¹¹ Leveraging synergies across goals—which generally prevail over trade-offs—through identified entry points can accelerate transformation and enhance the cost-effectiveness of policies and

investments. These in turn lead to more robust, resilient, effective, and legitimate governmental actions. Successfully implementing the SDGs in this integrated manner remains a key challenge, but it offers significant rewards, unlocking opportunities across key economic systems, including food, cities, energy, and health.

Lesson 2

Inclusive multilateralism remains indispensable

Despite recent headwinds, the UN-based multilateral system has proven essential for tackling problems that transcend national borders. Global health security—including the polio eradication efforts spurred by the MDGs, climate action, financial stability, refugee protection, and the setting of crucial technical standards—all rely heavily on international cooperation facilitated by the UN.

Landmark successes such as the effective phase-out of ozone-depleting substances under the Montreal Protocol, or the near-universal support for the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, demonstrate the potential of collective action through the UN framework. The crises of recent years,

11 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2023 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

from pandemics to conflicts and the climate emergency, strengthen the case for, not against, effective multilateralism as the only viable means to manage shared risks and achieve common goals. This history of successes serves as a powerful counterargument to narratives favouring unilateralism or isolationism.

However, multilateralism is not static and must continuously reform itself to remain compelling and legitimate. It needs to become more inclusive, networked, and responsive, adapting to a rapidly changing world, as shown in the recent push for a “UN 2.0”.¹² For example, while multilateral organizations now deliver a significant share of official development finance, funding fragmentation and the prevalence of earmarked contributions can limit flexibility and strategic alignment. Enhancing the quality, coherence, and impact of multilateral development finance, ensuring it supports long-term goals alongside crisis response, is crucial. This includes collaboration extending to the local level, with cities and regions playing active roles in SDG implementation and climate action by participating in the VLR movement. Their transformative potential ultimately depends, however, on strong, accountable, and adaptive institutions capable of translating global commitments into concrete national actions.

Lesson 3

Norms and frameworks catalyse change

UN-led processes, grounded in the principle of the UN Charter, have been instrumental in establishing globally recognized norms, principles, and goals across the spectrum of sustainable development—from human rights and gender equality to environmental protection and the concept of sustainable development. While implementation often lags and varies significantly by context, these internationally agreed frameworks provide essential benchmarks for national action. They inspire legislation and policies, empower civil society to advocate for change, and establish a basis for accountability through mechanisms such as the VNRs.

These norms and frameworks shape aspirations and guide long-term action. For instance, the principles embedded in

CEDAW continue to drive efforts for gender equality globally, contributing not only to social justice but also economic progress by promoting women’s participation in the economy. Frameworks like the SDG Impact Standards are now helping businesses and investors align their operations and capital with sustainable development, embedding impact considerations into core decision-making processes.¹³ Similarly, Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) provide countries with tools to align financing policies with national sustainable development priorities.¹⁴ The effectiveness of these frameworks is significantly enhanced by the active engagement of diverse stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and academia, ensuring inclusivity and broader ownership.

Lesson 4

Foresight, adaptation and innovation are vital for impact

The UN system has demonstrated a capacity to adapt throughout its history, creating new institutions in response to evolving needs, developing new guiding frameworks and benchmarks such as the MDGs and the comprehensive SDGs, embracing emerging global themes such as digital cooperation, and initiating complex reform processes. Contemporary efforts, such as the Pact for the Future, the push for inclusive international tax cooperation, and advocacy for reforming the international financial architecture, reflect this ongoing need not only to adapt but also to prepare for future shocks. These initiatives aim to make the multilateral system more effective in addressing current gaps, such as mobilizing the necessary finance for the SDGs and ensuring governance structures are fit for 21st-century challenges. The Pact for the Future also emphasizes the importance of foresight in shaping decisions and driving transformation.

The UN system, particularly UN DESA, supports Member States in translating global development commitments into context-specific policies through innovative capacity building and technical cooperation in areas such as digital transformation, data, strategic foresight, and behavioral science.

However, the rapid pace of global change—from technological disruption to accelerating environmental crises—

¹² [United Nations | UN 2.0 | United Nations](#)

¹³ [UNDP, Private Finance for the SDGs](#)

¹⁴ [United Nations, Integrated National Financing Framework](#)



demands continuous and accelerated adaptation to ensure the UN remains fit for purpose. This includes finding innovative ways to demonstrate the value of its work, such as highlighting the substantial economic returns and other crosscutting near-, medium- and long-term benefits associated with achieving sustainable development outcomes. Building on this, in March 2025, the UN Secretary-General launched the “UN80 Initiative,” aimed at accelerating the necessary reforms within the organization.¹⁵

Lesson 5

Intergenerational equity is essential

At its core, sustainable development is about securing the future: balancing present needs with the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Decisions made today regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, resource management, debt accumulation, and social investment will profoundly impact the opportunities and well-being of future generations. Failing to address these issues adequately shifts the burden onto younger and future generations.

The consequences of intergenerational inequity extend beyond environmental and social impacts; they also have economic implications. Unchecked climate change and biodiversity loss entail massive future costs and reduced growth potential. Unsustainable fiscal policies can create unfair financial burdens on future taxpayers. Embedding

the principle of intergenerational equity, as emphasized in the Pact for the Future and advocated by youth movements worldwide, must be a central consideration in all development planning, policymaking, and investment decisions. This involves recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and ensuring future generations can benefit from it, as well as designing policies, from climate action to pension systems and biodiversity finance, that ensure fairness across generations.

“[I]t is essential that an organizational system as complex and crucial as the United Nations subjects itself to rigorous and regular scrutiny to assess its fitness for purpose in carrying out its goals efficiently. And this 80th anniversary year of the United Nations is a prime moment to expand all our efforts, recognizing the need for even greater urgency and ambition.”

Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations at the launch of UN80 Initiative, 13 March 2025, New York

¹⁵ UN80 Initiative

Conclusion: Towards a resilient and sustainable future



Eighty years after its founding, the United Nations stands at a critical juncture. The universal and integrated vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a remarkable evolution in global understanding and ambition. This report traces a path, highlighting landmark achievements across the economic, social, and environmental spheres—from the early focus on growth and decolonization, through the articulation of fundamental human rights and environmental principles, to the comprehensive framework of the SDGs. These changes, forged through often-difficult multilateral negotiations and collaborative processes, demonstrate the enduring capacity of the UN to foster collective action on shared challenges.

However, this retrospective also underscores the persistent gaps between aspiration and reality, the inherent complexities of global cooperation, and the profound challenges confronting multilateralism today. Geopolitical tensions, rising nationalism, systemic inequalities, persistent financing gaps, the escalating climate crisis, and the lingering scars of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten to derail progress towards the SDGs and undermine the foundations of international cooperation upon which sustainable development depends.

The milestones celebrated here—the Development Decades, the LDC category, CEDAW, the Earth Summit, the MDGs, the Paris Agreement, the SDGs, the Pact for the Future, and others—represent hard-won progress through dialogue, negotiation, and the persistent belief in multilateral solutions. They demonstrate that, even amidst diverging interests and complex global dynamics, collective

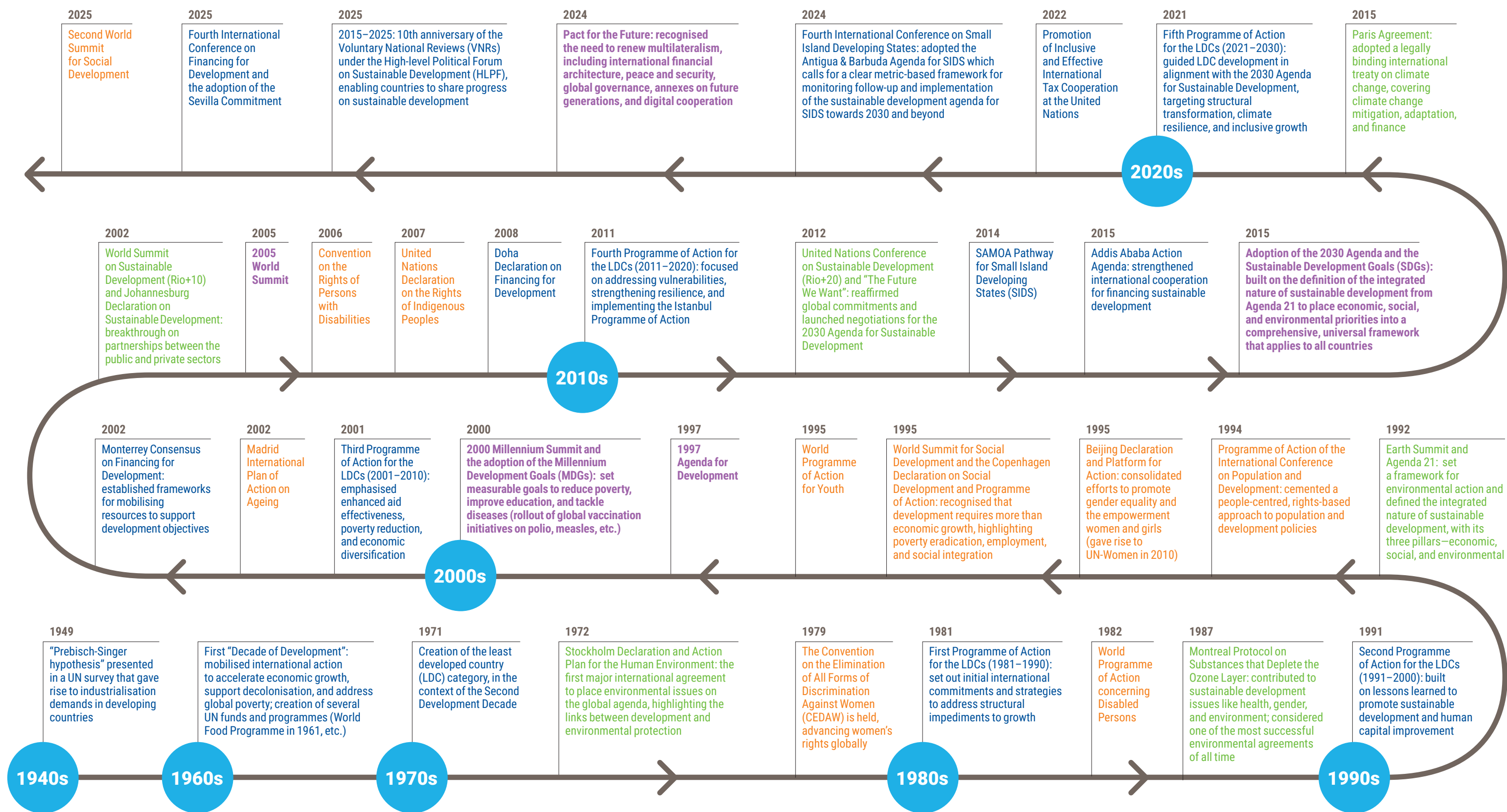
action through the United Nations can yield transformative results, improve lives, and expand opportunities.

The subsequent lessons, therefore, are critical to navigating future uncertainties. Given the interconnected nature of contemporary challenges, the imperative for integrated policymaking is clear. While facing strains, *inclusive multilateralism remains the primary viable mechanism for addressing international issues*, although its effectiveness necessitates ongoing reform, adaptation, and adequate resourcing. The value of *shared norms and frameworks as catalysts* for national action and accountability persists, emphasizing the importance of continued UN leadership. The *need for institutional adaptation, strategic foresight and innovation* is paramount if the UN system is to remain relevant and effective. Ultimately, intergenerational equity necessitates the systematic integration of policy to ensure long-term environmental and economic security.

Achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda and addressing longer-term global challenges requires translating these lessons into concrete, actionable steps. This necessitates not only reaffirming commitments but also strengthening the mechanisms for international cooperation, ensuring predictable and adequate financing for development, investing in robust data and analytical capacity to guide evidence-based policy, and fostering the political conditions necessary for effective collective action. The ability of the UN to support Member States in these efforts will be critical for realizing a sustainable, equitable, and resilient future. The choice is clear: we must advance together through genuine solidarity and cooperation. If we retreat into fragmentation, we risk collective failure.



Key development milestones since 1945



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