

# THE EROSION OF TRUST: A THREAT TO SOCIAL PROGRESS

## INTRODUCTION

Trust is central for societies, the State, and markets to function. It is key to building and maintaining social cohesion, as it promotes cooperation between groups of people as well as between people and the State. Trust is also fundamental to foster international cooperation and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

When people perceive institutions as legitimate, fair and efficient, they are more likely to comply with rules and uphold their duties and responsibilities. They might be more willing to cooperate, participate and adhere to rules and norms such as paying taxes, complying with government regulations, accepting the rule of law, adhering to contracts, or voting. Trust thus enables public institutions to provide for people's needs.

However, evidence shows that trust in institutions is in crisis: more than half of the world's population reports little or no trust in their government (United Nations and UNU-WIDER, 2025). Restoring people's trust is essential to repair the social fabric, mitigate rising polarization, accelerate social progress and achieve global goals.

## TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IS DECLINING FROM ONE COHORT TO THE NEXT

People's age and the period in which they were born are strong predictors of attitudes, opinions and behaviours. These form early in life and are shaped not only by personal experience, family, and community, but also by the broader social, political, and economic environment that people grow up in. Each cohort—say, people born within the same decade—inherits a world that is different from that of its predecessors, with new norms, opportunities and challenges, which in turn shape their expectations of what life should be like. Levels of trust will thus evolve as today's cohorts age and as new cohorts are born.

Assessing levels of confidence across successive cohorts of people provides important insights on possible future trends. As shown in figure 1, lack of trust in institutions has increased from one ten-year birth cohort to the next, particularly among young people. For the age bracket 25 to 34, nearly 25 per cent of those born in the 1990s say they do not trust their government at all, up from nearly

### Key Messages

- » Trust is **essential** for social cohesion and progress. It enables cooperation between people and institutions, supports the rule of law and public service delivery, and is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- » **Trust in governments is in crisis.** Institutional trust is declining worldwide, with over half of the global population reporting little or no trust in their government.
- » **Younger generations are losing trust fastest.** Trust in government has been declining steadily across successive birth cohorts. Without action, this downward trend will likely intensify in the coming decades.
- » **Rebuilding trust requires more than policies.** Investing in people through strong social policies is vital, but rebuilding trust also requires reforming institutions and promoting equitable and inclusive norms and values.

22 percent of those born in the 1980s and 16 per cent for those born in the 1970s when they were the same age. For the age bracket 35 to 44, the percentage of people who do not trust at all rose from 16 per cent, for those born in the 1960s, to 23 per cent for those born in the 1980s.

Across all cohorts examined, trust declines as people age. Declines by age have been larger across the most recent cohorts—those born in the 1970s and the 1980s, in particular. In some cases, major events—a conflict, crisis, or a global pandemic—can have an outsized effect on members of one cohort, especially if they occur during a key period in their lives, particularly adolescence or young adulthood. For instance, many people born in the 1980s entered adulthood during the 2008 global financial crisis, which triggered a protracted employment crisis that disproportionately affected youth. Sudden events, technological advances and shifts in norms and values further define each cohort's worldview and influence how they perceive institutions and other people. However, temporary shocks alone cannot explain the steady decline in trust across cohorts or as people age.

Based on current trends, and if no action is taken, trust in institutions is likely to continue declining in the future, as today's teens and young adults grow older. That is, should the age and cohort patterns shown in figure 1 remain unchanged, confidence in governments

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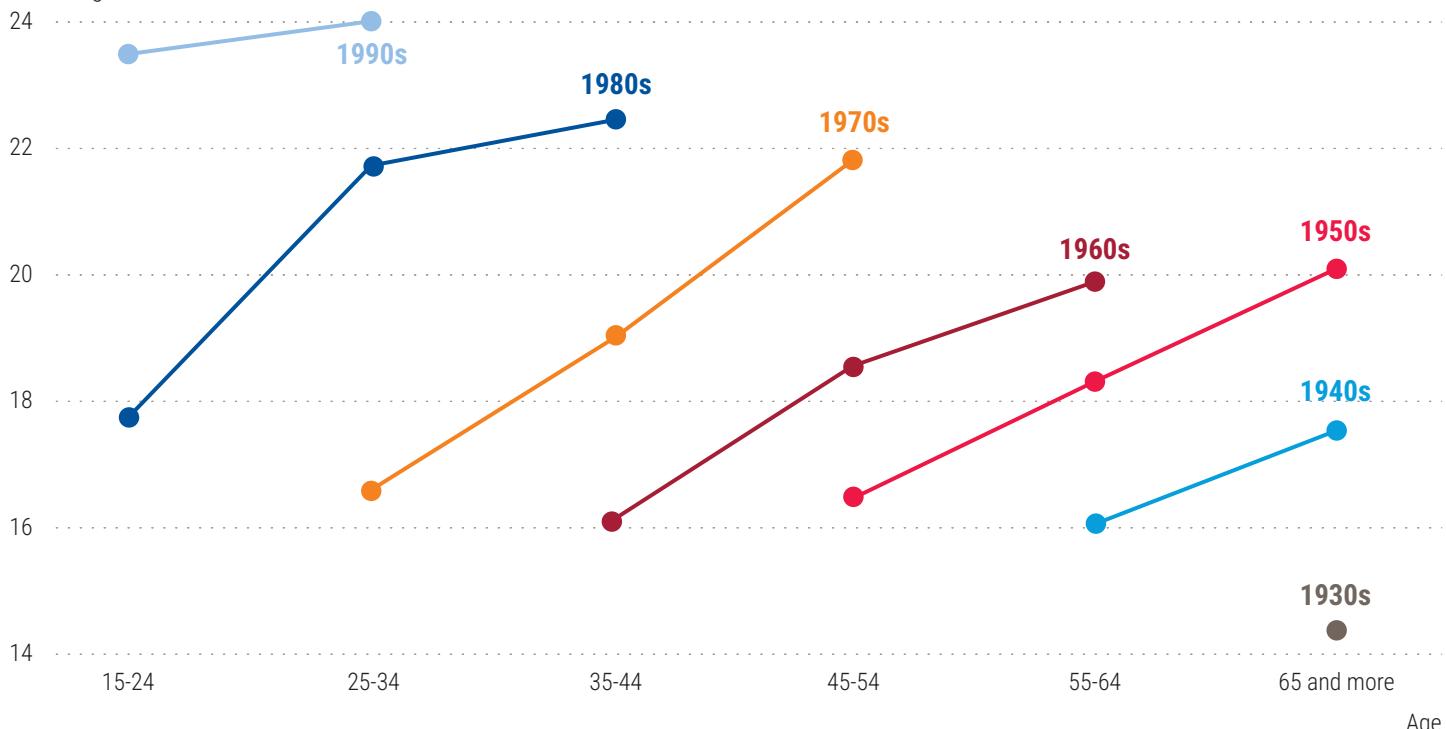
Figure 1

## Younger generations increasingly lack trust in their government

Share of people who **do not trust** their government at all, by birth cohort and age

**Birth cohort:** — 1930s — 1940s — 1950s — 1960s — 1970s — 1980s — 1990s

Percentage



**Source:** DESA calculations based on data from World Values Surveys.

**Note:** Share of people who do not trust their government at all, by birth cohort and age. Based on data for 28 developed and developing countries and areas, using World Values Survey wave 5 (2005–2009), wave 6 (2010–2014) and wave 7 (2017–2022).

will continue to fall in the coming decades. These worrying trends call into question the legitimacy of governments and reveal weaknesses in the social contract, serving as a warning sign for potential social turmoil.

a vicious cycle that is impacting well-being and weakening the capacity of people and countries to act collectively, with devastating effects for progress toward global goals (United Nations and UNU-WIDER, 2025). Rebuilding trust is essential to break this cycle.

### REBUILDING TRUST TO ACCELERATE SOCIAL PROGRESS

The root causes of low trust levels around the world go beyond any single crisis. They have been building over many decades. The rapid pace of globalization and technological change have benefited many people and filled the future with possibilities. At the same time, these trends, together with climate change and a growing wave of conflicts, have brought new risks and threats, unsettling lives and societies—and fueling distrust.

Investing more, and better, in people, and ensuring that the risks facing individuals along the life cycle are pooled and shared fairly, are key to reducing economic insecurity and raising people's confidence. People are more likely to trust their governments when they perceive that resources are used to protect, support, and advance people's well-being, for example, through the effective delivery of public services. These findings are consistent with predictions that better evaluations of government performance can lead to higher trust in institutions, especially when it comes to perceptions of stronger redistributive policies (United Nations and UNU-WIDER, 2025). But environments of trust and cooperation must also be sustained by responsive institutions.

Far from inevitable, today's crisis of trust and insecurity is in large part the result of policy choices. For decades, the prevailing policy approach to development—centred on free markets, small government and economic efficiency—has shaped global transformations marked by persisting inequality and widespread economic insecurity. Social tensions and grievances have grown, fueling

Today, many institutions are failing to respond to current challenges, leaving a void that furthers people's sense of insecurity and unfairness. Promoting solidarity and rebalancing relationships—between

people and the State, workers and employers, and among individuals—calls for re-negotiating formal and informal norms and values, and ensuring institutions are fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Economic, social, political, and cultural institutions such as markets, corporations, families, and education systems, play a pivotal role in shaping social relationships and fostering solidarity between people and across groups. When these institutions are inclusive and participatory, they can promote positive attitudes and behaviors, empower people, and strengthen social cohesion. This creates the conditions needed to end poverty, reduce inequality, and advance all SDGs. Moving in this direction involves embedding equity into constitutional and legal frameworks, expanding access to justice through legal empowerment, and formally recognizing the rights of historically excluded groups, including through robust civil registration systems. Equitable participation in decision-making, for example, through participatory budgeting, civic consultations, or digital platforms, should be accessible to all. Legal and institutional support for

workplace democracy and unions can also help renew civic engagement and reinforce democratic values.

Although normative and institutional change is a slow process, and often emerges from broad stakeholder coalitions, Governments play a key role in setting rules, removing barriers to participation, expanding access to social, political, and economic life, and ensuring that the State is accountable and responsive to all citizens. Only States can guarantee the rule of law, establish just regulatory environments and fair taxation systems, and deliver services at scale. Tackling corruption, strengthening accountability, and ensuring public sector effectiveness are critical to restoring legitimacy. Governments can also create space for grassroots movements, cooperatives, and social mobilization, which elevate collective interests and challenge exclusionary norms. Promoting sustainable economic models and justice systems can shift social values toward solidarity.

## References

United Nations and UNU-WIDER (2025). *World Social Report 2025: A New Policy Consensus to Accelerate Social Progress*.