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Youth in the spotlight as UN DESA examines mental health and population trends in new reports

Last month, UN DESA launched the *World Youth Report on Youth Mental Health and Well-being,* highlighting the urgent need for inclusive, youth-informed mental health policies. Another report, *World Population Highlights 2026: Youth*, is now being released, homing in on the latest youth population trends, helping policymakers use population foresight to address the needs of young people everywhere and to ensure that demographic change supports equitable and sustainable development.

The first report was launched by UN DESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development during the 64th session of the Commission for Social Development, convening Member States, UN entities, civil society partners and dozens of young people to examine the social factors shaping youth mental health and well-being. Its release aligns with a growing global concern over young people's mental health, as youth face intersecting challenges such as poverty and inequality, barriers to education and decent work, digital harms, conflict, social exclusion, and climate-related stress.

In her keynote address at the launch event, Bjørg Sandkjær, ASG for Policy Coordination of UN DESA, underscored that “addressing youth mental health requires confronting inequality itself through coordinated, equitable, and inclusive social policies that expand opportunity, reduce exclusion, and strengthen solidarity.” She emphasized that the report’s findings should inform intergovernmental processes, including the Commission for Social Development, and support the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth, alongside broader efforts to realize the commitments included in the Doha Political Declaration adopted during the Second World Summit for Social Development.

The *World Youth Report* adopts a youth-informed social determinants approach, examining how education, work, family dynamics, poverty, digital environments, societal attitudes, and climate change shape mental health outcomes. Presenting the findings, Masumi Ono, Chief of the Social Inclusion and Participation Branch of UN DESA, highlighted that inequalities in opportunities are closely linked to disparities in mental health and well-being; stigma and discrimination continue to limit access to care, education, and work; and preventive, community-based, and youth-responsive approaches are essential to closing mental health gaps.

A central feature of the report – and the launch – was the emphasis on youth lived experiences. UN Youth Delegates Jorina Kaminski of Switzerland and Cevor Tikerpuu of Finland shared their insights.

“Being young means having options; It means having a whole life ahead of you. But today, being young also means not being sure whether the world will allow you to have a future in it. This growing uncertainty is what drives mental health problems experienced by so many young people today. Structural inequalities are the root causes of distress among youth, and prevention is key in addressing those structural problems like discrimination, poverty or unequal access to education," Jorina said during her presentation.

Cevor added that, “Growing up in poverty taught me that mental health reflects the conditions of our physical environment. The *World Youth Report* underlines this. Young people are faced with global crises such as climate change, wars and rising inequalities. Preventive, inclusive social policies are essential to addressing the root causes why young people are losing hope, trust in societies and meaning in their life. An ideal world is not where every person is in therapy, but rather where the physical environment nurtures our mental well-being.”

Through video interventions, youth advocates Vanessa Dorcas, an anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) and anti-child marriage activist, and Brian Diang’a, an esports athlete and youth mental health advocate, shared reflections illustrating how youth are also key actors in shaping solutions when provided with safe spaces, resources, and meaningful participation opportunities.

The event also featured an overview of the global youth consultation process, including Expert Group Meetings, online surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, presented by Katie Acheson, who worked with Gemma Wood, both from Numbers and People Synergy (NAPS). Through partnerships with youth-led and youth-serving organizations, including the Major Group on Children and Youth, the consultations gathered perspectives from thousands of young people across all regions, ensuring that the Report reflects lived realities and youth-informed policy priorities.

UN DESA also released more data and analysis putting a spotlight on the global youth population. The report, *World Population Highlights 2026: Youth*, illustrates youth population trends that offer critical insights into how societies are evolving. Produced by UN DESA's Population Division, the report provides an essential evidence base for building more inclusive, resilient and sustainable futures for all.

The report seeks to provide governments, youth advocates and civil society with information on key population trends regarding global youth, including expected changes in the size and geographical distribution of this age group along with some of the core aspects of youth well-being. These findings aim to help policymakers and other key actors use population foresight to address the needs of young people everywhere and to ensure that demographic change supports equitable and sustainable development.

Youth priorities and concerns will also be addressed at the ECOSOC Youth Forum from 14 to 16 April 2026. The Forum serves as a platform for young people to exchange ideas, showcase innovative solutions, and strengthen youth engagement in accelerating progress on the SDGs.

For more information:

World Youth Report on Youth Mental Health and Well-being

World Population Highlights 2026: Youth

ECOSOC Youth Forum 2026

EXPERT VOICES

Financial integrity - a precondition for addressing the defining challenges of our time

Each year, illicit financial flows divert vast public resources away from classrooms, hospitals and climate action, shrinking the fiscal space countries need to serve their people. Following ECOSOC's first-ever Special Meeting on Financial Integrity last month, Nobel Laureate in Economics Joseph Stiglitz reflected on why financial integrity matters now and who is most affected when global rules fall short.

The meeting, a concrete outcome of the Sevilla Commitment adopted last June at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, brought together leading institutions across tax cooperation, anti-money-laundering and anti-corruption to strengthen coordination. Their discussion focused on how to get and use information to tackle tax abuses and financial crimes. And ultimately, considered how global financial rules can deliver fairer and more sustainable outcomes for all.

To dive deeper into this topic, we spoke with Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, and Professor at Columbia University, who weighed in on why financial integrity matters and what stronger international cooperation could mean for building a more transparent and accountable global system.

Many see financial integrity as a complex, technical issue. Why should it matter to everyone?

“When vast amounts of wealth can be hidden, shifted, or stolen with impunity, we should not be surprised that trust in institutions erodes, inequality widens, and democracy itself comes under strain.

Weak financial integrity fuels extreme inequality by allowing those at the top to escape taxation, steal public resources, hide assets, and launder money while ordinary citizens pay the price.

It undermines climate action by depriving governments of the fiscal space needed for the green transition. It weakens sovereignty, as states lose control over their natural resources, their own tax bases and policy choices. And it corrodes democracy, as economic power is translated into political power, often behind closed doors and beyond public scrutiny.

That is why financial integrity is not a technical issue to be postponed for better times. It is a precondition for addressing the defining challenges of our age.”

How should governments take action on financial integrity?

“This problem is far bigger than any one country or any one leader.

We are discussing financial integrity at a moment when multilateralism itself is under attack. Around the world, there are forces seeking to divide us, to weaken international cooperation, and to replace collective problem-solving with narrow national or private interests.

Defending multilateralism, therefore, is not an abstract exercise, but a practical necessity.

Financial integrity and transparency cannot be achieved by any country acting alone, no matter how powerful. Unilateral action is important, but without cooperation and coordination it will always be incomplete and vulnerable to circumvention.

The race to the bottom in taxation, the competition to attract hidden wealth, and the tolerance of secrecy jurisdictions are collective action failures. They can only be resolved collectively.”

This still seems very complex to tackle effectively. How can governments even find solutions?

“We are not starting from scratch. There is already a remarkable convergence of analysis. The UN FACTI Panel made clear: tax abuse, corruption, and financial secrecy are not isolated failures. They are systemic features of the global financial system.

Likewise, the G20 Global Inequality Report, which I had the honor to chair, showed that weak financial transparency and fragmented tax cooperation are central mechanisms through which inequality is produced and sustained, between and within countries.

The problem is not a lack of solutions. It is a lack of resolve to implement them.”

What are some of the concrete steps that countries should take?

“First, transparency must become the rule rather than the exception. This means full and public disclosure of who owns what and where. Beneficial ownership registries—

covering companies, trusts, foundations, and similar vehicles—must be mandatory, verified, and accessible. It means moving toward global asset registries that allow tax authorities to identify and track wealth across borders. It also means public country-by-country reporting by multinational corporations, so profits, taxes paid, and real economic activity can no longer be hidden behind accounting fictions.

Second, international tax cooperation must be strengthened. Both the FACTI Panel and the G20 report underscore the need for coordinated approaches that ensure income is taxed where economic activities take place, and that minimum effective taxation standards apply in practice, not just on paper. Information exchange must be automatic, inclusive, and usable by all countries, not restricted to a privileged few.

Third, illicit financial flows must not be treated as an unfortunate by-product of globalization. This requires common definitions, shared data, and coordinated enforcement. It also requires holding accountable the professional enablers—banks, law firms, accounting firms—whose business models too often depend on facilitating opacity. Without addressing these enabling structures, enforcement will always lag behind abuse."

Do you have any final thoughts on how financial integrity contributes to sustainable development?

"Financial integrity is not a narrow compliance agenda; it is about reclaiming the capacity of democratic states to govern in the public interest to deliver public services. The taxation of capital and the super-rich must work as a unifying strategy for mobilizing democratic forces. It is about ensuring that those who benefit most from globalization contribute their fair share. And it is about creating the fiscal and institutional foundations for a more equal, sustainable, and resilient world."

For more information: [ECOSOC special meeting on financial integrity]

UN DESA's Financing for Sustainable Development Office (FSDO) supports the intergovernmental process on financing for development, including the annual ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development Follow-up and related Special Meetings under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Learn more about this work [here].

Photo credit: Ian DiSalvo

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

5 ways forests drive inclusive and resilient economies

Forests generate employment, support rural and urban livelihoods, underpin food systems, supply raw materials and energy, and provide ecosystem services that enable productivity across sectors. Yet, despite their wide-ranging economic, social and environmental contributions, forests remain systematically undervalued in economic planning, investment strategies and financial systems.

In 2026, the theme for the International Day of Forests, ***Forests and Economies*** draws attention to the essential role forests play in sustaining global and national economies.

Here are five things you need to know:

1. **Forests underpin the global economy.**
   More than 1.6 billion people depend on forests for subsistence, income or employment. From timber and non-wood forest products to tourism and bioeconomy value chains, forests contribute directly to growth and development — particularly in low-income and forest-rich countries.

2. **Forests are economic infrastructure.**
   Beyond market products, forests regulate water supplies, protect soils, store carbon and reduce disaster risks. These ecosystem services sustain agriculture, energy systems, cities and industry — forming the natural foundation of many sectors.

3. **Much of forests' value remains invisible.**
   Conventional economic indicators capture mainly formal, cash-based transactions. Subsistence use, informal employment and ecosystem services are often excluded from national accounts, leading to systematic undervaluation and underinvestment.

4. **Forests are lifelines in times of crisis.**
   During economic shocks, conflicts or climate-related disasters, forests provide food, fuel, shelter and income — acting as safety nets for vulnerable communities and strengthening resilience.

5. **Investment is not keeping pace with ambition.**
   Despite their central role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Forest Goals, financing for sustainable forest management remains far below what is required to halt deforestation and restore degraded landscapes.

This year, #ForestDay will be observed at UN Headquarters on 24 March 2026. The United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, will host a panel discussion to explore how valuation, governance and finance can better reflect forests' full economic, social and environmental contributions. The event will be livestreamed on UN Web TV.

The International Day of Forests is observed each year on 21 March, following its proclamation by the United Nations General Assembly. This year's observance calls for a simple but urgent shift: recognising forests not as peripheral environmental assets, but as engines of inclusive growth, poverty reduction and long-term prosperity.

For more information: International Day of Forests

Demographic change and the transformative force of youth

By John Wilmoth, Director, and Lina Bassarsky, Population Affairs Officer, Population Division, UN DESA

With the size of the world's youth population surpassing 1.3 billion, its composition and geographical distribution are set to shift significantly in the coming decades. Patterns of growth in the population between ages 15 and 24 are likely to vary across countries, creating diverse opportunities and challenges that depend on local demographic, social and economic contexts. These changes will shape how young people live, learn, work and participate in society, with major consequences for development, equity and well-being. Understanding the changing demographic landscape for youth and their evolving needs is critical as we strive to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals—in particular those related to health, education, labour markets and gender equality.

The data and projections in the UN DESA report, *World Population Highlights 2026: Youth*, provide governments, youth organizations and civil society with a robust evidence base that can be used to anticipate emerging needs, design targeted interventions and ensure that demographic change contributes to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. Around the world, young people are demanding inclusion, asserting their right to take part in decisions that affect their lives, and bringing novel ideas to governance. By linking demographic foresight to strategic action, stakeholders can enable and support young people as drivers of social and economic progress.

As youth populations in many low- and lower-middle-income countries continue to grow, it is critical for governments to prioritize quality education, healthcare, skills development and social protection to reduce poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Expanding opportunities for decent work, fostering economic diversification, supporting the green economy and accelerating digital transformation are essential for realizing the demographic dividend. Investing in digital access, literacy and youth-led innovation will enhance productivity and drive structural change towards inclusive and sustainable growth.

Governments should intensify efforts to eliminate barriers to young women's empowerment across sectors. Ensuring that young women have access to quality education, skills training and equal opportunities in the labour market, including equal pay for work of equal value, and promoting the equitable sharing of care work and household responsibilities can contribute to social development and help to build more productive and resilient economies. In many low- and lower-middle-income countries, where youth populations are growing rapidly and gender equality remains low, such measures are crucial for advancing inclusive and sustainable societies.

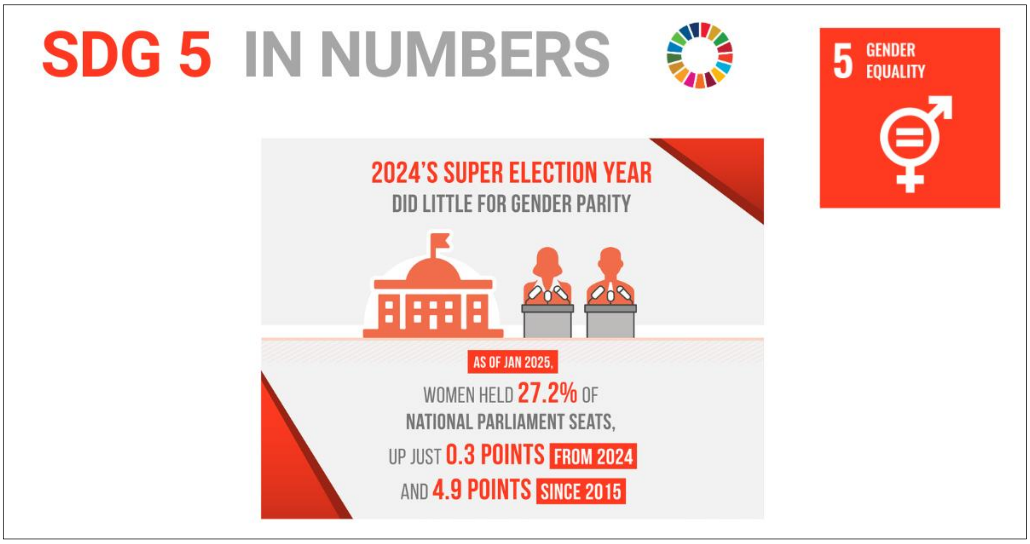
Another priority is addressing the environmental pressures associated with rapidly growing youth populations. Larger youth cohorts increase demand for energy, water, land and other natural resources, intensifying the environmental impacts of economic development, including higher greenhouse gas emissions and accelerated resource consumption. Although many low- and lower-middle-income countries have historically contributed only a small share of total global emissions, achieving sustained economic growth and meeting the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda will require substantial increases in energy and resource use. Strong international support will be required to ensure that such development is decoupled from further environmental degradation. Technology transfer and investments in clean energy can support young people in playing a leading role in achieving sustainability.

In high- and upper-middle income countries, older populations are projected to be almost three times as large as youth populations in 2050. With stable or decreasing numbers of youth, strategies that enhance productivity and promote technological innovation can mitigate the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with population ageing, strengthening economic resilience. Providing legal pathways for migration and student mobility can help meet the growing demand for labour while reducing the risks associated with irregular migration.

Addressing the socioeconomic factors that drive disparities in health and mortality among youth, including differences between young women and young men, is also essential. The health of the younger population has lasting implications for well-being, productivity and the overall quality of life, making health one of the key areas for investments in human capital. Policies should focus on preventing injuries and violence among youth, improving youth maternal health, and tackling rising levels of depression, anxiety and self-harm among youth. Strengthening primary health care and expanding young people's access to age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services, including modern contraceptive methods, are essential to reduce unintended pregnancies and support healthy transitions to adulthood. Ensuring access to accurate and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and education is equally important. Tailored policies should enable young parents, especially young mothers, to continue their education, find employment and obtain proper healthcare and social support.

The ultimate success of these measures will depend on whether young people are fully, meaningfully and equitably included in advocacy, policymaking and governance. Engaging youth as equal partners can help to harness demographic change as a driver of innovation, enhanced accountability and accelerated progress towards the green and digital transitions that are needed to achieve sustainable development.

Explore the latest analysis and foresight in UN DESA's *World Population Highlights 2026: Youth* available now.



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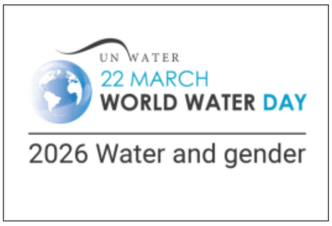

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