VOICE
UN DESA

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER, VOL. 30, NO. 9 – SEPTEMBER 2026

From global challenges to collective action: What to watch at UNGA 2026

This month, world leaders will convene at United Nations Headquarters in New York for the largest annual gathering in global diplomacy—the high-level week of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), happening 21-25 September. Amid mounting global challenges, UN Member States will participate in the UNGA's 81st session, debating a broad agenda and seeking solutions to keep the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in reach by 2030. Here are some of the key moments to look out for this month and beyond.

1. Latest data on gender equality to be revealed

On 17 September, UN Women and UN DESA will launch the latest edition of the Gender Snapshot, revealing the latest data on gender equality. The 2026 edition will focus on leadership and will provide evidence showing that progress towards women's equal participation in political leadership has lost momentum.

Stay tuned and follow the launch on 17 September live on UN Web TV. The report will be available online here.

2. SDG Moment to highlight recent progress

On 18 September, the annual SDG Moment will showcase inspiring stories of transformation from communities, countries and regions around the world, demonstrating how people everywhere are driving change across various SDGs. Follow the event live on UN Web TV as it unfolds in the UN General Assembly Hall.

3. UN Global Advocate Joseph Gordon-Levitt to put AI in focus

This year's UNGA will feature appearances by actor, entrepreneur and digital innovator Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who was recently appointed as the UN's first Global Advocate for Human-centric Digital Governance. The role, designated by the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and supported by UN DESA, reflects the UN's commitment to ensure that rapid digital transformation remains firmly anchored in inclusion and the public interest. During the UNGA high-level week, you can catch Gordon-Levitt at several events, including on 21 September at Digital Cooperation Day and in the SDG Media Zone.

4. SDG Media Zone puts spotlight on solutions

The SDG Media Zone will once again serve as a dynamic platform for conversations, innovation and storytelling around sustainable development. This year, UN DESA is expected to be involved in sessions on gender data and human-centric digital governance. Visitors to the SDG Media Zone will also be able to test a pilot version of the SDG Chat, an AI tool created by Accenture, UN DESA and the UN Office for Information and Communications Technology that aims to make trusted SDG information more easily digestible to a broad audience. The SDG Media Zone is organized by the UN Department of Global Communications in collaboration with the PVBLIC Foundation.

5. Unlocking private capital for energy transition and sustainable development

On 22 September, UN DESA partner the Global Investors for Sustainable Development Alliance (GISD), along with the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kenya and the Government of Kenya, will convene a high-level roundtable event between the government, global investors and development finance partners to scale up private investments aligned with Kenya's national priorities, including the objectives of Mission 300 and Kenya's Energy Compact, as well as infrastructure projects.

6. Catalyzing progress on affordable and clean energy

Advancing SDG 7, which focuses on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, remains a critical priority. The annual SDG 7 Action Forum is back and will take place on 24 September at the Lebanese American University with support from UN DESA.

7. Advancing sustainable finance in the Second Committee

Beyond the UNGA high-level week, Member States will participate in the General Assembly's Second Committee meetings, engaging in intensive discussions on some of the world's most pressing development challenges, including how to ensure essential SDG financing.

Behind these negotiations, UN DESA will provide the substantive expertise and analytical support that help ensure informed deliberations and effective multilateral outcomes. The 81st session aims to strengthen the Committee's efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance. The Department is supporting these reforms by providing policy expertise, technical guidance, and institutional knowledge to promote more evidence-based decision-making and improve intergovernmental processes.

UN DESA will also support the Committee's negotiations on financing for development, the international financial system, illicit financial flows, asset recovery, and international tax cooperation. Poverty eradication will remain a key priority as the third UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty nears its conclusion, with discussions focusing on progress in reducing poverty and rural poverty and on the theme "Safe Homes for All" for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

UN DESA also will support deliberations on operational activities for development, including the UN80 initiative, aimed at creating a more coherent, efficient and impactful UN system.

8. Empowering youth and promoting inclusion in the Third Committee

UN DESA's Programme on Youth will support Youth Delegates and help them engage in the Third Committee and the UN's work with young people.

Disability inclusion will be a key focus, as an upcoming Secretary-General's report will review progress on disability-inclusive development and recommend actions to address remaining barriers and accelerate implementation of international commitments.

Population ageing also will receive attention ahead of the 25th anniversary of the second World Assembly on Ageing in 2027. With the global population aged 60 and over projected to grow significantly in the coming years, the UN will mark the International Day of Older Persons on 8 October under the theme "The Age of Longevity: Rethinking Systems for Longer Lives."

Beyond public events, UN DESA provides critical behind-the-scenes support for UN meetings and negotiations, including the Secretary-General's bilateral meetings with representatives from more than 90 countries. Discussions will cover priorities such as the SDGs, financing for development, social development, support for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and more. Throughout the 81st session of UNGA and beyond, UN DESA will continue supporting negotiations, policy discussions and initiatives aimed at advancing a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient world.

For more information:

UNGA High-level Week 2026

UNGA Second Committee

UNGA Third Committee

EXPERT VOICES

Making the invisible visible: Why the worlds needs national inclusion accounts

As populations around the world grow older, understanding who benefits from economic growth and public policies across the lifecycle is becoming increasingly important. Nicole Mun Sim Lai of the UN DESA Population Division explains how National Inclusion Accounts (NTA-I) can reveal inequalities that conventional statistics often overlook, why this new framework matters for policymaking and how it can help countries build more inclusive and age-ready societies.

The world is ageing rapidly. Why do we need a new way of looking at the economic consequences of population change?

"Around the world, people are living longer and having fewer children, and societies are ageing. But population ageing is taking place in a world where substantial inequalities persist.

Traditional economic statistics tell us a great deal about the economy as a whole, but they rarely show age and inequality together. When data are not disaggregated by age and socioeconomic group, important differences can remain invisible. That makes it harder for policymakers to identify who benefits from public policies, who may be falling behind and how those patterns change as populations age."

What exactly are National Inclusion Accounts?

"National Inclusion Accounts are an extension of National Transfer Accounts, or NTA. In 2013, UN DESA published a manual on NTA, which provides a framework for measuring the generational economy, including how people produce, consume, save and share resources across different stages of life.

NTA-I takes the framework one step further. Instead of looking only at differences by age, it examines the generational economy by age and socioeconomic group, such as income or education.

This year, UN DESA is publishing the *National Inclusion Accounts Manual (forthcoming)*, which provides a standardized methodology for measuring these differences and supporting policy action that promotes greater equity across generations and population groups."

What does National Inclusion Accounts data actually measure? How should we think about it?

"Start with something we all share: a common economic lifecycle. We depend on others when we're young, we produce more than we consume through most of our working years, and later in life we rely on support again through public programmes, our families or our own savings. That pattern is universal. What NTA-I shows is that within that shared pattern, people live very different economic lives depending on things like their income or education. We measure those differences directly, and it reveals how inequality actually emerges, and how resources really flow across both generations and socioeconomic groups, not how we might assume they flow.

For example, we can see stark differences across education groups in many countries. Someone with a bachelor's degree tends to earn and consume in ways that generate a lifecycle surplus, which lets them save and accumulate resources over time. Someone with less than a high school education, by contrast, may earn barely enough to cover their consumption needs, leaving little or no room to save across the lifecycle."

So what kinds of questions can these data answer that we simply couldn't answer before?

"That's really the exciting part. Does public spending on education actually reach disadvantaged children? Do pension systems narrow inequality in old age, or do they widen it? And as populations continue to age, will today's inequalities grow or shrink? These are questions conventional statistics just can't answer, because they don't connect age and social group in the same dataset. One approach we use is the pseudo-Gini coefficient to get at this. In Ecuador, for example, our NTA-I analysis found that public health transfers increasingly benefited lower-income segments of the population over time. That is one way to evaluate public transfer programmes."

This sounds like it would require an enormous new data-collection effort. Is that the case?

"Actually, no. And that's by design. NTA-I is built on data that national statistical offices already collect: national accounts, household surveys and administrative records. We're not asking countries to go out and gather something entirely new. By bringing existing data together in a structured way, National Inclusion Accounts show how resources are actually shared across ages and socioeconomic groups. That gives policymakers the evidence they need to build more inclusive societies for people of all ages, without adding a heavy new reporting burden."

What's next for this work?

"We're continuing the conversation in Hangzhou, China. UN DESA, together with the UN Regional Commissions for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), is convening a global conference on National Inclusion Accounts, held alongside the Asia-Pacific Regional

Conference on Population Ageing in Hangzhou in October 2026. We're bringing experts and policymakers together there to share experiences and chart a path toward more inclusive, age-ready societies."

For more information: National Transfer Accounts

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

3 reasons everyone should care about the upcoming UN Water Conference

Later this year, water will take center stage at the 2026 United Nations Water Conference in Abu Dhabi. World leaders will then come together to tackle the global water crisis. Ahead of this major Conference on 8-10 December, here are 3 reasons everyone should care.

1. Despite progress, 2.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water
Since the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015, the world has made significant progress to advance the water and sanitation goals. Billions of people have gained access to safer drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services, and water use efficiency has improved significantly. Yet, today, an estimated 2.1 billion people still lack access to safely managed drinking water and 3.4 billion have no access to safely managed sanitation services. More than 1,000 children die each day from preventable illnesses linked to unsafe water and inadequate sanitation. Additionally, rising water demand, conflicts, population growth, and climate change are placing increasing pressure on water resources worldwide.

2. 2026 UN Water Conference to mobilize action and deliver results
To improve the situation for people around the world, the Conference will be an opportunity to strengthen political commitment, scale up investments and mobilize implementation efforts to build a water-secure future for all. Co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Senegal, the Conference will focus on concrete actions and significant investments in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); innovative technologies; disaster risk reduction, and other measures including a number of flagship initiatives to secure progress. It will also prioritize cross-cutting solutions, including those rooted in integrated water resource management (IWRM), which considers WASH, agriculture, urban infrastructure and freshwater ecosystems all as part of an indivisible whole. The

themes of the Conference's interactive dialogues— Water for People, Water for Prosperity, Water for Planet, Water for Cooperation, Water in Multilateral Processes, and Investments in Water—will give governments and their partners the chance to exchange ideas and ignite political will.

3. Water elevated to top of global agenda
The international community has recognized that water must be elevated to the top of the global agenda. The 2026 UN Water Conference will therefore be followed by another UN Water Conference in 2028. This time in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The deliberations and outcomes of both the 2026 and 2028 Conferences will help ensure that water is embraced as a key driver of sustainable development towards 2030 and beyond.

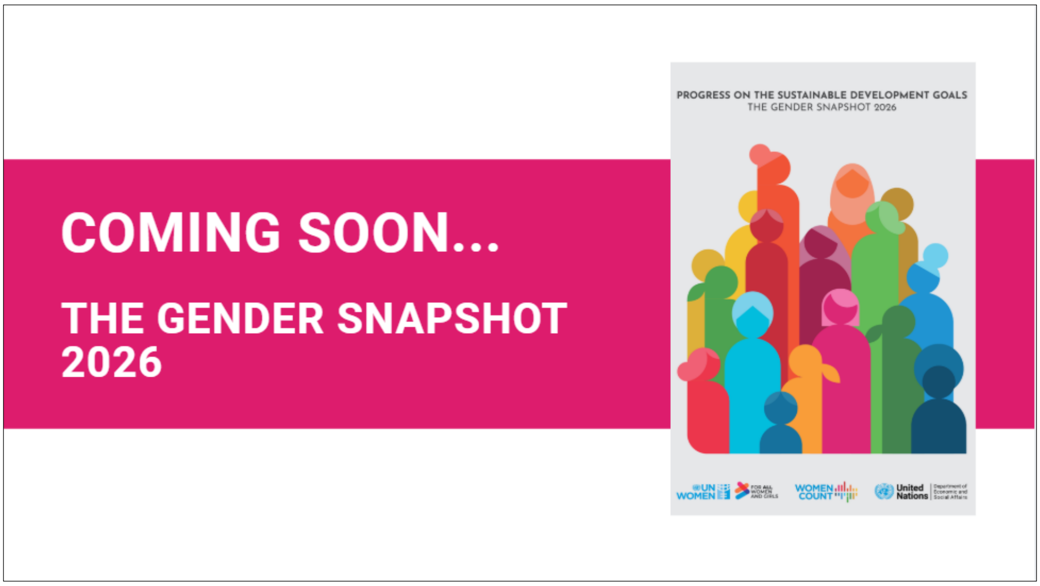
For more information:

2026 UN Water Conference

Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6): Clean Water and Sanitation

Explore the lazy person's guide to saving water

Photo credit: © UNICEF/UN0765069/Ho Hoang Thien Trang



The SDGs need more than financing. They need structural transformation.

By Fadhel Kaboub, Associate Professor of Economics, Denison University; President, Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity; Member of the UN High-Level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs (HLAB)

When the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015, they offered the world a powerful vision: End poverty, reduce inequality, protect the planet, and leave no one behind. Ten years later, that vision is slipping further out of reach. We often hear that the problem is a lack of financing, political will, or international cooperation. Those are certainly part of the story. But I believe the deeper problem is that the SDGs require a structural transformation that the global economic architecture was never designed to deliver.

Too often, development is treated as a question of mobilizing more resources within the existing global framework. But what if the framework itself systematically reproduces the very conditions the SDGs seek to overcome? This is why discussions about financing, while essential, cannot be separated from discussions about *economic structures*.

Many countries remain structurally trapped at the bottom of global value chains, exporting raw materials while importing high value-added manufactured goods, technology, and even basic necessities such as food and fuel. Debt burdens continue to crowd out investments in health, education, climate resilience, and infrastructure. Climate change is accelerating faster than adaptation efforts. Inequality within and between countries continues to widen. Under these conditions, it is difficult to imagine achieving not only SDG 1 on ending poverty, but virtually any of the other Goals.

This is why I believe we need to ask a more fundamental question. Are the SDGs failing because governments are not trying hard enough? Or are they failing because we are pursuing them within a global economic architecture whose rules continue to reproduce structural inequalities inherited from the colonial era? Those colonial economic structures have never truly disappeared. They have evolved into today's rules of global finance, trade, investment, and taxation.

Let's be very clear, colonial rules were never meant to produce development, peace, equality, justice, or democracy. In fact, colonial rules were violent, extractive, hierarchical, undemocratic, and unjust *by design*. So, why do we expect the same economic architecture somehow to achieve the SDGs today? They simply cannot, *by design*, no matter how much cash, transparency, and integrity we pour into the SDG process.

The root causes of external debt for most developing countries are three structural deficiencies that must be addressed if we are serious about achieving the SDGs: food deficits, energy deficits, and manufacturing value-added deficits. In other words, the structural transformation needed to achieve the SDGs requires strategic investments in food sovereignty and agroecology, renewable energy sovereignty, and regional (not national) South-South and South-North green joint industrial policies that prioritize manufacturing, clean public transportation, clean energy systems, clean cooking infrastructure, and all the building blocks of development and prosperity needed to achieve the SDGs.

Coincidently, these three strategic levers of structural transformation are simultaneously addressing the root causes of external debt, and they are also climate change adaptation and mitigation solutions. They are the fundamental processes of structural decolonization that were ignored in the 1970s when developing countries were advancing proposals for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), seeking fairer rules for trade, finance, technology transfer, and development.

Today's interconnected crises make international cooperation more important than ever. Climate change, financial instability, pandemics, biodiversity loss, and rising inequality cannot be addressed by countries acting alone. But effective multilateralism requires a global economic architecture that enables countries to build resilience rather than perpetuating structural vulnerabilities.

The United Nations' own flagship reports are increasingly pointing in the same direction. *The 2026 Sustainable Development Goals Report* documents how conflicts, climate change, slowing economic growth, rising debt burdens, and declining development assistance are pushing many SDGs further out of reach. *The 2026 Financing for Sustainable Development Report* goes further, arguing that developing countries are caught in a financing squeeze driven by global fragmentation, geopolitical tensions, high borrowing costs, debt distress, and repeated climate shocks. These are not isolated crises. They are interconnected symptoms of deeper structural weaknesses in the international economic system.

The SDGs remain the world's best shared vision for peace, justice, and sustainable prosperity. But achieving that vision requires more than accelerating implementation of existing policies. It requires asking whether the international economic rules themselves are fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.

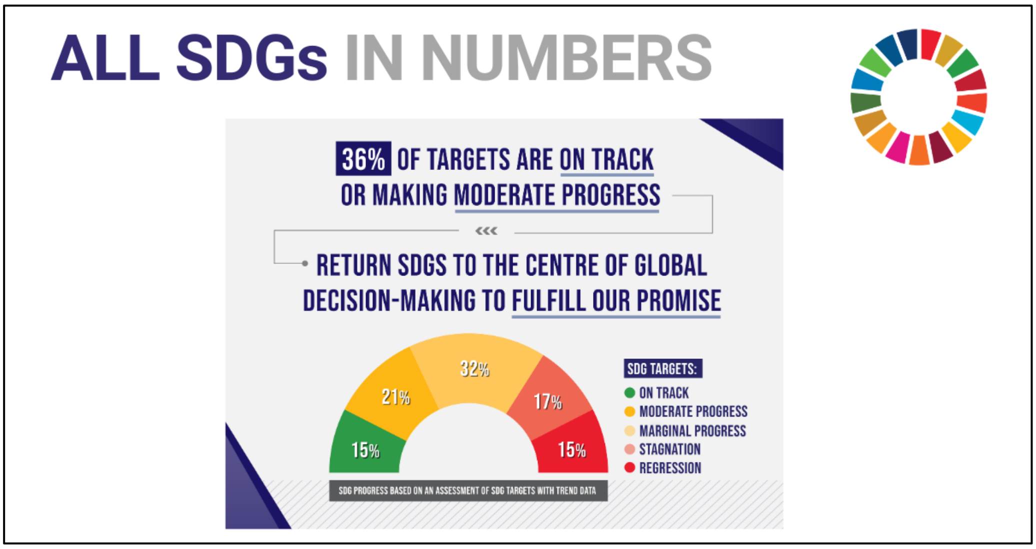
We often say that the SDGs require "transformational change." We should take those words seriously.

Transformational goals cannot be achieved through incremental adjustments to a system that continues to reproduce structural inequalities, *by design*. If we are serious about achieving the SDGs, we must be equally serious about transforming the global economic architecture so that it serves sustainable development rather than standing in its way.

The challenge before us is therefore not simply to finance the SDGs. It is to build a justice-based new international economic order capable of delivering them.

** Fadhel Kaboub is a member of the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs, an associate professor of economics at Denison University, and president of the Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity.*

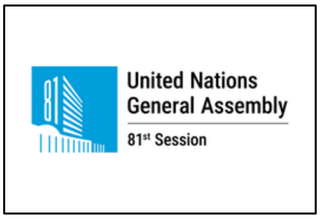
** The views expressed in this blog are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of UN DESA.*



MORE FROM UN DESA

- **What will it take to build a future-ready Caribbean?**
- **Transformation through technology: Young people bring new ideas to decision-making.**
- **Putting geospatial information at the heart of sustainable development**
- **UN Comtrade just crossed 1 billion data downloads. Here's why that matters.**

COMING UP



SDG MEDIA ZONE

MORE

FIND US ALSO ON: