

FRAMING THE FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT



UN DESA

... by turning foresight into forward-thinking solutions

UN DESA harnessed foresight, innovation, and data to help countries navigate uncertainty, reinforcing the Department's role as a strategic convener and knowledge partner. Through forward-looking analysis and the integration of UN 2.0 capabilities, the Department advanced long-term planning, strengthened institutional preparedness, and delivered future-oriented capacity development to Member States.

UN DESA...

- Analysed global economic uncertainties amid geopolitical tensions, weakened growth, strained supply chains, and financial volatility, and offered solutions to mitigate these risks and boost economic prospects through strategic policymaking and international cooperation.
- Elevated foresight as a core UN function through the UN Economist Network and its "Futures and Foresight" series.
- Equipped Member States with open-source macroeconomic tools and training for forward-looking policymaking.
- Supported national planning processes in small island developing States and other vulnerable contexts, applying systems thinking and strategic scenario models.
- Prepared countries for population ageing and demographic shifts through cutting-edge projections and policy guidance
- Integrated foresight and digital transformation into "UN DESA's internal capacity development, knowledge platforms, and youth engagement.

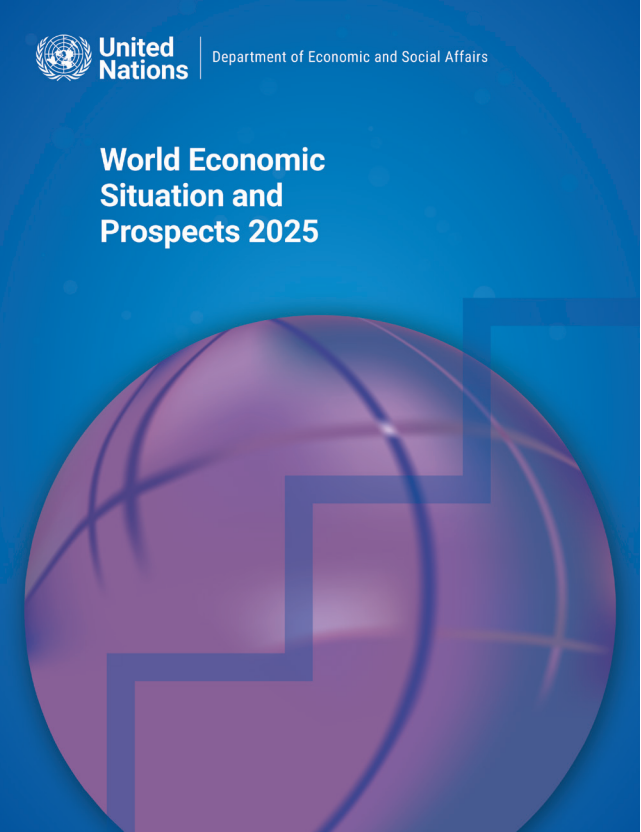
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FRAMING THE FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT

As the international community confronts converging crises—climate stress, technological disruption, economic volatility, and demographic transitions—UN DESA has responded with a renewed commitment to anticipatory action and intergenerational equity. In 2024–2025, the Department expanded its foresight capabilities and future-focused engagement, both internally and in its support to Member States. Embracing the UN 2.0 Quintet of Change, UN DESA mainstreamed strategic foresight into its analytical products, intergovernmental processes, and capacity development programming.

Navigating global economic uncertainty to safeguard sustainable development

Produced in partnership with United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the five United Nations Regional Commissions, UN DESA's flagship *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025* report, and the mid-year update of the report, examined the growing uncertainties facing the global economy in the wake of ongoing conflicts and rising geopolitical tensions. While the world economy demonstrated resilience at the beginning of 2025, the report warns that heightened trade tensions, along with policy uncertainty, have significantly weakened the global economic outlook for 2025, straining global supply chains, driving up production costs, and delaying critical investments, while also contributing to financial market volatility. It further warns that this subdued economic outlook poses significant risks to poverty reduction and progress towards the SDGs, particularly in vulnerable developing economies. To address these challenges, the report offers forward-looking recommendations to mitigate these risks and boost economic prospects through strategic policymaking and ramped-up



international cooperation, supporting policymakers in fostering sustainable and inclusive global development.

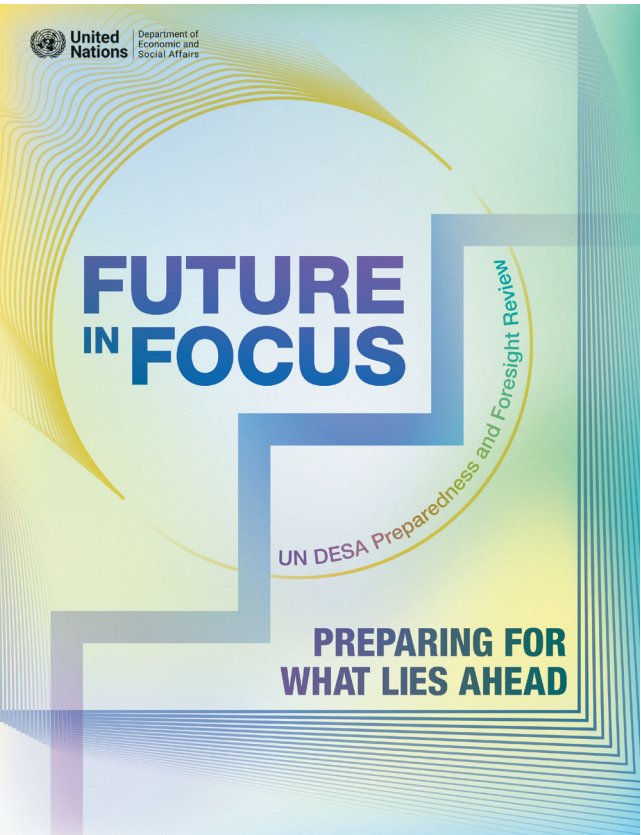
Showcasing the strategic foresight that builds preparedness

Considering the increasingly complex and interwoven challenges facing our world, the role of the United Nations in preparing for the future is more important than ever. Foresight is central to the vision of UN 2.0, signifying the organization's commitment to long-term thinking, strategic planning, and readiness for a spectrum of possible futures. UN DESA undertook a comprehensive review of its own foresight and preparedness efforts this year, releasing the results in a short, accessible report and interactive website.

The *Future in Focus* review highlights how the Department's economic and demographic forecasts, capacity-development programmes, as well as efforts towards accelerating an inclusive and just transition, help governments and people make strategic choices to shape and prepare for the future they want. A UN DESA Global Policy Dialogue on "Using Foresight Tools to Prepare for What's Ahead", held in January 2025, brought experts together for a public-facing conversation on how the Department's economic and population forecasts help countries better navigate an increasingly uncertain world.



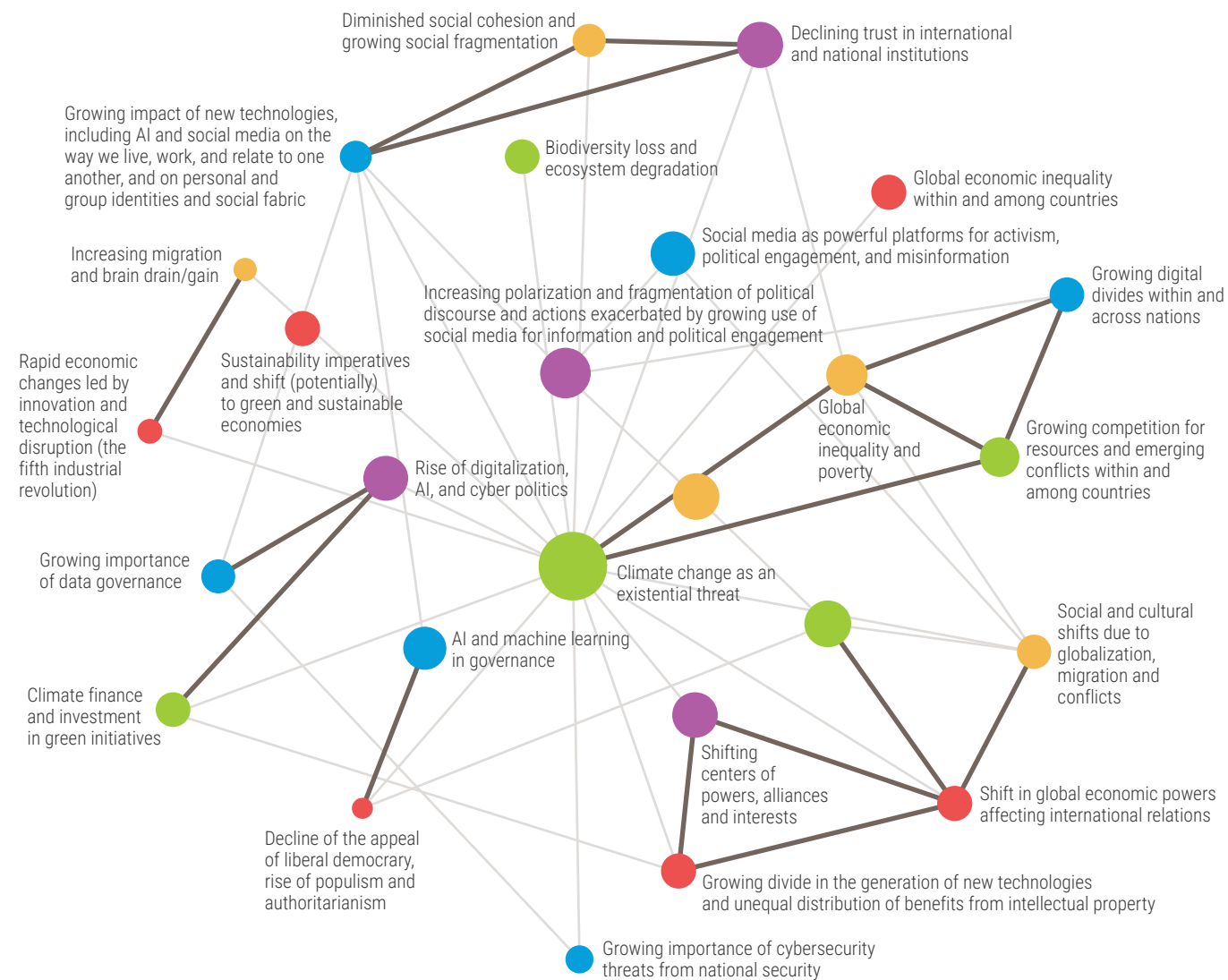
By fostering cross-system collaboration and leveraging the collective intelligence of the United Nations, the UN Economist Network (UNEN) contributed to a growing culture of anticipatory thinking and long-term policymaking. Convened by UN DESA, the Network deepened foresight capabilities across the UN system through a new series of forward-looking policy briefs. Topics included the future of work, digital transformation, climate, energy, biodiversity, and governance. Co-authored by economists from UN entities and Resident Coordinator Offices, the briefs applied strategic foresight approaches



to explore alternative development models and policy pathways for Member States. Each brief concluded with actionable policy options and implications for capacity development.

For example, a UNEN Futures and Foresight Policy Brief on Governance Futures was launched in March 2025 to guide UN efforts in integrating foresight into governance reforms, providing insights for transformational change, and helping policymakers design forward-looking, adaptive, and inclusive governance strategies. To support this work, UN DESA, in collaboration with the UN Futures Lab/Global Hub, organized a Foresight Webinar Series on Governance Futures. Participants from 21 UN entities engaged in scenario development, explored interlinked drivers of change, and identified implications for governance reform. The series helped build foresight capacity across the UN system and fostered a shared understanding of how to navigate uncertainty and shape desirable governance futures.

Drivers of Change Network Diagram



Interlinkages among the drivers of change for designing flexible, adaptive governance systems capable of managing future uncertainties and interconnected issues | UNEN POLICY BRIEF ON "GOVERNANCE FUTURES: KEY INSIGHTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS"

Harnessing AI-powered tools to transform foresight across the UN system

UN DESA showcased a groundbreaking AI prototype to transform how the UN system harnesses foresight at the 2025 STI Forum, developed in collaboration with the

UN Futures Lab. Drawing on horizon scanning reports from 2022–2024 by UN DESA, FAO, UNDP, UNEP, and WHO, the tool consolidates signals, trends, and drivers of change to support more informed decision-making, planning, and programming. Building on the efforts of the UN system, the UN Futures Lab/Global Hub and UN DESA have explored digital capabilities and analytics to enhance foresight processes by consolidating and

analysing insights from horizon scanning initiatives across the UN system. At the heart of this effort is an AI knowledge repository designed to analyse and visualize foresight outcomes, strengthen institutional learning and coherence, and support users with tools to navigate complexity and harness collaboration in shaping anticipatory, SDG-aligned initiatives.

Identifying development pathways in a new global context

The evolving global landscape demands new approaches, informed by research and evidence. In response to this demand, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), supported by UN DESA, examined how systemic crises are reshaping the landscape for sustainable development. At its 27th session in February 2025, the CDP provided analysis on a range of structural transformations—such as the breaching of planetary boundaries, geopolitical shifts, growing inequalities, and advances in artificial intelligence—that are challenging traditional policy models. The Committee emphasized the need for pragmatic, evidence-based approaches to navigate these complex dynamics. UN DESA supported the CDP in reporting its findings to ECOSOC and informing preparations for the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4) and the 2025 High-level Political Forum (HLPF). These efforts reflected the call for “breaking-the-mould” approaches that are adaptive, values-driven, and aligned with the realities of today’s global context.

Unlocking the development potential of critical energy transition minerals

Critical minerals—such as cobalt, lithium, and copper—are rapidly emerging as catalysts for poverty eradication, energy transition, and technological progress. Harnessing these resources effectively in developing countries holds immense potential to drive inclusive economic growth, generate quality employment, improve

infrastructure, strengthen technological capabilities, and boost government revenues to fund essential public services. However, realizing these benefits requires robust governance, strong institutions, and targeted investments. Low-income countries, in particular, must address structural barriers, including inadequate infrastructure and limited human capital. UN DESA plays a key role in supporting data-informed innovation and sustainable industrial transformation in Member States.

In one “Future of the World” [policy brief](#), for instance, UN DESA highlighted how enhanced international co-operation will be essential to bridge investment gaps, accelerate technology transfer, and scale up skills development. In its July 2025 edition of the [Frontier Technology Issues \(FTI\)](#), the Department also showcased how developing countries can tap into the potential of transforming recycling waste and scrap into a strategic source of critical minerals—reducing reliance on primary extraction, fostering green job creation, and advancing progress toward the SDGs.



Participants at the overlapping generations macroeconomic model workshop in Indonesia work together to prepare their policy scenario | UN DESA

 **Equipping countries with open-source macroeconomic tools**

UN DESA supported Member States to apply open-source “overlapping generations” (OG) macroeconomic models to simulate long-term policy outcomes in the context of a fiscally constrained environment. These tools enable scenario modelling of taxation, debt, and demographic change aligned with national SDG priorities. In the Philippines, over 30 analysts from government and academia were trained by UN DESA in Manila in August 2024, laying the groundwork for robust fiscal sustainability simulations. South Africa held a second intensive workshop in Cape Town in March 2025, focusing on inequality, social protection, and green transition. In Indonesia, a March 2025 workshop in Bandung helped officials assess investment strategies and development pathways using national data-driven scenarios. Through hands-on training, joint research, and community-building, these efforts have deepened local ownership, enhanced policy coherence, and fostered lasting national expertise in macroeconomic modelling.

 **Driving resilient recovery and strategic foresight in small island developing States**

In 2024–2025, UN DESA supported five small island developing States (SIDS)—Dominican Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Mauritius, and Seychelles—to strengthen recovery planning through forward-looking, integrated approaches. By building capacities in systems thinking, strategic foresight, CLEWs (Climate, Land, Energy, and Water systems) modelling, and forest financing strategies, UN DESA is enabling these countries in special situations to pursue development strategies that are adaptive, cross-sectoral, and aligned with the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS). These tools were delivered through national workshops, inter-ministerial coordination, and integration into development and financing frameworks.

 **Responding to demographic transitions with actionable insights on family planning**

UN DESA published its *World Fertility 2024* report, providing data-driven insights and policy recommendations to help governments prepare for fertility levels and demographic trends that may differ appreciably from those of the recent past and integrate demographic foresight into development strategies. Based on updated fertility estimates and projections from the *World Population Prospects 2024* dataset, the report supports Member States in planning for inclusive, sustainable futures grounded in robust demographic evidence. The report highlights how fertility trends reflect various stages of the fertility transition—from high fertility rates to historically low fertility. As coordinator of the global SDG indicator framework and custodian for indicators 3.7.1 and 3.7.2 on contraceptive use and adolescent birth rates, UN DESA provides insights into how improved access to sexual and reproductive

“I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the insightful and well-structured OG-Core training workshop. The sessions were highly engaging, and the materials provided have been incredibly useful in deepening my understanding of the model. [UN DESA’s] expertise and clear explanations made complex concepts much more accessible.”

Murendeni Nengovhela
Senior Economist for Economic Policy,
South Africa National Treasury



A mother and her newborn baby at the Maternal & Child Health Training Institute for medically needy in Dhaka, Bangladesh (2010) | UN ESCAP/KIBAE PARK

healthcare and education, would help to reduce early childbearing and unintended pregnancies, and support women and girls.

 **Scaling innovation and systems learning for transformation**

UN DESA reinforced its commitment to becoming a more agile, innovative partner in delivering effective, future-oriented capacity development support. Through its *Digital Learning Centre (DLC)*, the Department strengthened its institutional capabilities to support SDG implementation, in line with the Secretary-General’s vision of a UN 2.0. The DLC delivered over 53 courses to more than 9,400 participants across 185 Member States, issuing more than 3,800 certificates on topics ranging from governance and macroeconomic policy

to disaster risk reduction and digital transformation. Together, these initiatives equip Member States to better anticipate and respond to emerging trends, design adaptive policies, and integrate futures thinking into national planning processes.

 **Strengthening global engagement with the SDGs**

To enhance user experience and engagement with UN DESA’s analytical products, the Department developed “SDG Chat”—an AI-powered chatbot that offers seamless, on-demand access to SDG-related content. Leveraging generative AI technology, the tool connects users with authoritative data and content drawn from UN DESA’s reports and publications. Launched in March 2025, the SDG Chat consolidates previously dispersed



SDG Chat presented by UN DESA staff at the UN AI Day on 22 April 2025 | UN DESA

knowledge—spanning websites, databases, and social media—into a single, intuitive entry point. This innovation broadens global outreach, fosters deeper stakeholder engagement, and reinforces the Department’s role in advancing the SDGs through cutting-edge digital solutions.

Partnering with global thinkers to guide the UN forward

Convened by Under-Secretary-General Li Junhua, the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social

Affairs (HLAB) continued to play a vital role in guiding the Department’s strategies to address today’s most pressing global challenges. UN DESA launched the third term of HLAB in spring 2025, bringing together 22 globally renowned experts on sustainable development. The Board convened for its inaugural meeting in May 2025 in Bangkok, Thailand, co-hosted by UN DESA and UN ESCAP, where it offered bold, forward-looking recommendations to help the UN lead transformative changes in support of sustainable development. These proposals included redesigning global economic governance to prioritize equity and sustainability, mobilizing innovative financing for the SDGs, and advancing a



HLAB members discuss ways to leverage socioeconomic opportunities and Asia-Pacific perspectives to prepare for global challenges at the Global Policy Dialogue on "Converging crises, shared solutions: Applying socioeconomic lessons from Asia-Pacific to global challenges", May 2025, Bangkok, Thailand | UN DESA

just green transition tailored to the needs of developing countries. The HLAB also emphasized the importance of people-centred development, calling for new ways to measure progress beyond GDP and promoting inclusive economic models that empower communities. These insights have informed UN leadership, including at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4), the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF), and the Second World Summit for Social Development.

UN DESA has also played a central role in amplifying the HLAB’s voice and connecting its ideas with global audiences. Through the UN DESA Global Policy Dialogue Series, HLAB members engaged with civil society, students, policymakers and SDG practitioners in interactive dialogue sessions. Recent dialogues in Bangkok, at FFD4 in Sevilla, Spain and HLPF in New York, USA showcased the Board’s practical, solution-oriented thinking—reinforcing its commitment to advancing the SDGs and building a more inclusive, sustainable future.