



# UNDP IN THE FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT

## – Reflections from experiences in Africa<sup>1</sup>

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*In relentless pursuit of UNDP’s mandate to end poverty, build democratic governance, rule of law, and inclusive institutions, the future of development hinges on reimagining how we address complex challenges and harness collective potential. Our experiences across Africa underscore the urgency and opportunity to transform development systems to meet the demands of an ever-evolving world. .*

## Introduction

Are you optimistic about the pace of development and its future? Some may reply with a well-warranted scepticism. It’s understandable, given the state of affairs in our world today, and the unprecedented challenges we face: relentless inequality among and within nations, accelerating climate change, threatened democracies, persistent gender gaps, and the potential mass loss of jobs from the impending disruptive technological change among them.

Even then, is the future entirely doomed? In this article, we beg to differ – not in a way that dismisses the magnitude and gravity of the ever-evolving challenges but in a way that dares to assert that better is possible for us today and for generations to come. Our Breaking the Gridlock Human Development Report (2023/2024) presents this possibility too well. Let us stop and look back and reflect on the history of our well-being? The longstanding history of our existence is a testament that a better future is possible. It is undeniable that, despite all the challenges confronting us today, we are the wealthiest we have ever been.

## Key development challenges



Three development challenges stand out as global, cross-cutting, and of growing intensity in Africa: relentless climate change, mounting conflict and rates of poverty. These are interrelated urgent challenges, impacting many others, and their effects ravaging the lives of hundreds of millions and threatening our common future.

Our response to these challenges is the ‘test of times’ for UNDP’s relevance and for the future of development.

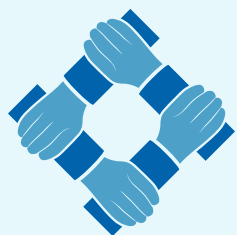
Most tragically, the effects of anthropogenic climate change are disproportionately shouldered by the world’s poorest communities—those who contribute least to the crisis. The interaction of climate, environment, and poverty are worsening livelihoods, undermining food security, disrupting ecosystems, creating favorable conditions for diseases, and exacerbating existing inequalities.

<sup>1</sup> As UNDP holds consultations different countries, convenes its annual leadership retreat for the first time in a programme country, South Africa, it is time to reflect on the value the organization brings to development in the future. The insights shared in this opinion piece is for a UNDP audience and will hopefully contribute to the discussion on positioning the organization for development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The piece begins by painting a global picture of development challenges and context, and given the writer’s experience in Africa, the insights shared is more of a reflection on Africa but may hold true for other regions of the world.



Further, the World Bank finds that the impacts of climate change could drive more than 130 million people into poverty by 2030 (similar to poverty increase due to Covid-19) with over 200 million people expected to migrate from their countries by 2050 - eroding decades of development gains<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, the proliferation of conflicts—including Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan,— has led to loss of lives and destruction of property and livelihoods, driving even more people into poverty. Conflicts demand global attention and consume significant resources needed to address the impacts of climate change, and build thriving productive societies. The 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index Report reveals that people in conflict-stricken countries are nearly three times more likely to be poor than those in peaceful nations.



## Multilateralism under threat

Each of these challenges transcend borders.

***As Goldin has said: Development is less and less about 'specific geographic spaces' and increasingly about our collective ability to cooperate in sowing and harvesting global opportunities and managing associated global risks.<sup>3</sup>***

No country or region can single handedly tackle the challenges and crises we face – history shows our greatest successes come from cooperation. Yet, paradoxically, protectionist and nationalist ideologies are rising, and multilateralism faces serious challenges precisely when it is most crucial. It is this underlying tension—the global nature of our challenges on the one hand and the rise of isolationism/protectionism and division on the other—that our strategies must address.



## UNDP's role

For nearly 60 years, UNDP has led international development through its role as a knowledge broker, capacity builder, and facilitator of global development. With deep local experience and a vast global network, UNDP connects countries to the knowledge, resources, and networks they need for development breakthroughs. With its integrated response, UNDP is

committed to renew its commitment to contribute to end poverty and hunger, protect the planet from degradation, to foster peaceful and inclusive societies, and ensure no one is left behind.

Translating that commitment into real world impact under rapidly changing conditions is the challenge in front of us.

## Four key strategies to strengthen the value of UNDP in development

Given that our most pressing challenges—climate change, rising poverty and conflict—transcend national borders and interact in complex ways, UNDP must evolve its approach. There is need for increased focus on four strategic approaches that UNDP and its stakeholders can explore and effect to create transformative change and strengthen UNDP's relevance and impact.

<sup>2</sup> See 'revised estimates of the impact of climate change on extreme poverty by 2030', <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/a549a5ee-71cd-5ed4-bcf3-3a8cb508b199>

<sup>3</sup> Quote is sourced from Goldin 2018, Development: a short introduction



## 1. Focus on Regional Initiatives:

Regional cooperation offers powerful opportunities for scaled impact. Furthermore, agile regional engagement is required to respond to rapidly rising crises on global, regional and multi-country scales. UNDP's timely response to crises, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, is among the truest tests of our relevance.

There is a crucial role of regional approaches in initiatives that address poverty, unemployment and potential among youth:

- **YouthConnekt Africa**, a partnership between governments, the African Union, and UNDP, demonstrates how regional platforms can enhance youth skills and leverage innovations across borders. With over USD 18 million mobilized and implementation through 36 country chapters, endorsed by the African Union in 2019, YouthConnekt, through UNDP's support is enabling youth become employees. In Rwanda, UNDP is supporting more than **10,000 young entrepreneurs** to improve profitability and sustainability of their businesses registering



**44,330 jobs created**  
**57% for Men**  
**43% for Women**  
in Rwanda<sup>4c</sup>.

- UNDP's ambitious **timbuktoo Initiative** aims to mobilize \$1 billion to transform 100 million livelihoods while creating 10 million new jobs, utilizing both commercial and catalytic capital to fund African start-ups. It utilizes both commercial and catalytic capital to fund and de-risk African start-ups in various sectors. In its initial years, the initiative is showing prospects with the university innovations pods (UnilPod) and more than 10 hubs to be established in different African countries, with 2 already launched.



- In addition, the Agreement Establishing the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** exemplifies the potential of regional initiatives, promising to transform African economies by breaking down trade barriers and creating vast economic opportunities that young people and others are eager to seize. The AfCFTA entered into force in 2019 and we have already seen the enthusiasm with 54 signatories and 48 countries ratification, as of October 2024, demonstrating increased awareness of the urgency to integrate.<sup>5</sup> Though significant progress on commercial trading is yet to be realized as about 31 countries are engaged through the Guided Trade Initiative, a trading programming launched in 2022 and aimed at piloting the operational AfCFTA instruments. Through GTI countries like Ghana have reported improved intra African trade with countries like Kenya and South Africa. Such initiatives, some still in development, show how regional approaches can address complex challenges through coordinated action.



<sup>4</sup> An impact mapping on youth employability and entrepreneurship conducted by the youthconnekt hub in 2023, showed that Youthconnekt Africa has reached over 12 million young people within the first year of its strategy

<sup>5</sup> <https://au-afcfta.org/>

## 2. Foster Multi-directional Cooperation:

The exchange of ideas and experiences is crucial for development innovation, especially as the Fourth Industrial Revolution unfolds with lightning speed.

- **South-South cooperation platforms** like the African Economic Conference enable vital knowledge sharing on economic issues and poverty reduction strategies. UNDP's establishment of the Africa Center of Competence for Digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI) skilling, building on global experience and insights from Bangladesh's a2i (Aspire to Innovate) is a shining example<sup>6</sup>.
- The **Rwanda Cooperation Initiative** offers a compelling example, currently assisting Chad in implementing an Integrated Financial Management System to strengthen public financial management to enhance public service delivery, which in turn fosters development.
- **North-South cooperation** continues to yield results, as seen in the Mwanza-Tampere Local Governance Cooperation Project, which enhanced municipal administration and environmental management in Tanzania through Finnish expertise.
- **South-North cooperation** also has much to add. Its importance is seen through initiatives like Rwanda's home-grown solutions that offer lessons for countries worldwide. One such home-grown solution is Rwanda's approach to reconciliation of prior adversaries and the re-integration of ex-combatants into society as productive citizens.

Given UNDP's deep local experience and global presence, it is uniquely positioned to facilitate and deepen these exchanges and ensure their sustainability.

## 3. Shift from Funding to Innovative Financing:

With shrinking donor funding, a narrow reliance on a funding from external partners puts the future of development that heavily relies on donors at risk, and limits impact. This reality demands a fundamental shift toward innovative financing mechanisms that can mobilize resources at scale. There is a lot to build on:

- UNDP is pioneering this approach through initiatives like Moonshot (Financing for SDGs), which uses catalytic financing to attract private investment.
- Other examples include use of blended finance facilities that de-risk private investment in sustainable infrastructure, green bonds that channel capital toward climate action, and impact investing platforms that align profit with social progress.
- UNDP's [Africa Investment Insights Report](#) identified an abundance of private sector opportunities. For example, it finds that In Africa's energy transition alone, investors could cover 70 percent of infrastructure financing requirements.

By expanding these innovative financing approaches, UNDP can help bridge the significant funding gaps in development while creating sustainable, market-driven solutions. But this switch will take a deliberate effort from UNDP, its government partners, and other stakeholders to incentivize development. In doing so, we will create mutual interest and benefits, and safeguard development on a much larger scale.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.undp.org/kenya/blog/africa-center-competence-digital-and-artificial-intelligence-skilling>





## 4. Development is for the long run

As we approach the final stretch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and look toward the next chapter of global development, it is crucial to recognize that development is not a sprint but a marathon. For nearly six decades, UNDP has been a steadfast partner in Africa's development journey, working hand-in-hand with governments, communities, and stakeholders to address immediate needs while building the foundation for long-term transformation.

The future of development in Africa—and globally—will depend on our ability to strike a balance between addressing urgent crises and maintaining a strategic focus on sustainable outcomes. Whether responding to health emergencies, tackling climate change, or advancing governance reforms, UNDP's relevance lies in its ability to adapt quickly while remaining committed to the broader vision of sustainable and inclusive development.

Africa's development trajectory underscores the importance of thinking beyond short-term cycles. National development plans and UNDP's country programme strategies, typically spanning 4-5 years, are vital for tackling immediate priorities, but they must also align with a vision that extends decades into the future. This long-term approach allows us to capitalize on the continent's unique opportunities, such as its demographic dividend, burgeoning innovation ecosystems, and commitment to regional integration through frameworks like Agenda 2063. Development, after all, is not just about the immediate outcomes—it is about building a legacy that lasts..

## Conclusion

While UNDP's partnerships with national governments remain fundamental, these four strategies—regional solutions, multi-directional cooperation, innovative financing and agility and long term development perspective—represent crucial approaches to strengthen our impact and make headway against development barriers that are intensifying and global in scope.

Through them, UNDP can help catalyze transformative change at a scale that matches today's unprecedented global challenges, ensuring its continued relevance in shaping development today and tomorrow.

