



The landscape of development: UNDP trends update 2026

February 2026

What changes do we see on the horizon for development? Following on UNDP's [Landscape of Development](#), which set the scene for the UNDP [Strategic Plan 2026-2029](#), this slide deck reviews the latest changes in 12 areas of global development – and highlights what to watch in the coming year.

Each theme describes:

- **The current picture**
- **What was new in 2025**
- **Key trends**
- **What to watch: emerging issues that could become more prominent**

Note: This analysis was prepared by the Strategy & Futures Team, Executive Office, UNDP. The views expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily represent those of UNDP. Some parts were developed with AI support, reviewed by UNDP experts.

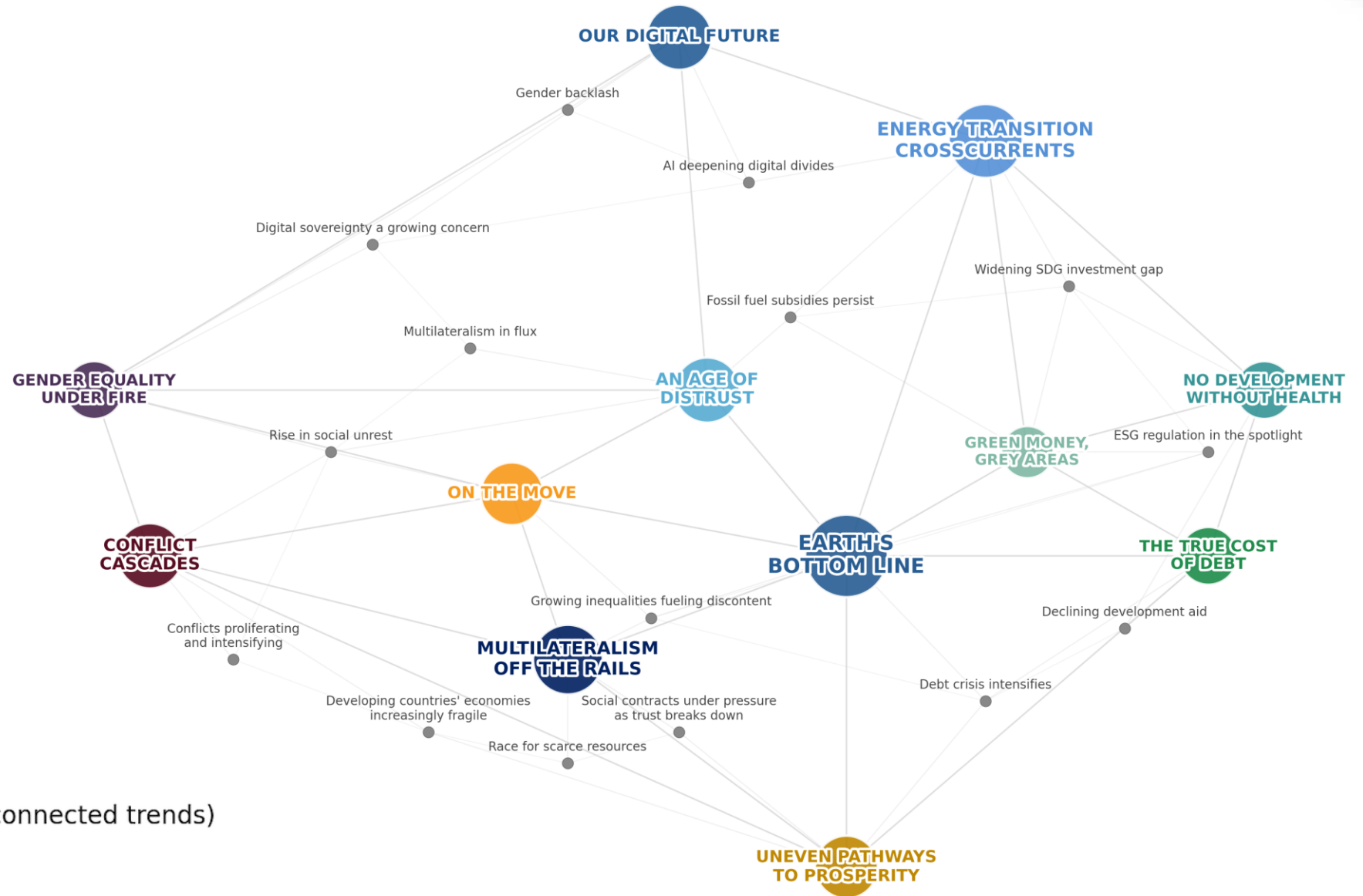
The landscape of development

Key themes

1. Multilateralism off the rails
2. Conflict cascades
3. Gender equality under fire
4. No development without health
5. Our digital future
6. Uneven pathways to prosperity
7. On the move
8. An age of distrust
9. The true cost of debt
10. Green money, grey areas
11. Crosscurrents in the energy transition
12. Earth's bottom line

The complexity of change

Given the speed and complexity of change today, major trends and risks should be seen not through pure geographic or thematic lenses, but as an interconnected system.



- Themes (size = number of connected trends)
- Trends

Did you know...?



- Renewables overtook coal as the primary source of electricity worldwide in mid-2025
- 1 in 5 cars sold worldwide is now electric
- Governments adopted the world's first pandemic agreement in 2025
- The High Seas Treaty was ratified, protecting ocean biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions
- 62% of organisations across 105 countries are experimenting with or scaling AI agents

Yet....

- Global military spending grew by 9.4% in 2024, the steepest year-on-year rise since the end of the Cold War
- 40% of UN member states - 78 countries - are involved in conflicts beyond their borders
- Gen Z boys and girls are the most divided generation on feminism and gender roles
- Half of young people in 28 countries approve of at least one kind of "hostile activism," like online attacks, spreading disinformation or threatening violence
- Debt service absorbs up to 70% of government revenues in some low-income countries

Multilateralism off the rails

Multilateralism is fracturing precisely when it's most needed. Great-power rivalry and security anxieties are driving a global turn inward, including access to critical minerals and natural resources. Defence budgets are surging while many OECD countries are cutting development aid. Member states demand UN reform, yet without consensus on what it should look like. Global cooperation [has flatlined](#), but public opinion still yearns for multilateral cooperation.

What's new

- Global military expenditure grew by 9.4% from 2023 to 2024, the steepest year-on-year rise since the end of the Cold War. 2.5% of global GDP now goes to military expenditure.
- ODA fell to \$212.1 billion in 2024 and is projected to drop by 9-17% from 2024 to 2025.
- Recent events in Latin America raise questions about the interpretation and application of international law, sovereignty and the use of force.
- 34 countries are considered to have “substantial influence” in another country, up from six in the 1970s. 59 countries recorded poorer ties with their neighbours in 2025, while 19 improved: a marked deterioration since 2008.
- Global cooperation continues, but its shape is evolving under the weight of geopolitical tensions. Peace and security cooperation continued to decrease.
- 55% of people still support international cooperation, even if it means compromising on national interests. But UN favourability fell from 65% to 60% since 2021.

What to watch

- Could the rise of unilateral action reshape [global norms](#)—and what does this mean for the rules-based order?
- Will defence spending crowd out development aid? Or could it create new openings, if investments in human security or climate are framed as strategic investments in security?
- How non-traditional development finance actors and [philanthropists](#) are reshaping funding (eg blended finance, co-investment)
- The “[Group of Friends of Global Governance](#)” focused on improving global governance in a multipolar world; and the [Article 109 Coalition](#) to renew the UN Charter

Trends

- **Conflicts proliferating and intensifying**
- **Developing countries' economies increasingly disrupted by geopolitical tensions**
- **Multilateralism in flux**

Conflict cascades

Conflict remains at record levels worldwide. Many are prolonged crises, or rooted in long-unresolved tensions — from Ukraine and Gaza to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and the Sahel — some commanding global attention, others persisting with far less visibility. Increasingly, violence unfolds below traditional thresholds of war: through violent protests, coups, proxy actions, organised criminal violence, cyber operations and information warfare, with significant destabilizing effects and humanitarian consequences. Conflict is becoming harder to define, contain or resolve within borders or traditional peace architectures, increasing the risk of deterioration in fragile settings.

What's new

- There are 59 active state-based conflicts, the most since World War II.
- 40% of UN member states (78 countries) are now involved in conflicts beyond their borders. Only 4% of conflicts in the 2010s ended in peace agreements (it was 23% in the 1970s).
- The global economic impact of violence reached \$20 trillion (12% of global GDP) in 2024. Every \$1 invested in prevention— in economic stability, and strong institutions— can save between \$26 and \$103 in possible conflict-related costs.
- International humanitarian law protecting civilians is increasingly disregarded, with mounting civilian deaths and little accountability. Civilians accounted for most of the deaths in 14 conflicts in 2024. 1 in 6 people were exposed to conflict in 2025.
- Private military actors are playing more strategic roles in conflict - blurring lines of accountability and risking protracted conflicts.
- Asymmetric warfare technology is empowering non-state actors. Between 2018 and 2023, non-state groups conducting drone attacks surged from 6 to 91.
- Information warfare is being fought through deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda and mis- and dis-information campaigns.

What to watch

- How the "arms race" for critical minerals is financing conflict - and competing with the energy transition as countries scramble to secure lithium, cobalt and rare earths for both advanced military technologies and green energy
- Social media narratives attacking aid organisations as politicised or foreign-controlled, undermining humanitarian efforts, putting aid workers in danger
- Race to integrate AI into military decision-making and its ethical implications, including protection of civilians and compliance with international law

Trends

- **Conflicts proliferating and intensifying**
- **Rise in social unrest**
- **Race for scarce resources**

Gender equality under fire

Progress on gender equality has stalled. At current rates, global gender parity remains 123 years away. No SDG 5 indicator has reached "target met" or is even [on track](#). The [2025](#) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) called for faster action yet failed to reach consensus on any reference to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Moreover, nearly a quarter of governments worldwide reported [backlash](#) against women's rights in 2024. Online, resistance is intensifying — anti-gender movements are exploiting digital platforms and AI-generated content to amplify their reach. What was once slow progress is now contested ground.

What's new

- The 2025 [Global Gender Gap](#) report, covering two-thirds of the world, found only 69% of the gap closed. At current rates, full parity would not be achieved until 2148.
- Despite working 10 more hours a week than men, women [earned only 28%](#) of total income worldwide in 2025 - unchanged since 1990.
- The gender digital divide – especially [stark](#) in low- and lower-middle-income countries - could cost the global economy [\\$1.5 trillion](#) in lost GDP by 2030.
- Agentic AI risks amplifying [gender biases](#) in decision-making, while [online misogyny](#) and technology-facilitated gender-based violence are increasingly weaponized to silence women in public life.
- Declining birth rates are [driving pro-natalist policies and rhetoric](#) that risk amplifying the gender backlash.
- UN Special Rapporteur warns Afghanistan is suffering an [extreme and systematic assault on gender equality](#).
- In fragile settings, [climate change](#) and nature loss act as "threat multipliers," with climate shocks linked to rising sexual violence, trafficking and child marriage.

What to watch

- Gen Z men and women – the next generation of leaders - are the [most divided generation](#) on feminism, gender roles and women's rights. What will that mean for leadership?
- [Female journalists](#) experiencing real-life harm linked this to online violence at twice the rate they did in 2020
- [CSW70](#) action on the [six key priorities](#) in the Beijing+30 Action Agenda (with digital inclusion and climate justice as new frontiers). Given a [fractured consensus](#) at CSW69 and diminishing ODA, will these attract funding?

Trends

- **Gender backlash**
- **Inequitable distribution of technology persists**
- **Global birth rates decline**

No development without health

Five years after COVID-19, hard-won health gains are at risk. Though global life expectancy is increasing again, under-5 mortality is [projected to rise](#) for the first time this century. While high-income countries invest in AI-driven drug discovery and next-generation treatments, many low- and middle-income countries still lack basic care and face [deaths from famine](#). Fiscal pressures are forcing governments to [cut health budgets](#) at the worst possible moment. Global health aid has fallen to its lowest in 15 years, disrupting disease surveillance, vaccination campaigns and maternal health programmes. The lesson of the pandemic — that health security is indivisible — risks being forgotten just when it matters most.

What's new

- Global [life expectancy](#) at birth is rising again, reaching 73.3 years in 2024, up from 70.9 during the pandemic.
- [Maternal mortality](#) fell 40% and under-5 deaths halved between 2000-23, yet 94% of deaths remain in lower-income countries. Progress is stalling due to under-investment in primary care, [health workers](#)' shortages and immunization gaps.
- Funding cuts have reduced critical services by up to 70% in some low and middle-income countries. [External health aid](#) is projected to drop by 30% to 40% in 2025.
- HIV deaths fell by [about 70%](#) since their 2005 peak, and new vaccines offer [hope](#) - but sustaining progress will depend on financing of early and lifelong treatment.
- Women spend [25% more of their lives](#) in poor health than do men. The Gates Foundation [committed \\$2.5 billion](#) through 2030 to women's health research. \$1 invested in women's health [yields \\$3](#) in economic growth.
- Accelerated by forest clearing, there is an [increasing likelihood of future pandemics](#).
- Over 40 countries reported outbreaks of [re-emerging infectious diseases](#) in 2024, including measles, dengue and cholera.

What to watch

- The World Health Organization [Pandemic Agreement](#) adopted in 2025: the first legally binding global framework for pandemic preparedness
- Pay-per-performance approaches (eg Zipline medical drone delivery that helped reduce [maternal mortality](#) by 56% in Ghana)
- Risks of [health misinformation](#) via chatbots and social platforms, causing "infodemics"
- Opportunities of [health innovation](#) and biotech advances, like new vaccines, cleaner fuels or [cultivated](#) fish and meat

Trends

- **Biotech breakthroughs accelerating**
- **Digital health solutions are expanding**
- **Mental health under stress**

Our digital future

AI's reach is expanding rapidly, with implications for development only beginning to take shape. In 2025, the frontier has shifted from generative AI toward autonomous [agents](#) capable of acting with limited human oversight — while momentum continues around [quantum computing](#), [robotics](#) and advanced manufacturing. Yet these advances are unfolding [unevenly](#) across countries, sectors and socio-economic groups. Governments are responding - including through investment in digital public infrastructure – but whether governance can keep pace with increasingly autonomous, resource-intensive, and privately controlled AI systems remains uncertain.

What's new

- One quarter of humanity ([2.2 billion people](#)) remains offline in 2025.
- AI [labor market exposure](#) is uneven - 34% of jobs in advanced economies versus 11% in low-income countries – yet those with fewer resources face the [greatest adjustment challenges](#). [Women](#) are disproportionately at risk.
- 62% of organisations in 105 countries are experimenting with or scaling [AI agents](#)
- [Experimentation with AI](#) is widespread in the public sector, but legacy processes, procurement rules, data constraints and skills gaps inhibit productivity gains, widening the performance gap with the private sector.
- [137 countries](#) (98% of global GDP) are developing Central Bank Digital Currencies, attracted by the blockchain's potential for financial traceability and oversight.
- 2.9 billion people remain without access to digital IDs (down from 3.3 billion in 2021), while [800 million](#) lack a legal identity.
- AI's appetite for water and energy is growing fast – data centre power demand could increase by 165% globally by 2030 -prompting tech giants to invest heavily in energy, including [over 10GW in nuclear deals](#).

What to watch

- Divergent regulatory approaches—eg EU, US and China— [fragmenting AI governance](#), challenging efforts toward universal safety norms
- Emerging economies pursuing “[sovereign](#)” AI through open-source models amid evolving geopolitics of [digital sovereignty](#)
- Shifting social contracts, as corporate platforms increasingly mediate [daily lives](#) through authentication, payments and digital infrastructure
- Internet-free [messaging apps](#) that allow communication even during internet outages

Trends

- **Growing choices for countries between digital sovereignty and pathways to inclusive digital development**
- **Momentum increasing around digital public infrastructure**
- **AI deepening digital divides**

Uneven pathways to prosperity

Prosperity increasingly depends on [capabilities, resilience and adaptive capacity](#), as well as income growth. Post-pandemic recovery has followed sharply [divergent paths](#): countries with stronger institutions, fiscal space and human capital rebounded faster, while others remain stuck in low-growth cycles. Rising debt burdens, climate/environmental stress and labour market disruption are narrowing pathways to prosperity, even where headline poverty rates have [improved](#). Technological change is compounding the divergence — boosting productivity and incomes for some, while exposing gaps in skills, social protection and access to finance for others. Development gains once considered irreversible now look increasingly fragile.

What's new

- [80% of countries](#) are expected to see poverty fall in 2025, including 75% of low-income countries (the largest share in a decade). Extreme poverty, however, remains stubbornly high in sub-Saharan Africa: [46%](#) of the population.
- Economic growth is [increasingly uneven](#), with the poorest and fragile countries falling behind. At less than [3% in 2026 and 2027](#), the 2020's could be the slowest growth decade since the 1960's.
- AI adoption is [raising productivity](#) in lower skilled tasks, but uneven access to skills and computing power is [widening prosperity gaps](#) between countries.
- [Inequality](#) was considered the most interconnected global risk over the next decade by World Economic Forum respondents.
- [Insurers' retreat](#) from climate-exposed regions is accelerating. Climate [insurance innovations](#) are emerging to fill the gaps.
- New [data shows](#) investing in nature and ecosystems could unlock \$10 trillion in business value and 395 million jobs by 2030.
- Domestic resource mobilization is gaining traction as a fiscal sustainability strategy, with tax reform a priority of the [2025 Sevilla Commitment](#).

What to watch

- Progress with the "[Beyond GDP](#)" initiative to measure economic growth differently to balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development; and calls to [measure poverty](#) differently
- Will [universal basic income](#) pilots expand beyond early adopters, amid concerns over AI-driven labor market disruption?
- Shifts in the [global tax architecture](#): UN negotiations on a [Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation](#) – covering multinational taxation and high-net worth tax evasion - plus [G20](#) proposals for a 2% minimum wealth tax on billionaires

Trends

- **Growing inequalities fueling discontent**
- **Widening SDG gap in developing countries**
- **Developing countries' economies increasingly disrupted by geopolitical tensions**

On the move

Human mobility remains a defining feature of our era - and a persistent governance challenge. While 2025 saw the first [decline](#) in forced displacement in over a decade, the structural drivers of migration remain firmly in place: climate impacts, conflict, demographic shifts and economic inequality. Most human mobility still occurs within rather than across national borders, increasingly triggered by weather-related disasters. Yet public debate, political attention and funding focus on international and irregular migration. Some states are adopting visible [deterrence measures](#); others, recognizing [demographic pressures](#), are expanding managed pathways for [skilled workers](#) or encouraging the return of [skilled diasporas](#).

What's new

- The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide [dropped by 5%](#) in 2025. But mobility pressures remain high as underlying drivers continue to intensify. Displacement [hits women](#) especially hard.
- Most people forced to flee stay in their own countries. Of the more than [117 million people](#) forcibly displaced worldwide, 58% are internally displaced.
- In 2025, several OECD countries set [explicit objectives](#) to reduce migration. The EU adopted new rules enabling offshore "[return hubs](#)" such as the Italy–Albania agreement. The [US expanded](#) travel restrictions to 39 countries and [paused](#) immigrant visa processing from 75.
- Japan, Germany, Türkiye and Hungary are [expanding targeted visa schemes](#) and work-permit exemptions to address labour shortages. [China](#) and [Bangladesh](#) are attracting skilled diasporas back into priority sectors.
- Disasters triggered some [46 million](#) internal displacements in 2024, double the annual average of the past decade. 99% were triggered by weather events like cyclones and floods. Many were pre-emptive evacuations (eg Philippines, Bangladesh), a sign that early warning systems are saving lives.

What to watch

- Whether [restrictive migration policies](#) continue to grow
- [Planned relocation](#) (eg from high-risk coastal and flood zones) as a proactive development tool rather than emergency response
- [Anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) amplified online and in [European](#) and US political discourse
- Deportations generating [secondary social and political tensions](#) in origin countries

Trends

- **Anti-migrant movements growing**
- **Growing youth bulge in many developing countries**
- **Multilateralism in flux**

An age of distrust

Civic engagement is shifting. Participation is being shaped less by confidence in democratic systems and more by grievance, frustration and perceived exclusion from decision-making. Digital platforms have amplified voices, particularly among young people, but have also shortened attention spans, fragmented publics and weakened shared spaces for deliberation. In 2025, youth-led protests illustrated a paradox: high engagement alongside deep institutional distrust. Participation is shifting toward localised, issue-based, sometimes confrontational forms of action - energy that formal governance structures struggle to absorb or respond to. How to rebuild a social contract where institutions are trusted and participation feels meaningful?

What's new

- Democratic backsliding continues; the degree of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985 levels. 39% of people worldwide live under authoritarian rule, with another 15% in hybrid regimes with authoritarian tendencies.
- Two-thirds of the world - 5.1 billion people - lacked access to justice in 2019. In 2025, the rule of law declined in 68% of countries (up from 57% in 2024), with increasing constraints on judicial independence, restriction of civic participation and weakening of fundamental rights.
- 57% of people across 26 countries have a moderate or high sense of grievance, believing government and business hurt them and the system favours the rich. 7 in 10 are hesitant or unwilling to trust someone different from them.
- Protest activity increased in 88 countries in 2025 (though still lower than 2021's record). Youth-led "Gen Z protests" - against inequality, rising prices and corruption - forced political reform and changes of government in several countries.
- 40% (and over half of those aged 18-34) across 28 countries approve of at least one type of "hostile activism", like online attacks, spreading disinformation, threatening violence or damaging property.

What to watch

- With trust in national institutions declining globally, can local governments navigate divisive challenges and mitigate polarization better than national governments?
- Calls to invest in ethical political leadership to restore trust in democratic institutions
- Can AI-driven information integrity tools rebuild trust in shared facts?
- Whether participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies can become mainstream

Trends

- **Social contracts under pressure as trust breaks down**
- **Rise in social unrest**
- **Growing demand for new forms of governance**



The true cost of debt

Global debt remains historically high at above [235% of global GDP](#). Public debt in developing countries is rising [twice as fast](#) as in developed countries. [Geo-economic fragmentation](#), trade tensions and conflicts have slowed growth and, critically for developing countries, further increased the cost of external borrowing. At the same time, [cuts to development aid](#) has removed a key source of affordable funding. These patterns deepen the divergence between advanced economies that benefit from cheap, long-term debt and developing countries that face high short-term debt rates. Calls to reform the international financial architecture, including debt restructuring, continue.

What's new

- Over half of low-income countries and [23% of emerging economies](#) are in or at high risk of debt distress, the highest share in decades.
- Developing countries hold about one-third of global debt but pay four to [eight times higher](#) interest than advanced economies.
- Debt service now absorbs [45% of government revenues](#) across the Global South, as high as 70% in low-income countries. [3.4 billion](#) people live in developing nations where governments spend more on debt service interest payments than on health or education.
- Despite a focus on African debt sustainability, the G20 summit in Johannesburg [failed to deliver](#) concrete proposals.
- A group of 165 organisations has called on the International Monetary Fund to [sell its gold reserves](#) and set up a debt relief fund.

What to watch

- Calls for G20 Common Framework and IMF to pivot from prioritizing creditor payouts to delivering [structural debt relief solutions](#)
- [Borrowers' Forum](#), launched to amplify the voice of debt-distressed nations
- Will temporary debt relief offered through [Climate-Resilience Debt Clauses](#) after natural disasters delay deeper debt restructuring rather than support it?
- [Debt-for-development-swaps](#) – potentially helpful but [criticized](#) for lack of transparency, and inferior to debt restructuring

Trends

- **Momentum towards international financial architecture reform**
- **Debt crisis intensifies**
- **New wave of debt swaps for climate and nature**

Green money, grey areas

SDG-aligned finance is scaling but not yet to the levels needed for transformational outcomes. Investments remain concentrated in [select advanced and emerging economies](#), while climate-vulnerable and low-income countries still face [high borrowing costs](#) and limited access. Without cheaper capital and stronger public risk-sharing, sustainable finance risks reinforcing global inequalities. Moreover, the market is becoming polarized: pulled in one direction by an ESG (environmental, social and governance) [backlash](#) and a surge in [greenwashing](#), and in the other by [stakeholder pressure](#) for information about how companies are managing sustainability.

What's new

- Sustainable bond issuance reached a [record \\$11 trillion](#) in 2024, up 11% from 2023. However, the expansion of sustainable funds [slowed](#), reflecting regulatory uncertainties and rising anti-ESG sentiment.
- Multilateral development banks reported a record [\\$137 billion](#) in climate finance in 2024. Yet the COP29 [pledge](#) to triple climate finance to \$300 billion annually by 2035 - with aspirations of \$1.3 trillion from all sources - remains far below needs.
- Some regulators are [pulling back](#) from mandatory ESG reporting, with the EU simplifying requirements under its Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive and US climate-related financial disclosure regulations in flux. ["Greenhushing"](#) (companies staying quiet on their sustainability goals) has gained momentum.
- Nevertheless, most companies say [stakeholder pressure](#) to provide sustainability data has increased. AI-driven analytics and [automated disclosure tools](#) raise reporting expectations.
- The EU [carbon border tax](#) came into force in 2026. It could push others to introduce carbon pricing but some developing countries say it will [restrict trade](#).

What to watch

- Whether the [new climate finance goals](#) from COP deliver on their promise to prioritize grants over loans, reducing the debt burden on countries struggling to invest in climate action
- Can green finance taxonomies [converge](#) internationally without a "race to the bottom" on environmental criteria?
- Will strong stated interest in sustainable investing — [88%](#) globally, led by Gen Z and Millennials — [translate](#) into meaningful [capital allocation](#)?

Trends

- **Sustainable finance market growing**
- **Widening SDG investment gap in developing countries**
- **ESG regulation in the spotlight**

Crosscurrents in the energy transition

Renewables are expanding rapidly and becoming cheaper, but not yet fast enough. For the first time, renewables overtook coal in the global electricity mix in mid-2025, yet the rate still falls short of what's needed to triple capacity by 2030. Global electricity access stands at 92%, yet [666 million](#) people remain without power, 85% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, AI is reshaping energy systems—optimising grids while driving up electricity demand through data-centre growth. Nuclear power is resurging, and the geopolitics of energy are shifting as countries pursue divergent pathways: some advancing renewables and efficiency, others securing traditional fuel supplies.

What's new

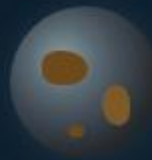
- Scientists warn a temporary overshoot beyond 1.5 C warming is inevitable as countries fail to meet their Paris pledges.
- Renewables overtook coal as the primary source of electricity in mid-2025. Global renewable capacity is projected to double by 2030, but still below the 16.6% annual growth needed to triple capacity by 2030 to meet COP28 consensus.
- Global investment in clean tech in 2025 was double that in fossil fuel projects.
- Electric vehicles (EVs) are now firmly mass-market, with over 17 million electric cars sold in 2024 (20% of global car sales), reshaping demand for charging networks and critical minerals. Sales increased a further 35% in early 2025.
- Battery costs have fallen by 20% per year in the last decade, enabling cheaper storage and making solar more feasible.
- Electricity consumption by data centres has grown 12% per year in the last 5 years. It is projected to double by 2030 (=still only 3% of global electricity demand). But digital technologies and AI also enable system optimization and technical innovations that are accelerating the energy transition.
- Investment in nuclear power is resurging, including in fusion tech.

What to watch

- US withdrawal from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and other climate bodies
- How policy volatility (eg such as a 50% cut in US renewables growth) affects investor confidence and competitive momentum
- Whether surging critical-minerals demand strengthens local value creation or deepens dependency
- How the 2026 SDG7 review shapes pathways to close the energy-access gap

Trends

- **Renewable energy on the rise**
- **Fossil fuel subsidies persist**
- **Growing investment in clean tech**



Earth's bottom line

With seven of nine planetary boundaries now breached, climate instability and ecosystem degradation are creating pressures on food security, health, land and water systems. While nature-positive approaches and restoration efforts are expanding in some contexts, progress remains uneven and fragile. The defining challenge has shifted from ambitious pledges to enforcing and implementing what has already been agreed, including correcting incentives that continue to drive ecological degradation. The viability of development pathways now depends on delivering genuine ecological repair, not simply managing growth within failing Earth systems.

What's new

- Only 55 of 196 countries submitted updated biodiversity action plans aligned with the Kunming-Montreal framework by late 2025—though many have set ambitious national targets for nature protection and restoration.
- Over 130 countries have now started calculating their national finance gap and drafting a national Biodiversity Finance Plan.
- The High Seas Treaty came into international law in January 2026: a new era in ocean conservation.
- Only 30% of ocean health monitoring systems have sustained funding, threatening critical climate monitoring.
- 730+ organizations adopted recommendations from the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures in 2025, but 70% of national policies lack budgets.
- Ecological risks have intensified in 96 countries/territories since 2019, driven by rising water stress, food insecurity, climate-related hazards and population growth.
- Global inequalities in freshwater access are widening, driven less by scarcity than by insufficient infrastructure to capture, store and distribute water. Solutions include water pricing reforms, improved efficiency and resilient infrastructure.

What to watch

- The stalled global plastics treaty faces another test in February 2026: can multilateral environmental governance deliver?
- A new independent science panel on chemicals, waste and pollution starts work in 2026 to strengthen the global science-policy interface
- The efficacy of nature-based carbon markets, as verification standards tighten amid greenwashing claims
- If biodiversity credits can emerge as a credible financing mechanism

Trends

- **Accelerating biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation**
- **Increasing investment in nature-based solutions**
- **New alliances for the global commons**

