

2024 GLOBAL OUTLOOK

Prospects for Children: Cooperation in a Fragmented World

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Introduction

For 2024, the Global Outlook addresses cooperation in a fragmented world and examines the ways in which embracing cooperation in the face of growing global fragmentation will help protect the rights, lives and futures of children.

This theme picks up from the 2023 Global Outlook, which focused on the ‘polycrisis’. That report delved into the multiple shocks converging simultaneously in an interconnected world, threatening progress towards achieving global development goals for children. The polycrisis has been further complicated by the fracturing of the world into greater political polarity, which has reignited old grievances and led to more instability and conflict. In the 2024 edition, the Global Outlook spotlights this growing global geopolitical and geoeconomic fragmentation and makes an urgent call for global cooperation.

This Global Outlook shows how escalating competition among the world’s major powers has increased the prospect of conflict and sparked volatility in energy and food markets – all of which disproportionately

threaten the rights, lives and well-being of children. Economic fragmentation has jeopardized hard-won progress reducing poverty and has threatened innovation and the global transition to green energy. Democratic backsliding, disinformation and political violence pose threats, even in established democracies. While AI offers many benefits for children, unregulated technologies risk undermining child well-being. The multilateral system built to manage these risks has faltered, causing dissatisfaction over inequitable access to global public goods.

But positive forces – such as political accountability, financing reforms and digital cooperation – offer hope. Collective action on strategic investments and proactive social policies can create more inclusive and resilient societies. Diplomacy and stronger peacebuilding mechanisms can prevent geopolitical rifts from escalating into warfare. Prioritizing the most vulnerable groups, especially children, in trade policy formulation and cooperation on commodity markets can ensure more equitable access to essential goods. A swift and just transition to green energy and carbon-zero emissions and collective management of global public goods offer promise for today's children and future generations.

As we enter 2024, the world stands at a pivotal juncture. We can *choose* a path marked by increased global collaboration – a path that embraces innovation, knowledge sharing, policy transfer and equitable growth. Or we can go down a path that is less united and more protectionist, leaving countries to grapple alone with the consequences of climate change, conflict and resource constraints. The future of children globally will hinge on the interplay of these factors.

The Global Outlook presents four scenarios to 2050 on different degrees of international cooperation and technological advancement. These scenarios illustrate that children's prospects for the future depend on the policy choices we make today ([*see The Future for Children: Four scenarios*](#)). The analysis shows that the best outcomes for children's health, education and overall well-being result from a path of 'global synergy' – one defined by high levels of cooperation, productivity and technological advancement.

With the United Nations' Summit of the Future ahead in September 2024, the world must rekindle the cooperative spirit envisioned by the post-World War II international order and recognize humanity's shared destiny. The best way to achieve this goal is by placing children, their interests and their voices, at the centre of decisions about our shared future.



Eight trends for 2024

1. [Geopolitical shifts](#) and the risk of conflict may threaten children's survival and well-being – but avenues for accountability and cooperation hold promise.
2. [Economic fragmentation](#) threatens families' livelihoods, children's development and youth employment – but economic solidarity, market collaboration and investing in future skills can safeguard children's rights and futures.
3. [A fragmented multilateral system](#) is not delivering on key issues for children – but it has a chance to reset its course in 2024 through global governance and financing reforms.
4. [Developing economies](#) still face structural inequities in the international financial architecture, limiting their ability to invest in children – but reforms to lending approaches and new technologies offer hope.
5. [Global democracy](#) faces unprecedented risks presented by disinformation and higher levels of political violence – but positive forces, including those led by children and youth, may still reverse the democratic decline.
6. [Fast-tracking the transition](#) to green energy is reshaping critical mineral and labour markets – if managed responsibly, cooperatively and justly, this can benefit children.
7. [El Niño](#), mosquito-borne diseases and water scarcity threaten children's health and well-being – but greater collaboration, holistic programming and technological innovation can mitigate the negative impacts and protect children.
8. [Potential impacts of unchecked technologies](#) spark fear and concern for children's well-being – but proactive policy and global digital cooperation can place children at the centre of responsible design and regulation.

1. Geopolitical shifts and the risk of conflict may threaten children's survival and well-being – but avenues for accountability and cooperation hold promise.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Increasing their exposure to violence and war



Raising the risk of grave violations of child rights



Diverting resources from education, health care and nutrition

The world has entered a period of increased strategic competition – rivalries based on competing interests – among major state powers, and this will continue to intensify in 2024.

The result is likely to be increased volatility in trade, financial markets and technology – and an increased risk of conflict. For children, this volatility could mean a 2024 of disruption – to education, health care, nutrition and routines of daily life.

Geopolitical shifts

In 2024, major state powers will continue to compete against each other with the goal of strengthening their standing within military, political, economic (*see Trend 2*) and technological (*see Trend 8*) spheres. They will look to bolster their capacity to project power globally and within multilateral institutions (*see Trend 3*). The result will be less cooperation and more confrontation among the traditional world powers.

Mid-sized and small state powers, including those in the Global South, are distancing themselves from confrontation between the major powers by forging new kinds of alliances – alliances among themselves, in smaller groupings of countries, and with several major powers at once. This new configuration of alliances has been described as the '[multi-aligned movement](#)'.

Shifting geopolitical alliances, strategic competition and the rise of the multi-aligned movement will most likely mean continued instability in 2024. As a result, countries, and the people who live in them, will experience the fallout that will reverberate in agriculture and food markets, economies, political systems, the climate and development technologies.

Increased risk of conflict

Conflict was a defining feature of 2023. At the start of 2024, the outlook for peace and security remains bleak.

As major powers seek to use technology to assert primacy on the global stage, cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns may be used to influence elections and sow discord.

The heightened risk of conflict will be particularly evident in ongoing regional disputes.

Escalation, by accident or intent, threatens regions where disputes within a country or region entangle neighbours. This will be especially problematic in regions where mid-level and major state powers support conflict by proxy in the pursuit of their own power. With a lack of confidence in the United Nations (see *Trend 3*), and as powerful nations are distracted by securing their own geopolitical position, 'frozen' conflicts could be reignited and new conflicts could be sparked.

Environmental and climate change factors coupled with geopolitical tensions will continue to create conditions ripe for conflict.

As the recent Ecological Threat Report states, the battle for water, arable land and energy resources will escalate tensions, particularly in regions already grappling with political instability. Furthermore, conflict harms the natural environment, with long-lasting ramifications. This harm affects not only critical ecosystems but also people's health, livelihoods and security.

The private sector will also remain deeply involved in warfare, as weapons manufacturers, private security companies and mercenaries.

The introduction of new technologies has also created a demand for private actors as partners in war, including in cyber operations and communications. These new roles create unfamiliar situations in which these private actors could be considered parties to conflict under international humanitarian law, thus complicating issues of accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

Urban warfare will continue to present particular dangers in 2024.

In the most recent data verified by the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, which tracks grave violations of child rights, explosive weapons were responsible for [47 per cent of all child casualties](#) documented by the mechanism. Even when the fighting ends, the risk of explosive weapons continues. Globally, children account for two thirds of all of the civilians killed and maimed by [explosive remnants of war](#) – with the lasting consequences including physical disabilities and [mental health issues](#).

Urban conflict also [destroys the infrastructure](#) necessary for children’s well-being and, often, their survival. Homes, schools and play spaces are destroyed or damaged, as are water and energy supplies, markets, health care facilities and other vital infrastructure. Indeed, far more children are victims of indirect harm caused by conflict than of conflict itself.

For children, the impact of geopolitical rivalries, increased volatility and rising risk of conflict is profound.

One of the most egregious effects is [an increase in grave violations](#) of children’s rights – such as killing, maiming, sexual violence, abduction and the recruitment by state and non-state armed groups – persisting alongside the destruction of essential infrastructure. [These abuses must stop](#).

Another problem for children is that the fear of military confrontation – and the corresponding surge in spending on arms and military – may lead nations to divert resources away from social and economic development, including from services such as education and health care.

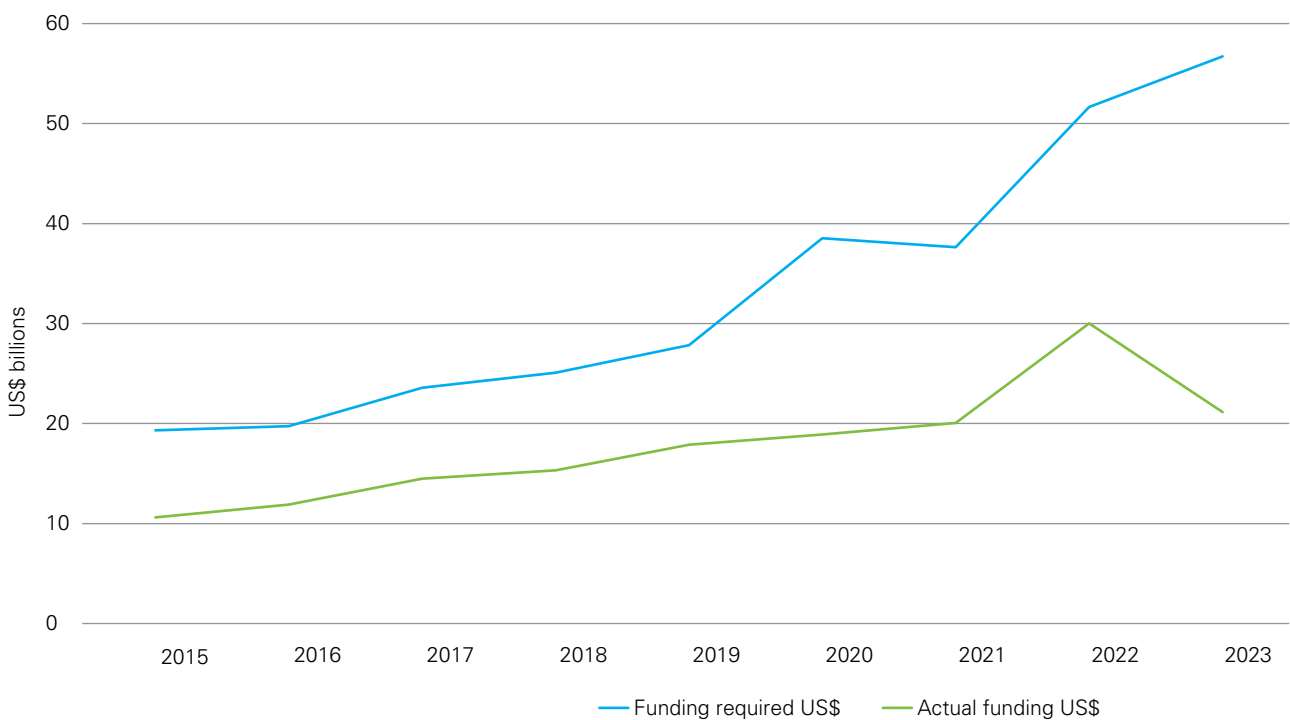
In a time of shrinking government budgets in many low- and middle-income countries and dwindling support for development assistance, it is likely that public investment in the world’s poorest countries will shrink. This shift in allocation of resources could hinder progress and aggravate economic disparities. Ultimately, it could lead to social unrest and fuel conflict.

Humanitarian needs have reached unprecedented levels and are likely to grow, thus putting a strain on resources and compassion.

Large-scale, high-profile crises attract immense levels of aid, which can deplete the resources available to respond to less visible

humanitarian crises. This lack of funding for humanitarian responses has been an ongoing but growing issue. For example, in 2023, the United Nations' global [humanitarian appeal](#) asked for US\$56.7 billion to respond to crises. As of December 2023, the appeal had fallen nearly 68 per cent short, and most of the funding was targeted for a handful of high-profile crises. In some instances, inadequate funding has forced aid agencies [to cut food rations](#) for affected populations, and many agencies have faced challenges in delivering medical services.

Figure 1: Humanitarian funding gap has more than doubled since 2015



Source: Financial Tracking Service.

Collective action and cooperation can help protect children

To protect children from the consequences of shifting geopolitical alliances and armed conflict, state and non-state actors must protect the most vulnerable children by reinforcing respect for international humanitarian law and child rights in armed conflict. Monitoring and reporting of violations should be strengthened to shine a light on

children's suffering and to advocate for changes in law, policy and practice that better protect children. Parties to conflict that commit violations must be held accountable through national or international justice mechanisms.

Amid intense, high-profile conflicts and increasing frequency of natural disasters, the international community must strive to support humanitarian action and avoid the creation of 'forgotten emergencies' in which the risks to children's lives and futures are overlooked.

Despite the prevailing tumult in the world, this changing geopolitical landscape offers opportunities for hope. If approached effectively, including through some of the steps proposed in the Secretary-General of the United Nations' [New Agenda for Peace](#), a more inclusive and collaborative approach to solving global problems may develop. As power becomes more diffused, the world may witness increased diplomatic engagement and growth in multilateral initiatives aimed at addressing transnational peace and security.

HIGHLIGHT

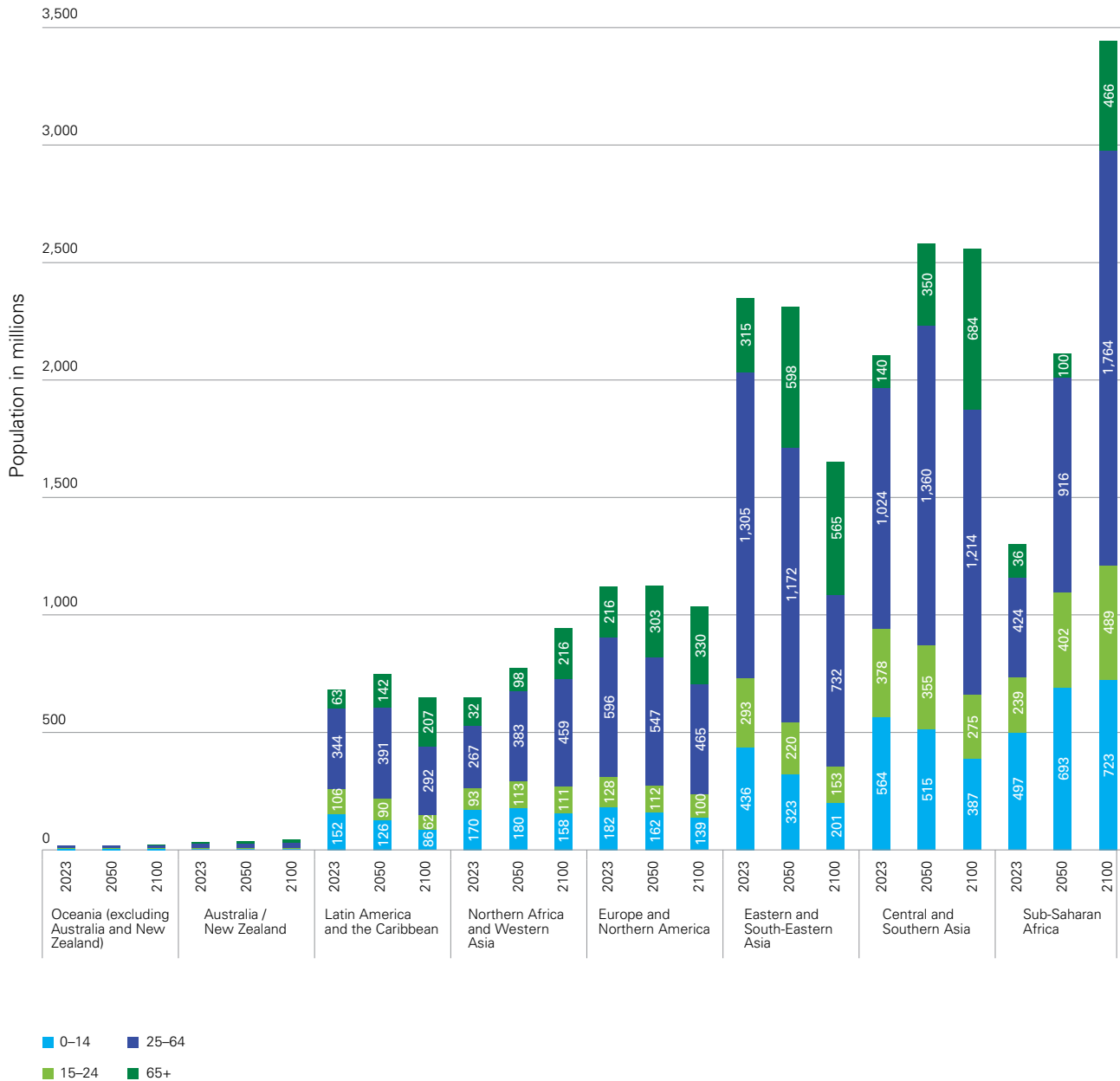
Demography

With the Summit of the Future, world leaders will need to consider new threats and opportunities presented by demographic shifts, to ensure justice for current and future generations. Although population growth is at its [slowest since 1950](#), the world population will reach nearly 10 billion by 2050. Advances in health care and declining fertility rates have triggered reduced birth and death rates over time. This shift is also known as the [demographic transition](#).

This transition is happening everywhere, but it is unfolding at different paces and has distinct implications in individual countries. It also impacts many spheres of life, and understanding how it affects economies, political institutions and geopolitical trends is essential to ensure that the right measures are taken and that all age groups, including children, benefit.

Figure 2: Population shifts will differ by region

Population in millions by Sustainable Development Goal regions and age brackets (2023, 2050, 2100)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

Population changes can present **economic opportunities and challenges**. Countries in the early stages of the demographic transition can experience a 'demographic dividend'. This is a window during which countries with a large workforce compared to the number of children and elderly can experience an increase in productivity, savings, investment and consumer demand. This population shift can lead to faster gross domestic product (GDP) and job growth, contingent on adequate policies, resources, and cultural and social dynamics, and the global context.

On the other hand, countries at later stages of the demographic transition can experience slower growth due to lower public and private savings and investment resulting from higher dependency ratios, in many cases due to [ageing populations](#). This adds to fiscal pressure as demand for public services rises while tax revenues decrease with a shrinking workforce, thus heightening the importance of protecting children's interests.

Population dynamics also have implications for **political systems and democracy**. Since most countries restrict the right to vote to people older than 18, electoral outcomes may fail to represent adequately the interests of children and young people, even in places where they are the majority of the population. Although almost half of the world population is under the age of 30, the [average age of political leaders](#) is 62. In contrast, in countries where the old outnumber the young, implementing policies specifically for children may become politically [more difficult](#). The lack of voting rights and representation in leadership may impact policy and services for children and young people.

Lastly, demography matters in **geopolitics**. Countries that successfully tap into the demographic dividend and prosper may have more sway in international affairs. By 2100, 5 of the 10 most populous countries [will be in Africa](#). On the other hand, countries with declining populations may see a decrease in their global influence. For many high-income countries, international migration [will be the sole driver of population growth](#) in the coming decades. This will require a rethink of migration policies and the creation of opportunities for more just and inclusive societies.

Shifting global population dynamics can lead to positive or negative outcomes for children depending on the quality of government response. Responses to population growth – or decline – will need to rely on foresight analysis and look [beyond family planning and reproductive health rights](#). These responses will need to embrace paid parental leave, child-care subsidies, expanded health coverage and investment in education and early childhood development. It will be essential to equip children with future skills such as digital literacy and critical thinking, support the development of green spaces and playgrounds, and introduce policies that promote sustainability.

2. Economic fragmentation threatens families' livelihoods, children's development and youth employment – but economic solidarity, market collaboration and investing in future skills can safeguard children's rights and futures.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Increasing food prices, which affects nutrition



Undermining young people's access to job markets



Diverting money from programmes to fight child poverty

As the world enters 2024, the trajectory of the global economy is at a pivotal juncture, with implications that will loom large for children and young people.

Economic fragmentation – a reversal of global economic integration – is projected to deepen disparities between nations in a time of persistent inflation and modest growth. This fragmentation is often driven by [geopolitical interests and strategic considerations](#), threatens years of economic prosperity, progress and innovation, and puts pressure on government purses. In addition, economic fragmentation prevails at a time when, in the wake of multiple global crises, an uptick in child poverty in many parts of the world threatens children's rights, lives and futures.

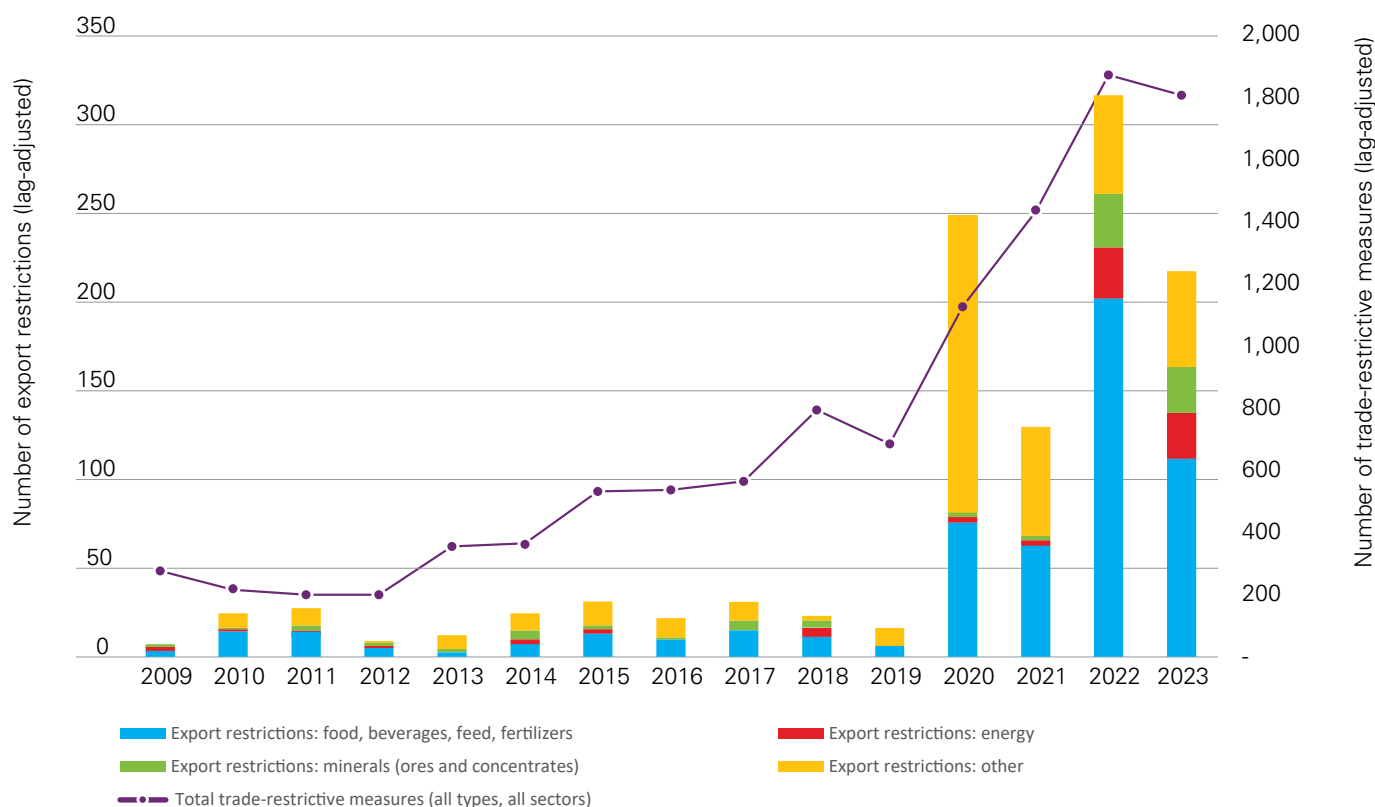
In contrast, reduced fragmentation, greater trade openness and economic cooperation can benefit children. This kind of global cooperation can positively impact children's lives by improving household incomes and livelihoods, bolstering public revenue and spending, raising wages and increasing the availability of essential goods and services.

Fragmentation impacts livelihoods and investments in children

Economic fragmentation manifests most strongly in international trade, with a significant impact on children's lives and well-being. Economic fragmentation occurs as countries increasingly resort to trade restrictions and 'friend-shoring' – shifting trade and production to politically aligned partners. Export restrictions on food, fertilizer, energy and critical minerals (*see Trend 6*) in particular have risen in recent years (*see Figure 3*). This economic fragmentation entails a trade-off between geopolitical expediency and resilience, on the one hand, and efficiency and growth, on the other.

As with any trade-off, there are winners and losers. Developing countries, especially those that are highly indebted or dependent on imports, will be affected more acutely, thus driving further economic divergence and polarization.

Figure 3: Trade-restrictive measures have increased more than fourfold in the last decade



Source: Global Trade Alert database.

Note: The Global Trade Alert database is retrospectively updated with new information on past trade policy decisions. The resulting reporting lag leads to more measures registered in previous years. To correct for this, we report lag-adjusted statistics with a cut-off date of 31 December. For each year from 2009 to 2022, export restrictions are reported that are implemented and documented in that year before the cut-off date. For 2023, the cut-off date is in November.

The trend towards economic and trade fragmentation is perhaps most immediately visible in global food markets, where trade restrictions are becoming an uncomfortably common reaction to global shocks. Agri-food export restrictions surged in the aftermath of COVID-19, after the start of the Russia–Ukraine war, and they grew again in the latter half of 2023. These restrictions put pressure on global food prices. For example, between 2008 and 2012, export restrictions imposed by 36 countries raised the prices of key staples such as wheat and rice by over [30 per cent](#).

Recent evidence shows that food inflation has a strong impact on child nutrition. [In a sample of 44 developing countries](#), a 5 per cent increase in the real price of food between 2000 and 2021 was found to be associated with a 9 per cent increase in the risk of wasting. An increase in the price of food during a pregnancy was associated with an increased risk of stunting in children aged 2–5 years. A UNICEF analysis showed that, from March 2022 to October 2022, over 2 million newborns in 127 low- and middle-income countries may have been at risk of stunting due to rising food prices because of the Russia – Ukraine war.¹ This increase translates into an 8 per cent total increase in the risk of stunting.

Economic fragmentation is also likely to hurt job prospects for youth, particularly in low-income countries. Labour market outcomes for youth in these countries still [lag behind](#) pre-COVID-19 levels, with rates of unemployment and youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) being higher in 2022 and 2023 than in 2019. These persistent employment deficits could result in long-term ‘scarring’ in terms of employment and wage trajectories for young people entering the workforce in 2024. This scarring will be similar to that experienced by young people who [entered the workforce](#) during the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

The lack of opportunity and reduced wages for young people entering the job market could be exacerbated by disjointed policy approaches to new technologies. Technologies such as AI and robotics promise efficiency but will also have negative labour market impacts. These negative impacts will particularly affect [sectors prone to automation which have largely young workforces](#). However, efforts are lacking to endow the next generation of workers with the flexibility and adaptability needed to thrive in the face of this technological transformation. It remains to be seen whether regulations can effectively converge to address impacts on youth employment (*see Trend 8*).

¹ In this analysis, we estimate the impact of food inflation shock from March to October 2022 on children in utero on their human capital formation (counterfactual is average 2021 month-on-month (MoM) inflation*). The analysis follows the methodology outlined in the World Bank’s Middle East and North Africa Economic Update (April 2023), *Altered Destinies: The Long-Term Effects of Rising Prices and Food Insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa*, and applies it to a global sample of 127 low- and middle-income countries. *According to the International Monetary Fund, passthrough of international food price shocks to higher domestic retail food prices could take 6–12 months, so we defined food inflation shock as the difference between MoM inflation in March to October 2022 in contrast to a counterfactual of average MoM inflation in 2021.

Slow economic growth halts progress on reducing child poverty

In addition to the rise of economic fragmentation, the prospect of continued inflation is particularly worrisome for developing countries. The [International Monetary Fund's \(IMF\) latest projections](#) show that inflation – the biggest economic challenge of 2022 – will come down from around 9 per cent in 2022 to around 5 per cent in 2024. However, inflation is decelerating faster in developed countries than in emerging markets and developing economies.

In developing economies, which will still have to contend with inflation of around 7 per cent in 2024, the outlook is worsened by the looming effects of recent events in the Middle East, the continuing war between Russia and Ukraine, and the ongoing impacts of climate change and El Niño. It is well [documented](#) that inflation erodes the purchasing power and wealth of households, especially in [poor](#) households in which families spend most of their income on necessities and have few hedges against inflation (such as investments and savings in foreign currencies). This household financial stress can lead to severe increases in child poverty [even in developed countries](#).

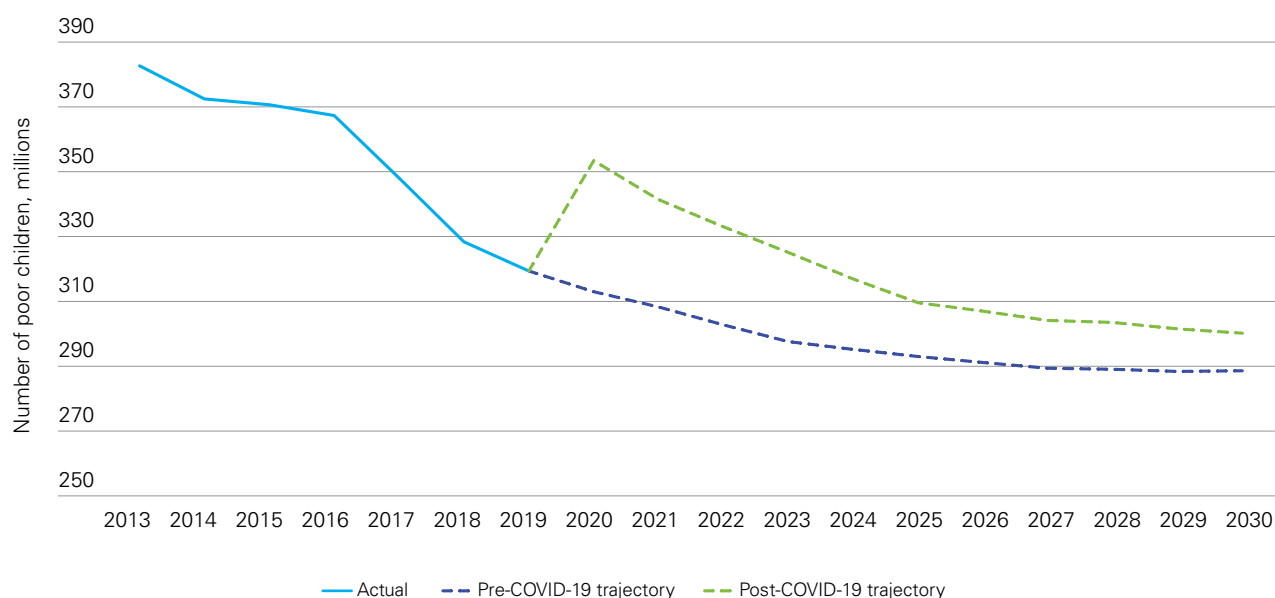
Although economic growth in developing economies will remain steady in 2024, it will still be well below historical averages and will mask heterogeneous regional outlooks.

Global growth slowed from 3.5 per cent in 2022 to 3 per cent in 2023 and will slow to 2.9 per cent in 2024. Overall growth in emerging markets and developing economies will stay at around 4 per cent. However, different developing regions are expected to follow divergent trajectories in 2024: some will experience slumps and persistent slow growth (Latin America, for example); others will experience shifts in their centres of economic gravity accompanied by a modest slowdown in growth (developing countries in Asia); still others will experience slumps followed by different levels of recovery (the Middle East, Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa).

This limited growth is insufficient to reverse the progress on reducing child poverty lost during the pandemic. In fact, our projections show child poverty remaining grimly above pre-pandemic levels in 2024 and beyond.

Child poverty

Figure 4: Projected trajectories for the number of children in poverty before and after the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: World Bank.

The previous strong gains in reducing extreme child poverty stalled in the wake of the converging global crises that began around the start of 2020. The latest joint nowcasts [from the World Bank and UNICEF for 2022](#), released in the summer 2023, reiterate that at least three years of progress in reducing child poverty had been lost during the one-two punch of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing [polycrisis](#).

The cost to children will clearly continue. Using the World Bank and UNICEF methodology to project child poverty between 2024 and 2030, estimates indicate that about 15 million more children will live in extreme poverty than would have if the economic fallout of these multiple crises had not occurred. In other words, over the next six years, 100 million more children will experience poverty each year and face its life-long consequences than would have if progress on reducing poverty had maintained its pre-pandemic trajectory.

This trajectory is expected to continue. Long-term projections indicate that the rate of reduction in child poverty will decelerate significantly by the end of the 2020s – from a 3 per cent annual reduction between 2014 and 2019 to 0.6 per cent between 2025 and 2030.

An important cause of this decline in the rate of poverty reduction is that the substantial gains already achieved in reducing child poverty in East, Southeast and South Asia have brought diminishing returns, making further alleviation increasingly difficult. As a result, the regions that have spearheaded global reductions are projected to see their rate of progress slow down. Unfortunately, this deceleration will not be compensated by faster reductions in other regions.

Our outlook once more highlights the need for urgent action to accelerate child poverty alleviation. Successive crises have dealt children a heavy blow, with lasting impacts that place an entire generation at risk. However, expanding social protection, improving the quality of services and investing in human capital can lift families out of poverty before it leaves an enduring imprint. With debt burdens and low growth limiting fiscal space in many nations, substantial international investments remain essential to safeguard children.

Safeguarding children's rights for the future

Economic fragmentation jeopardizes children's rights globally. It restricts their ability to compete in the global labour markets and blocks their access to essential goods and services, including affordably priced food. Divergent trade policies, unequal fiscal capacities and the inconsistent flow of aid directly impact children's access to these resources, thus contributing to persistent child poverty.

With economic fragmentation occurring at a time when some regions and countries are slowly recovering from inflation, the consequences for children and young people need to be a global consideration.

These consequences highlight the need to rethink how addressing economic fragmentation can safeguard children's rights and futures. Equitable budgeting, taxes, debt management and public finance are key to ensuring essential services and securing environments that allow children to thrive, especially given economic disparities. In addition, the developed world needs to demonstrate economic solidarity through flows of foreign aid and financing for climate and development actions that are orders of magnitude higher than current levels.

Amid rising economic fragmentation, decisive and unified policy actions are urgently needed to secure children's rights and futures.

Targeted [social spending](#), [safety nets](#) and commodity market collaboration are critical to ensure smooth flow of goods essential for children. Investing in high development return areas is particularly crucial in constrained fiscal environments, and investing in the critical periods of [early childhood](#) and [adolescence](#) has shown considerable returns. Strategic investments in youth employment and education can help young people find meaningful work in the emerging sectors of the future. In particular, investing in the digital, care and green economies has the potential to [generate over 30 million jobs for youth](#), thus enabling sustainable growth. Skills development readies young people for these emerging opportunities and helps developing countries to improve their competitiveness. Despite wide recognition of what helps students to learn, education and skills systems are failing. International cooperation is hence more important now than ever to address the global education and skills crises. The result will be a fair chance for developing countries to participate in the global markets and for children to own their future.

3. A fragmented multilateral system is not delivering on key issues for children – but it has a chance to reset its course in 2024 through global governance and financing reforms.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Limiting efforts to protect child rights



Inhibiting collective action to prevent and end conflict



Creating new avenues of engagement and cooperation to address common risks to children

What kind of world will today's children and future generations inherit?

In 2024, an increasingly fractured international system will have to tackle this question. Amid increased calls and pressure for reform, along with alternatives growing in strength, 2024 will be a pivotal year for charting the way for a multilateral system that was created nearly eighty years ago and is grounded in the United Nations Charter.

Multilateralism – operating through an architecture of organizations, institutions, common norms and agreements – strives to benefit humanity through collective action and solutions for common problems: preserving peace and security; addressing common threats, such as climate change and pandemics; and increasing prosperity and equality among nations. The decisions made in 2024 could determine whether today's children will inherit an inclusive and resilient system poised to protect them or instead bear the long-term consequences of division and discord.

Distrust and weakness of multilateralism today

Multilateralism has been under increasing pressure from competing national interests, power politics and dissatisfaction with the system's ability to deliver equally for all. First, geopolitical tensions risk turning multilateral forums into battlegrounds for influence and factionalism. The erosion of trust and wariness about cooperation between countries makes it harder to agree, take collective action on global issues or uphold commitments to global norms and rules.

Second, many countries, especially those in the Global South, believe the system has failed to address core challenges and is no longer fit for purpose in an evolving world. The inequity of the response to the

COVID-19 pandemic was clear to many. Likewise, the international system has floundered in its attempts to combat climate change and secure financing from industrialized countries to compensate least developed countries for the loss and damage incurred by the former's climate-harming actions. Many countries also fault the multilateral system for failure to address recurring debt crises in developing economies and prevent international conflict. Respect for human rights and international humanitarian law seems to be weakening. To some critics, it appears that the multilateral system has been unable to secure compliance of United Nations Member States with the global standards to which they agreed. Many countries in the developing world feel that the current system is biased in favour of powerful, high-income countries in the West, and they have called for reform.

These pressures imperil peace, children's rights, trust and funding – in 2024 and beyond

As a result of these pressures, guaranteeing international peace and security will be further compromised by geopolitical fragmentation. The structure of the United Nations Security Council has inhibited action on many conflicts, especially where permanent members have a stake. In response, a coalition of Member States led by [Liechtenstein](#) established a process, through Resolution 76/262, to promote debate in the General Assembly after the use of the Security Council veto. It was used in 2022 and 2023 following vetoes on resolutions related to the situations in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Israel, Mali, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine.

The normative development and application of human rights may also see further backsliding in a fragmented multilateral system. The promotion and protection of children's rights could be lost amid issues considered of greater importance to specific organizations and alliances. Children's rights can also be challenged under national political agendas in countries and regions experiencing political contention. Children's rights are already being challenged on many fronts within national contexts, with particular risks to the rights linked to gender and protection against child labour. As mentioned in the [2023 Global Outlook](#), respect for children's rights erodes when rule of law, social norms and social cohesion break down.

This rapidly changing international landscape will see shifting alignments and alliances. In some cases, this shift will take the form of alternative institutions that expand beyond their membership of competing major powers to include ‘middle powers’. In other cases, the shift will occur as countries try to distance themselves from the confrontation between major powers by forging alliances along shared political or (more frequently) economic interests – a trend known as minilateralism. These new configurations can offer opportunities for engagement on work to support the pursuit of the SDGs and to promote respect for the rights of the child.

These landscape shifts can have both positive and negative implications for children. In an era marked by rapid geopolitical shifts and evolving threats, traditional multilateral negotiations often face bureaucratic hurdles. Minilateralism provides nimble and flexible platforms for diplomacy. Countries participate in minilateral and informal arrangements to advance issues that may be at an impasse globally, as well as to navigate relationships among major powers.

For example, the decision to expand the membership of BRICS, an intergovernmental organization of Brazil, the Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa, in 2024 gave the informal grouping potentially more global clout. The new BRICS+ will represent more than 40 per cent of the world’s population, 25 per cent of its GDP and 43 per cent of the world’s oil production. The group has already reiterated in its 2023 Declaration the intent to address several key children’s rights issues, including ending child labour, providing universal social protection and improving education and early childhood development.

However, a fragmented system, with multiple bilateral, plurilateral and minilateral groupings, may contribute further to polarization, competition and divided priorities, stretching the already limited resources of smaller and least developed countries. Minilateral agreements often generate changes applicable only to a small number of countries and should therefore augment and not replace the multilateral process.

Global fragmentation will further threaten the ability to fund action and deliver vital global public goods. Despite climate change posing an existential threat that demands unprecedented

global cooperation, financing to address climate impacts remains wildly insufficient.

[Estimates](#) indicate that the financing needed for developing countries to address climate change will amount to US\$1 trillion in 2025 and grow to over US\$2 trillion a year by 2030. Although the latest data show that, annually, total climate finance increased from [US\\$653 billion in 2020 to US\\$1.1 trillion in 2022](#), the flow of funding to developing countries still falls short of estimated needs. The success of the Loss and Damage Fund, aimed at compensating developing countries for the losses and damages incurred in the past and future, could also be compromised. The US\$400 million pledged so far has already been [criticized](#) for cutting into funding for climate change adaptation, which also suffers a tremendous funding [gap](#). The Loss and Damage Fund has important implications for children's outcomes, as reported in [Loss and Damage Finance for Children](#).

Like climate and development finance, preventing and preparing for pandemics is a global public good requiring international cooperation. The COVID-19 experience revealed huge gaps in pandemic readiness and the ability to coordinate a global response. Estimated costs for improved pandemic prevention [total US\\$20 billion annually](#). Without dramatically increased investment in research, response capacity and early warning systems, the world risks repeating past failures. This would again have devastating consequences for children worldwide.

Cooperation can advance children's rights and participation in the reform of multilateralism

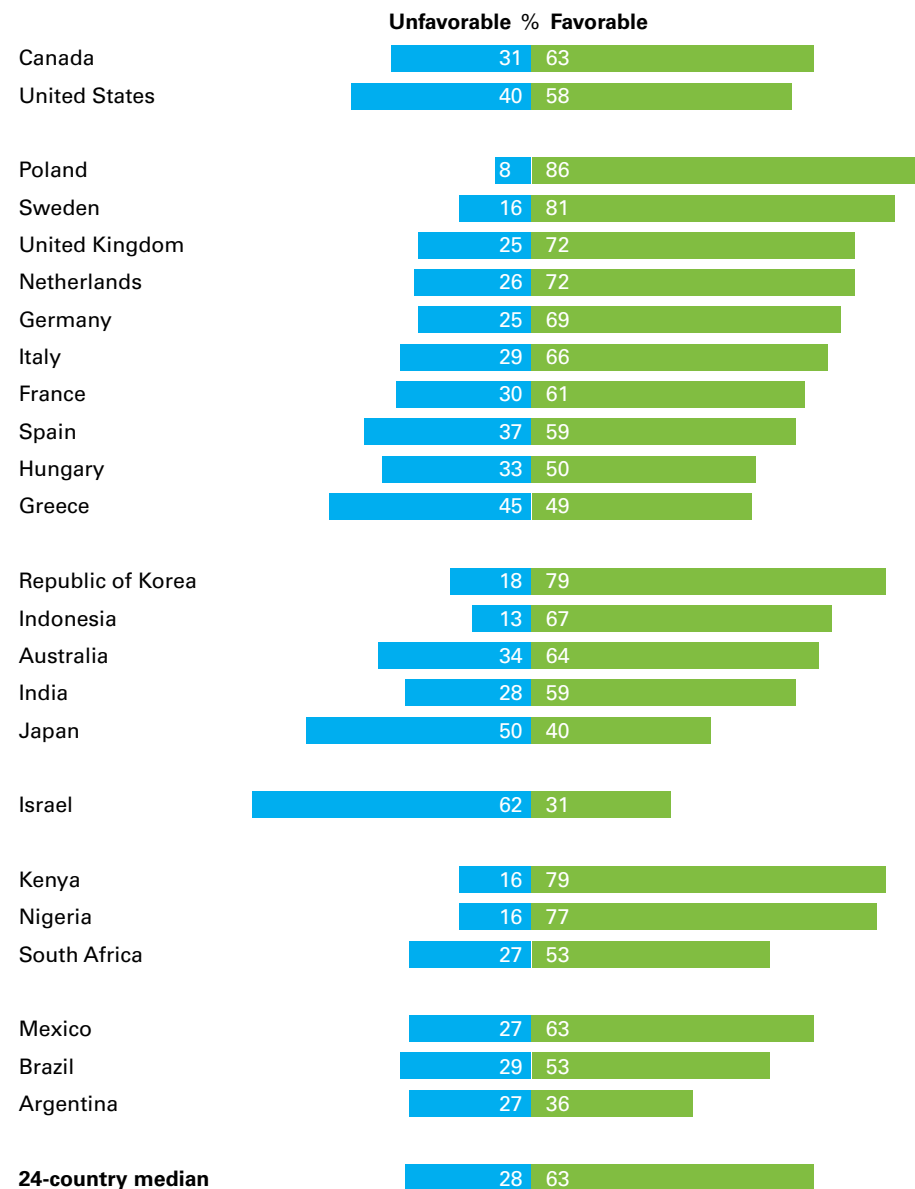
Despite its perceived shortcomings, many people still trust the United Nations. The Pew Research Center, in its annual [survey of attitudes](#) in 24 countries, found that the majority of respondents continue to view the United Nations favourably (*see Figure 5*), thus suggesting that it continues to play a role that the general populace finds valuable despite the aforementioned shortcomings.

The year 2024 offers a critical window of opportunity for reforming global governance and financing for better provision of public goods essential for sustainable development and child

well-being. Key summits in 2023 on [climate](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) have raised hopes that the United Nations Summit of the Future could be a turning point. With unmatched global challenges demanding unprecedented cooperation, the Summit of the Future is aimed at launching an agenda to rescue multilateralism through reforms and renewed commitments to overcome North–South tensions. If renewed commitment to inclusive multilateralism is achieved, the world could be better equipped to collaborate on public goods vital for sustainable development.

Figure 5: Views of the United Nations are generally positive

Percentage of respondents with an opinion of the United Nations



Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2023 Global Attitudes Survey.

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Reforming global security governance is also essential for revitalizing tools for peace and stability and directly protecting children from conflict harms. Innovative proposals, such as requiring debate in the General Assembly after a Member State uses its veto power, are aimed at promoting accountability. With political will, the Summit of the Future represents an opportunity to strengthen the capacity for decisive action and to help prevent and end wars before they escalate.

A multilateral system that is fit for children will require mainstreaming children's rights and interests into all programmes, agencies, international financial institutions (IFIs) and agreements. Achieving this goal will also require stronger participation of children and young people in decision-making processes and in reshaping the multilateral system that serves their needs. It will further require significant core funding for issues affecting children's well-being and development. The Summit of the Future and the resulting Pact for the Future present an opportunity to mainstream children's issues, thus paving the way for future decision-makers. Overcoming divisions through governance reforms, expanding developing country voices and strengthening coordination mechanisms are crucial to humanity's ability to collaborate on shared existential challenges, all of which will profoundly affect children. Acting for and on behalf of children requires, above all, depoliticizing the system and reigniting the sense of purpose felt after World War II.

4. Developing economies still face structural inequities in the international financial architecture, limiting their ability to invest in children – but reforms to lending approaches and new technologies offer hope.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Reducing government spending on social safety nets



Increasing the cost of remittance transfers essential for health and education



Constraining international resources available to invest in their futures

For developing countries, structural constraints imposed by the global financial architecture limit access to affordable financing. This in turn restricts the resources those countries have available for making child-focused investments. Poor countries are penalized by excessive debt burdens, the high cost of international remittance payments, the impact of foreign monetary policies and a lack of voice in international financial governance. Frequent debt crises triggered by these dynamics hurt children through austerity budgets and weakened social safety nets.

However, reforms led by developing countries offer hope. Purposeful cooperation in 2024 to expand and refocus the mandates of IFIs, leverage new and efficient payment technologies, and reform global financial governance could profoundly improve outcomes for marginalized populations in developing economies. The enormous potential gains for children's lives and well-being warrant renewed commitment to a more inclusive and development-focused global financial architecture.

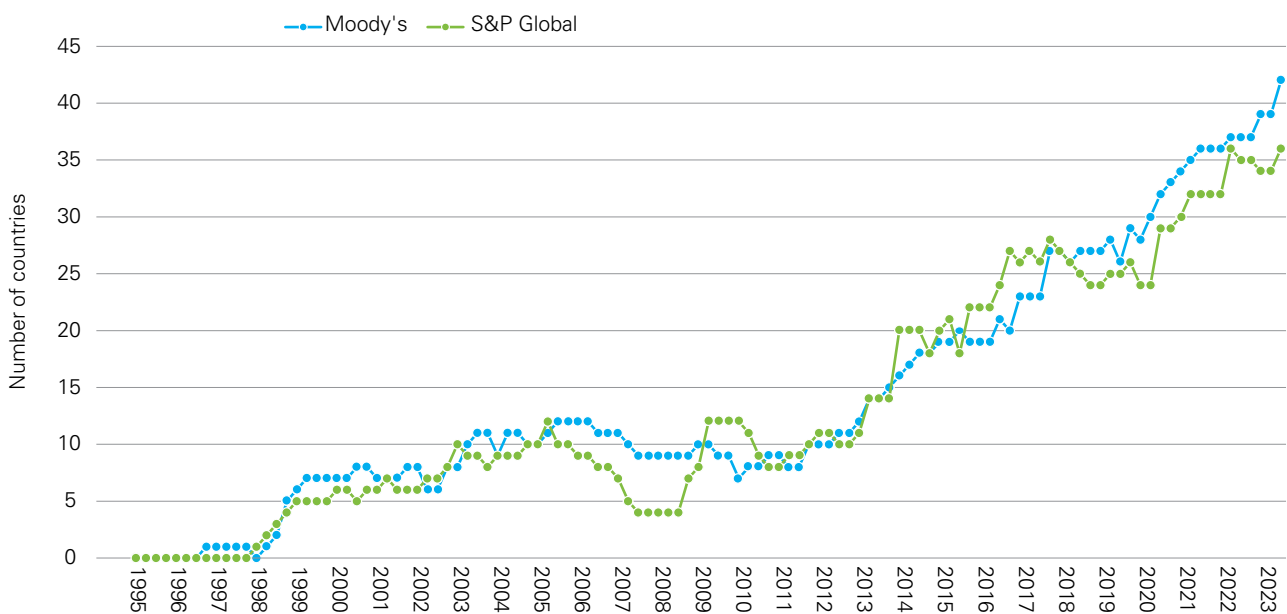
Structural disadvantages constrain access to international capital markets

A lack of economic infrastructure, limited institutional development and deficiencies in political, economic and corporate governance can mean that international investors see lending to developing countries as a risky venture. As a result, developing countries often have limited financing options and are forced to rely on high-interest, short-term borrowing. Even before the recent rise in interest rates, least developed countries were offered interest rates of between 5 and 8 per cent. In contrast, interest rates for many developed countries were as low as 1 per cent. Rising interest rates over the past two years have exacerbated the problem.

IFIs, which are established to facilitate access to affordable financing for developing countries, are currently unable to mobilize concessional financing at the scale needed to meet the mounting needs of developing countries. This inability has been caused, in part, by outdated structures and self-imposed strict capital adequacy requirements that are perceived by some as being too conservative. The result is excessive debt that crowds out investments in children and frequently devolves into crises that spark inflation, which further hurts children. Indeed, the number of countries in debt distress continued to climb in 2023 despite a relatively low number of defaults (see *Figure 6*).

When debt crises strike, inherent power imbalances, information gaps and unaligned interests between creditors and debtors prevent an effective and timely response. The challenges are further compounded by the need to negotiate with multiple creditors, including private entities and international institutions, each with their own set of interests and expectations. The existing international debt framework, which has been questioned as being ill-suited to the needs of developing nations, hampers these countries' ability to invest in critical areas for children, such as health care, education and other services. This inability to invest in children highlights the urgent need for a more coherent and responsive debt management system.

Figure 6: Debt distress continues to rise despite low number of defaults



Source: [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#)

Beyond financing, the technical complexities of the global financial architecture, such as the multilayered governance of international payments, impose excessive costs on remittance flows to developing countries. According to [recent estimates](#), the average cost of sending a US\$200 remittance is 6.2 per cent, which is over double the target of 3 per cent set by SDG 10.C High remittance costs have been linked to the cumbersome processing requirements and low transfer speeds of dominant cross-border payment systems (a problem the [Group of 20 \(G20\)](#) has sought to address), as well as to the fees, foreign exchange margins and recipient payout charges imposed by the numerous intermediaries. These high costs diminish the amount of money transferred and limit the potentially positive impact of remittances on families, children and communities in developing countries. For example, remittances are known to lead to [significant reductions in child mortality](#), increases in school enrolment and decreases in child labour.

Opportunities for developing countries in a reshaping global financial system

The deep-rooted constraints and inequities imposed by the global financial architecture on developing countries have fuelled growing momentum for reform. Amid wider geopolitical realignments and rapid technological changes, a series of initiatives led by countries with developing and emerging economies are gaining traction. This momentum will continue in 2024. These initiatives are aimed, at least partially, at addressing the disadvantages imposed on countries with developing economies by a global system.

The push to overhaul the governance and lending capacity of IFIs is one of the major reform efforts expected to dominate the [international finance landscape in 2024](#). Calls for these institutions to scale up climate and development finance have grown throughout 2023 and will continue in 2024. Important reform objectives include: the direct integration of climate and social finance; emphasis on providing more concessional financing for low-income countries; and enhancement of multilateral development banks' balance sheets in line with G20 suggestions in order to substantially expand their lending capacity.

A second set of initiatives is under way, aimed at increasing the speed and efficiency of cross-border financial transactions while reducing the related costs – and increasing the speed and efficiency of the financial system more broadly. These efforts include integration of new technologies into global financial systems. One of the main technologies is central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) – an innovation which [the IMF has supported](#).

In 2023, there was a notable acceleration in the development of CBDCs. By the end of that year, a total of 131 countries had actively explored these instruments, compared with 105 by the end of 2022 ([Atlantic Council](#) and [IMF](#)). There are also at least 15 active cross-border CBDC projects, including the China-led mBridge project, which is already being tested and has [successfully transferred millions of US dollars' worth of digital currencies across borders](#). Such projects could significantly increase the speed of cross-border transactions, such as remittances, and decrease the cost by simplifying transaction procedures and reducing the number of intermediaries.

The growing interest in CBDCs is tied, in part, to a broader 'de-dollarization' agenda. This agenda is supported mainly by BRICS countries and is aimed at decreasing reliance on the US dollar and SWIFT (an electronic transfer system) for reserve holdings and global exchange. The goals of the de-dollarization push are: (i) greater trade resilience against external shocks; and (ii) a decrease in the secondary impacts of United States' monetary policy decisions on other countries. CBDCs are seen as an alternative that could assist with achieving these aims.

However, the potential impacts on developing countries of any shift away from dollar dominance are many and complex.

In the short term, de-dollarization risks significant transition costs, as developing countries would either need to shift dependence to a potentially less transparent and predictable monetary authority or manage reserves and debt across a more complex mix of bilateral trade relationships, thus increasing their exposure. Such a shift could introduce greater macroeconomic volatility, higher inflation and decreased spending on essential services – all to the detriment of children.

Over the longer term, however, reducing over-reliance on the US dollar could allow developing countries more autonomy over their monetary policies and financial systems. Policymakers should consider both short- and long-term risks and benefits in charting any shift away from dollar dominance in the global financial architecture. The impacts on vulnerable groups, including children, should be central to these assessments.

With purposeful cooperation, a more equitable global financial system is possible

Children in developing countries disproportionately bear the costs of structural deficiencies and power imbalances in the global financial system. Impact on child well-being should be a key consideration in reform processes aimed at making global finance more inclusive and focused on sustainable human development.

Proposed reforms must be accompanied by definitive efforts by the international community to sustainably address developing country debt and balance economic growth and debt management. Specific attention must be paid to the implications of debt for children to ensure that essential social spending, particularly on social protection, education and health, is protected, even if debt is restructured.

A multifaceted approach is imperative for addressing the complex debt challenges facing developing countries. These approaches include: prudent and responsible financial practices; an increase social investments; the use of innovative financing mechanisms; and balanced policy measures that control inflation while preserving access to sustainable finance.

In the short term, impactful debt relief and restructuring are critical and must be integrated into transparent strategies that, when possible, link forgiven sums to investments in climate, health and development goals. In the long-term, however, there is no substitute for a cooperative international efforts to break the cycle of debt and safeguard financing for critical public services.

Further gains are attainable by modernizing the cross-border payment infrastructure and making advances in digital finance.

Transitioning from fragmented transaction channels to efficient, transparent digital systems can dramatically reduce the cost of remittances. The potential savings are enormous: over US\$5 billion annually just by reaching the SDG target for remittance charges. Remittances are a lifeline for vulnerable households and children: 75 per cent of remittances go towards essentials, including medical expenses and school fees, and studies have linked them to [higher education expenditure](#) and [lower school dropout rates](#). Digital financial technologies also have the potential to enable much faster [extreme poverty reduction globally](#) and would be key in implementing [universal child benefits](#) at scale. A more agile and cost-efficient cross-border payment system could increase opportunities for international consumption and remote employment for young people.

Reforms should also balance financial returns with assessments of long-term developmental potential. IFIs have a key role to play in properly evaluating growth opportunities beyond perceived near-term risks. Constructing and enabling global financial architecture requires meeting the needs of countries across all levels of development.

5. Global democracy faces unprecedented risks presented by disinformation and higher levels of political violence – but positive forces, including those led by children and youth, may still reverse the democratic decline.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Exposing them to disinformation but creating new forms of participation



Subjecting them to increased risk of political violence



Prompting them to civic action that may reshape democracy

In the 2023 Global Outlook, we anticipated that democracy around the world would continue to face threats. Indeed, throughout 2023, democracy was challenged by [coups](#), [electoral violence](#) and the [harassment of journalists and protestors](#). This democratic backsliding matters for children because democratic societies tend to prioritize children's rights and services.

Although the extent of the recent democratic decline is unclear, most experts agree that it is substantive. The [Varieties of Democracy Project](#) found that 96 democratic nations worldwide organized free elections and upheld some, but not all, civil and political rights in 2016. By 2022, this number had decreased to 90 nations. The global population in democratic countries also dropped in that period, from 3.9 billion to 2.3 billion. In a fractured global landscape, the weakening of democracy may be aggravated by a lack of international collaboration focused on building stronger democratic institutions and improving governance.

Heralded as the [Year of Democracy](#), 2024 will feature critical elections in several countries, including Ethiopia, India, Mexico, South Africa and the United States of America, and a [record number of people](#) will head to the polls.

Recent technological advances are expected to increase the risk of disinformation, and higher levels of political violence will pose additional challenges to democratic institutions. Democratic backsliding and youth dissatisfaction with democracy have been unfolding for a few years, but in 2024, as many nations face critical elections, we see two reasons for additional concern: disinformation and violence.

In contrast, we also see that the positive force of political engagement led by young people may offer an opportunity for policymakers to tackle these emerging risks.

Disinformation fuelled by new technologies

Technological changes in the past few months have increased the risk of disinformation and present unprecedented threats to the integrity of democratic institutions and public debate.

Until recently, disinformation primarily spread on social media through AI systems and algorithm ranking which amplified false content. In some cases, widespread disinformation impacted democratic institutions, public services and trust in institutions such as the media or academia. The effects on elections and voters' trust in results from the ballot box have been real. [Polls](#) in 74 countries have shown that disinformation campaigns are linked to less accurate and more polarized beliefs about fairness in elections.

Advances in large language models and generative AI have introduced [even more dangerous](#) disinformation mechanisms that can create [convincing text](#) and realistic images quickly and cheaply. If exploited by propagandists, false or misleading content can inundate electoral campaigns and deliberative spaces to overshadow human contributions and distort public debate. Authoritarian regimes and malicious actors are [currently](#) deploying these new tools to impose censorship, undermine opponents and fabricate support. With [even greater uptake, and in the absence of regulation](#), this new technology poses unique challenges which the world is not yet ready to tackle.

The impact of disinformation and technology on democracy is likely to continue in 2024, and more than [4 billion people](#) live in countries where elections could be impacted. Young people often [distrust social media](#), yet they may still be vulnerable to the disinformation on it due to their developing cognitive abilities. Although data on children or youth around the world and generative AI are limited, consumer surveys from advanced economies indicate that, worryingly, individuals aged 11 to 26 show [high levels of trust](#) in content generated by these tools. The effect of these challenges on them as political agents is uncertain.

Political violence is on the rise, even in democracies

A second major challenge is that the erosion of democratic institutions is being accompanied by increasing levels of political violence, including in established democracies.

In 11 of the countries that will hold elections in 2024, an average of 59 per cent of respondents believe that political turmoil will lead to violence.² Children and young people can be particularly vulnerable to this violence, which may result in death, physical or emotional harm, disruption of public services and school closures, among other effects. [Women](#) and other groups that have been historically under-represented in politics may face higher risks of experiencing this violence.

Democracy does not shield countries from this type of unrest. [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data \(ACLED\)](#), an organization that tracks political violence around the world, found that of the 50 countries facing the worst levels of political violence, half are considered 'free' or 'partly free' – a categorization made by [Freedom House](#) of countries' levels of democracy and protection of civil and political liberties (see *Figure 7*).

² Author's calculations based on the [Open Society Foundations' survey](#). In 2024, a total of 57 [countries and territories](#) will face presidential, parliamentary or legislative elections, but only 11 of them were included in the Open Society Foundations' survey.

Figure 7: Political violence is also seen in established democracies

ACLED Conflict Index measuring political violence by Freedom House score



Source: ACLED 2023 and Freedom House 2023.

Note: The x-axis shows the inverse ACLED Conflict Index ranking, which is equal to $[\text{abs}(\text{ranking} - \text{max}(\text{ranking}))]$. The inverse ranking is the absolute value of the difference between the country's ranking and the maximum ranking for any country in the sample.

Tackling the challenges

Despite these emerging risks, it is not the end for democracy.

Democratic declines are not unprecedented in human history. When they occurred in the twentieth century, popular struggles for political and civil rights led to stronger democratic institutions by the turn of the twenty-first century. Critically, most people today still wish to live in democratic states and believe in democratic values.

Still, children and young people are coming of age and becoming citizens at a time of great democratic uncertainty.

The democratic decline has happened against the backdrop of increased youth dissatisfaction with democracy. A [recent survey in 30 countries](#) found that when questioned about whether democracy is preferable over other forms of government, 71 per cent of respondents aged 56 and above agreed, but only 57 per cent of those under 36 agreed. This scepticism and mistrust in the efficacy of government is related to low levels of engagement by [children](#) and [youth](#) in traditional politics – such as voting or joining political parties. [Youth voter turnout](#) has been decreasing.

However, children and young people also face [practical barriers](#) to exercising political rights. Only a few countries allow people younger than 18 to vote, and for young voters, it can be costly to access the ballot box. Young people feel that democracy is not enough to deliver a better life and that existing democratic institutions are failing to address this concern.³

Despite this dissatisfaction with democracy, children and youth are not apathetic. They are passionate about the critical challenges facing our societies and expect prompt and tangible responses. Even when facing great risks, their frustration is being channelled into constructive civic action, through protests, online activism and other informal mechanisms of political engagement, including global initiatives.

To reinvigorate inclusive democratic practices for children and youth, governments should collaborate with tech companies, the media, academia and civil society, including youth organizations, to reshape public debate while ensuring freedom of expression and information integrity.

Governments must also invest in [civic education](#), better platforms for children and youth participation in the political process, and equitable access to existing democratic structures. They also must take concrete action to address young people's demands.

Making these changes requires a fresh understanding of how young people engage politically, and it means delivering results in areas that matter to them – addressing poverty, inequality, corruption and climate change.

³ We are grateful to Nanjira Sambuli, Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for this insight.

Young voices: The past, present and future of democracy

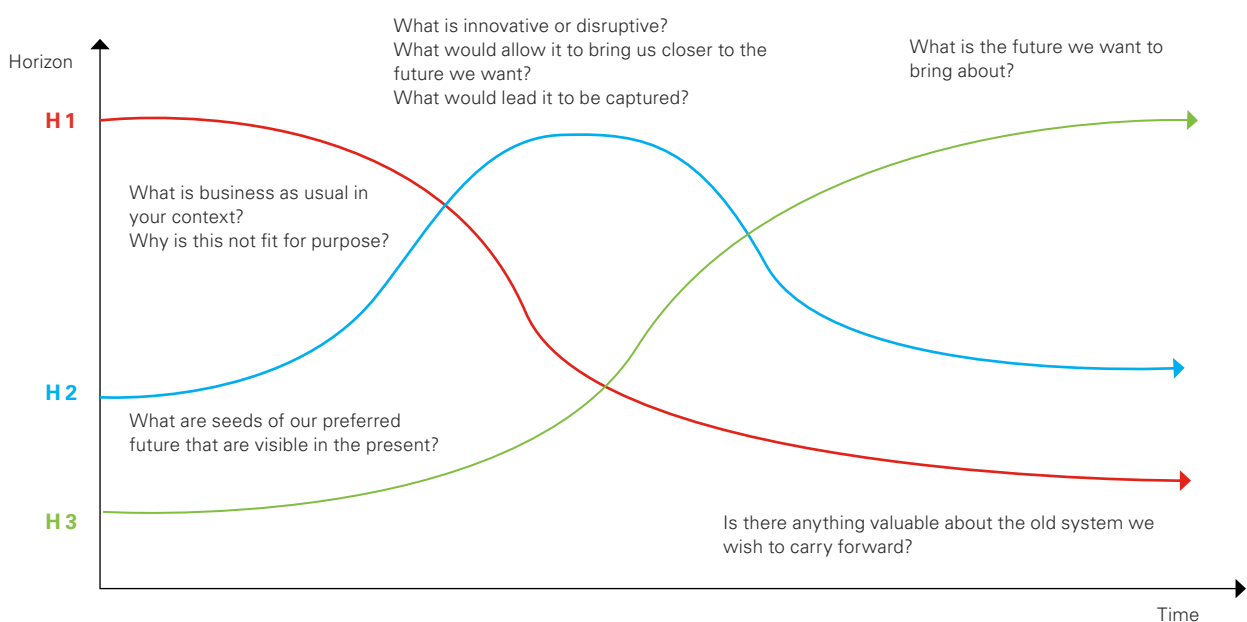
“Education stands as the catalyst for democratic values, teaching us the understanding and commitments needed to uphold democracy.”

Zahanath Zuhury
UNICEF Youth
Foresight Fellow
2023–2024

This section, dedicated to young people, was prepared by Fisayo Oyewale, Ijun Kim and Nourhan Badr El Din, the UNICEF Youth Foresight Senior Fellows. The insights were gathered through the Youth Foresight Circle (YFC), a participatory space for young people to experiment with foresight tools and present insights. Every step was led by young people, from the conception of the agenda to the synthesis of the workshop output. Of more than 650 YFC applicants, over 60 per cent selected democracy as the trend they would most like to discuss.

A framework based on three horizons was essential to guiding workshop discussions. Horizon 1 reflected on the current system in decline. Horizon 2 focussed on the innovations and disruptions that can either be captured to maintain the current system or harnessed to bring about the new. Horizon 3 considered the preferred vision of the future. Each horizon also reflected a different perspective: the manager, who maintains the current system for stability; the visionary, who conveys compelling images of the future; and the entrepreneur, who experiments with creative means of progression.

Figure 8: Three horizons essential to guiding workshop discussions among youth



In addition to the [12 UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows](#), 45 people aged 15–30 from diverse backgrounds participated in the workshop, which was facilitated by participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North and Latin America, and the Pacific. The goal was to encourage context-specific discussions and, in plenary, to create a collective vision of the future based on the importance of global cohesion. We conducted a survey with the broader UNICEF Innocenti Youth Network, a global platform for young people interested in research, applying foresight and shaping discourse. The survey garnered over 180 responses from more than 30 countries and gave us a more comprehensive understanding of how young people perceive the past, present and future of democracy.

Horizon 1: Business as usual

Across the four regions, young people shared similar observations about the current state of democracy. The observations focussed on a lack of equity in decision-making, specifically in political and governing bodies. Participants highlighted that other social issues, such as poverty or limited access to education, directly contributed to maintaining unequal power dynamics, leading to policies and practices that were “not representative of diverse populations”. Lack of intergenerational equity was one of the most salient discussion points. Participants identified a cycle in which young people experience exclusion which leads to dissatisfaction and frustration that speaking up only results in further exclusion from critical democratic processes. Young people were also found to forgo participation altogether after years of discontent.

The adverse effects of misinformation and disinformation, exacerbated by social media and generative AI, was another point of interest. It was noted that current democratic institutions were ill-equipped to effectively prevent and address these effects, especially polarization. Perhaps more significantly, participants emphasized that there was little difference between generations. People of all age groups were unprepared for using technology responsibly and identifying malicious intent, thus leaving communities vulnerable to anti-democratic forces and movements.

However, the positive impact of technology cannot be overlooked. It improves access to information and provides tools to empower young people and help them to act on the changes they want to see. This was particularly relevant in Africa, Asia Pacific and the Middle East, where corruption was seen as a major factor restricting access to and hindering democratic processes.

Participants also identified elements they believe are valuable and should be retained. They called for greater momentum behind ongoing efforts to support transparent elections or improve information access through innovative technology. Participants also believed freedom of expression and freedom of the press and media were critical values. Quota systems that include under-represented groups, including women or racial and ethnic minorities, in legislative bodies also received much support. Finally, the need for environmental sustainability to shape policies garnered attention, reflecting young people's eagerness to take ownership and provide solutions to address the climate crisis.

"The vision of the future, as shaped by these recommendations, resonates deeply with my belief in a democratically empowered youth population, wielding technology as a tool for inclusive, informed and transformative participation in shaping our world."

Nahjae Nunes,
UNICEF Youth
Foresight Fellow
2023–2024

Horizon 2: Innovations

Participants were asked to share innovations or disruptions that could either strengthen democracy or maintain business as usual. Interestingly, quality education and intersectoral cooperation were identified as key features of the preferred 2033 (see Horizon 3), and they were also selected as high-potential spaces for strengthening democracy. In contrast to the discussion about the positive influence of the climate movement on policies in Horizon 1, some participants pointed out that environmental deterioration could deepen fractures and trigger new or more intense conflicts, further undermining democracy. We delved deeper into this topic, and this resulted in a set of recommendations for bridging the gap between the present and preferred future.

Horizon 3: Our preferred future

When asked to describe how democracy would work in the preferred version of 2033, participants collectively produced a vivid collage of their experiences and hopes. Such activities are crucial to cultivating a sense of agency and mission – elements that we believe are transformative for young people. The vision of the future was characterized by accountability, transparency, equitable planning and

decision-making. Intersectoral cooperation – most notably between public and private spheres to improve education and technology – cultivates an environment that further upholds democratic values. Shared belief in peace and sustainability drives more people to continuously engage in democratic processes.

Recommendations from youth

Democratic participation

It is challenging to minimize the risks of technology while maximizing the benefits. However, we believe it is possible. Decentralized platforms could foster active citizen engagement in policymaking by enabling [direct participation](#), especially for young people and marginalized communities. Blockchain-enabled voting mechanisms should also be leveraged, as these have already increased voter participation and protected electoral processes through cases such as [automatic voter registration](#) and electronic voting stations. Technology should also be harnessed for transparency and accountability through practices like increasing accessibility to government data and [using AI](#) to simulate policy outcomes.

“Without climate innovation and democratization, our future generations won’t have a planet to vote in.”

Kate Seary,
UNICEF Youth
Foresight Fellow
2023–2024

Youth are dissatisfied with the current democratic systems. In the survey responses from the UNICEF Innocenti Youth Network, many respondents were either ambivalent or pessimistic about the future of democracy. However, the majority felt that they could, indeed, do something about it. This echoes the observation that young people are not apathetic. The 2023 YFC is also proof of that. The sheer number of youth network members who chose to join the workshop on democracy, the intense discussions and the vivid images of the future all show that young people are eager to learn, participate and contribute. We simply need the space and the trust to do so.

Climate change

The climate movement provides many lessons. The right to challenge decisions to protect one’s well-being is imperative in just and equitable practices of law. Creative avenues for individuals to do so, such as granting [personhood status to ecosystems](#), opens pathways for truly democratic processes. Youth and indigenous peoples are some of the key actors pushing for meaningful climate action, and their role

should be recognized by establishing mechanisms for them to provide direct input on policies. A fair energy transition might consider the democratization of energy, for example by including an individual's right to choose their energy sources.

Education

Education has often been considered the foundation for any social change, and this remains true today. Schools should engage students in debates that help them to build capacity to actively participate in decision-making.¹ Institutions should work to provide civic education, raise awareness and provide [mentorship opportunities](#) for youth. Civil society organizations play a key role in empowering communities and should continue to provide learning opportunities, especially for [marginalized communities](#). It is also of paramount importance to recognize that strengthening democracy through education is not just about learning the necessary skills. It should also provide opportunities for students to experience relevant values and obtain a more holistic understanding of the world.²

1 From an interview with Soraya Rady, LKS2 IGCSE English language teacher.

2 Recommendations developed by Mamadou Doucoure, Rawan Elsayed and Zahanath Zuhury, UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows 2023–2024.

6. Fast-tracking the transition to green energy is reshaping critical mineral and labour markets – if managed responsibly, cooperatively and justly, this can benefit children.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Potentially exposing them to harmful labour practices



Creating new job prospects in the green economy



Challenging governments to address education and skills training for the green transition

The interplay of geopolitics, technology, volatility in energy markets and intensification of climate change impacts has amplified calls to reduce dependence on fossil fuel and fast-track the transition to green energy. An accelerated transition

brings significant benefits to children and young people, but it also poses risks. In particular, a faster green transition requires vast amounts of minerals, and this has created or exacerbated pressures on trade, geopolitics and the environment. It has also come with the risk of child labour, which puts the rights, lives and well-being of children in danger. A faster transition is also reshaping the demand for skills, thus requiring education and skills training systems to be responsive to changing labour markets.

Unless the transition to a green economy is managed in an inclusive, just and transparent way, many developing countries will lose out on the chance to make an affordable and timely energy transition, and children and young people will face risks to their rights, welfare and future prospects.

The push to fast-track transition to green energy

Although oil and gas prices have come down recently, the push to reduce dependence on fossil fuels has been strong in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war.

This drive towards clean energy has multiple causes. First, energy markets remain tense, volatile and uncertain. Second, there has been unprecedented growth in the deployment of clean energy technology, driven by lower prices of renewable energy, especially solar and wind, and fast-rising demand for electric vehicles. In addition, new innovations and investments in solar generation and energy storage and distribution are playing a role.

Policy initiatives are also playing a role. In 2024, for example, new nationally determined contributions will be developed and are expected to contain ambitious targets to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by 43 per cent by 2030. The targeted reduction will be 60 per cent by 2035, leading to global net-zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.

Balanced risks and opportunities in the transition to green energy

An accelerated transition to clean energy will bring both benefits and risks for children and young people. Access to clean, reliable electricity can benefit health facilities, homes and schools, and it can lead to better health and education outcomes for children. If managed inclusively, justly and transparently, the green transition promises new fields of employment for youth. If the transition is unjust, children and young people may face considerable risks to their health, rights, well-being and futures.

In 2024, two main trends threaten the push to fast-track the green energy transition. First, the race for critical minerals in a fragmented world jeopardizes affordable and just green transitions, and it puts additional pressure on people and the planet. Second, the gaps in education and training for children and young people compromise the knowledge and skills they need to realize the promise of the transition to a green economy.

Competition for critical minerals

The first trend is linked to the competition for critical minerals needed to develop clean energy technologies such as wind turbines, solar panels, electric vehicles and battery storage.

The increased demand and limited supply of these critical minerals amid growing geopolitical tensions has led to new policy initiatives to promote mining and exploration and to interventions that inadvertently increase market fragmentation risks. These risks include export restrictions and 'friend-shoring' of critical mineral supply chains to countries with similar strategic interests or values.

The fragmentation of critical mineral markets puts the green energy transition at risk. Globally, it could drive up prices of four key minerals by 90 per cent and reduce [investment](#) in clean energy technologies by 30 per cent, thus impeding progress to decarbonize the world economy. The rise in prices will also lead to unequal, divergent green transition pathways with poorer countries struggling more to afford the transition to green energy.

The race for critical minerals puts new stresses on people and the planet, with implications for children. Increased mineral demand could be an [economic boon](#) to countries and communities that are home to large mineral reserves. However, in contexts with unregulated mining of minerals and metals and a lack of adequate governance, the failure to follow responsible sourcing practices could increase conflict and fragility in supply chains and push more children into child labour. For example, in the [Dilala](#) mining area in the Democratic Republic of Congo, about 1 in 10 children are engaged in child labour in mining. They work long hours in hazardous conditions in which they are exposed to dust, smoke and gases. Child labour in mica mining is also documented, including in [Madagascar](#) and [India](#).

In addition, mining operations and processing are energy intensive, which can lead to [significant greenhouse gas emissions](#). Clearing land for [mining](#) can also cause increased deforestation and degradation. Such environmental damage can impact children's access to clean water and food sources, thus affecting their health and well-being.

Mindful of these potential risks, the public and private sector have promoted sustainable and responsible practices, but gaps remain. Policies to secure critical minerals and clean energy supply chains have been introduced to promote exploration and production and to ensure supply chain resilience and reliability (see *Figure 9*).

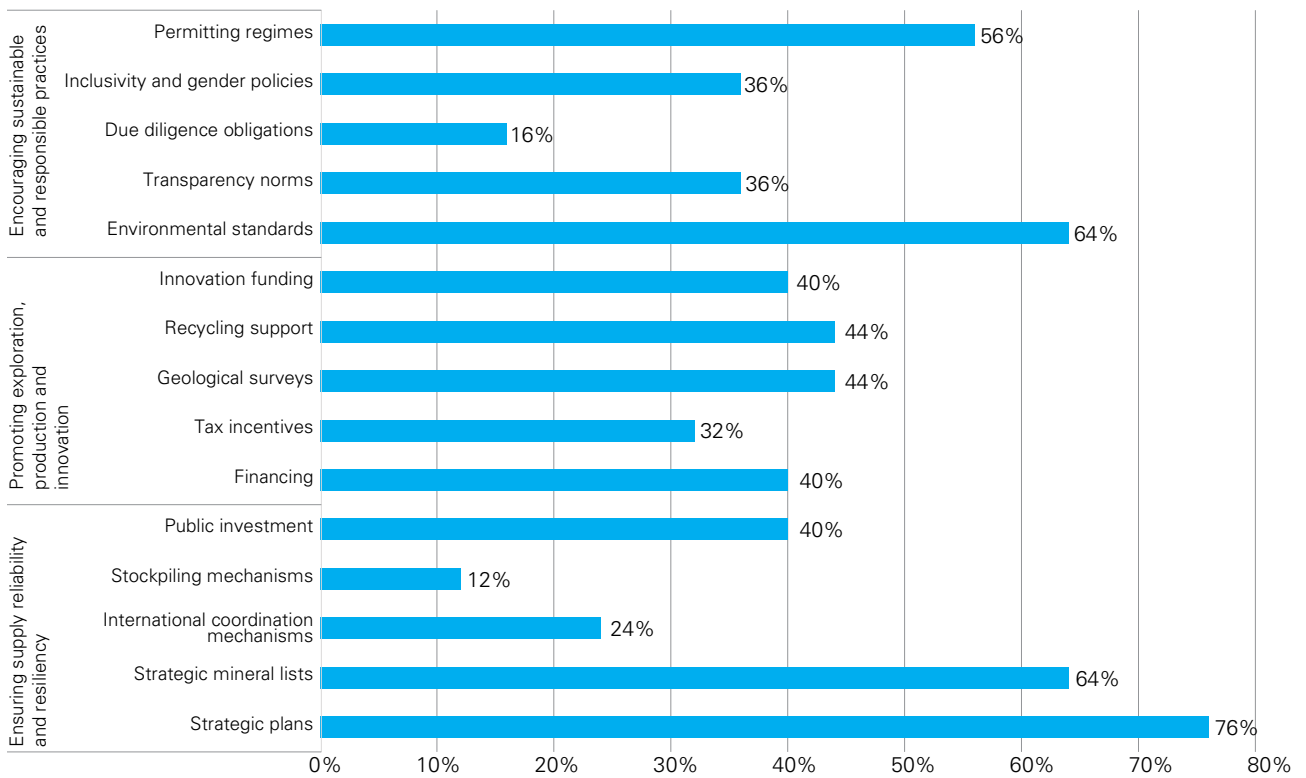
Indeed, several countries have established environmental standards by issuing legal permits and other approaches. However, policy actions around transparency, due diligence and inclusivity are less common. The European Union (EU) is currently discussing [legislation](#) on due diligence obligations for companies to assess and address human rights and environmental risks. In the [United States](#), a bill has

been introduced to ban imports from the Democratic Republic of the Congo that contain cobalt mined by exploiting children and forcing people into labour.

In the private sector, an [assessment by the International Energy Agency](#) shows that companies are making progress in community investment, worker safety and gender balance. However, management and mitigation of environmental risks needs further attention.

Figure 9: Policies need greater focus on resiliency, due diligence and inclusivity

Types of critical minerals policies by focus area (% of countries, N=25)



Source: Author’s calculation using the International Energy Agency’s Critical Minerals Policy Tracker

Green energy transition and new labour trends

The second trend related to fast-tracking the green transition is linked to reshaping energy employment trends. Skill shortages and weak skills training systems pose risks to meeting changing employer demand. Nearly 67 million people were [employed in energy jobs](#) in 2022, with around half employed in clean energy jobs. Clean

energy jobs outpaced fossil fuel-related jobs in 2021 due to huge growth in investments, particularly in solar cells, wind energy, electric vehicles, batteries, heat pumps and critical minerals. The clean energy sector's demand for workers is growing. Relatedly, demand for labour in the fossil fuel industry will decline. Consideration needs to be given to how policy will meet the clean energy sector's demand for labour and new skills as well as how to manage the transition out of fossil fuel jobs. Labour and skills shortages already plague the clean energy sector. These shortages place the ramping up of clean energy technologies at risk. Much of the [skills shortage](#) in the clean energy industry is in vocational roles. Sectors such as solar photovoltaic and wind need workers to be installers and technicians, and newer technologies need more highly skilled workers.

[Funding for adaptation efforts](#) has been focused on physical infrastructure rather than human capital, and almost no climate finance goes to education and skills training systems. Further, many training programmes, especially in low- and middle-income countries, are not aligned with labour market needs. There is an added challenge of developing a robust pipeline of skilled workers. Young people [do not feel adequately prepared](#) to take green jobs, with young women feeling less skilled than young men. Women are already underrepresented in fast-growing green energy sectors that require high-level technical skills.

Making an accelerated green energy transition work for children and youth

A green transition brings benefits but also risks for children and youth, but the accelerated pace of this transition requires careful management of resources and critical minerals, greater collaboration among countries and reduced market fragmentation. It will also require political will to transition away from fossil fuels.

Now more than ever, multilateral cooperation is vital to ensure critical

mineral flows, resilient energy and mineral markets, and an inclusive global green transition. Joint government and businesses action is essential. In particular, both regulatory frameworks and private sector environmental, social and corporate governance standards should consider stronger human rights-based due diligence that is responsive to children's rights so that they are better equipped to identify risks to children and address them.

Inclusive skills building and access to emerging jobs are critical to realizing a transition that works for young generations. Achieving these goals will require close coordination between governments, education institutions and industry. It will also be critical to prepare young jobseekers, particularly women and girls, to enter job markets and cooperate with governments and companies as they change business and recruitment practices. It will also require political will to transition away from fossil fuels.

Furthermore, policymakers should consider a [holistic, life cycle approach to supporting 'green' school-to-work transitions](#). Such an approach would require interventions that start early in life, making sure green skills are introduced at a young age and that climate change and environmental education is embedded into the school curriculum. Preparing young people for work and entrepreneurship opportunities in the green economy includes not only technical education and vocational training but also information, mentoring and guidance on green careers.

7. El Niño, mosquito-borne diseases and water scarcity threaten children's health and well-being – but greater collaboration, holistic programming and technological innovation can mitigate the negative impacts and protect children.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Exposing them to greater risk of mosquito-borne diseases



Increasing the risk of forced displacement because of extreme weather



Creating conditions for water and food insecurity

Climate risks are appearing faster and will become more severe sooner than previously expected. Throughout 2024, climate change will continue to pose many threats to children's health and nutrition. While there are many challenges, three forces stand out for 2024: the continuation of El Niño; the rise in outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases due to climate change; and water scarcity. When these three forces act together, they present considerable dangers to children, including dehydration, disease, malnutrition, developmental deficits, trauma caused by forced displacement and even death. Addressing the combined impact of these three threats requires a holistic approach that includes community involvement, technological innovation and interventions in health, nutrition and social protection. Given the transboundary nature of these threats and the vulnerability of low-income countries, international cooperation is more important than ever to address the health and nutrition risks that the climate crisis can have on children.

El Niño threatens children's health and nutrition

El Niño returned earlier than expected in 2023, contributing to record-high temperatures around the globe. It presents the possibility that 2024 will be even hotter and more dangerous to people and the planet than 2023 was. Although El Niño occurs naturally, there is increasing evidence that climate change has become a significant factor in its formation. During an El Niño year, climate change impacts are further exacerbated, leading to even more extreme weather events. The El Niño of 2015–2016 brought record-breaking hurricanes to the central North Pacific and severe drought to parts of the Caribbean and the Horn of Africa, and it sparked the largest one-year jump in carbon dioxide concentrations.

This El Niño is particularly worrisome, as it comes on the heels of the polycrisis.

As a result, the effects of El Niño may exacerbate the impact the polycrisis has had on the cost of living, food security and poverty. Countries at high risk of facing additional humanitarian needs due to El Niño are mainly low- and lower middle-income countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The financial toll of an El Niño event can persist for years, especially in the poorest countries, with women and children in poor rural households suffering disproportionately. According to recent estimates, the current El Niño event could lead to income losses of [US\\$3 trillion](#) by 2029.

For children’s health and nutrition, the outlook may be particularly bleak.

During the 2015–2016 El Niño, millions of families were forcefully displaced from their homes after extreme weather devastated infrastructure, crops and livelihoods. Food prices [rose](#) for several key staples, and [6 million more children than expected became underweight](#). The 2023–2024 El Niño could worsen an already [grim](#) food security situation, especially given the [severe shortfalls in the funding required to protect children and families](#). The results may threaten progress towards achieving global [child nutrition](#) goals. At the same time, increased outbreaks of diseases, including cholera, malaria and dengue, can leave children more vulnerable to severe illness and even death. Extreme heat caused by El Niño can also harm [foetal](#) development and lead to severe dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke, especially in [infants and small children](#).

The World Meteorological Organization has [sounded the alarm](#) and urged governments to take precautions to mitigate the impact of El Niño. Preparedness and anticipatory policies are critical to preventing costly emergencies later. Since the impact of El Niño persists for years, preparation requires an integrated multisectoral approach that includes long-term recovery and long-term resilience plans. As the worst of the effects are felt by poor and vulnerable communities, expanding social protection programmes will be essential.

Years of progress reversed by disease-carrying mosquitoes

Climate change is dramatically impacting the spread of vector-borne diseases.

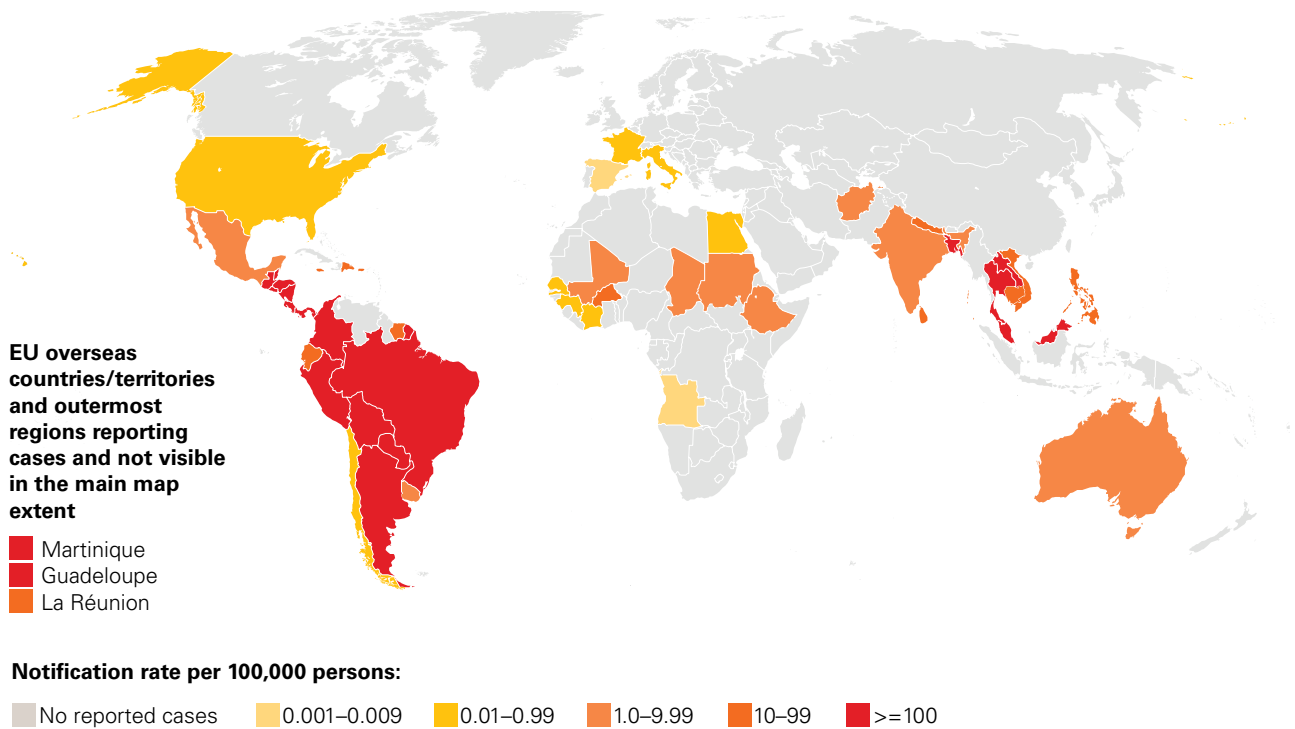
Mosquitoes have long posed a danger to children because they can transmit deadly diseases such as malaria, dengue, Zika and chikungunya. Between 2000 and 2019, the use of mosquito nets and insecticides and billions of dollars invested in other forms of prevention led to a global drop in deaths from malaria by more than a third. However, climate change is now reversing years of progress.

The mosquitoes that transmit malaria and dengue thrive in warm and wet areas. Rising temperatures and rainfall patterns linked to climate change have caused droughts and floods, thus increasing the number of places where, and for how long, disease-carrying mosquitoes can breed. As a result, mosquitoes are able to spread diseases more prolifically and across more territories, and malaria deaths rose by 8 per cent between 2019 and 2021. In 2023, the first locally transmitted cases of malaria in 20 years occurred in the United States. By 2040, malaria could affect as many as 5 billion people, including a billion in Africa.

Malaria is not the only threat. Outbreaks of dengue, a tropical disease that mostly exists in parts of Asia and Latin America, have appeared with increasing frequency and in more locations, thus affecting the ability to control it. Dengue is now considered endemic in more than 100 countries globally, and about half of the world's population is now at risk (*see Figure 10*). An estimated 100 million–400 million infections occur each year.

Figure 10: Dengue is now endemic in more than 100 countries

Three-month dengue case notification rate per 100,000 population, August–October 2023



Source: ECDC European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control [Dengue worldwide overview](#), accessed 5 January 2024.

Note: Data refer to dengue virus cases reported in the last three months (August–October 2023, data collection: October 2023). The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Scientists are always looking for [new ways](#) to address the problem of mosquitoes – especially as some become resistant to insecticides. However, there is new hope for the fight against malaria, with two vaccines having been approved. In 2021, the world’s first malaria vaccine, RTS,S or Mosquirix, was [approved for widespread use](#) in children. Initial findings show a substantial reduction in severe malaria hospitalizations and a drop in child deaths linked to malaria. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 40 million–60 million doses a year will be needed by 2026. That figure will increase to 80 million–100 million doses a year by 2030. A second vaccine, [R21/Matrix-M](#), was approved in 2023, and WHO estimates that it will be distributed by mid-2024. The two vaccines were the [result of collaboration](#) between academic institutions, philanthropies and pharmaceutical companies around the world.

Vaccines alone are not a silver bullet. They need to be manufactured and distributed, particularly in Africa, where [99 per cent of vaccines](#) are imported. Demand for malaria vaccines also outstrips investment in them, with a funding gap of [US\\$3.8 billion](#). As the impacts of climate change increase, collaboration will be critical to securing the funding needed to manufacture vaccines and implement malaria prevention programmes that focus on insecticides, bed nets and other preventive measures. It also will be essential to ensuring that clean water, hygiene, food and medical services, to adequately diagnose and treat mosquito-borne diseases, are available.

Water scarcity puts children's health and nutrition at risk

In 2024 and onwards, global attention will need to turn to water scarcity, the natural availability of water and the efficiency of water management systems. The first [United Nations Water Conference](#) in 46 years took place in March 2023 to shine a spotlight on the urgent issue of global water scarcity, which is being exacerbated by climate change and directly impacts children worldwide – even children in high-income countries. By [2050, 4.3 billion people](#) will live in arid areas and regions with high water stress, a billion more than in 2023. Clean and safe water access is fundamental for children's health and development.

In an interconnected global food system, food insecurity may deepen globally as agrarian countries in Africa and Asia increasingly face water stress. This heightens poverty, food security and child malnutrition risks, and it could result in [child neglect](#) and [child labour](#) in water-stressed agrarian countries.

Water is increasingly expected to be used as a trigger, a weapon and a casualty of conflict worldwide. Children are particularly impacted: in areas of protracted crises, [children are 20 times more likely to die from diarrhoeal disease linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from violence.](#)

Water also has the potential to become a casualty of conflict, especially in the Middle East, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Water scarcity can also increase tensions between countries that share water sources and lead to population displacement, with children particularly vulnerable to the physical and psychological tolls of migration during crises.

The United Nations rolled out **the Water Action Agenda at its water conference in 2023**, seeking commitments across sectors to accelerate progress on SDG 6 – clean water and sanitation for all. However, this agenda is not legally binding, and most of its commitments lack the bold action required for such a critical issue. Although these commitments signify progress, 2024 needs to be a year of strong financial support, targeted efforts and political will to realistically ensure water security for children.

Addressing the combined impact of these climate forces

Combined, the three interconnected climate forces of El Niño, mosquito-borne diseases and water scarcity will significantly impact children. El Niño events, for instance, exacerbate water scarcity in some regions while intensifying rainfall in others. The resulting surplus of stagnant pools and puddles creates optimal conditions for mosquito population growth. Simultaneously, water scarcity prompts people to store water in open containers, inadvertently fostering additional mosquito breeding grounds. The cyclical interplay between El Niño events, water scarcity and mosquito-borne diseases underscores the intricate connections linking climate patterns, water availability, human behaviour and infectious diseases.

The repercussions for children and their families are profound. Not only do these forces directly impact children's health, they also elevate the risks of child malnutrition and dehydration. Families, particularly those in poor, rural and low-income households, grapple with heightened financial and time burdens as they cope with the increased demands of caring for the sick.

The far-reaching implications of these climate-related impacts on children's health and nutrition transcend political boundaries. Effectively addressing these challenges necessitates collaboration across borders and sectors. Yet achieving such cooperation proves challenging in our fragmented global landscape. Nevertheless, the urgency of the situation calls for integrated solutions and heightened collaboration among countries. Key areas requiring attention include research and development, cooperation within and between governments, strong governance mechanisms and the ability to pool resources to incentivize collective action against shared threats.

8. Potential impacts of unchecked technologies spark fear and concern for children’s well-being – but proactive policy and global digital cooperation can place children at the centre of responsible design and regulation.

IMPACTS

CHILDREN BY:



Exposing them to risks and opportunities from emerging technologies



Raising the stakes for policies that allow online opportunities and participation



Affecting their prospects due to geopolitical tensions

The digital environment continues to be an ever-increasing aspect of children’s lives, with advances such as in AI bringing new opportunities for children’s learning, health care and development. But as technology also poses risks, the challenge of striking a regulatory balance for children intensifies.

In 2024, three drivers of change will affect how digital technologies are developed, shaped and controlled.

First, fear of unknown impacts from disruptive technologies such as AI will galvanize regulatory responses. Past experiences with unregulated technologies and platforms, such as social media, are fuelling these concerns. This moment is crucial for children because they interact with AI systems in ways that could lead to the unchecked negative impacts now and throughout their lives.

Second, societies will push back against the influence of technology. For decades, the world has recognized the multifaceted interplay between [technology and society](#): New technologies have social and economic impacts, while social factors influence how technology develops and is governed. Even as new benefits emerge, in 2024, there will be growing awareness that digitalization does not always serve people’s best interests. Public concerns over technology’s effects on children’s well-being and safety have sparked demands for more judicious thinking around the design, deployment and regulation of technology.

Third, geopolitical and geoeconomic interests are increasingly driving technological development. As tensions between countries mount, power, politics and economic interests often take priority over children’s rights in digital governance.

The interplay of these three drivers in 2024 will determine whether digital regulation will support or undermine children’s rights.

Calls for AI regulation result in swift but divergent regulation efforts

Apprehension around the risks of disruptive technology is resulting in more forward-looking and quicker approaches to regulation.

While existing technologies, such as social media, are still being debated and regulated after the fact, forward-looking regulation is emerging, as can be seen clearly in the urgent interest to govern AI.

Since generative AI entered the mainstream in late 2022, responses to regulating large language models like ChatGPT have been exceptionally swift and taken [various approaches](#). For example, China published provisional regulations on generative AI, with strict data and intellectual property protections. Three months later, the country released a [significantly less restrictive version of the regulations](#). The draft of the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, under deliberation since 2021, now includes clauses for generative AI providers. In the United States, the government quickly created a mechanism for developers to make [voluntary commitments](#) regarding the safety of their generative AI products. This measure was followed by an [Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy AI](#).

More broadly, many countries, including Brazil and the United Arab Emirates, are crafting or considering AI regulations, each with distinct approaches. In 2023, the Group of Seven (G7) committed to aligning AI regulations across its membership, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, urged global AI standards as part of the 2024 Global Digital Compact. His new [AI Advisory Body](#) will first focus on AI governance options.

Such swift responses can signal promising engagement by governments and international organizations.

Regulation has [traditionally lagged behind technological innovation](#), but the responses to AI suggest a narrowing of regulatory gaps, both nationally and regionally, and a shift towards anticipatory policymaking. Well-crafted regulations can shield children while upholding their rights. Foresight methods can help lawmakers to better anticipate and mitigate potential harms. However, despite the best of intentions, rushed policymaking can lead to unforeseen consequences, such as constrained digital opportunities for children.

Public pressure mounts for tech providers to answer for children's safety

Growing unease over the negative impacts of digitalization on society will keep fuelling public pressure to reign in Big Tech and protect children. In the past, many regulators avoided stifling innovation during rapid digital uptake, but [heightened awareness](#) around technology's negative impacts points to a course correction.

Since 2019, reports of child sexual abuse material jumped [87 per cent](#). Eighty-nine per cent of Americans now worry about the [lack of protection for children's online privacy](#). As exposure to AI rises, the United States public [increasingly doubts safety and security assurances](#). Concerns over impacts on children's safety, well-being and development are also [rising](#). Governments around the world, including those in [Australia](#), [China](#), [India](#) and [Kenya](#), are responding to this dissatisfaction with policy proposals, regulations and technology bans. The EU's Digital Services Act, which took full effect on 1 January 2024, signals the end of industry self-regulation in Europe. This will potentially have a ripple effect globally.

With the start of 2024, the efficacy of recent regulations will be revealed, ushering in still more distinct approaches and further fragmentation in the regulatory landscape. Well-meant regulations to protect children might [unintentionally impact children's other rights](#) – restricting, for example, their access to age-appropriate and accurate sexual and reproductive health information. Measures that rely too heavily on parental control may be intrusive for vulnerable children who do not live in supportive family environments. As we flagged in the [Global Outlook 2023](#), a patchwork of regulations can limit transparency in the implementation of technology and result in uneven protections for children in different states and countries.

Digital cooperation is necessary for global governance to work

The politicization of technology will hinder efforts to reduce fragmentation and build consensus on digital governance.

Geopolitics and technology are now fully entwined, resulting in regulatory approaches guided foremost by government interests and ideology. Generative AI regulation illustrates this concern: China's state-led model of regulation differs from the EU's balanced rights and growth focus. In the United States, the approach is largely based on voluntary industry compliance. These divergent approaches present obstacles to the United Nations' efforts to develop cooperative digital governance. Multiple and competing approaches may also slow progress towards global agreements.

The vast power of Big Tech in shaping AI brings another challenge. The United Nations is under pressure not only to prioritize national sovereignty but also to bring these powerful new stakeholders to the table. This pressure provides an opportunity to explore new models of governance based on genuine multistakeholder engagement. This kind of engagement brings diverse voices into the regulatory discussions on equal footing, including the voices of children. It also can safeguard against Big Tech dominating regulatory discussions – and against regulatory capture.

In late 2023, there was a flurry of commitments to responsible AI that may point towards success as the United Nations works towards greater cooperation. For example, the Bletchley Declaration, which came out of the United Kingdom's AI Safety Summit, garnered 30 signatories. Despite divergent approaches to AI, the signatories include China, the EU and the United States. Though non-binding, this declaration signals potential momentum towards global governance which heightens accountability and child protections.

Children's needs and participation are still missing from design and policy, but 2024 opens the door for change

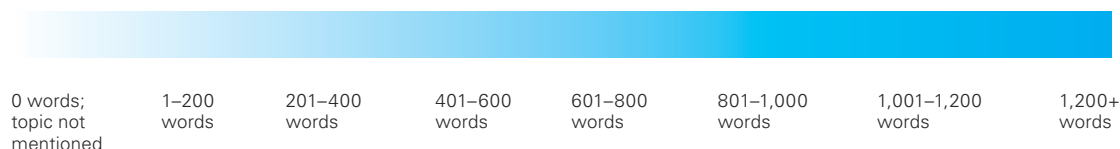
Despite the advances, attention to children's rights and needs in national AI strategies and policies is still limited (see *Figure 11*). These limits are particularly important because children often struggle to grasp the implications of AI technologies and the impact they can have on their lives. Children usually lack the resources to respond to instances of bias, seek redress for discrimination or rectify any misconceptions in their data, but 2024 offers the opportunity to take action. These actions need to result in policies that resonate with children's lived digital experiences and which truly serve their needs and hopes. In countries where digital access and skills are limited, extra support should be given to ensure that children are equipped and able to safely navigate online risks and opportunities. In all countries, children should have adequate digital skills proficiency, and policies should ensure that the corporate sector does its part to minimize risks equally for every child, wherever their products and services are used.

As forward-looking policies are being considered and laws for current technology are being implemented, the meaningful and ongoing engagement of children and youth can bring much needed change. Forward-looking approaches to policymaking pave the way for regulation to be more agile, anticipatory and cooperative, with and for children. To achieve these goals, it will be essential to employ foresight methods to map potential AI futures and create safe spaces for experimentation through regulatory sandboxes. In the spirit of collaboration, countries should be more open to sharing knowledge and learning from each other.

Figure 11: Engagement with key issues in national AI-related documents since 2020 that explicitly mention children

	Source	Year	Cultivating children as a future workforce	Enabling children to obtain strong AI competences	Improving the quality of life/ services for children	Protecting children's personal data, privacy or other rights
Australia	Tech Trends Position Statement: Generative AI	2023				
Brazil	Summary of the Brazilian Artificial Intelligence Strategy	2021				
Chile	Política Nacional de Inteligencia Artificial	2021				
Colombia	Política Nacional para la Transformación Digital e Inteligencia Artificial	2020				
European Union	EU Artificial Intelligence Act	2021				
Ireland	AI - Here for Good: A National Artificial Intelligence Strategy for Ireland	2021				
Mexico	Inteligencia Artificial: Perspectivas y prospectivas desde el derecho a la protección de datos personales y la privacidad	2022				
Peru	Estrategia Nacional de Inteligencia Artificial: Documento de Trabajo para la Participación de la Ciudadanía	2021				
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia National Strategy for Data and AI 2020	2020				
Spain	Carta Derechos Digitales	2021				

Colour key



Source: [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) AI Policy Observatory](#). Documents were selected based on two key criteria: (i) the document is a national strategy; or (ii) the document includes variations of the word 'children'* in its description on the OECD website.

Note: The methodology draws on the approach used in the UNICEF [review](#) of national documents related to AI strategies and children (2020). It presents a snapshot of how documents published since then have discussed children across four categories. Instead of human coding, as in the 2020 exercise, this time we used a machine learning technique – latent Dirichlet allocation. While this analysis cannot be directly compared to the previous heat map, the aim here is to broadly illustrate focus areas and knowledge gaps in national AI documents that explicitly mention children.

*The full list of terms referring to children is as follows: English: 'Adolescent', 'Adolescents', 'Child', 'Children', 'Infant', 'Infants', 'Juvenile', 'Juveniles', 'Kid', 'Kids', 'Minor', 'Minors', 'Teen', 'Teens', 'Teenager', 'Teenagers', 'Youngster', 'Youngsters', 'Youths'; Spanish: 'Adolescente', 'Adolescentes', 'Bebé', 'Bebés', 'Chica', 'Chicas', 'Chico', 'Chicos', 'Infante', 'Infantes', 'Joven', 'Jóvenes', 'Menor', 'Menores', 'Niño', 'Niños', 'Preadolescente', 'Preadolescentes'; French: 'Adolescent', 'Adolescents', 'Bambin', 'Bambins', 'Enfant', 'Enfants', 'Gamin', 'Gamins', 'Gamine', 'Gamines', 'Jeune', 'Jeunes', 'Jeunet', 'Jeunets', 'Mineur', 'Mineurs', 'Môme', 'Mômes', 'Nourrisson', 'Nourrissons'.



Swans and signals

The 2024 Global Outlook presents some of the global trends that the UNICEF Innocenti Foresight and Policy team expects will have a significant impact on the lives and well-being of children and young people. In this section, however, we want to draw attention to some possibilities – issues that could be consequential for children.

Some of these issues are black swans, like the start of the Russia –Ukraine war in 2022. White swans are events such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2020. Tipping points are issues on the verge of becoming major global concerns, such as the surge of generative AI, which was discussed in the 2023 Global Outlook and has been taken up with widespread interest in many fields, including software coding, weather forecasting and graphic design. Signals are issues that may or may not become important to children in 2024 but are still worth mentioning. Signals denoted with an asterisk were highlighted by young people from across the world during our youth foresight workshops.

KEY TERMS:

White swans:
highly infrequent
and anticipated
events

Black swans:
highly infrequent
and unexpected
events

Tipping points:
emerging trends
that precipitate
irreversible,
systemic effects
if they pass a
threshold

Weak signals:
data points
that augur an
emerging trend

Black swan

Although extremely unlikely, **the activation of nuclear weapons** – deliberately, by accident or by miscalculation – would be devastating. After years of reporting improvements, the [Nuclear Security Index](#) concluded for the first time in 2023 that conditions for nuclear security are deteriorating. Geopolitical tensions among nuclear powers could escalate into nuclear exchanges, which would have catastrophic consequences for children, adults, the environment and future generations. However, the general [erosion of the disarmament and arms control architecture](#), along with an increasingly polarized and transactional world order, are key drivers of an existential nuclear risk.

Weak signal

Children, infants and pregnant women are uniquely vulnerable to heat stress, and [559 million children are currently exposed to high heatwave frequency](#). The use of air conditioning simply pushes hot air from one area to another, giving rise to [urban heat islands](#) and consumption of vast amounts of electricity. Cities are investing in multiple solutions, including roofs and pavements. An **ultra-white paint, a potentially revolutionary breakthrough**, is being developed at [Purdue University](#). The paint can reflect 98 per cent of the sun's energy into outer space. Tests show that the paint can reduce ambient air temperatures by 19 degrees Fahrenheit at night and by 8 degrees at noon. When applied to a roof area of 1,000 square feet, it produces a cooling power of 10 kilowatts – more powerful than central air conditioning. This could be a groundbreaking development for vulnerable women and children in cities around the world.

White swan

Developed to treat type 2 diabetes, medications such as Ozempic (semaglutide) and Mounjouro (tirzepatide) may **transform weight loss treatment, reduce obesity rates** and reform [food systems](#) around the world. The drugs help to lower blood sugar and lead to a loss of appetite, slower digestion and, ultimately, [significant weight loss of 10–20 per cent](#) of body mass. Emerging evidence suggests these drugs may be particularly effective in preventing obesity when given in [adolescence](#). While the drugs are currently expensive and need to be taken weekly, they are increasingly seen as potent means of addressing obesity across all income levels. Including these drugs

on WHO's future [Essential Medical List](#), could help to significantly lower prices and improve access for many patients if production and distribution are also stepped up.

Tipping point

Sweeping changes in how humans interact with computers are already happening. AI-driven digital personal tutors, assistants and [cloned personalities](#) are embedded into chat, search and productivity software. Meta, for example, has released [advanced conversational assistants](#) based on real people, and some of them are [aimed at engaging young users](#). [AI agents](#) are being developed that not only respond in conversation but may also be able to complete a range of internet tasks on behalf of users. Such services may become increasingly prevalent on platforms used by or in support of children. Uses include health care, counselling, personal tutoring, learning, shopping and gaming. These AI agents may also signal the [end of the smartphone era](#), as these interactions do not need to happen through screens. How much and how quickly users, including children, hand over information and tasks to AI assistants and agents will depend on many factors, including levels of trust. In any case, an irreversible shift in human–computer interaction now looks likely.

Weak signal

Companies involved with **cryptocurrencies may increasingly go mainstream and support financial integration**. The largest crypto companies are likely to consolidate further in the coming years, as evidenced by them starting to seek and obtain approval to operate under the supervision of financial regulators in various countries, including [Japan](#), [Singapore](#), [Spain](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). There are indications that these companies are also becoming more focused on financial integration through technology which could support more agile and efficient borderless payments and [may accelerate financial inclusion](#) in developing countries. This would also be good for [remittances](#) – a lifeline for many households in the developing world, and for remote work, which has the potential to significantly expand [employment opportunities for youth in developing countries](#).

White swan

Although the rollout of the RTS,S and R21 vaccines for malaria constitutes pivotal progress in the fight against malaria, the search for a long-lasting vaccine which can block transmission in endemic areas continues. Multiple researchers around the world, in [university](#) and [corporate](#) labs, are exploring mRNA-based vaccines, with several announcing dramatic laboratory-based results. Since children under 5 years old make up 80 per cent of malaria deaths, a **successful mRNA-based malaria vaccine** could be life-changing for children if the [costs and logistics of production and distribution](#) are affordable.

Weak signal

As water scarcity threatens billions of children around the world, efforts have been redoubled to find **cheaper and more efficient means of desalinating seawater**. Researchers have been working on multiple promising applications across a range of technologies, including [AI](#), [nanotechnologies](#) and process-based technologies. The goal is to significantly lower the cost of reverse osmosis, forward osmosis and evaporation stills. Harnessing renewable energy sources effectively for both [forward osmosis](#) and simple [household-level evaporation stills](#) looks particularly promising. Dramatic progress, however, will not depend on a single breakthrough but on steady technological progress on all fronts.



The future for children: Four scenarios

The future for children hinges on the interplay of multiple factors – particularly the dynamics of international cooperation, the trajectory of technological advancements and the availability of resources. To envision how these factors might affect children’s lives, UNICEF Innocenti collaborated with the [Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures](#). Using the Pardee Center’s International Futures model, we crafted four scenarios that explored how the world might change from 2023 to 2050. The four scenarios were shaped by two critical axes of uncertainty: the degree of geopolitical and economic cooperation (from high to low) and the rate of technological advancement (high to low).

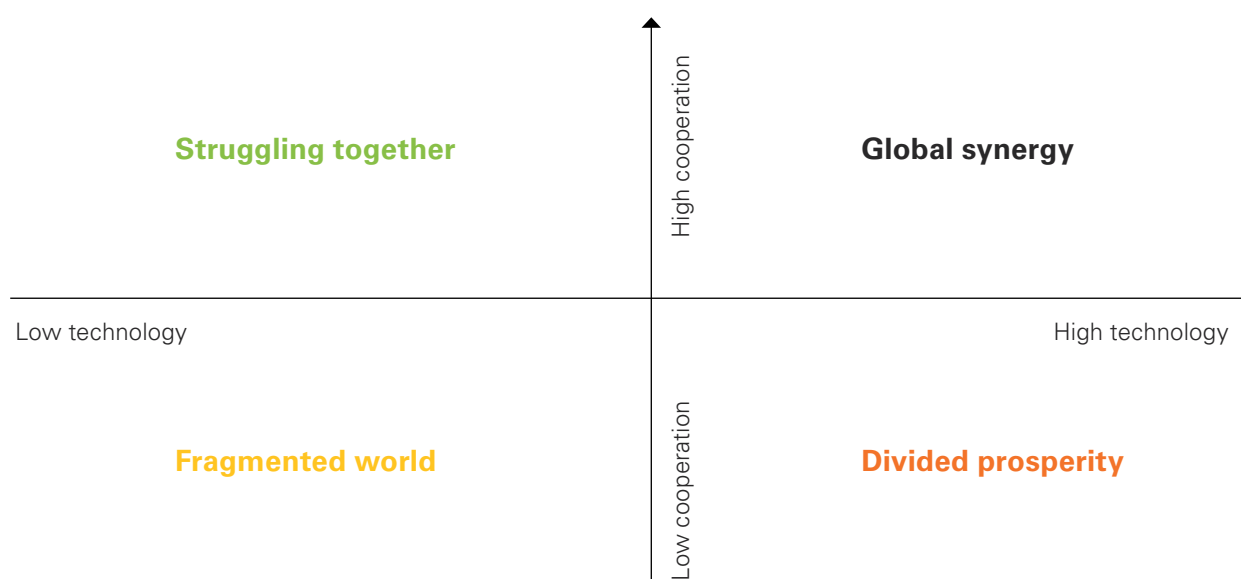
Next, we looked at how the different scenarios might alter economic growth, trade, poverty, labour, population, conflict, energy demand and climate change – factors that have a huge impact on children’s lives and well-being. In addition, we forecasted how these different scenarios would directly affect children’s outcomes in health, nutrition and education.

The goal of this foresight analysis was to provide policymakers and stakeholders with scenarios that allow them to anticipate challenges and identify action to improve children’s health, lives and futures.

SCENARIOS

Four scenarios for the future

Figure 12: Four scenarios



Scenario assumptions

The four scenarios were developed based on different assumptions about the evolution of global trends and policy choices in the realm of high and low cooperation and high and low technology. For example:

HIGH COOPERATION

More diplomacy and a lower probability of conflict, strategic carbon taxes in affluent regions, reduction in fossil fuel production, policies that promote more equitable income distribution, lower trade barriers, increase in official development assistance outflows, improved government effectiveness

LOW COOPERATION

Less diplomacy and greater probability of conflict, rise in income inequality, increase in trade protectionist policies, emergence of rival trading blocs, decline in official development assistance receipts, lower government effectiveness

HIGH TECHNOLOGY

Increased multifactor productivity,¹ higher agriculture production, increase in green energy investments and demand, easing of demographic pressures, increase in public and private research and development investment

LOW TECHNOLOGY

Falling multifactor productivity, decline in agriculture production, stagnant green energy investment and demand, demographic imbalances, decline in public and private research and development investment

The four scenarios imagined different futures based on levels of cooperation and technological advancement. More particularly:

1. The **global synergy** scenario imagined a future of great technological proliferation combined with high levels of geopolitical and economic cooperation (**high technology–high cooperation**). In this scenario, broad-based economic expansion and innovation in sectors critical for children’s well-being foster children’s health, education and food security. Meanwhile, global commitment to reducing carbon emissions and investment in renewable energy lead to a healthier environment. This scenario also envisions a global push towards equity and more effective government that will provide children with greater access to opportunities.
2. The **divided prosperity** scenario envisioned a future in which technological advancements are juxtaposed against a backdrop of fragmented international relations, which (**high technology–low cooperation**) produces mixed benefits for children. In this scenario, despite remarkable technological progress, ambitious investments, high productivity and increased yields, high trade barriers and a fragmented economic system lead to unequal access to essential goods. Weak global cooperation in addressing climate change exacerbates environmental threats to children’s health and security, and growing inequality threatens children’s futures.
3. In the **struggling together** scenario, where the world is characterized by robust international cooperation in the face of economic and environmental crises due to limited technological progress and resource availability (**low technology–high cooperation**), persistent economic challenges and environmental crises have cascading effects on children’s health, education and well-being. Yet, international cooperation, underpinned by a global commitment to leaving no child behind, drives improvements in basic health and education.

4. The **fragmented world** scenario was defined by scant resources and slow technological advancement with little global cooperation (**low technology–low cooperation**). In this scenario, the world is less united and less affluent and children’s development is harmed by the consequences of climate change, conflicts over resources and geopolitical tensions. High trade barriers, decreased investment in technology, slow agricultural yields and struggling energy systems negatively impact children’s well-being. Meanwhile, growing inequality and weak governance further entrench disparities, jeopardizing children’s prospects for the future.

1 **Multifactor productivity** refers to the productivity of all the inputs used in the production process. These include: labour, capital, land and intermediate inputs (e.g., energy inputs). Consequently, multifactor productivity measures output per unit of combined inputs and indicates the overall production efficiency of an industry, sector or economy.

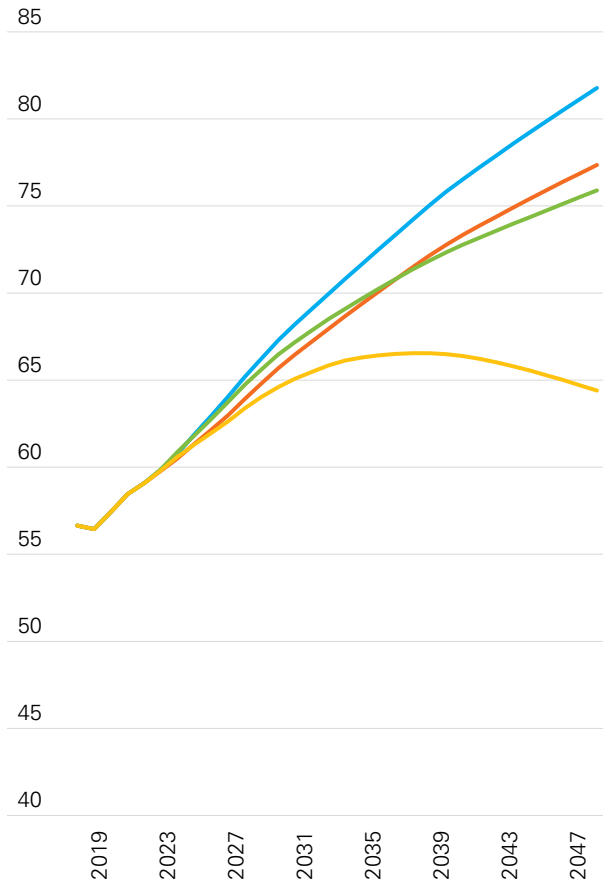
Our analysis showed that the **global synergy** scenario provided the most optimistic outlook for children’s development, with enhanced access to education, improved health-care infrastructure, greater food security, shared economic prosperity and a healthier environment. In contrast, the **fragmented world** scenario painted a grim picture for children in 2050, highlighting an urgent need for policies that prioritize sustainable development and global cooperation to safeguard and enhance the welfare of the world’s youngest citizens.

By the numbers: Impact on children’s health, nutrition and education

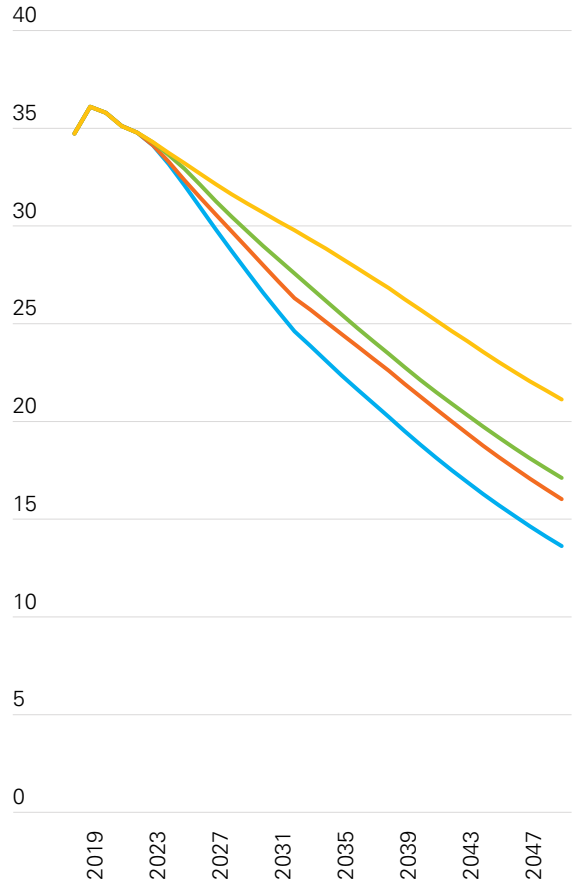
Technological advancement and cooperation are both critical to improve children's health, nutrition and education outcomes in the long run (see *Figure 13*). In the **global synergy** scenario, for example, under-five mortality fell from 34.78 deaths per 1,000 births in 2023 to 13.63 deaths per 1,000 births in 2050. However, in the **fragmented world** scenario, the mortality rate only fell to 21.12 deaths per 1,000 births in 2050. In other words, progress in reducing child mortality between 2023 and 2050 would be diminished by more than a third in the **fragmented world** scenario compared with the **global synergy** scenario. Similarly, secondary education completion rates would increase from 59 per cent in 2023 to more than 80 per cent in 2050 in the **global synergy** scenario. However, they would remain under 65 per cent in the **fragmented world** scenario (see *Figure 13*).

Figure 13: Greatest progress on children’s health, education and nutrition is in a world of global synergy

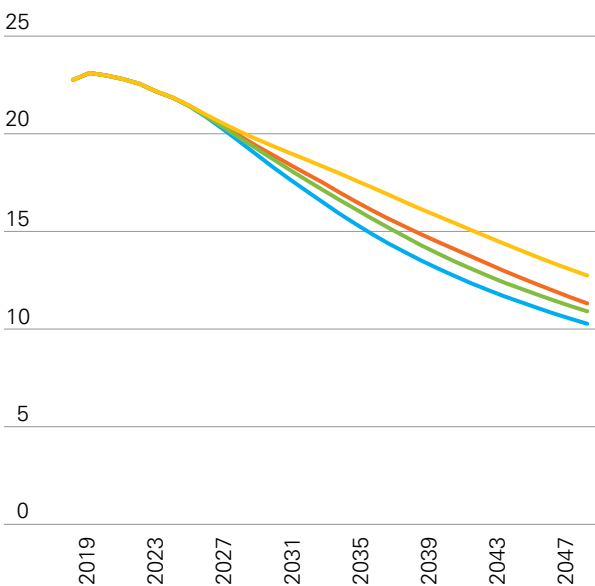
Secondary education graduation rate projections up to 2050 (%)



Under-five mortality rate projections up to 2050 (deaths per 1,000 births)



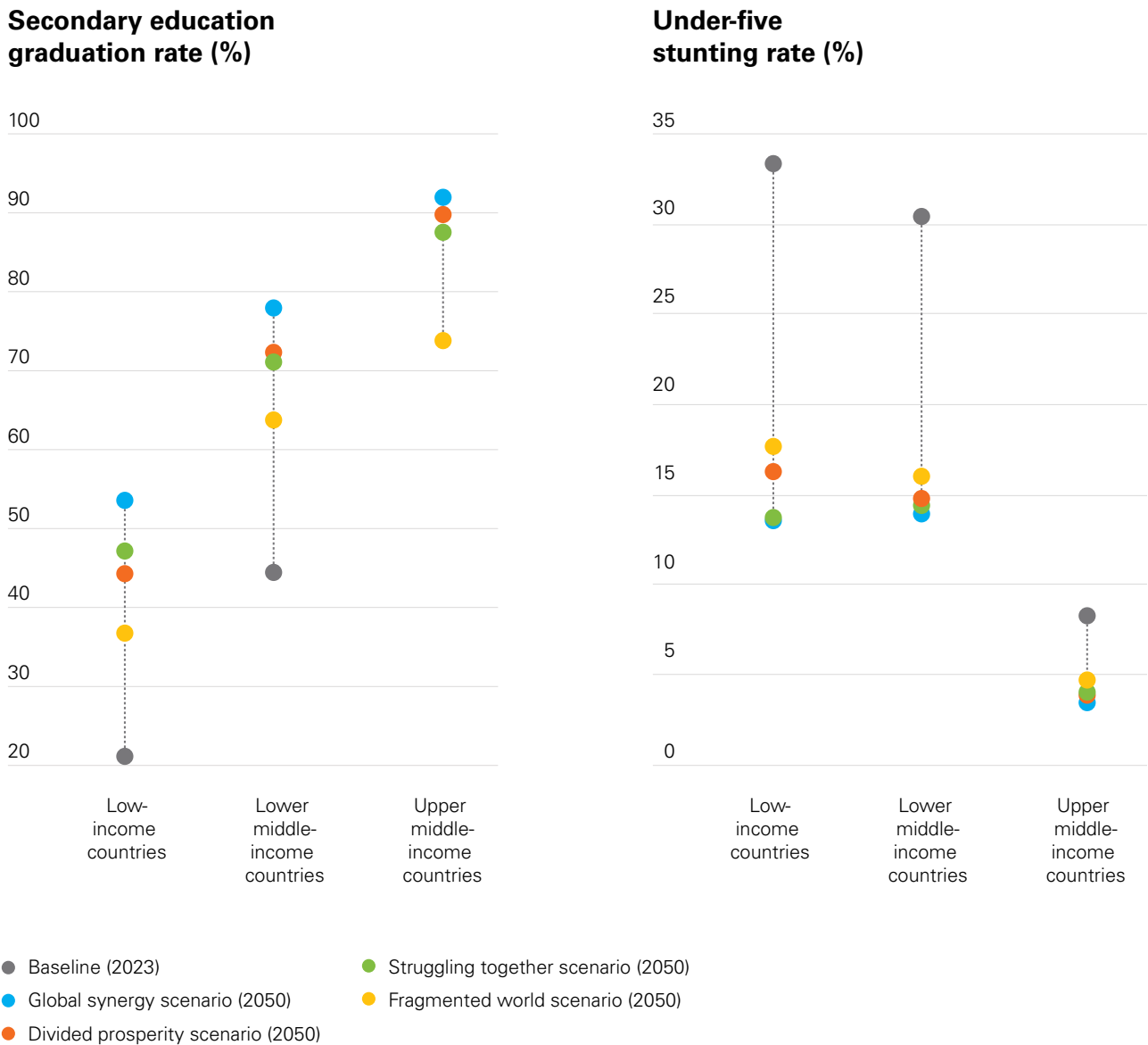
Under-five stunting rate projections up to 2050 (%)



- Global synergy: High technology–high cooperation
- Divided prosperity: High technology–low cooperation
- Struggling together: Low technology–high cooperation
- Fragmented world: Low technology–low cooperation

There were also variations in different income categories. For example, international cooperation that drove improvements in basic education and health standards worldwide and a global commitment to equity was more important for improving children’s health and education outcomes in low-income countries than it was in higher-income countries (see Figure 14). For instance, secondary education graduation and stunting rates in low-income countries improved more in the **global synergy** and **struggling together** scenarios (both high cooperation) than they did in the **divided prosperity** scenario (a high technology but low cooperation scenario).

Figure 14: Cooperation matters more for improving child outcomes in low-income countries, 2023 and 2050



On the other hand, secondary education graduation and stunting rates in lower middle-income countries improved more in the **global synergy and divided prosperity** worlds (both high technology scenarios) than they did in the **struggling together** world (a low technology and high cooperation scenario).

By the numbers: Impact on economic prosperity and inequality

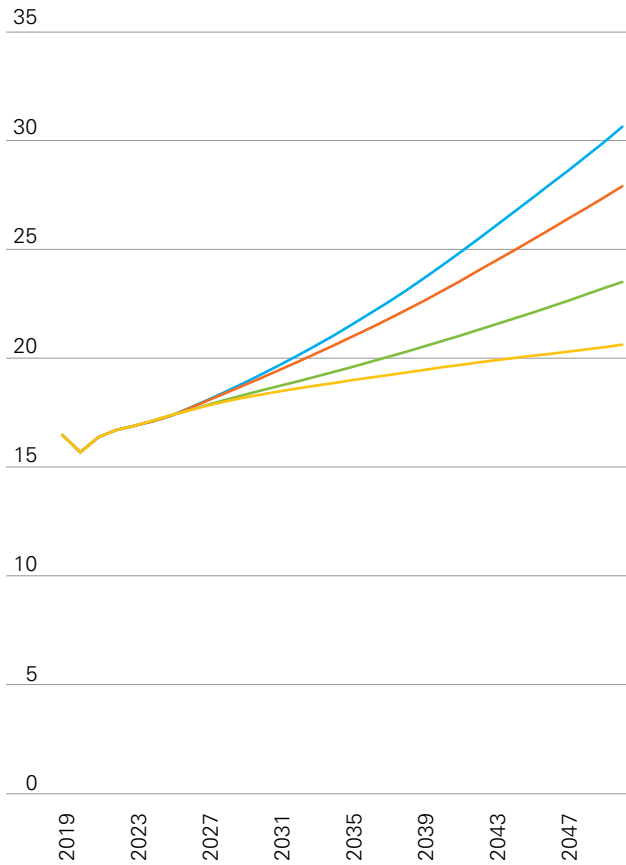
Global synergy is also the best-case scenario for economic prosperity (see *Figure 15*), which, in turn, impacts children's health and nutrition and can protect them from poverty.

In this scenario, historically lagging economies harnessed technological advancements to catch up with developed economies (economic convergence). As a result, GDP grew at an average annual rate of 3.5 per cent between 2024 and 2050. This translated into an increase in GDP per capita from US\$16,890 in 2023 to US\$30,640 in 2050 (based on 2017 US\$). In contrast, the GDP growth rate was just 1.7 per cent per year in the **fragmented world** scenario – this reduced GDP per capita in 2050 in the **fragmented world** scenario to half the amount in the **global synergy** scenario.

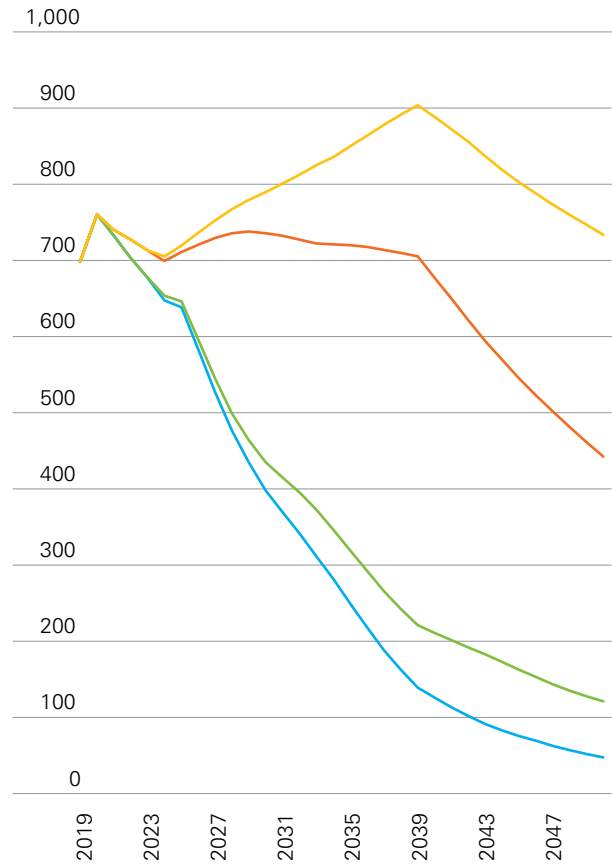
The **global synergy** scenario could also profoundly impact poverty and inequality. For instance, the number of people living in extreme poverty could fall from 698 million in 2019 (9 per cent of the population) to just 47.37 million (0.5 per cent) in 2050. In contrast, 733.2 million people (7.7 per cent of the population) would remain in extreme poverty in 2050 in the **fragmented world** scenario.

Figure 15: The global synergy scenario could profoundly impact economic prosperity and inequality

GDP per capita projections up to 2050, in US\$1,000 (2017)



Extreme poverty poverty projections to 2050 at PPP US\$2.15 a day (millions)



- Global synergy: High technology–high cooperation
- Divided prosperity: High technology–low cooperation
- Struggling together: Low technology–high cooperation
- Fragmented world: Low technology–low cooperation

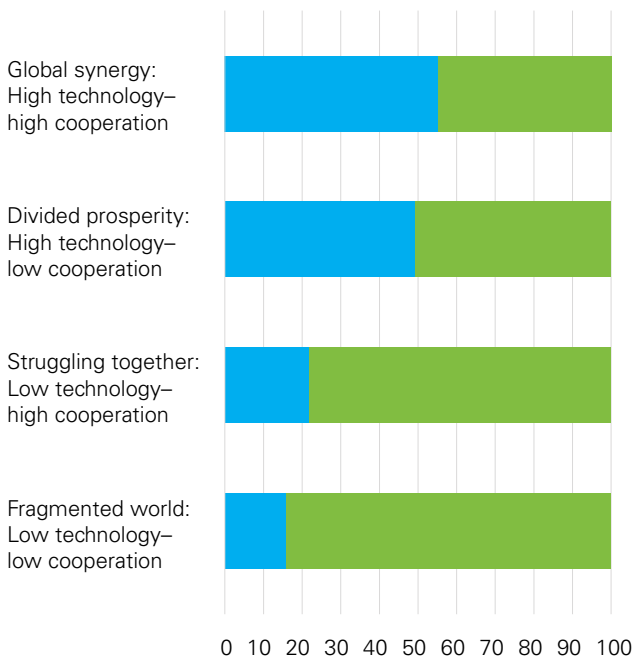
By the numbers: Impact on climate and the transition to green energy

The foresight analysis also showed that **global synergy** is better for the planet (see Figure 16). For example, the **global synergy** scenario resulted in a 44.8 per cent reliance on fossil fuels in 2050 compared with 84 per cent reliance in a **fragmented world**. In the **global synergy** scenario, technological advancements and international cooperation propelled a transition to a low-carbon economy and comprehensive climate change initiatives financed largely by global taxes on carbon emissions. In such a world, carbon emissions would

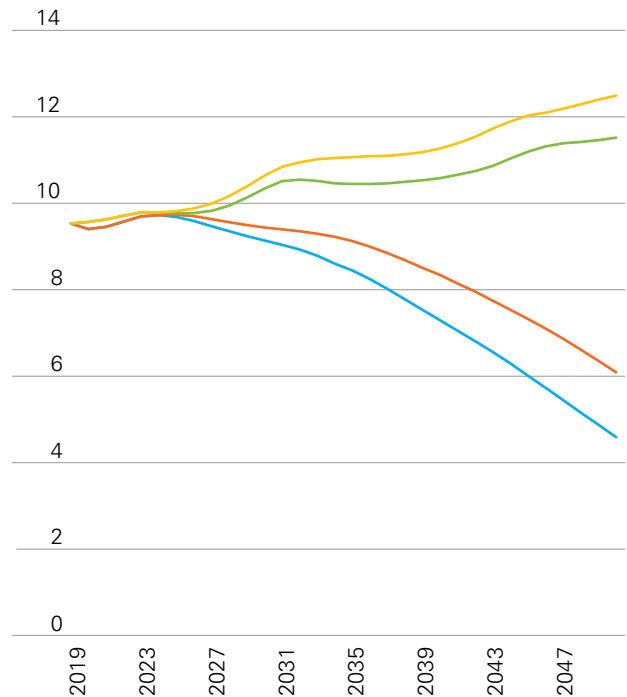
drop from 9.7 billion metric tons in 2023 to 4.6 billion metric tons in 2050. In contrast, in a **fragmented world**, the climate crisis would intensify by slowing the pace of global transition to green energy and limiting the funding available for resilience and adaptation initiatives, thereby putting children’s health and safety at risk.

Figure 16: Fragmentation decelerates clean energy transition and emissions reductions

Projected share of energy production in 2050 (%)



Global carbon emissions projections to 2050 (billion tons)



- Share of renewable energy
- Share of energy from fossils
- Global synergy: High technology–high cooperation
- Divided prosperity: High technology–low cooperation
- Struggling together: Low technology–high cooperation
- Fragmented world: Low technology–low cooperation

Placing children at the centre of our shared future

A brighter tomorrow starts with the policy choices we make today. These choices are not always straightforward or easy, but success is possible. History shows that collaboration can create dramatic change for children. For example, [child mortality rates](#) were halved between 2000 and 2021 and more than 2 billion people gained access to water and sanitation services since 1990.

The foresight analysis conducted by UNICEF Innocenti and the Pardee Center for International Futures shows that the future for children hangs in the balance between fragmentation and cooperation. The data clearly show that a pathway modelled on the **global synergy** scenario presents the most optimistic outlook for children's health, education, nutrition and overall well-being.

However, achieving this future will require international policies that actively support children's rights and development. These policies will need to focus on investing in universal education and health care to ensure equitable access to opportunities for all children. They must establish and enforce international environmental standards to guarantee a safe and sustainable world for future generations. Although technological innovation offers promise, its benefits may be muted without policies that prioritize equity and sustainability.

For these policies and approaches to work, they must be underpinned by a robust framework for global collaboration, involving governments, NGOs, and private sector and civil society organizations. Indeed, we all must work collectively towards ensuring the best and most equitable outcomes for children and future generations. With solidarity, openness and a spirit of mutual interest, a more prosperous, secure world is within reach – one where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

About the Global Outlook

For the fourth edition of the Global Outlook, the UNICEF Innocenti Foresight and Policy team took a continuous, iterative approach rather than treating this report as a one-time exercise. Our three objectives were to: (i) assess the specific effects of emerging trends on children; (ii) amplify young voices about the trends affecting their futures; and (iii) ensure a truly global perspective by employing a consultative process with experts from multiple regions and specifically including insights from experts in the Global South.

Our key partners in the development of this report were the Atlantic Council and the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures. We also sought input and analysis from agencies including the World Bank and UNDESA. These alliances significantly enhanced the qualitative and quantitative rigour of this report. Together, we applied foresight methodologies that helped to shape the report, including trends analysis, horizon scanning, forecasting, quantitative scenario analysis and the three horizons framework

In October 2023, three senior members of the UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows organized an online YFC. This workshop engaged participants aged 15–30 from 40 countries. Guided by the senior Youth Foresight Fellows, the workshop participants engaged in a three horizons foresight exercise, through which they offered youth views on the current state of democracy and the innovations needed to achieve their vision for an ideal democratic system in the future. This activity fostered intergenerational dialogue. The insights from this workshop, along with survey responses from 196 youths, were incorporated into a chapter on youth and democracy authored by young contributors.

Combining expert insights from the Global South, youth perspectives and in-house research, the UNICEF Innocenti Foresight and Policy team crafted sections on key emerging trends for 2024. To ensure thoroughness, these sections were reviewed by other UNICEF colleagues.

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Thank you.

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About us

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence.

And we never give up.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the current and emerging questions of greatest importance for children. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represent the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development.

The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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