

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

REPORT 2023/2024
SNAPSHOT



**Breaking
the
gridlock**

Reimagining
cooperation in
a polarized world

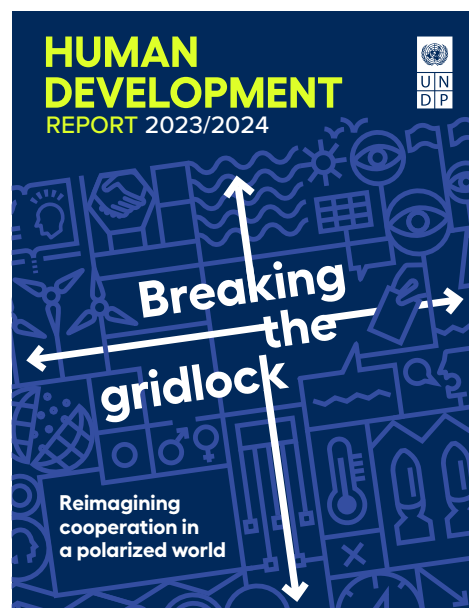
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The 2023/2024 Human Development Report



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SNAPSHOT

Breaking the gridlock

A snapshot of the 2023/2024
Human Development Report

Breaking the gridlock

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We can do better than this. Better than runaway climate change and pandemics. Better than a spate of unconstitutional transfers of power amid a rising, globalizing tide of populism. Better than cascading human rights violations and unconscionable massacres of people in their homes and civic venues, in hospitals, schools and shelters.

We must do better than a world always on the brink, a socioecological house of cards. We owe it to ourselves, to each other, to our children and their children.

We have so much going for us.

We know what the global challenges are and who will be most affected by them. And we know there will surely be more that we cannot anticipate today.

We know which choices offer better opportunities for peace, shared prosperity and sustainability, better ways to navigate interacting layers of uncertainty and interlinked planetary surprises.¹

We enjoy unprecedented wealth, knowhow and technology—unimaginable to our ancestors—that with more equitable distribution and use could power bold and necessary choices for peace and for sustainable, inclusive human development on which peace depends.

So why does pursuing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement feel like a half-hearted slog through quicksand?

Why in many places does restoring peace, even pauses or ceasefires as hopeful preludes to peace, feel so elusive?

Why are we immobilized on digital governance while artificial intelligence races ahead in a data goldrush?

In short, why are we so stuck? And how do we get unstuck without resorting myopically to violence or isolationism? These questions motivate the 2023/2024 Human Development Report.

Sharp questions belie their complexity; issues with power disparities at their core often defy easy explanation. Magic bullets entice but mislead—siren songs peddled by sloganeering that exploits group-based grievances. Slick solutions and simple recipes poison our willingness to do the hard work of overcoming polarization.

Geopolitical quagmires abound, driven by shifting power dynamics among states and by national gazes yanked inward by inequalities, insecurity and polarization, all recurring themes in this and recent

Human Development Reports. Yet we need not sit on our hands simply because great power competition is heating up while countries underrepresented in global governance seek a greater say in matters of global import. Recall that global cooperation on smallpox eradication and protection of the ozone layer, among other important issues such as nuclear nonproliferation, happened over the course of the Cold War.

Slivers of hope have emerged even now. The Ukraine grain deal, before its suspension in 2023, averted widespread food insecurity, which would have hurt poorer countries and poorer people most. The production of Covid-19 vaccines, which saved millions of lives, relies on global supply chains, although, tragically, many more lives could have been saved if vaccine coverage had been more equitable.² Countries continue to cooperate on genomic sequencing of variants, even as shameful inequities in vaccine access persist.³ At the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the world established a new loss and damage fund to benefit more than 3 billion people, with pledges totalling over \$600 million.⁴ Global clean energy investment, and the jobs and opportunities that come with it, reached an all-time high of \$1.8 trillion in 2023 (equivalent to the size of the economy of the Republic of Korea), almost twice the amount in 2020.⁵

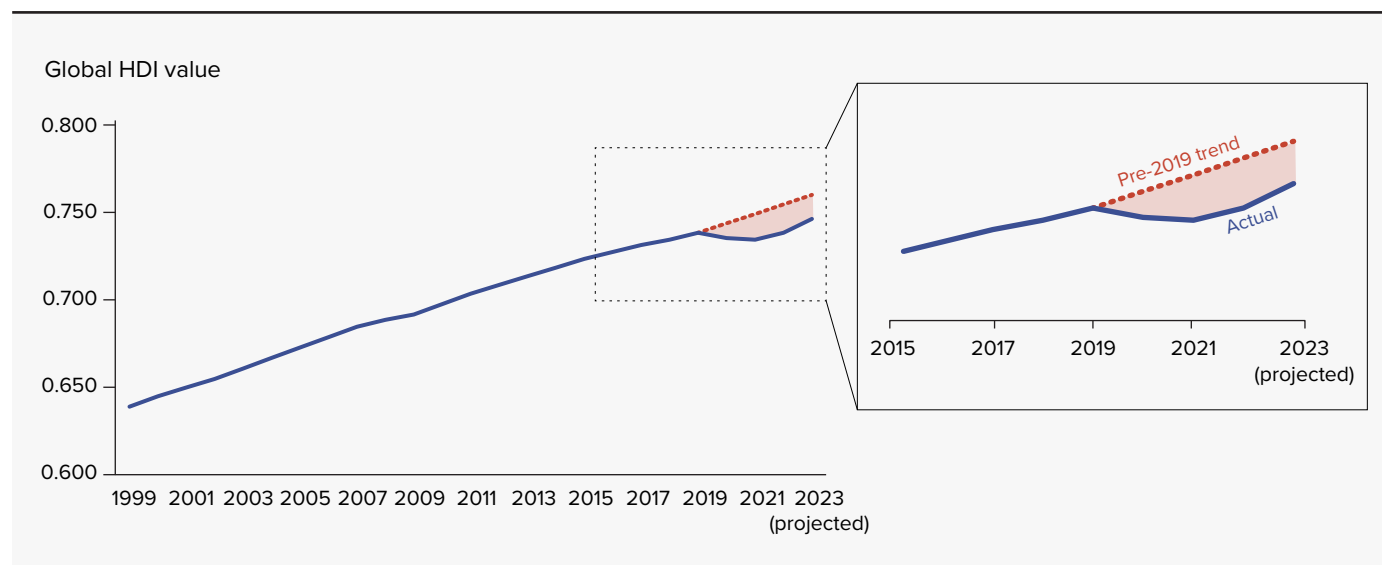
However challenging they are, geopolitics are simply not an excuse to stay stuck in gridlock. There are paths through. Reimagining and fully providing global public goods in ways that meet national development needs at the same time is one of them.

The 2021–2022 Human Development Report argued that a new uncertainty complex is unsettling lives the world over and dragging on human development. The global Human Development Index (HDI) value fell for the first time ever—in both 2020 and 2021.

The global HDI value has since rebounded to a projected record high in 2023 (figure S.1). All components of the global HDI are projected to exceed their pre-2019 values.⁶

Despite being projected to reach a new high, the global HDI value would still be below trend. And the global figure masks disturbing divergence across countries: every Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development country is projected to have recovered, but only about half of the Least

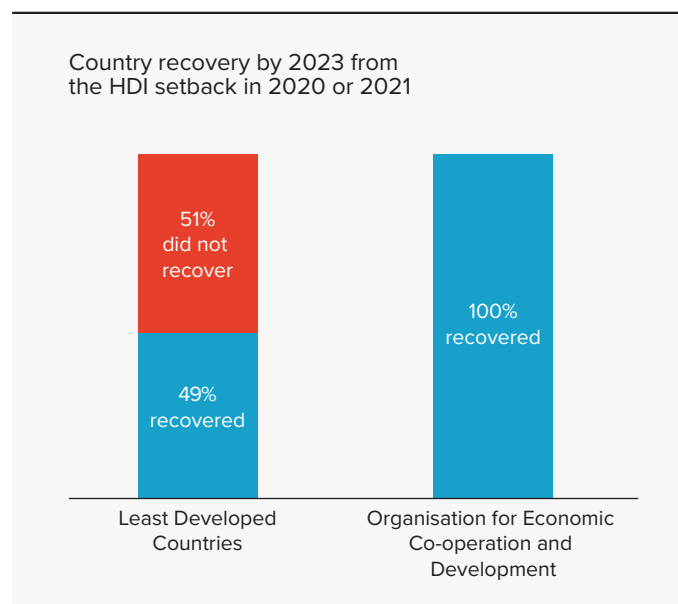
Figure S.1 A permanent shift in the Human Development Index (HDI) trajectory?



Note: The global HDI value for 2023 is a projection. The pre-2019 trend is based on the evolution of the global HDI value in the previous 20 years.

Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from Barro and Lee (2018), IMF (2023), UNDESA (2022, 2023), UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), United Nations Statistics Division (2023) and World Bank (2023).

Figure S.2 Recovery of Human Development Index (HDI) values since the 2020–2021 decline is projected to be highly unequal



Note: Least Developed Countries have low levels of income and face vulnerabilities that make them “the poorest and weakest segment” of the international community (<https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/about-least-developed-countries>). Recovery means that countries that suffered a decline in HDI value in 2020 or 2021 are projected to reach or surpass their pre-decline HDI value by 2023.

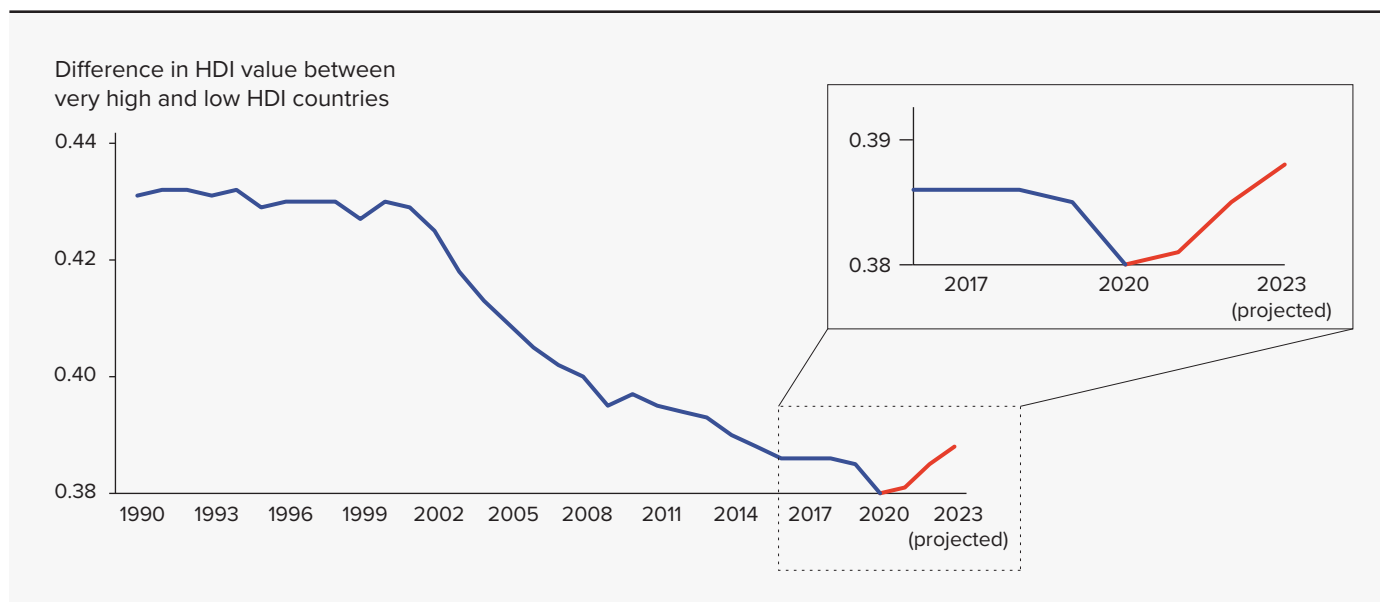
Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from Barro and Lee (2018), IMF (2023), UNDESA (2022, 2023), UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), United Nations Statistics Division (2023) and World Bank (2023).

Developed Countries are projected to have done so (figure S.2). After 20 years of steady progress, inequality between countries at the upper and lower ends of the HDI has reversed course, ticking up each year since 2020 (figure S.3).

If the global HDI value continues to evolve below the pre-2019 trend, as it has since 2020, losses will be permanent. Based on the 1999–2019 trend, the global HDI value was on track to cross the threshold defining very high human development (a value of 0.800) by 2030—coinciding with the deadline to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Now, the world is off track. Indeed, every region’s projected 2023 HDI value falls below its pre-2019 trend. Whatever its future trajectory, the global HDI value will capture—incompletely, if at all—many other important elements, such as the debilitating effects of chronic illness or the spikes in mental health disorders or in violence against women, all restricting people’s possibilities for their lives. For rich and poor countries alike some losses will never be recovered. Whatever the charts and indicators may say about people today, the Covid-19 pandemic took some 15 million lives.⁷ We cannot get them back. Nor the time siphoned off in so many ways—in isolation, in caregiving, in not attending school.

The HDI is an important, if crude, yardstick for human development. Just a few years ago wellbeing had never been higher, poverty never lower. Yet people

Figure S.3 Inequality between very high Human Development Index (HDI) and low HDI countries is increasing, bucking long-run declines



Note: The difference in HDI values for 2023 is based on projections.

Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from Barro and Lee (2018), IMF (2023), UNDESA (2022, 2023), UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), United Nations Statistics Division (2023) and World Bank (2023).

around the world were reporting high levels of sadness, stress and worry (figure S.4).⁸ Those self-reported measures have since risen for nearly 3 billion people.⁹ And while 9 in 10 people show unwavering support for the ideal of democracy, there has been an increase in those supporting leaders who may undermine it: today, for the first time ever, more than half the global population supports such leaders (figure S.5).¹⁰

The uncertainty complex has cast a very long shadow on human development writ large, with recent years marking perhaps an unfortunate and avoidable fork in its path rather than a short-lived setback.

What gives?

Progress feels harder to grasp, especially when planetary pressures are brought into view; our standard development measures are clearly missing some things. One of those things may be the disempowerment of people—gaps in human agency—which is taking combined hits from new configurations of global complexity and interdependence, uncertainty, insecurity and polarization.

People are looking for answers and a way forward. This can be channelled helpfully via shared ambition that brings everyone along (not necessarily on everything) in areas of cooperation that are not zero-sum, enabled by cooperative narratives and

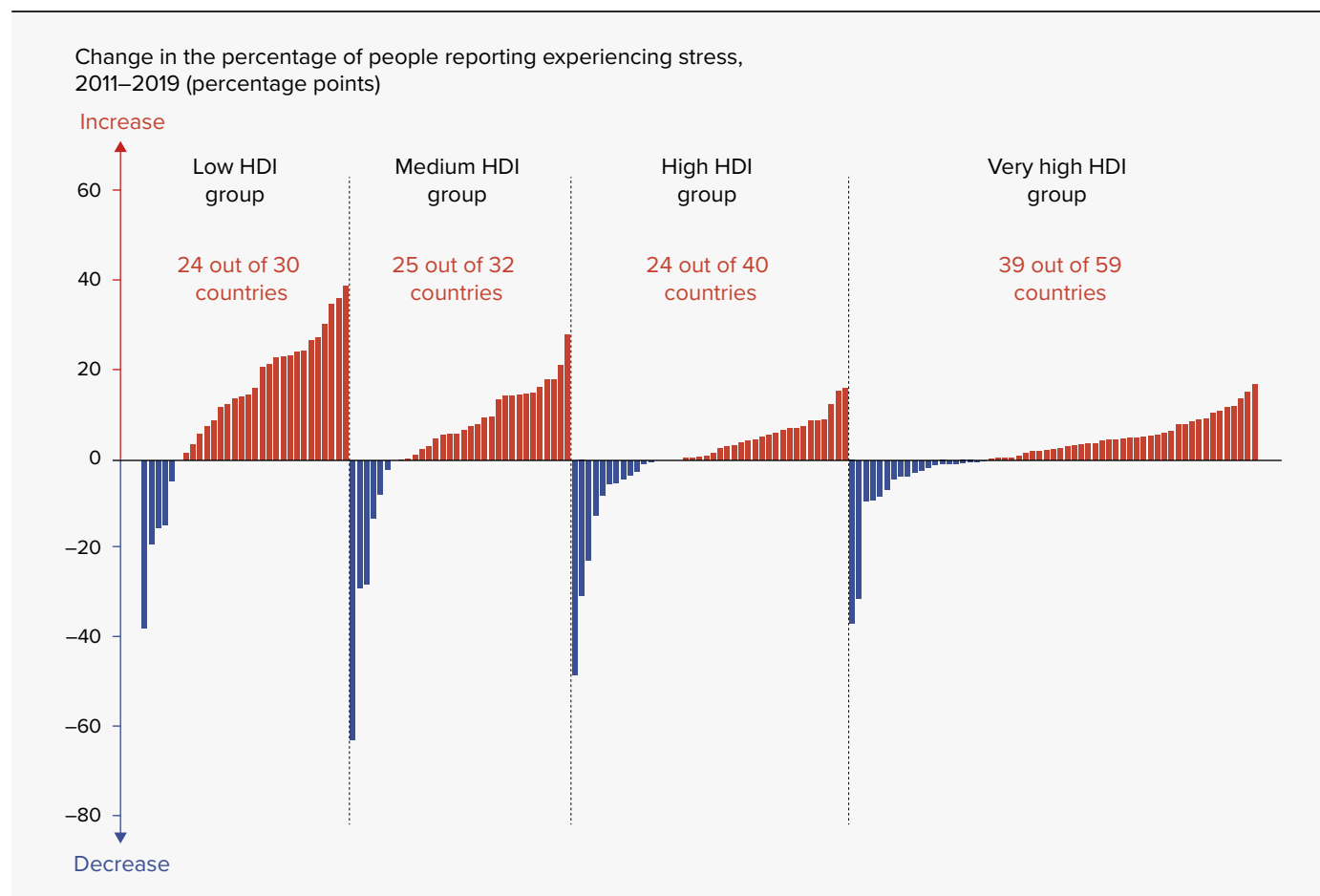
institutions built on a bedrock of generalized trust. Over the past 10 years both very high and high HDI countries have improved their HDI values without increasing planetary pressures, a shift from previous trends of the two increasing together, so there are reasons to hope that this might be possible (figure S.6).

Or it can be channelled, as it seems now, into vicious cycles of demonizing blame games that breed, at best, suspicion and distrust and, at worst, prejudice, discrimination and violence.

Troublingly, populism has exploded, blowing past last century's peaks, which roughly corresponded to periods of mismanaged globalization.¹¹ That is happening alongside, and in many cases exploiting, wicked forms of polarization, such as the winnowing and hardening of narrow identities, a sort of coercion or unfreedom enabled, if not outright celebrated, by an ongoing fetishization of so-called rational self-interest.

People's ability to determine for themselves what it means to live a good life, including defining and reassessing their responsibilities to other people and to the planet, has been crowded out in many ways. Metastatic hands-off dogma hides the raiding of the economic and ecological cookie jar. Dog-eat-dog and beggary-neighbour mindsets harken back to mercantilist eras. And policies and institutions—including those

Figure S.4 Self-reported stress rose in most countries, even before the Covid-19 pandemic



HDI is Human Development Index.

Note: Values refer to the change in the percentage of people who reported experiencing stress “during a lot of the day yesterday.”

Source: Human Development Report Office, based on Gallup (2023).

that have mismanaged globalized market dynamics—default to “me” before “we.”

We are at an unfortunate crossroad. Polarization and distrust are on a collision course with an ailing planet. Insecurity and inequalities have a lot to do with it. So does a constellation of disempowering narratives that engender defensive fatalism and catastrophic inertia—all circumscribed and, in some sense fuelled by, dizzying political polarization.

What can we do to help turn things around? Quite a lot.

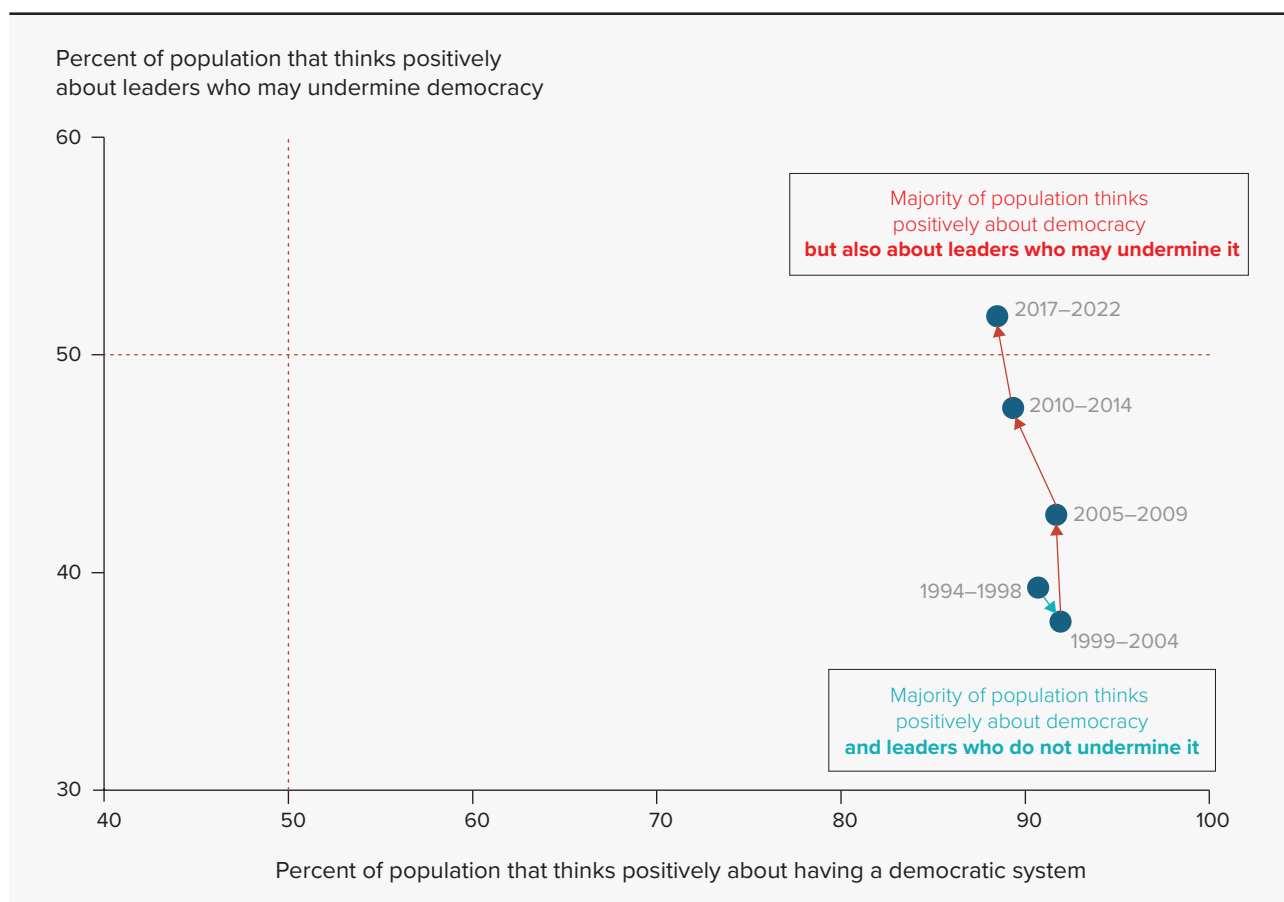
Build a 21st century architecture for global public goods

First, we should build out a 21st century architecture to deliver the global public goods that we all depend on. It would function as a third track to international

cooperation, complementing development assistance focused on poorer countries and humanitarian assistance focused on emergencies. These tracks are not silos. Distinctively, a global public goods architecture would aim for transfers from rich countries to poorer ones that advance goals for every country to benefit. Every country has a chance to have a say, as well as an opportunity to contribute. As such, this third track is intrinsically multilateral.

Global public goods will require additional financing as a complement, rather than substitute for or competitor, to traditional development assistance. The financing can come in many forms. For example, when some portion of an investment in a poorer country generates global benefits, the corresponding financing (or technology transfer) should tend to be concessional, so that alignment is achieved between who benefits (the rest of the world) and who pays (the

Figure S.5 The democracy paradox? Unwavering support for democracy but increasing support for leaders who may undermine it



Note: Data are population-weighted averages for a panel of countries representing 76 percent of the global population. Percent of population on the vertical axis refers to people who responded that having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is “very good” or “fairly good.” Percent of population on the horizontal axis refers to people who responded that having a democratic political system is “very good” or “fairly good.”
Source: Human Development Report Office based on data from multiple waves of the World Values Survey (Inglehart and others 2022).

rest of the world). The flipside is the case of hazards or shocks that are not of a single country’s making. Automatic triggers can be embedded in bonds or loan agreements, especially state-contingent debt instruments, to help poorer countries cope with crises that they had little part in generating, as with climate change. This would create more predictable conditions in navigating an uncertain world that could mobilize and attract private finance to those countries.

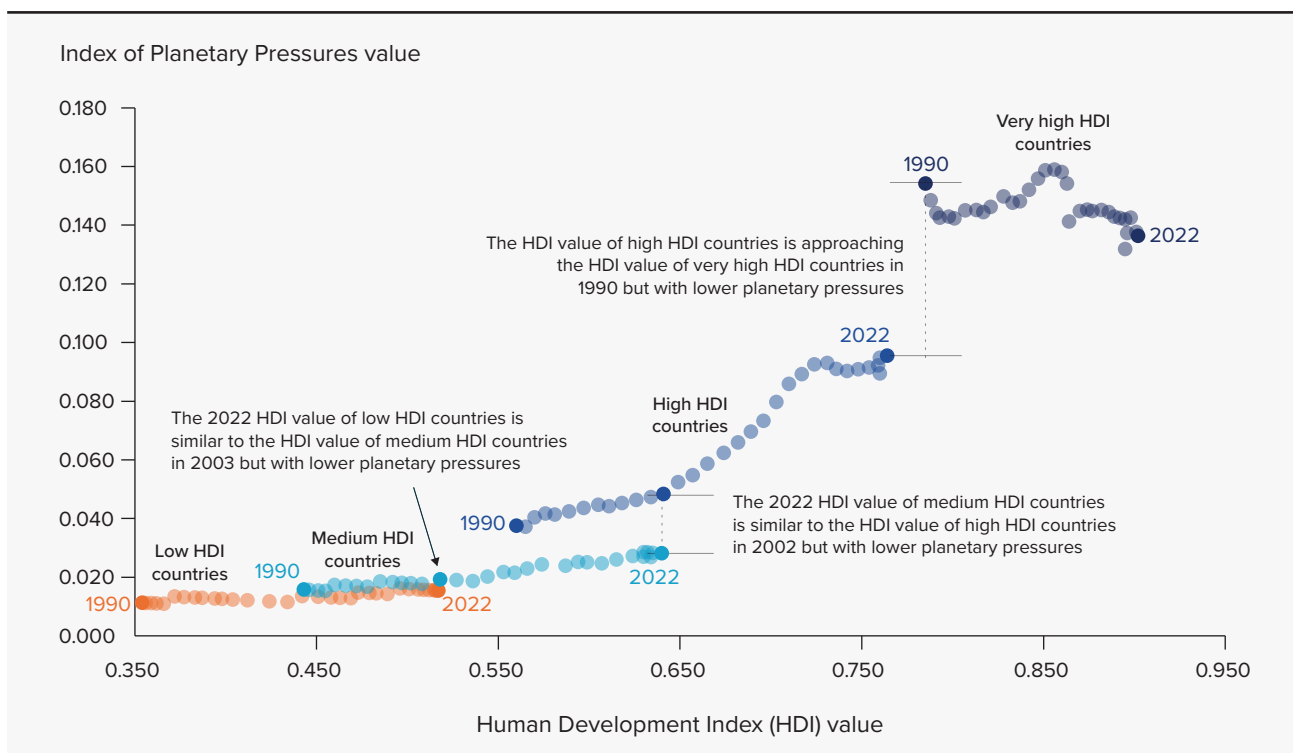
Dial down temperatures and push back polarization

Second, we need to dial down the temperature and push back on polarization, which poisons practically everything it touches and impedes international cooperation. Providing global public goods will help. So

will correcting misperceptions about other people’s preferences and motivations. All too often people make biased assumptions about other people, including people on the other side of political divides. Often, people agree with one another more than they think. For example, while 69 percent of people around the world report being willing to sacrifice some of their income to contribute to climate change mitigation, only 43 percent perceive others believing the same (a 26 percentage point misperception gap).¹² The result is a false social reality of pluralistic ignorance where incorrect beliefs about others hampers cooperation that, if recognized and corrected, could help build collective action on climate.

Not all polarization can be reduced to misperception, however big a role it plays. That makes it important to create spaces of deliberation to bridge divides.

Figure S.6 Reasons for hope: Improvements on the Human Development Index without increasing planetary pressures



Note: The Index of Planetary Pressures is constructed using the per capita levels of carbon dioxide emissions (production) and material footprint in each country (it is 1 minus the adjustment factor for planetary pressures presented in table 7 in the *Statistical Annex* of the full Report).

Source: Human Development Report Office. See specific sources in tables 2 and 7 in the *Statistical Annex* of the full Report.

Citizen assemblies can function in this way, but they are not the only means. Practical schemes to facilitate more deliberative processing of information can help counter the growing danger of people becoming trapped in beliefs that have no basis in fact.¹³ In contexts of intergroup conflict, presenting information in a frame that does not provoke anger can be depolarizing.¹⁴ Interventions that rely on qualitative and narrative-based approaches, such as storytelling and vignettes, are particularly effective.¹⁵

The key words are deliberate and deliberative. Polarization is more likely to self-destruct badly than to self-correct helpfully. Steady positive pressure that encourages empathy, builds interpersonal trust and emphasizes overlapping, shared identities is the way to go.

Narrow agency gaps

Third, we need to narrow agency gaps—fuelled in part by the divergence between what people believe is possible or probable and what is objectively possible.¹⁶ Agency gaps are also apparent in half of people

worldwide reporting that they have no or limited control over their lives and more than two-thirds perceiving that they have little influence in the decisions of their government (figure S.7).

To help narrow agency gaps, institutions need to become more people-centred, co-owned and future-oriented.

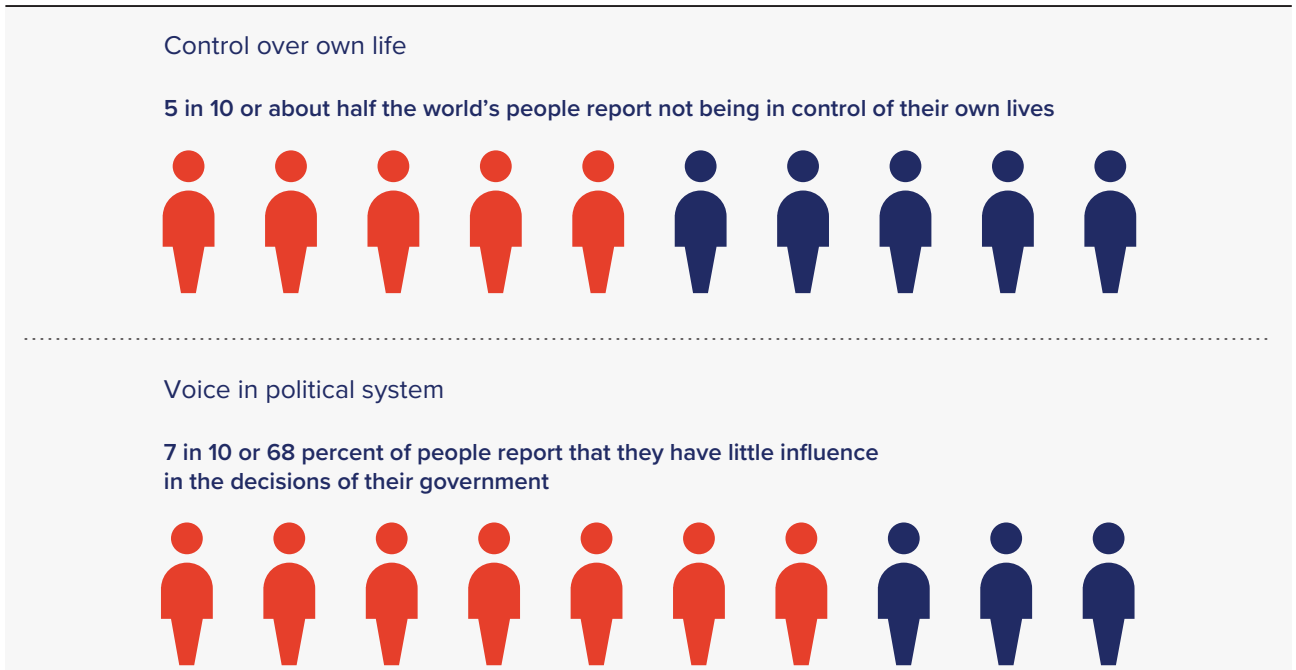
People-centred is about placing ultimate objectives in terms of human development and human security, recognizing the interdependence of people and the planet.

Co-owned is about the fair distribution of the power to set collective goals, the responsibilities to pursue them and the resulting outcomes. It stresses the formation of social norms that cultivate the value of collective achievements and cooperative behaviour.¹⁷

Future-oriented is about focusing on what we can shape and create if we work together, enriching the space for deliberation and agreement.¹⁸ In the face of challenges, a future-oriented perspective opens possibilities for hope and creative resolve.

Tailoring these principles to different contexts will put us on the road to productive dialogue and action,

Figure S.7 Agency gaps in collective action are higher than those in control over one's own life



Note: Agency is the ability of people to act as agents who can do effective things based on their commitments (Sen 2013). It is proxied by two indicators: the share of the population that reported feeling in control over their lives (measured on a scale of 1–10, where 1–3 indicates an acute agency gap, 4–7 indicates a moderate agency gap and 8–10 indicates no agency gap) and the share of the population that reported feeling that their voice is heard in the political system (those who responded “A great deal” or “A lot”). Data are computed using microdata and equal weights across countries. **Source:** Human Development Report Office based on data from wave 7 (2017–2022) of the World Values Survey (Inglehart and others 2022).

which must be flexible and iterative amid so much uncertainty, for lessons to inform course corrections.

They will help us break through the tyranny of single adversarial narratives and single exclusive identities.

They will help us better manage evolving global interdependence.

They will help us cooperatively and peacefully break through the global gridlock.

Notes

- 1 See UNDP (2020, 2022a).
- 2 Watson and others 2022.
- 3 See the United Nations Development Programme's Global Dashboard for Vaccine Equity at <https://data.undp.org/insights/vaccine-equity>.
- 4 Vaidyanathan 2024. These pledges still fall short of the annual loss and damages associated with climate change, which have been estimated to be as high as \$400 billion a year.
- 5 <https://about.bnef.com/blog/global-clean-energy-investment-jumps-17-hits-1-8-trillion-in-2023-according-to-bloombergnef-report/> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- 6 HDI data up to 2022 are from table 1 in the *Statistical Annex* of the full Report. Values for 2023 are projections using the same data sources used for that table.
- 7 Msemburi and others 2023.
- 8 See UNDP (2022b).
- 9 Some 3 billion people report feeling worried today, an increase of 687 million people over the past decade; 2 billion people report sadness, 540 million people more than a decade ago; and 2.9 billion people experience stress, an increase of 596 million people over the past decade (Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from Gallup 2003). Daly and Macchia (2023) document an increase in the prevalence of feelings of emotional distress between 2009 and 2021.
- 10 See Kurlantzick (2022), Nichols (2021) and UNDP (2023).
- 11 Funke, Schularick and Trebesch 2023.
- 12 Andre and others 2024.
- 13 Fernbach and Van Boven 2022.
- 14 Gur, Ayal and Halperin 2021.
- 15 Graeber, Roth and Zimmerman 2023; Vogt and others 2016.
- 16 Demeritt and Hoff 2023. Expanding agency is about enhancing the ability of people to be agents of change. Policies have not stressed enough the central role of agency as a key pillar of human development. Narrowing agency gaps allows people to participate in public reasoning and decision-making through institutions they have confidence in.
- 17 On the importance of co-ownership for political institutions, see Allen (2023).
- 18 On the mobilization of the future as a political idea, see White (2023).

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KEY TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX RANKS, 2022

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