



Youth-led innovations for SDG 1: shaping inclusive solutions to end poverty

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This policy paper presents insights and recommendations collected through consultations with the Better Learning Better Innovation (BIBO) Network, led by youth innovators and supported by UNESCO IESALC, to contribute to the 2024 United Nations Summit of the Future. Held on June 3, June 17, and July 15, these consultations gathered youth from all five UNESCO regions –Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean- ensuring a diverse and inclusive process.

The paper highlights the role of youth in achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) by harnessing their energy, innovation, and leadership for transformative action. Empowering young people to drive efforts toward a sustainable and resilient future aligns with the Summit's goal of shaping a more inclusive and forward-looking global agenda.

As part of a broader initiative by the BIBO Young Innovators Network, this paper also connects with reviews of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Together, these papers present a comprehensive youth-led vision to inform and support the outcomes of the 2024 Summit of the Future, advancing progress across the Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1), which aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms, faces significant challenges as we approach the 2030 deadline. Official data (United Nations General Assembly, 2023) indicates that the SDG 1 targets are not on track, underscoring the situation's urgency. Poverty remains the most significant global challenge and a fundamental barrier to sustainable development, particularly in its extreme form.

Today, nearly 700 million people worldwide live in extreme poverty, struggling to survive on less than \$2.15 per day (De Schutter, 2024). The impact of recent global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and various socio-economic shocks, has been severe, causing a significant setback in the fight against poverty. This setback has increased the number of people living in dire conditions and further exacerbated the issue. The persistence of poverty in the world's poorest and most fragile regions complicates efforts to achieve other global development goals, creating a cycle of deprivation and exclusion that is difficult to break.

Historically, poverty reduction has been a significant success story, with global extreme poverty rates halving ahead of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals deadline. However, progress has slowed in recent years, and the impacts of recent global crises have reversed much of the gains made, with millions more falling into extreme poverty. The projection that 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty by 2030 demands immediate and concerted action (United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

Young people play a critical role in achieving SDG 1 in this context. They are not only the most affected by the repercussions of poverty but also possess the potential to drive innovative solutions and advocate for policy changes that can reverse current trends. By leveraging their energy, creativity, and commitment to social justice, young people can be powerful agents of change in the global effort to eradicate poverty. This policy paper explores the current state of poverty globally, the key challenges in achieving SDG 1, and the inspiring and hopeful role young people can play in realising a world free from poverty by 2030.

Background

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, achieving Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1) — ending poverty in all its forms everywhere — faces urgent and significant challenges. Global economic growth is projected to decelerate to 2.4% in 2024, marking the weakest performance of any half-decade since the 1990s (United Nations, 2023). This urgent need for action is further underscored by the high costs of disasters, climate change, unsustainable debt, and tight budgets, which severely hamper efforts to eradicate poverty. The situation is exacerbated by rising interest rates and food prices, which disproportionately affect the world's poorest countries and households.

Key issues and challenges

1. **Economic and fiscal constraints:** Developing countries are grappling with tight fiscal situations, high debt servicing costs, and borrowing expenses, leaving them with limited capacity to invest in

education, health, and essential services. In 2022, developing countries spent a record \$443.5 billion on external public debt servicing, diverting resources from critical poverty-alleviation needs.

2. **Social protection gaps:** There is significant underinvestment in social protection systems, particularly in low—and middle-income countries. Public expenditure on social protection is drastically lower in these regions, resulting in vulnerable populations, such as migrants and rural communities, lacking access to essential services and safety nets. Women, especially those in agrifood systems, face additional barriers due to limited access to resources, finance, and technology.
3. **Impact of trade on poverty:** While trade has been a global driver of economic growth and poverty reduction, its benefits have yet to be evenly distributed. In least-developed countries (LDCs), rapid trade growth often coincides with increased poverty levels. Policymakers in these regions are challenged to create stronger linkages between trade and poverty reduction to ensure that economic growth is inclusive and benefits people experiencing poverty.
4. **Multidimensional poverty:** Poverty is closely linked to multiple dimensions of deprivation, including hunger, lack of access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and inadequate education. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues, pushing millions into extreme poverty and highlighting the urgent need for dynamic and resilient social protection systems (Chzhen, Y. 2014; Bitler, M., Hoynes, H., & Kuka, E. 2014).
5. **Rural poverty:** Over 80% of the world's extreme poor live in rural areas, primarily engaged in agriculture. These communities are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks and environmental changes, with women disproportionately affected due to unequal access to resources and opportunities.

The role of young people in achieving SDG 1

As agents of change, young people are pivotal in driving concrete progress toward SDG 1 by tackling poverty through innovative actions and initiatives. Their work is not just about poverty alleviation, but also about addressing the pressing issue of climate change. For example, youth-led organizations such as the African Youth Initiative on Climate Change have developed community programs that provide sustainable energy solutions to low-income households, reducing energy costs while addressing climate resilience. This dual impact of their initiatives is a call to action for all. Young entrepreneurs across Africa are also launching social enterprises, like Sanivation in Kenya, which turns waste into fuel, offering employment opportunities and affordable energy to vulnerable communities.

By creating green job opportunities, such as those promoted through the Global Shapers Community's sustainable development projects, youth are not just ensuring the global shift toward sustainability of low-income people. Their advocacy for policies that support fair wages, environmental justice, and social

protection is creating a more inclusive economic system that benefits vulnerable populations. This inspiring role of young people in shaping a fairer economic landscape is a source of motivation for all.

Recommendations and calls-to-action

1. ***Ensure inclusive participation in economic growth:*** Actively involve and empower those at the bottom of the income distribution to participate in and benefit from economic growth. Implement targeted policies that invest in the productive capacities of equity-deserving groups, breaking cycles of deprivation and exclusion based on all forms of discrimination, such as caste, gender, ethnicity, descent, and disabilities. Analyse how different population segments contribute to growth and develop strategies to address regressive patterns, allowing the most marginalised to engage fully and benefit from economic progress.
2. ***Prioritise inclusive and redistributive economic policies:*** View economic growth as a means, not an end, in pursuing SDG 1. Focus policies on promoting inclusive economic practices and redistributive measures that enhance overall well-being, reduce inequality, and address the multidimensional nature of poverty. Shift from a narrow focus on gross domestic product (GDP) to adopting a broader development framework incorporating human rights as a guiding principle. Ensure equitable access to health, education, social services, and infrastructure. Promote broad-based economic growth that generates quality jobs, especially for women and youth.
3. ***Integrate climate adaptation and poverty reduction policies:*** Integrate climate adaptation strategies with poverty reduction efforts to build resilience among vulnerable populations. Prioritise "double" and "triple win" policies that improve the livelihoods of those living in poverty, reduce their vulnerability to climate risks and contribute to climate mitigation efforts. Ensure a transition to a low-carbon economy by making the process inclusive and avoiding disproportionate burdens on low-income individuals. Base this approach on dialogue, inclusion, and support for those affected by transition costs, such as job losses in carbon-intensive sectors.
4. ***Maximise trade's potential for poverty eradication:*** Implement complementary policies that ensure international trade benefits are widely shared and contribute to inclusive socio-economic outcomes. Recognise that trade can stimulate economic growth and create jobs, particularly in countries with diversified exports. For regions like Africa, fully implement initiatives such as the [African Continental Free Trade Area](#) to increase incomes and lift millions out of extreme poverty. Create a supportive domestic and international policy environment, including trade facilitation, particularly for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), to maximise trade's potential to reduce poverty (World Bank 2022).
5. ***Address high debt burdens to expand social protection:*** Alleviate high debt burdens that constrain fiscal space for social protection. Prioritise effective debt management to unlock resources that can expand social protection programs. Support and scale up global initiatives, such as the Brazil

G20 Presidency Task Force on the Global Alliance on Hunger and Poverty and the proposal for a Global Fund on Social Protection, to close social protection financing gaps and ensure vulnerable populations are adequately protected.

6. **Address poverty among women and girls:** Implement targeted policies to address poverty among women and girls, recognising that global poverty rates are systematically 0.5 per cent higher for females than for males (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024). Prioritise access to family planning, adolescent health, and maternity benefits, as these services significantly enhance household well-being and build higher productive capacity. Strengthen the productive capacity of those at the bottom of the income distribution by allowing women to participate in the labour force and reducing the care burden.

Conclusion

There is a critical need for immediate and inclusive action to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1) by 2030, particularly in the face of recent global setbacks. Despite past successes in reducing poverty, current challenges, such as economic constraints, social protection gaps, and the impact of climate change, threaten progress. Young people are positioned as key drivers of innovative solutions and advocacy, which is essential for overcoming these barriers. The recommendations emphasise the importance of inclusive economic growth, redistributive policies, climate adaptation, and targeted support for vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls, to break the cycle of poverty and ensure a sustainable future for all.

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