



# Economic and Social Council

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## High-level political forum on sustainable development, convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council

12 and 13 March 2025

### Summary of the ninth biennial meeting of the Development Cooperation Forum

#### Note by the Secretariat

In accordance with General Assembly resolutions [67/290](#) and [70/299](#), the President of the Economic and Social Council has prepared the present summary of the ninth high-level meeting of the Development Cooperation Forum for submission to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, convened under the auspices of the Council. The summary is also intended to inform and strengthen the financing for development follow-up process, as mandated by the Assembly in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. The high-level meeting of the Forum, which was convened at United Nations Headquarters on 12 and 13 March 2025, entailed focused, action-oriented discussions based on the trends, progress and challenges identified in the report of the Secretary-General on trends and progress in international development cooperation ([E/2025/8](#)). The summary highlights the Forum's discussions on international development cooperation amid multiple global crises and lagging Goal progress, with progress on track towards only 17 per cent of targets. It presents key recommendations for transformative action, including: restoring the integrity and effectiveness of official development assistance (ODA), with a focus on poverty eradication and leveraging additional public and private resources to support countries through development transitions; scaling up and simplifying access to climate finance; aligning cooperation modalities to navigate evolving country needs and priorities; modernizing international development cooperation architecture; refocusing ODA on assisting the most vulnerable and catalysing other resources; adopting a multidimensional approach to assessing eligibility for development resources, beyond income-based classifications; strengthening country leadership and ownership; and investing in evidence-based development and leveraging emerging technology.



## I. Introduction and key messages

1. The Economic and Social Council convened the ninth biennial Development Cooperation Forum,) chaired by the President of the Council, Bob Rae (Canada), on 12 and 13 March 2025. The Forum brought together government officials, development cooperation practitioners and stakeholders, in an extraordinary moment shaped by lagging progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, insufficient financing for development and the devastating impacts of climate change and geopolitical tensions, as well as growing humanitarian crises. With only 17 per cent of Goal targets currently on track and an estimated 600 million people still projected to live in poverty by 2030, the Forum called for transformative actions to realign increasingly fragmented international development cooperation with the needs, priorities and vulnerabilities of developing countries – including through greater access to concessional finance and grants for country-led, long-term sustainable development. Participants strongly emphasized that now, more than ever, development cooperation is a core necessity for addressing market failures, supporting the most vulnerable and ensuring stability and sustainable development. The Council can play a vital role as a platform for aligning global efforts towards high-quality and high-impact development cooperation that is fit for purpose and leaves no one behind. The 2025 Development Cooperation Forum elevated key issues of concern for Member States, such as the following:

- Restoring the integrity and effectiveness of Official Development Assistance (ODA), with a focus on poverty eradication and leveraging additional public and private resources to support countries through development transitions.
- Scaling up and simplifying access to climate finance, ensuring that resources are available to address climate adaptation and mitigation, and integrating climate resilience into national development strategies.
- Aligning development cooperation modalities with development impact, emphasizing the need for flexible, responsive and context-specific approaches to navigate evolving needs and priorities, in particular in crisis situations.
- Modernizing international development cooperation architecture, to better support sustainable development and address systemic imbalances caused by globalization.
- Refocusing ODA on assisting the most vulnerable and catalysing other resources, finding innovative ways to reverse the trend on declining ODA and increasing opportunities for domestic resource mobilization.
- Adopting a multidimensional approach to assessing eligibility for development resources, moving beyond income-based classifications to address structural obstacles to progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Strengthening country leadership and ownership by moving away from fragmented, donor-driven programming to country-led coordination within frameworks of accountability and transparency.
- Investing in evidence-based development and leveraging emerging technology, especially for data collection efforts, to enhance the effectiveness of development cooperation.

2. These recommendations will inform the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the high-level political forum, offering pathways to realign international development cooperation with current realities and future challenges.

We need to fight for development cooperation because it is at risk, because it is being challenged throughout the world, because it is something that is worth fighting for.

–Bob Rae, President of the Economic and Social Council

## II. Making development cooperation work for today's world

*Development cooperation must respond to today's complex crises*

3. The global development landscape has changed dramatically over the past 10 years. Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals has been derailed by cascading crises – from climate disasters and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic to debt distress, conflicts and wars and geopolitical shocks. These events have created sharp reversals in development trajectories and exposed the fragility of current development cooperation models.

4. In this context, development cooperation in all its forms – financing, capacity support, policy change and multi-stakeholder partnerships – must move beyond traditional approaches and deliver more focused, impactful support. Development cooperation must reflect the urgency of rescuing the Goals and focus on the experiences of the people that policies and practices are meant to serve, especially the most vulnerable.

5. Today's development cooperation frameworks must align with the goals set out in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 and the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

*Prioritize international public finance, including official development assistance, where it is most needed*

6. In this challenging landscape, development actors must ensure that ODA serves its foundational purpose – promoting sustainable development in line with the needs, priorities and vulnerabilities of developing countries – where it is needed most. International public finance must be refocused on poverty alleviation, economic growth and institutional capacity-building for low-income and conflict-affected countries.

7. There were calls to reverse the current trend of declining ODA and honour existing commitments to ensure sustainable financing for developing countries, in particular for the most vulnerable least developed countries, where ODA comprises up to two thirds of total external financing.

8. Concurrently, it is vital to consider the ability of ODA to mobilize and leverage other resources, including domestic resources and private sector finance. This is essential amid rising debt vulnerabilities, tightening fiscal space and the widening gap between financing needs and available resources in many developing countries.

9. The share of country programmable aid as the most predictable and stable form of development finance, should be increased. Currently, country programmable aid accounts for less than half of overall ODA, while in-donor refugee costs have risen from 9 per cent in 2000 to 25 per cent. This rebalancing is essential to address persistent underfunding of critical long-term investments in education, health, infrastructure and economic transformation.

*Shift from treating symptoms to addressing root causes*

10. As development cooperation increasingly responds to short-term crises, long-term poverty alleviation, inequality reduction and structural transformation are often deprioritized. Too often, development assistance is used to “put out fires” – addressing the symptoms of climate disasters, conflicts, refugee hosting, financial instability or infectious diseases – rather than tackling root causes, prevention and building resilience.

*Reinforce national ownership and reduce fragmentation*

11. Misalignment, duplication and lack of coordination continue to weaken the overall impact of development cooperation. There is no space left for unproductive competition. Actors must recommit to the principle that development is most successful when developing country-led and driven by their needs and priorities.

12. Genuine partnerships and prioritization on high-impact areas that produce sustainable results are essential for mobilizing cooperation and maximizing quality outcomes. Country-led coordination of international development cooperation actors and activities benefits from whole-of-society approaches that involve all relevant stakeholders, including civil society and youth, and inclusive and transparent planning processes.

*Operate within frameworks of transparency and accountability*

13. With resources limited, the catalytic effect of development cooperation requires strong alignment with national policies, clarity in implementation and robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Transparent governance and accountable institutions are essential for ensuring the efficiency and legitimacy of cooperation.

14. Robust development cooperation requires a coordinated approach to strengthen institutional capacities in developing countries as they combat money-laundering, corruption and violence linked to illicit economies.

*Recognize multidimensional development realities*

15. There is an urgent need to revise development finance eligibility criteria to include indicators that capture structural inequality and persistent vulnerability. Current classification systems – especially those relying on per capita income – fail to reflect the complex and persistent challenges of many developing countries. Using the multidimensional vulnerability index can strengthen existing allocation practices and policies.

16. As a measure of people’s ability to improve their health, education and income across and within generations, social mobility could also serve as a useful indicator that captures the multidimensional nature of sustainable development and the barriers that persist even in high-income countries.

### **III. Improving modalities to better respond to evolving needs and priorities**

*Adapt modalities to be inclusive, responsive and aligned with the needs of those most at risk*

17. Across countries and regions, the need for more agile, responsive and context-specific international development cooperation modalities has become urgent. Quantity alone is not sufficient; achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

requires quality financing, tailored intervention and a focus on modalities – the right financial instruments, in the right context, with the right partnership and the right balance of short-term crisis-response with long-term resilience-building.

*Build flexibility and responsiveness into all development cooperation*

18. The increasing frequency and intensity of crises require development cooperation that can adapt swiftly to dynamic contexts. Rapid-response facilities, pre-approved contingency budgets and adaptive disbursement mechanisms are needed. Instruments must move beyond bureaucratic rigidity and become facilitators of fast and targeted action, financial and non-financial.

*Tailor modalities to country contexts*

19. Development cooperation modalities must be applied where and in the ways in which they make the most sense. In some cases, countries may need financial support while others require stronger technical cooperation. Grants may be most appropriate in fragile and low-income contexts, where debt sustainability is a pressing concern. Concessional loans work best for countries with moderate debt capacity and investable projects. Budget support allows predictable, flexible funding tied to national plans. Blended finance is suited for catalysing private sector investment in profitable sectors.

*Expand access to finance through diverse channels*

20. Access to development finance, and climate finance in particular, remains highly uneven. Procedural complexity, slow disbursement and burdensome eligibility criteria disproportionately impact those most in need.

21. Existing mechanisms should be realigned to be demand-driven, responsive to local contexts and designed to support rapid disbursement in moments of crisis and recovery. For example, swiftly disbursed budget support that bolsters government capacity is especially critical in fragile settings, where rapid institutional strengthening is essential.

*Ensure predictable and multi-year funding*

22. Volatile and short-term funding undermines development planning, institutional continuity and resilience building. Long-term budget support mechanisms provide predictability and empower national Governments to maintain development focus even amid global or regional instability.

23. Predictable financing allows countries to make investments in human capital, infrastructure and systems-strengthening. This improves both national and local capacities and the effectiveness of external cooperation.

## **IV. Driving quality, impact and country leadership**

*Reduce fragmentation through improved alignment and country-led coordination*

24. Fragmentation remains one of the most persistent and damaging barriers to effective development cooperation, especially for least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States. The number of donor countries increased from 64 to 117, and the number of donor aid entities that provided official finance has increased from 227 to 630 over the past 20 years. Some African countries are partnering with more than 250 agencies.

25. Disjointed projects, overlapping initiatives and competing reporting requirements divert precious time and resources from implementation to coordination and bureaucracy. Coordinated programming frameworks that consolidate international support around national priorities, reduce parallel structures and streamline engagement with external partners are essential.

*Simplify development cooperation and support country systems*

26. Complexity and duplication undermine national capacities and disempower institutions. The average size of an ODA grant has decreased by nearly 50 per cent, from an average value of \$1.5 million in 2000 to only \$800,000 today in real terms.

27. Excessive fragmentation in funding sources, modalities and accountability structures leads to short-term interventions rather than sustainable system strengthening. Consolidated and longer-term funding reduces volatility and aligns support with national development planning cycles.

*Build partnerships around transparency and mutual accountability*

28. Trust and credibility are prerequisites for impactful cooperation. National Governments and their partners must be mutually accountable for results, expenditures and alignment. Transparent systems – supported by digital tools and real-time data – are necessary to track resources, assess outcomes and build trust among stakeholders.

*Enhance monitoring and evaluation systems*

29. Robust data ecosystems that support real-time monitoring, enable adaptive learning and assess development impact are essential. These systems should be driven by national institutions and designed to inform decision-making at all levels.

30. Strengthening national statistical systems and building institutional capacity for monitoring and evaluation and impact assessment are critical enablers of accountability and continuous learning. There is room to improve impact measurement for financial and non-financial development cooperation, without placing unnecessary reporting burdens on developing countries.

*Harness digitalization for efficiency and coordination*

31. Digital platforms and tools offer transformative potential to improve the quality and coordination of development cooperation. Real-time tracking, integrated databases and mobile monitoring tools can reduce administrative burdens, improve service delivery and foster citizen engagement.

32. These mechanisms also function as instruments to enhance transparency and mutual accountability in international development cooperation. Ensuring digital inclusion and local ownership of digital infrastructure is essential for equitable access to these benefits.

*Strengthen national systems and prioritize capacity development for effective implementation and sustainable impact*

33. Strengthening national systems and institutions is a cornerstone of high-quality and high-impact international development cooperation. Development cooperation that bypasses national systems or relies heavily on parallel structures weakens local capacity and sustainability and creates duplication and incoherence.

34. Short-term technical assistance must give way to long-term capacity development, including support for public administration, procurement, data systems,

monitoring institutions and policymaking capabilities. Development partners should significantly scale up their support for developing countries' capacities in domestic resource mobilization and public financial management at the national and local levels.

35. By investing in national systems, knowledge institutions and public sector leadership, development cooperation can assist countries in building the adaptive capacity needed for sustained impact. Effective modalities build upon and amplify local expertise and networks rather than impose external blueprints.

## V. Strengthening policy coherence at all levels

### *Ensure policy coherence in support of sustainable development outcomes*

36. Policy reinforces country leadership by shifting development cooperation from isolated, project-based efforts towards integrated, systemic solutions addressing interconnected global challenges. Partners should consider aligning their trade, finance, technology and environmental policies to support rather than undermine development outcomes in developing countries.

37. For instance, a coherent approach to international development cooperation also requires support for a fairer global tax system, robust international action against illicit financial flows and reforms to multilateral financial institutions.

### *Update the international development cooperation architecture*

38. The existing global patchwork of rules, practices and procedures spans numerous bilateral donors, multilateral agencies and philanthropic actors that too often operate in silos and/or at cross purposes. The international development cooperation architecture needs updating to bring greater coherence, stemming from its core purposes.

39. Global policy dialogue and knowledge-sharing must bring together all actors, including traditional and emerging actors, more regularly and on a more equal footing.

### *Leverage and amplify regional, South-South and triangular cooperation*

40. Regional cooperation can align cross-border infrastructure, trade policies and institutional innovations. Pooled funds and policy dialogues at the regional level can help fight against harmful fragmentation at the bilateral level. Such strategies can harmonize diverse financing and technical assistance, producing more scalable outcomes. Regional cooperation can also amplify the bargaining power of smaller economies and ensure more balanced engagements with global actors.

41. South-South and triangular cooperation can amplify international coordination efforts and promote mutual learning. These modalities strengthen national capacities and foster policy innovation.

42. The regional and local dimensions of South-South cooperation are particularly useful for countries with shared development challenges, including vulnerability to climate shocks and debt distress.

### *Build public support for international development cooperation*

43. Building a sustainable base of public support for international development cooperation depends on informed and deeply engaged constituencies. Elected officials could do more to show how development cooperation directly contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including poverty eradication, climate

action and global health – outcomes that also enhance global stability and shared prosperity. They can further engage the electorate by sharing concrete success stories and emphasizing the mutual benefits of a more sustainable and equitable world.

*Empower existing forums for international development cooperation*

44. Existing forums for development cooperation – if empowered with clear mandates and deeper stakeholder engagement – can better consolidate best practices, bridge multiple perspectives and encourage mutual accountability.

## **VI. Background**

45. The Development Cooperation Forum is a biennial meeting convened by the Economic and Social Council and chaired by the President of the Council. With the objective of reviewing trends and progress in international development cooperation and to ensure its effectiveness, this year's meeting built on an extensive two-year preparatory process, involving expert group meetings, capacity-development workshops and analytical work. The latter included the 2024–2025 Development Cooperation Forum survey exercise, which had the highest response rate since its inception, and the report of the Secretary-General on trends and progress in international development cooperation ([E/2025/8](#)).

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