

UN Warns Of 'Unsettling' Development Slowdown In 2024

AFP :: Humanity recorded an unexpected and “unsettling” slowdown in development in 2024 as the global post-pandemic recovery began losing steam, well before President Donald Trump dramatically cut US international aid, the UN warned Tuesday.

The world had rebounded from the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic by 2023, as measured by the UN’s Human Development Index (HDI), which charts living standards, health and education.

But that rebound appears to be losing momentum, according to the United Nations Development Programme’s annual report, released Tuesday.

If that “unsettling” slowdown becomes the new normal, achieving levels of human development once hoped for by 2030 “could slip by decades – making our world less secure, more divided, and more vulnerable to economic and ecological shocks,” warned UNDP head Achim Steiner.

Recent drastic cuts to international aid announced by several countries – most notably the United States, where Trump has slashed programs and dismantled USAID, the country’s main foreign development arm – will exacerbate the issue, Steiner told AFP in an interview.

If wealthy countries stop funding development, “this will ultimately impact economies, societies, and yes, I think it will also register maybe a year or two down the line in the Human Development Index, lower life expectancy, declining incomes, more conflicts,” Steiner said.

UNDP experts are not yet certain of the underlying causes of the slowdown observed in 2024.

But they have identified one of the driving forces as a slackening of progress in life expectancy, perhaps linked to the side-effects of Covid, or to the wars that are multiplying around the world.

There is a potential glimmer of hope: artificial intelligence could create the conditions for kickstarting development, the UNDP suggested.

AI “is perhaps the greatest potential pivot in putting development of individual economies, but also of maybe poor people, wealthy people, on a different trajectory. It will change virtually every aspect of our lives,” Steiner said.

The report stressed that it would come down to how people use the technology, however.

There are risks. Access to AI in poorer countries is not the same as in wealthier ones, and cultural biases could influence the way the tools are developed, it said.

But “we can design for reducing that risk,” said Steiner, adding that it should not be an impediment to using AI for medical research, for example.

“The future is in our hands,” the UNDP report said.

“Technology is about people, not just things. Beneath the razzle-dazzle of invention lurk important choices, by the few or the many, whose consequences will reverberate across generations.”

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