

# As inequality grows, the UN fights for a fairer world

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – the UN’s blueprint for a better and more sustainable future for all – calls for a [reduction in inequality](#) between and within countries. Nevertheless, global inequality is increasing. So what can be done?

## **Inequality is an “entrenched imbalance”**

This question was raised several times by the UN in January: speaking at the World Economic Forum [Annual Meeting](#) in Davos, UN chief António Guterres pointed out that, while technological progress and globalization have led to “fantastic improvements” in many areas, they have also increased inequality and marginalized millions.

And, in her [annual letter](#), Lise Kingo, CEO of the [UN Global Compact](#), which supports private sector efforts to do business responsibly, noted that, in 2018, we saw “a small group of individuals are getting exponentially richer as billions are left behind in poverty.”

Inequality is not only rising, it is also an “entrenched imbalance,” according to Richard Kozul-Wright, a globalization expert and Director with the Trade and Development agency [UNCTAD](#).

In an interview with UN News, which you can listen to [here](#), Mr. Kozul-Wright said that notionally high employment rates in many economies mask the fact that wages and working conditions are not improving, and that whilst wages have been stagnant for a decade, dividends on shareholdings have been recovering, benefiting financial asset holders. His remarks came in the wake of the January [launch](#) of the 2019 World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) report which showed uneven growth (both between and within countries) that is often failing to reach where it is most needed.

## **Will AI take away our jobs, or transform them?**

The beginning of 2019 saw a focus on the role of technology on the world of work, and the impact it is having on inequality. The [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) launched a [landmark report](#) in January: the Global Commission on the Future of Work. This study concluded that technological innovations provide “countless opportunities” for workers, but warned that, if these technologies are not deployed as part of a human-centred agenda based on investing in people, work institutions and decent, sustainable employment, we run the risk of “sleepwalking into a world that widens existing inequalities and uncertainties.”

One of the key technological innovations mentioned in the report, one that garners significant media attention, is artificial intelligence (AI). A

[report](#) from the World Intellectual Property Organization ([WIPO](#)), published at the tail-end of January, noted a “quantum leap” in AI-related patents, suggesting that AI could soon “revolutionize all areas of daily life beyond the tech world.”

AI inspires as much fear as excitement, evoking a dystopian world in which more and more work is carried out by machines, with society split between a tiny super-rich elite and the rest, an unemployable mass of people with no prospect of finding work.

[Kriti Sharma](#) doesn't see things that way. She has been recognized by the UN as a Young Leader For [Sustainable Development Goals](#), in recognition of her work to ensure that AI helps to create a better, fairer world, through her [AI For Good](#) organization, and her role in the Sage Future Makers Lab, which was set up to equip young people around the world with hands-on learning for entering a career in Artificial Intelligence.

[Speaking](#) to UN News, Ms. Sharma acknowledged that people who live in countries which are on the wrong side of the digital divide (with less access to data) will be at a disadvantage, and pointed to studies that show a gender divide is looming, with women twice as likely to lose their jobs to automation, because of the kind of work they are involved in: “We need to make sure that we give people enough opportunities to reskill themselves, otherwise we end up creating more inequality that we had before.”

However, she believes that one of the biggest risks is failing to embrace this technology, and not equipping people with the skills to use it to solve global problems. Ms. Sharma laid out three ways to help ensure that AI brings about a fairer world.

First of all, it is important that a diverse group of people from many backgrounds are creating this technology, people who “understand society, policy-makers.” The second point is to ensure that AI is being used to solve the “right problems,” such as accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals, by diverting energy, research and funding into this area. And, lastly, international standards must be agreed upon, to make sure that the technology we create is used in a way that is safe and ethical for the world.

## **No progress without international cooperation**

So, what is the way out of the “entrenched imbalance” of inequality? For the UN, a greater emphasis on international cooperation is an important part of the solution. The 2019 World Economic Situation and Prospects report concludes that, at a global level, a “cooperative and long-term strategy for global policy” is the way towards progress in reducing income inequality, and warns that a “withdrawal from multilateralism will pose further setbacks for those already being left behind.”

As the Secretary-General told the audience in Davos, a coordinated and global response is the only way to fight inequality, because “we need to work together. There is no way we can do isolated responses to the problems we face, they are all interlinked.”

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## [World must do more to tackle 'shadowy' mercenary activities undermining stability in Africa, says UN chief](#)

"From antiquity to the medieval era to the present-day, those who fight for financial reward or other material compensation have been [a near constant](#) on the battlefield", [Secretary-General Antonio Guterres](#) told the Council, noting that the shadowy nature of mercenary activities has evolved over the years.

"Today they are exploiting and feeding off other ills such as transnational organized crime, terrorism and violent extremism", he told the meeting, which was [convened by Equatorial Guinea](#), which holds the Council's presidency for the month.

Their activities in Africa require "work across the spectrum", Mr. Guterres stated, "from prevention to prosecution, and from mitigating the impacts of mercenary activities to addressing the root causes that give rise to them".

He zeroed-in on mercenary activities in the Sahel, Cote d'Ivoire, Central African Republic, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea and emphasized specific actions needed to resist their scourge, including strengthening legal regimes and frameworks.

Mr. Guterres vowed that the [UN Regional Office for Central Africa](#) and the [UN Regional Centre](#) for Peace and Disarmament in Africa would continue to help advance the African Union's 'Silencing the guns by 2020' agenda.

He pointed to the importance of cooperation, such as mixed border commissions, joint border security monitoring mechanisms and intelligence-sharing between national defense forces, highlighting as "vital", strategic partnership between the UN, African Union (AU), Economic Community of Central Africa States and region countries.

He also said it was critical to create opportunities for youth to reduce "the lure of mercenaries and the threat of radicalization" – underscoring that the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) can help with this and more.

He concluded with the UN's promise of continued support in "tackling mercenary activities".

### **African Union Commission Chair calls for bolstered international support to tackle scourge**

Speaking via teleconference from Addis Ababa, Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the AU Commission, recalled since the 1960s, the continent's history has been "punctuated by the of involvement of mercenaries in

activities of destabilization, including coups, interventions in armed conflicts and attempts to seize control of natural resources in the countries concerned” – endangering the harmonious development of African States.

While efforts have been made over the years to combat the scourge, mercenaries persist.

“It is clear that we have to strengthen international instruments as they relate to this phenomenon”, he maintained.

Moreover, Mr. Faki Mahamat said he “could not stress enough” the need for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in countries emerging from conflict.

He concluded by calling for “increased international support”.



UN Photo/Cia Pak

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea and President of the Security Council for the month of February, chairs the Council meeting on threats to international peace and security.

For his part, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, the President of Equatorial Guinea, said that after more than 50 years of independence, most African countries have yet to know peace or socioeconomic development, “despite the great economic potential they have in natural resources”.

“Africa remains the least developed continent” he attested, calling mercenaries one of “the potential causes of this delay”.

Mr. Mbasogo spoke of five different attempts in his own country over the last quarter century, with the last attempt thwarted by Angola, Zimbabwe and Cameroon.

Speaking on behalf of Rwandan President Paul Kigami, Foreign Minister Richard Sezibera also underscored Africa's history of mercenaries, saying they have "presented a grave threat to the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of Member States".

He recounted the 1977 definition of mercenaries, which he said "may no longer be adequate to describe" today's activities "of the worrying increase of transboundary criminal networks...many connected to global terrorist networks".

Rwanda is no stranger to the scourge.

"Today, mercenaries are not only involved in active combat, we now see an increase in cyber attacks and industrial espionage carried out by mercenary groups within the comfort of their own homes", he said.

As they continue to evolve and innovate, he argued: "We should not be static in our response" but update existing legal instruments to meet the unfolding challenges.

### **UN chief recommends actions to combat mercenaries:**

- Bolster legal regimes, globally and nationally, including the 1989 [International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries](#).
- Increase bilateral, regional and international cooperation, with a focus on border management to stem the flow of weapons and foreign armed actors throughout Central Africa.
- Examine the political, economic, social and psychological factors that promote mercenary activities, such as exclusion, poor governance, inequitable public services and no protection for minorities and other vulnerable groups.

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## **Neither side stands to benefit in US-China trade spat, UN says**

The tit-for-tat trade dispute between China and the United States may do little to protect domestic producers in either country and could have "massive" implications on the global economy unless it is resolved, United Nations experts said on Monday.

Of the \$250 billion in Chinese exports that are subject to US tariffs, only about six per cent will be picked up by firms in the United States, [according to a report](#) by the [UN Conference on Trade and Development](#) (UNCTAD).

And of the approximately \$85 billion in US exports that are subject to China's tariffs, only about five per cent of this will be taken up by Chinese firms, the UN research shows.

## **Trade in machinery, chemicals and precision instruments under threat**

The study also cautions that the effects "are consistent across different sectors" including machinery, furniture, chemicals and precision instruments, noting that bilateral tariffs "would do little to help protect domestic firms in their respective markets".

Unless the US and Chinese agree to drop their tariff dispute by 1 March, duty on each country's products will rise to 25 per cent, up from the current 10 per cent level.

Tariffs 'a gun that recoils on ourselves'

Quoting former US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, UNCTAD's Pamela Coke-Hamilton repeated his description of protective tariffs as "a gun that recoils on ourselves", which had also contributed to the Great Depression of the 1930s and the rise of extremism.

"I think that is a single lesson from what we have had here today," Ms. Coke Hamilton said. "If – barring an agreement between US China on 1 March – tariffs will escalate to 25 per cent, which is a significant difference from the 10 per cent as it currently exists."

The implications of such a development would be "massive", the UNCTAD Director, Division on International Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities, continued, adding that its effects would first of all involve "an economic downturn...due to instability in commodities and financial markets".

Next, Ms. Coke-Hamilton said, there would be "increased pressure on global growth, as companies will have to impose adjustment costs which will affect productivity investment and profitability".

## **Winners and losers from trade tensions**

Countries that are [expected to benefit the most from the trade war](#) are European Union members; the UN study indicates that exports in the bloc are likely to grow by \$70 billion. Japan and Canada, meanwhile, will see exports increase by more than \$20 billion each.

Although these figures do not represent a large slice of global trade – which was worth \$17 trillion in 2017 – for some countries, like Mexico, the increase in exports will amount to a six per cent rise in exports overall.

Other countries set to benefit from the trade tensions – which erupted in early 2018, when China and the US imposed tariffs worth around \$50 billion on each other's goods – include Australia, with 4.6 per cent export gains,

Brazil (3.8) India (3.5), Philippines (3.2) and Viet Nam (5).

## **East Asian producers face export contraction**

But the UNCTAD study also warns that the spat could hit East Asian producers the hardest, with a projected \$160 billion contraction in the region's exports unless discussions between China and the US are resolved before the March deadline.

The study also underlines the "common concern" that trade disputes have an unavoidable impact on the "still fragile" global economy, particularly on developing, commodity-rich countries that are dependent on exports.

"One major concern is the risk that trade tensions could spiral into currency wars, making dollar-denominated debt more difficult to service," the report adds.

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## **World Cancer Day: Early cervical cancer diagnosis could save lives of over 300,000 women**

[Cervical cancer](#) kills more than 300,000 women every year, with one woman diagnosed every minute, despite the fact that it is one of the most preventable and curable forms of the disease.

In a [statement](#) released on Monday to coincide with World Cancer Day, the United Nations [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) said that nine out of ten women who die from cervical cancer are from poor countries, and that if no action is taken, deaths from the disease will rise by almost 50 per cent by 2040.

The WHO points out that new diagnoses can be reduced by ensuring that all 9-14 year old girls globally are vaccinated against Human papillomavirus ([HPV](#)), a group of viruses that are extremely common worldwide, two types of which cause 70 per cent of cervical cancers.

Women in developing countries have only limited access to preventative measures, and cervical cancer is often not identified until it has reached an advanced stage. Access to treatment of late-stage cervical cancer – such as surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy – is also very limited, resulting in higher death rates in these countries.

To achieve this aim, WHO says that innovative technologies and strategies, access to diagnosis and early-stage treatment of invasive cancers are needed.

In addition, palliative care for women who need it must be ensured.

All of these services must be part of strong health systems aimed at providing [universal health coverage](#), and will require political commitment, greater international cooperation and support for equitable access.

Several countries and UN agencies have already joined forces under the [UN Joint Global Programme on Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control](#), a five-year programme to provide global leadership and technical assistance to governments and their partners as they build national cervical cancer control programmes, with the aim of eliminating cervical cancers as a public health concern across the world.

In order to succeed, WHO says that governments, UN agencies, researchers, healthcare professionals and individuals all have a role to play, as do the manufacturers of life-saving vaccines, diagnostics and treatments.

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## [UN chief hopes for new agreement after Israel concludes international observation mission](#)

United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres [expressed](#) his gratitude to the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), West Bank, after Israel decided not to renew its mandate.

Noting a joint statement issued by the Foreign Ministers of the TIPH's contributing countries – Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey – the Secretary-General conveyed his hope on Friday “that an agreement can be found by the parties to preserve the TIPH's long-standing and valuable contribution to conflict prevention and the protection of Palestinians in Hebron”.

The UN chief said that he is “grateful” to them “and the service of their respective observers over the past 22 years”.

According to news reports, hundreds of Jewish settlers guarded by thousands of soldiers live in the heart of Hebron, which has a population of over 200,000 Palestinians.

The TIPH was established pursuant to the provisions of the 1995 Interim Agreement, known as the Oslo II Accord, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Mr. Guterres said that he continues to engage with relevant Member States and the parties on the ground “to ensure the protection, safety, and wellbeing of



civilians”.

He also reiterated his “commitment to the two-State solution” and to safeguarding the principles and vision enshrined in the Oslo framework, relevant UN resolutions, and other applicable agreements.