

TRUE FREEDOM

ONE

NELSON MANDELA'S CHALLENGE
TO A 'GREAT GENERATION'
AND WHAT IT MEANS IN 2025

INTRODUCTION

On a cold winter's day in February 2005, Nelson Mandela addressed thousands in London's Trafalgar Square and called for unprecedented action to overcome poverty and injustice. He stirred the world to act. But his call to "make poverty history" was not an end in itself. He knew that overcoming extreme poverty was a vital step towards dignity and the protection of fundamental human rights. "While poverty persists", he said, "there is no true freedom".

Mandela, after 27 years behind bars, knew the meaning of freedom more than anyone. It was the destination of the long walk that defined his life, and the guiding ambition for the post-apartheid South Africa he led. His approach resonated with the constitutional foundations of the United Nations and of many democratic countries around the world, as well as in the development thinking of Amartya Sen and others. For generations, freedom has rallied activists risking their lives to fight injustice, scientists working tirelessly to cure diseases, women making hard-fought gains for political representation, and leaders acting with courage and wisdom.

Figures like Martin Luther King, Wangari Maathai, and Eglantyne Jebb fought for freedom. Freedom from injustice, discrimination, environmental collapse, poverty, and disease. Freedom for each of us to fulfil our potential, underpinned by the belief that every life has equal value.

On that day in 2005, Nelson Mandela called for action to overcome extreme poverty and injustice as a means to that end. For those trapped in the "prison of poverty", he said, it was "time to set them free".

Campaigners around the world took up the call, and policymakers responded with an ambitious plan to cancel debt, improve and increase aid, and make trade fair. Decisions taken in 2005 were not all that campaigners demanded, but they nevertheless triggered an era of action and catalysed a new path for progress in international development that had previously been absent.

Twenty years on, how far has the world progressed in Mandela's long walk to freedom? How has it changed since 2005? What does "true freedom" look like today? And if Nelson Mandela were making a similar speech today, what core challenges would he call all of us to take up, so that people everywhere are free from want, free from fear, and free to thrive?



WHAT WAS THE 2005 MANDELA MOMENT?

In 2005, Nelson Mandela stood before the world and declared poverty “a prison” that must be broken. Speaking in London to launch the Make Poverty History campaign, he called for canceling unpayable debt, increasing aid, and reforming trade — not as a gesture of charity, but as an act of justice.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown, the UK hosted the annual G8 summit, chaired the Commission for Africa, and oversaw the first major review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) since their launch in 2000. It was also five years since the Jubilee 2000 campaign secured \$110 billion in debt relief for vulnerable nations — momentum Mandela sought to build upon.

Fifteen years after his release from prison and a decade after apartheid’s end, Mandela’s moral authority was unmatched. Comparing poverty to apartheid and slavery, he urged a new generation to “be great” and take up the fight for justice.

Millions rallied to his call. Progress followed. Debt relief expanded, aid grew, and global efforts tackled disease and extreme poverty — helping create economic opportunities for millions in the years that followed. That progress was uneven and complex. There were on-going challenges with governance and conflict, and some of the necessary reforms to international systems were not delivered. But nonetheless, this is an extraordinary story of human progress.

2005 proved that
bold leadership,
public mobilisation
and international
cooperation
could drive
historic change.

20 YEARS OF PROGRESS AND CHALLENGE SINCE 2005

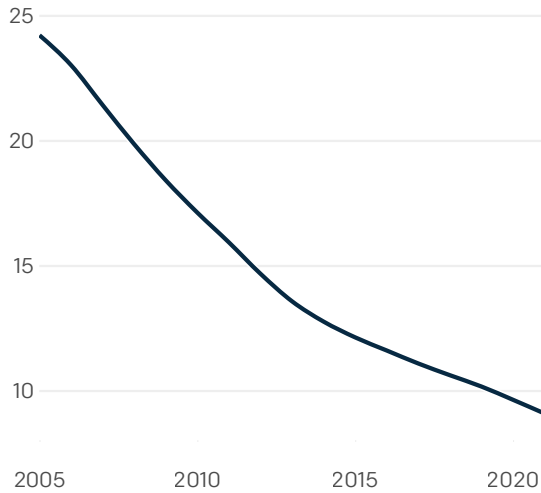
It would be easy to tell a simple story of progress since 2005, and equally easy to paint a grim picture of setbacks and struggle. But the true story is more complicated and nuanced. The last two decades have seen remarkable progress but also rising challenges.

The changes for the better are undeniable:

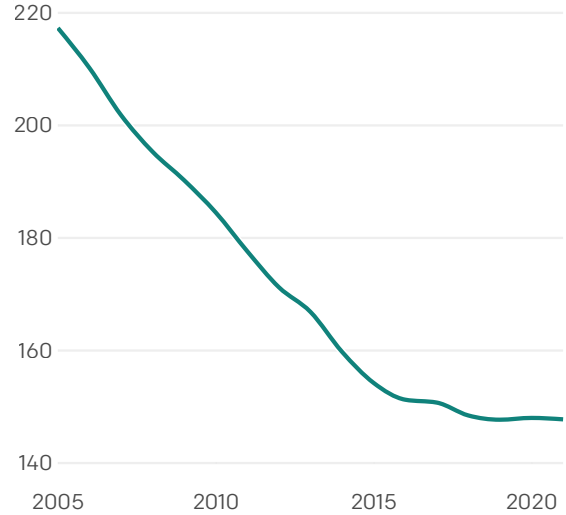
- **Fewer live in extreme poverty.** In these two decades, we've gone from more than one in five people in the world living in extreme poverty to fewer than one in 10. In 2005, 1.4 billion people lived below the extreme poverty line — 21.5% of the world's people. In 2024, 8.5% of the global population lived below that line — 692 million people. Hundreds of millions are no longer below that brutal threshold of extreme poverty.¹
- **We live longer lives.** For a baby born in 2005, the average life expectancy was 68.1 years. In 2023, it was 73.2 years. Overwhelming improvements in life expectancy in low and middle-income countries have driven this change. In every part of the world, people have years more to live, work, love, and learn. In fact, the average human lives almost 2,000 more days than just two decades ago.²
- **Fewer die because of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.** Deaths from HIV/AIDS have more than halved, from 1.58 million in 2005³ to 630,000 in 2023.⁴ 77% of people living with HIV are accessing lifesaving antiretroviral treatment,⁵ compared to 7% in 2005.⁶ 2.35 million people died of TB in 2005,⁷ a figure that declined to 1.25 million in 2023.⁸
- **Many more children are protected against disease and live past the age of 5.** In 2005, very few children were protected against pneumococcal diseases like pneumonia and meningitis, or against rotavirus, because the vaccines for these diseases were not widely available in low- and middle-income countries. By 2023, more than half of the world's 1-year-olds had received this vital protection.⁹ The child mortality rate was 6.3% in 2005. That has declined to 3.7% — sparing hundreds of millions more families the devastating loss of a child.¹⁰
- **The gender gap in primary education has been eliminated.** In 2013, the number of girls enrolled in primary school matched the number of boys for the first time. Secondary education also now has virtual parity in enrollment between girls and boys. Gender gaps in education are narrowing across all income groups.¹¹ And children are getting more time in school than ever, with mean years of schooling up from 7.4 years in 2005 to 8.7 years in 2022 — more than a year more learning.¹²
- **The world is connected as never before.** The last 20 years have seen a huge increase in internet connectivity (from 16% of the global population to 67%),¹³ and 2.27 billion more people have access to electricity.¹⁴

GLOBAL HEALTH SINCE 2005

HIV mortality (deaths per 100,000 people)



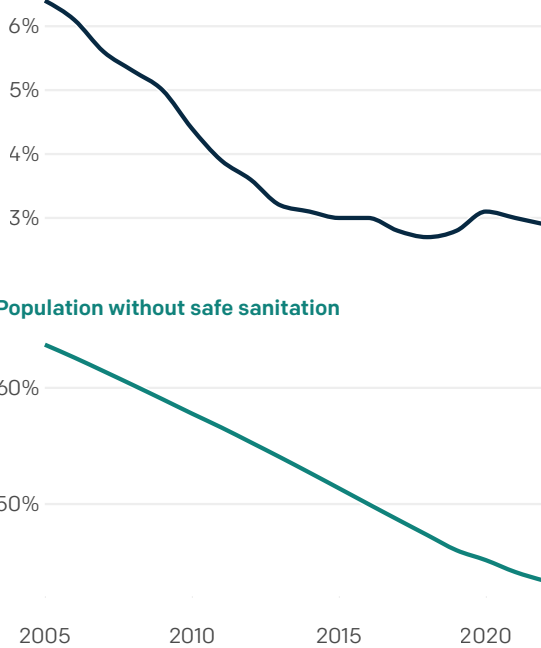
Maternal mortality (deaths per 100,000 live births)



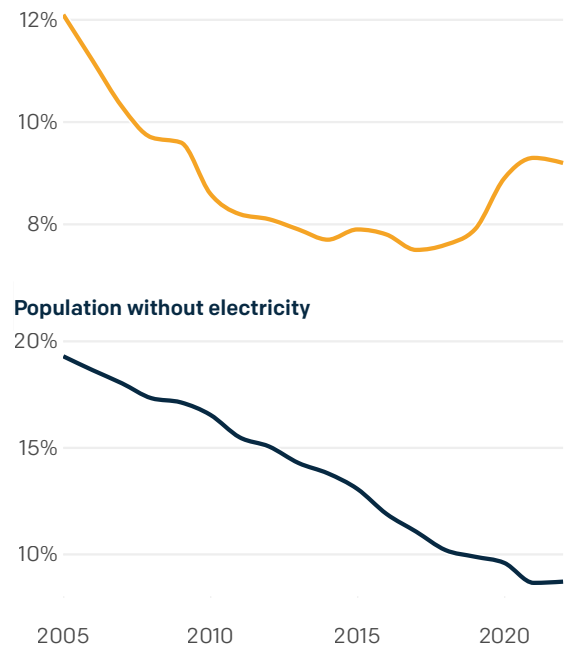
Source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT SINCE 2005

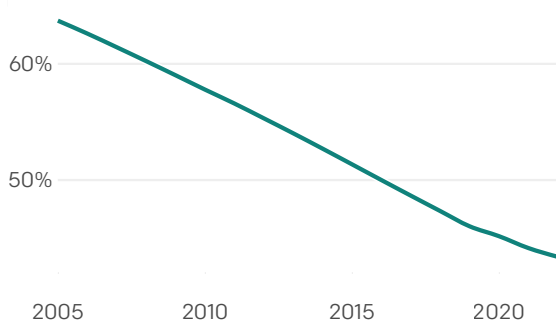
Population living with less than \$2.15 a day



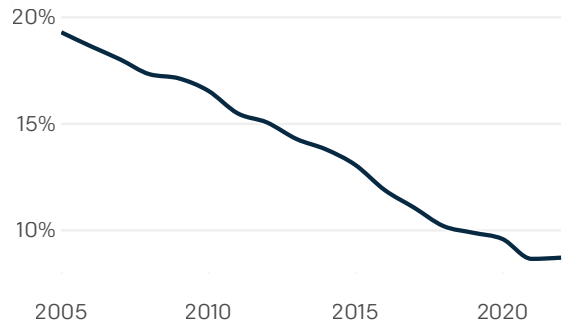
Population without sufficient dietary energy



Population without safe sanitation



Population without electricity



Source: World Bank, FAO, WHO/UNICEF JMP

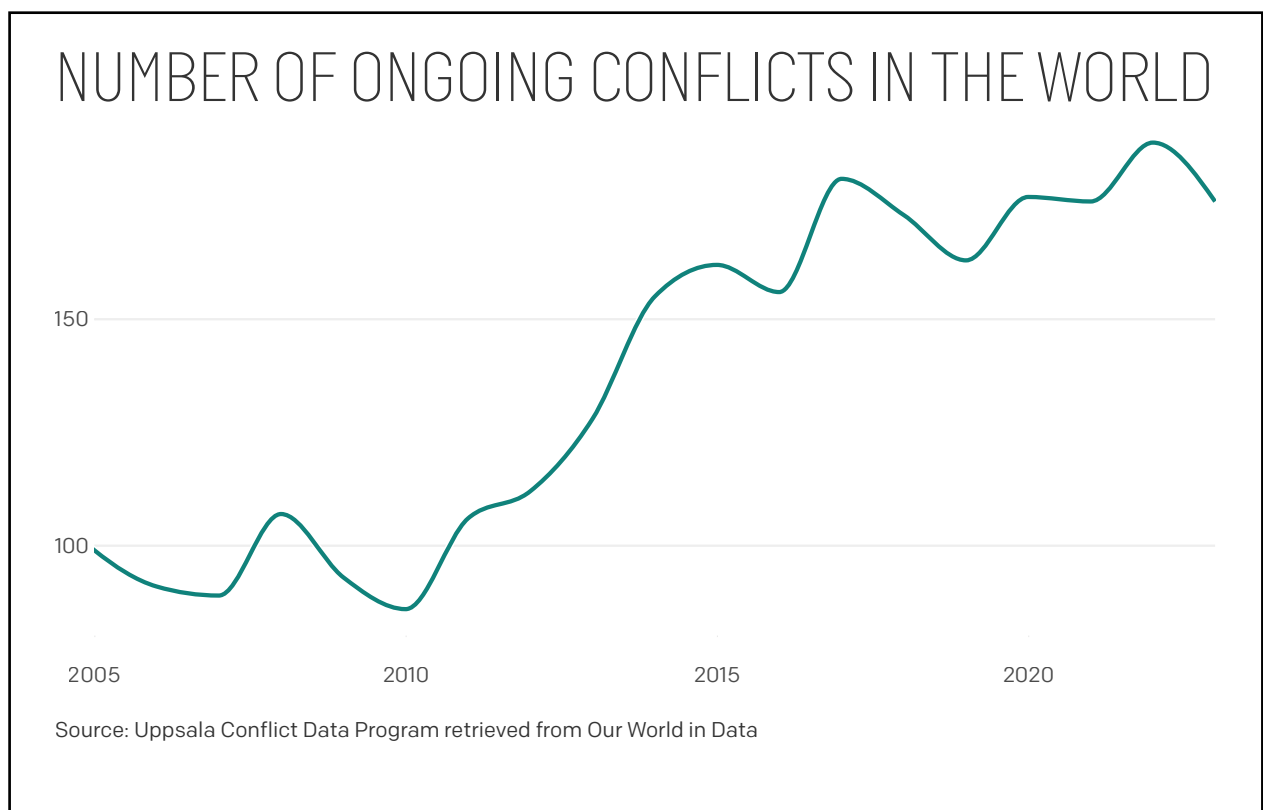
Life is far better than it was two decades ago for a huge part of the world's population. But that is not the whole picture. Alongside these positive trends:

- **Many still face poverty, hunger, and preventable disease.** 733 million people went to bed hungry in 2024.¹⁵ Nearly 800 women die every day from pregnancy or childbirth.¹⁶ And while fewer are below the extreme poverty line, 1.73 billion people live just above it, surviving on less than \$3.65 per day.¹⁷
- **The climate and nature emergency has become more real than ever.** The enormous challenge of global climate change, and the global nature crisis have become more and more urgent since 2005. 2024 was the hottest year on record. The last 10 years have all broken records too.¹⁸ The world now produces more than 20% more greenhouse gas emissions every year than it did in 2005,¹⁹ more than 10 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent.²⁰ Meanwhile the total biodiversity in the world (total numbers of all species) has declined by over 30% from 2005 to 2025.²¹
- **More people are living under the horror of war and conflict.** There are almost twice as many active conflicts in the world today than there were in 2005. The world is experiencing the highest number of conflicts since World War II.²² One in six children live in an area affected by conflict.²³ In 2022, around 600 million women (15% of women globally) resided within 50 kilometers (31 miles) of an armed conflict in conditions where violence against women and girls is widespread and can increase rapidly and unpredictably.²⁴
- **Autocratic rule and corruption are on the rise.** Fewer than one in five of us live in a liberal democracy.²⁵ And corruption remains a major challenge globally as citizens have lost trust in their governments. The average level of human rights, and political freedoms, and the total number of free democracies around the world, have been declining every year since 2005.²⁶
- **Progress on gender equality is rolling back.** The UN estimates that it will take 286 years to close legal gaps between men and women in the world of work; 140 years for women to achieve equal representation in leadership; and at least 40 years to see equality between men and women in national parliaments.²⁷
- **COVID-19 has set back progress.** Meanwhile COVID-19 and its associated impacts have significantly undermined progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁸ During COVID-19, women were the first to lose their jobs, and as markets recovered, the last to regain employment.

Looking beyond these positive and negative trends, there are more subtle factors to be considered. The 2008 financial crash, the escalating climate crisis, growing inequality within and between nations, and increasing political and social divisions have reshaped the global landscape. As a result, a series of vulnerabilities may be coming home to roost.

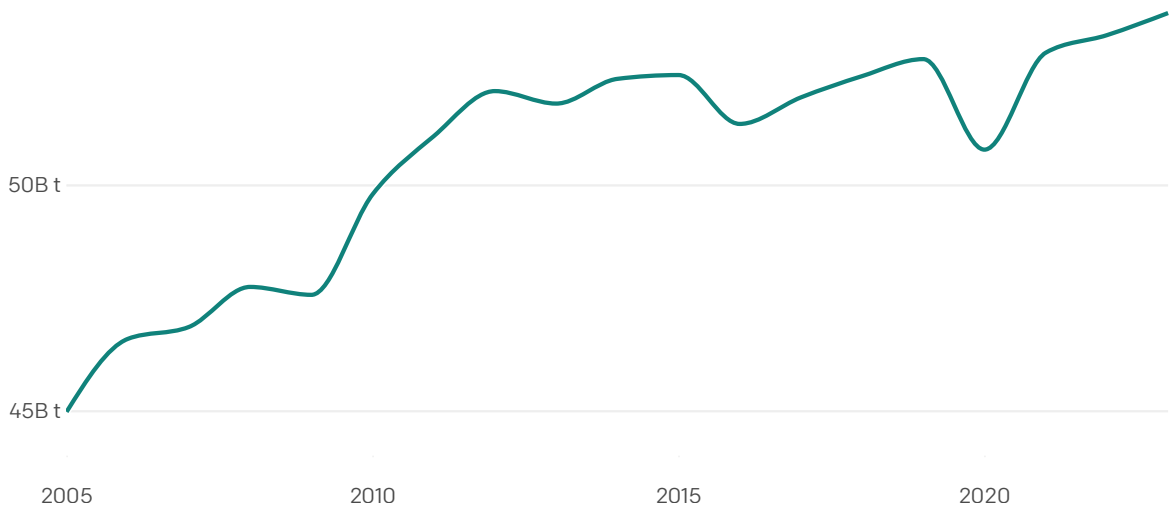
Quantitative easing led to a low-interest rate environment, which encouraged countries to borrow from bond markets. China increased its lending to many countries for infrastructure projects backed by a commodity super-cycle. While much of this money was used well, weak debt management created vulnerabilities to global shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened economic and social disparities around the world. The inflation that followed significant fiscal stimulus packages and Russia's invasion of Ukraine drove up global interest rates. This fiscal tightening had knock-on effects for vulnerable countries and the cost of servicing their debt skyrocketed. As a result, the most vulnerable people in those countries have seen their opportunities and safety erode.



GLOBAL GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS

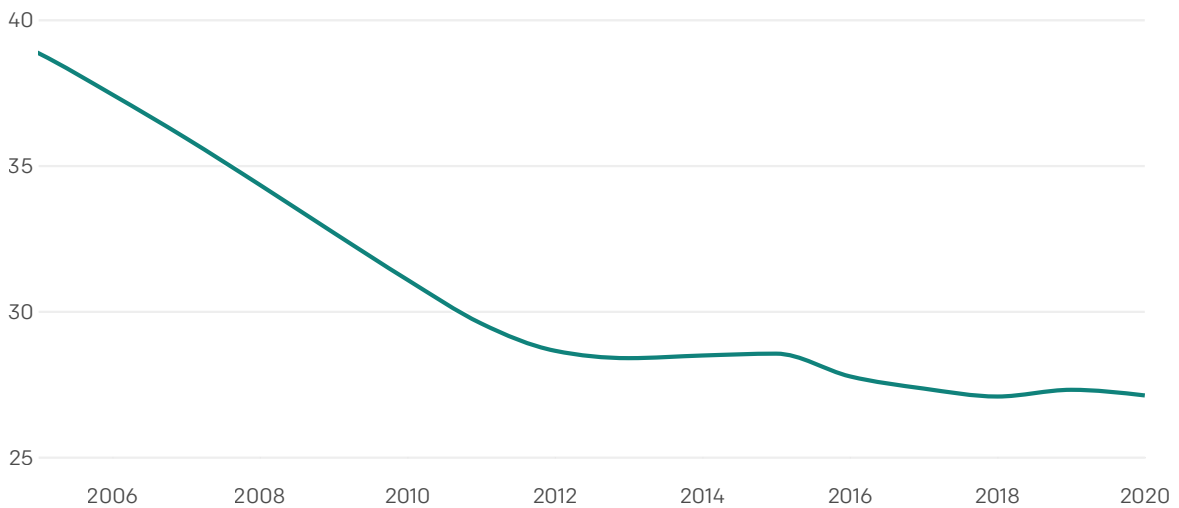
Including carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide



Source: Jones et al. (2024) retrieved from Our World in Data • Emissions measured in billion tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalents

GLOBAL WILDLIFE

Based on the Living Planet Index



Source: World Wildlife Fund and Zoological Society of London retrieved from Our World in Data • The index value measures the change in abundance in 34,836 populations across 5,495 native species relative to the year 1970 (i.e. 1970 = 100%).

At the same time, global power has shifted. The 2005 world of the G8 — dominated by the old Western powers — has given way to the G20, where emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil wield greater influence. This more multipolar world reflects the successes of economic development, but also introduces competing visions for global governance, democracy, and human rights.

In this transformed context, nations like the UK — less dominant than before but still one of the world's wealthiest and most globally connected economies, with significant soft power assets — can play a critical role in tackling shared challenges such as climate change, poverty, and inequality, and their interconnected impact on gender equality. The UK's necessary evolution from a G8 leader to a G20 team player allows it to remain ambitious and progressive in its international engagement.

WHAT MIGHT A 2025 MANDELA+20 MOMENT LOOK LIKE?

Given the mixed picture of progress and challenges, especially in the last few years, how do we give ourselves the best chance of success in 2025 and beyond? And what would Nelson Mandela's challenge be to the world today? What call to action would he issue to a new generation, one that both honors the progress of the past two decades and confronts today's emerging crises?

The first key to answering this is recognizing and reinforcing the new picture of global leadership. In 2025, South Africa picked up the baton of leadership as chair of the G20 group, representing 85% of global GDP, 75% of international trade, and 64% of the world's population.²⁹ South Africa is rightly shining a spotlight on Africa and the Global South during its presidency. It is focusing on "people-driven, sustainable development", and will prioritise inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment and reduced inequality, food security, artificial intelligence, data governance, and innovation for sustainable development.

These priorities reflect the desires of billions of people to secure decent work and build prosperity for themselves and their families.

A second step is to seize the opportunities that can emerge from crisis and change. Alongside a hoped-for easing of conflict in 2025, we will see a need for reconstruction in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and many other parts of the world facing war and poverty. We also need reform of outdated patriarchal global financial structures within which the majority world remains excluded. Even advanced countries will need a reconstruction of their own — retrofitting houses, transitioning to clean infrastructure, addressing gender disparity in the impacts of climate change, and reducing our energy reliance on autocratic leaders. And adapting our education and skills base to the age of artificial intelligence, hyper connectivity, and the increasing risk of dis and misinformation will be vital.

Wherever we live in the world, global challenges rebound on us at home. To grapple only with the effects of war, poverty, climate change, pandemics, or irregular migration when they arrive on our doorstep is to set ourselves up to fail.

A “FRAMEWORK FOR FREEDOM”

Invoking the spirit of Mandela and recognising the priorities of this year’s South African G20 presidency, we propose a “Framework for Freedom”. We offer this framework as a way of understanding and organising the issues where action is needed. This can then allow further plans to be developed setting out the specific measurable actions that yield benefits in the everyday lives of billions of people around the world.

- 1. Freedom from want:** We must renew the fight against global poverty and inequality. After so much progress, we cannot let efforts stall or unravel. Instead, we must redouble our commitment to achieving the Global Goals and ending extreme poverty everywhere by 2030. The huge progress on poverty and preventable disease over recent decades risks stagnating — particularly for diseases where eradication is within our reach. At the same time, building resilience to climate shocks is an imperative for the most vulnerable countries and the most vulnerable people within them. The goal should be an agreed stable threshold on preventable diseases, education, and climate action. To do this, governments should maintain strong funding for critical programs such as Gavi and the Global Fund on AIDS, TB and Malaria; channel scarce ODA resources to vulnerable countries; and tackle the global debt crisis and the cost of capital to unlock countries’ fiscal space. We must also tackle inequality at its core, and ensure development spend and foreign policy objectives can benefit whole societies for the long term, rather than just respond to their immediate needs. This requires more investment in programming that seeks to address discriminatory structures, policies, and norms. It requires a progressive foreign policy approach that adopts feminist principles to help dismantle structural inequalities and power imbalances that trap people in poverty and deny their rights and freedoms.
- 2. Freedom from fear:** We must stand together to defend democracy, human rights, and political freedoms and respond to shrinking civic space. We must acknowledge that women’s rights are a bedrock to preserving these rights for everyone. In a world increasingly shaped by conflict, misinformation, and repression, all who believe in freedom must resist those who seek to undermine it. This is particularly true in major conflicts such as Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan. 2025 must bring resolutions to these conflicts. This must involve brave diplomacy, adherence to international humanitarian law, and giving women a seat at the decision-making table. And if these resolutions succeed, there will be a need for a massive reconstruction package for these regions. As of December 2023, the estimated reconstruction and recovery cost just for Ukraine alone over the next decade stands at \$486 billion.³⁰ This must involve looking at innovative finance approaches that can unlock resources needed, such as Special Drawing Rights and frozen assets. 2025 also marks the 25th anniversary of the ratification of the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda – a fitting time for governments to commit to ensuring women are central to shaping inclusive and lasting peace.

3. Freedom to thrive: We must confront the climate crisis and environmental destruction head-on. By shifting to clean energy, sustainable economies, and circular models of production and consumption, aided by AI and digital delivery platforms that empower local communities and citizens as well as help policymakers with precision. By shifting to clean energy, sustainable economies, and circular models of production and consumption, we can ensure that both humanity and nature not only survive but thrive in a sustainable future. This can create new economic opportunities allowing countries to transform their economies and become self-sustaining into perpetuity. G20 governments can rally behind country action plans that unlock finance by cracking down on tax evasion, taxing polluters fairly, building a more transparent and representative global financial system that represents the interests of developing countries and respects their autonomy, and unlocking new resources through reform of the World Bank and IMF.

Such an approach seeks to respond to the massive challenges facing the world today, bringing creativity and innovation while recognizing the tough economic climate governments find themselves in.

Nationally led development

This will require bringing together the sharpest minds and political champions to develop strong ideas and have the courage to make deals to deliver them. The 2005 G8's Commission for Africa provided a blueprint for the actions that followed. Today that blueprint should be led by the countries most affected – and supported by partners in the global community.

Every country involved should have an equal seat at the table and each country should chart its own development path. This would include national economic development plans, leveraging Global South businesses and wise international investment, national taxation and social spending plans that prioritize children's welfare, and civil society holding governments accountable.

Internationally supported

But significant global economies have a role to play in supporting such nationally led development, through catalysing change and mobilising the tools at their disposal from financial regulation to foreign policy.

This should include championing reform of institutions like World Bank and IMF, reforming unjust and costly debt, and unlocking the trillions in the right kind of patient, long-term private sector investment to grow strong and fair economies; championing progress on global tax agreements and transparency; and unlocking climate finance to ensure low-income countries can respond to the impacts of climate change and transform their energy systems to be green and renewable.

HARD-HEADED HOPE

It is easy to look back on 2005 as a more hopeful time — a world of peace, prosperity, and shared ambition to tackle poverty and inequality. By contrast, the world of 2025 may feel more fractured, facing climate catastrophe, conflict, inequality, economic instability, and deepening polarization. It might seem tempting to lower our sights, to become more cautious, less ambitious, and more self-interested.

But Mandela's life reminds us that great victories are often born in the darkest times. After 27 years in prison, he emerged not with despair but with determination and led South Africa to freedom. His legacy is a testament to hope, perseverance, and bold ambition. It teaches us that precisely when challenges loom largest, we must resist the urge to retreat. Instead, we must raise our eyes, recommit to justice, and act boldly to confront poverty, inequality, and oppression. The past 20 years prove that large-scale progress is possible — and that we can achieve it again. Breakthroughs against HIV/AIDS, the eradication of extreme poverty for hundreds of millions, and advances in health and education all stand as proof of what is possible when bold leadership meets determined action.

And acting on such a vision is not just a moral imperative. It is in our shared interest. In today's interconnected and globalized world, the challenges we face at home and abroad are deeply linked. Wars, climate change, pandemics, migration, violence against women, and international crime cannot be tackled by any one nation alone.

Today, we face a new moment of reckoning, but also of opportunity. By reviving Mandela's spirit of hard-headed hope, we can once again match vision with pragmatism, ambition with realism, and ideals with measurable outcomes. From rebuilding shattered communities in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan to financing climate adaptation and sustainable development, the world must unite around solutions that are both urgent and lasting.

The path forward requires courage, innovation, and cooperation. But above all, it demands that we believe, as Mandela did, that progress is possible. Our generation's challenge is clear: to create a world where freedom, justice, and dignity are not distant hopes, but shared realities.

Mandela's message endures: progress is possible — but only if we choose courage over despair, ambition over retreat, and action over resignation. This generation's challenge is no less urgent than Mandela's was. The question is: Will we rise to meet it?

MANDELA'S SPEECH

TRAFALGAR SQUARE, LONDON
FEBRUARY 5, 2005

Friends, I am privileged to be here today at the invitation of the campaign to Make Poverty History.

As you know, I recently formally announced my retirement from public life and should really not be here. However, as long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.

Moreover, the global campaign for action against poverty represents such a noble cause that we could not decline the invitation.

Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times - times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation - that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils. The global campaign for action against poverty can take its place as a public movement alongside the movement to abolish slavery and the international solidarity against apartheid.

And I can never thank the people of Britain enough for their support through those days of struggle against apartheid. Many stood in solidarity with us just a few yards from this spot. Through your will and passion you assisted in consigning that evil system forever to history. But in this new century, millions of people in the world's poorest countries remain imprisoned, enslaved and in chains. They are trapped in the prison of poverty. It is time to set them free.

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is the protection of a fundamental human right. The right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.

The steps that are needed from the developed nations are clear. The first is ensuring trade justice I have said before that trade justice is that truly meaningful way for the developed countries to show commitment to bringing about an end to global poverty.

The second is an end to the debt crisis for the poorest countries.

The third is to deliver much more aid and make sure it is of the highest quality.

In 2005 there is a unique opportunity for making an impact. In September, world leaders will gather in New York to measure progress since they made that the Millennium Declaration in the year 2000. That declaration promised to halve extreme poverty. But at the moment that promise is falling tragically behind. Those leaders must now honour their promises to the world's poorest citizens.

Tomorrow here in London, the G7 finance ministers can make a significant beginning. I am happy to have been invited to meet with them. The G8 leaders, when they meet in

Scotland in July, have already promised to focus on the issue of poverty especially in Africa. I say to all those leaders: do not look the other way. Do not hesitate. Recognize that the world is hungry for action, not words. Act with courage and vision.

I am proud to wear the symbol of this global call to action in 2005. This white band is from my country. In a moment I want to give this band to you, young people of Britain, and ask you to take it forward along with millions of others to the G8 summit in July. I entrust it to you. I'll be watching with anticipation.

We thank you for coming here.

Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation.

Of course the task will not be easy, but not to do this would be a crime against humanity against which I ask all humanity now to rise up.

Make Poverty History in 2005. Make History in 2005.

Then we can all stand with our heads held high.

I thank you.

ENDNOTES

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