

NEW TO THE UN? START HERE

Start here: how the UN works, and how to read this site

IN BRIEF

- The UN General Assembly gives every country one vote, and most of what it agrees does not bind anyone.
- Real power sits with the Security Council, with the five countries that hold a veto, and with whoever pays.
- This page explains where Africa sits in that system, how money for Africa moves, and how to use the rest of this site.

ON THIS PAGE

1. [What the UN General Assembly is, and what high-level week decides](#)
2. [Who holds power at the UN](#)
3. [Where Africa sits](#)
4. [How money for Africa moves](#)
5. [How to read this site](#)
6. [How to use this site](#)

What the UN General Assembly is, and what high-level week decides

All 193 member states of the United Nations sit in the General Assembly, and each has one vote, whatever its size. The Assembly meets every year from September to December, and it approves the UN budget and decides how much each member must pay. Most of what it adopts is a recommendation, and no court or police force makes governments follow it. Most decisions are taken without a vote, by consensus, which means that no country objects.

Each September, presidents, prime ministers and ministers come to New York for what is called high-level week. At its centre is the General Debate, where each country gives a national speech. Around the speeches, governments hold summits and side meetings, and many of the week's deals are made there. In 2026, at the 81st session, the Assembly adopted a declaration on rising seas that

commits no money. A declaration on pandemics failed to win agreement. The largest sum of the week, about \$3 billion to fight Ebola, was raised at a meeting called by the United States.

High-level week therefore decides less than its size suggests. It shows what governments want the world to hear, and who can bring money to the table. It does not create binding law or new budgets on its own. For an African reader, the side meetings deserve as much attention as the speeches.

Sources for this section (4)

- [UN: key facts about the General Assembly, its 193 members, voting and budget role](#)
 - [World Meteorological Organization: the declaration on sea-level rise](#)
 - [Health Policy Watch: the pandemic declaration was not agreed](#)
 - [Africa CDC: the Ebola meeting of 23 September](#)
-

Who holds power at the UN

The Security Council is the UN body of 15 members that decides on war and peace. Five are permanent: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. The other ten are elected by the General Assembly for two years at a time. Every UN member has agreed to carry out the Council's decisions, such as sanctions or sending peacekeepers.

A Council decision needs nine votes, and none of the five permanent members may vote against it. This is the veto, and it lets any one of the five block a decision on its own. Africa has no permanent seat, so it has no veto. The Council also recommends a candidate for Secretary-General, the head of the UN, and the Assembly then appoints that person. In 2026 the Council is choosing the next Secretary-General, and two of the candidates are African.

Money is the third source of power, because each member must pay a share of the UN budget. The Assembly approved a budget of \$3.45 billion for 2026, about 7% below 2025, and cut 2,900 posts. The cuts follow unpaid bills: by 1 July the United States had paid \$160 million of the \$767 million it owed for the year. By 21 September, 141 countries had paid in full, and some African governments were among those that had not. A country that pays late has less say when cuts are decided.

Sources for this section (6)

- [UN Security Council: members and terms](#)
 - [UN Charter, Chapter V: the Council, its voting rule and the duty to carry out its decisions](#)
 - [UN: how the Secretary-General is chosen, and the candidates](#)
 - [UN: the General Assembly approves a \\$3.45 billion budget for 2026](#)
 - [PassBlue: what the United States had paid by 1 July 2026](#)
 - [UN: countries that have paid their 2026 dues in full](#)
-

Where Africa sits

The African Union (AU) brings together 55 African states. Its heads of state meet each February, and its secretariat, the African Union Commission, prepares and carries out their decisions. The AU also runs specialist agencies. One is its health agency, Africa CDC, which coordinates disease control across the continent. Another is its Peace and Security Council, which can send African peace missions.

The AU recognises eight regional groups as its building blocks. They include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa. Many AU policies are carried out through them, so a plan agreed at the AU often succeeds or fails at this level.

At the UN, 54 African states hold more than a quarter of the Assembly's votes. Africa also holds three of the ten elected seats on the Security Council. In 2026 they belong to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Somalia. Somalia leaves at the end of the year, and Zimbabwe joins on 1 January 2027. The three usually agree a joint line, and they are the only African votes inside the Council.

African governments have also agreed common positions. The best known is the Ezulwini Consensus of 2005 on Security Council reform. It asks for at least two permanent seats for Africa, with the veto. It does not say which countries would take them, and that silence keeps Africa united, and it also leaves other governments nothing definite to vote on.

Sources for this section (5)

- [African Union: its 55 member states](#)
- [African Union: the eight regional economic communities](#)
- [UN Security Council: current members and their terms](#)
- [UN News: Zimbabwe elected to the Council for 2027 and 2028](#)
- [Center for Strategic and International Studies \(CSIS\): Africa's design for a reformed Security Council and the Ezulwini Consensus](#)

How money for Africa moves

Aid is grants and cheap loans from governments. Some aid is bilateral, meaning it goes directly from one government to another. Some is multilateral, meaning it passes through a shared body such as the World Bank or a global fund. In 2025 total aid fell to \$174.3 billion. After inflation, that was a fall of 23.1%, the largest ever recorded. Direct aid to Africa from the main donor governments fell 23.9%, to \$29 billion. The United States accounts for three-quarters of the global fall.

Development banks lend for roads, power and schools, and the World Bank and the African Development Bank each run a fund for the poorest countries, and donors refill these funds every few years. The African Development Fund raised \$11 billion in its latest round, and its growth comes from borrowing on markets. Governments also borrow directly from investors by selling bonds. In 2024, developing countries paid a record \$415 billion in interest on their foreign debt.

More money now arrives through deals between two governments, each with its own conditions. Thirty-five countries have signed health agreements with the United States worth \$24.1 billion over five years. The receiving governments pay 39% of the cost, and their share rises each year. Of the European Union's €710 million package announced in New York, €380 million is linked to migration from sub-Saharan Africa. Each African government negotiates such terms alone.

Private money and philanthropy fill some gaps. In September the Gates Foundation committed at least \$1 billion over two years to artificial intelligence (AI) for health, education and farming. African savings are a large and little-used source. African pension and insurance funds hold about \$775 billion, much of it lent to their own governments. Since 2025, money from abroad has become smaller and carries more conditions, so money raised at home matters more.

Sources for this section (7)

- [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\): preliminary aid figures for 2025](#)
- [African Development Fund: report on its 17th funding round](#)
- [World Bank: developing countries paid a record \\$415 billion in interest in 2024](#)
- [KFF: tracker of US health agreements](#)
- [UN Regional Information Centre: the EU's €710 million package](#)
- [Gates Foundation: at least \\$1 billion over two years for AI](#)
- [African Arguments: African pension and insurance funds hold about \\$775 billion](#)

How to read this site

Each sector page opens with a verdict, a one-sentence judgement on what the week meant for Africa in that area. A short summary follows for readers with one minute. The page then explains what happened at the UN, what is really going on, how individual countries are affected and why it matters. It ends with the strongest case against its own view.

Every section carries one of four confidence labels. Observed means a primary source shows the fact directly. Strong inference means several sources support the reading. Contested means credible evidence points in different directions. Speculative marks a possibility to watch. The sources for each section of every page are listed in its notes, so any reader can check them.

Each recommendation is set out at four levels of action. The first says what Africa asks of the rest of the world. The second says what the African Union does, and the third says what regional groups do. The fourth names the country best placed to go first, and why. Each page also lists actions for particular readers, such as governments, businesses, NGOs, funders, researchers and young people.

Words that may be unfamiliar are marked on each page. Tap or hover over them to see a short plain definition, and find all of them in the glossary. The evidence for the overview and the judgements runs to 28 September 2026, and for the sector and recommendation pages to 30 September 2026.

How to use this site

- ☒ If you have one minute, read the summary at the top of the overview.
- ☒ If you have ten minutes, read the seven judgements.
- ☒ If you care about one area, such as health or climate, open its sector page.
- ☒ If you want to act, open a recommendation and find your role in its list of actions.
- ☒ If a word is unclear, tap or hover over it, or open the glossary.
- ☒ If you want to check a fact, open the notes under each section.
- ☒ If you want to know how the work was done and where it falls short, read the method page.

[Go to the overview](#)

[Browse the glossary](#)

Words used on this page

UN General Assembly

The meeting of all 193 UN member states, each with one vote. It meets every year from September. It can make statements, elect members of other bodies and approve the UN budget, but most of what it says does not bind governments. [Glossary](#) ·

Source: [un.org](#)

UN Security Council

The 15-member UN body that decides on war and peace. It can impose sanctions and send peacekeepers, and its decisions bind all UN members. Five permanent members can each block any decision. [The UN and diplomacy briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · Source:

[un.org](#)

High-level week

The week each September when presidents and ministers come to New York for the General Assembly. Speeches, summits and side meetings on money and deals all happen in the same few days. [Glossary](#)

General Debate

The part of high-level week when each country gives a speech of about 15 minutes to the General Assembly. Speeches show what a government wants people to hear. They do not commit it to anything. [Glossary](#)

Veto and permanent members

China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States hold permanent seats on the Security Council. Each can block any decision on its own. Africa has no permanent seat. [The UN and diplomacy briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

UN Secretary-General

The head of the UN's staff and its main public voice. The Security Council recommends a candidate and the General Assembly appoints them, usually for five years. António Guterres's term ends on 31 December 2026. [The UN and diplomacy briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

African Union (AU)

The organisation of 55 African states, based in Addis Ababa. Its heads of state meet each February. It can suspend members after a coup. [Glossary](#) · Source: [au.int](#)

African Union Commission

The African Union's secretariat. It prepares decisions for heads of state and carries them out. [Glossary](#)

Africa CDC

The African Union's public health agency, based in Addis Ababa. It coordinates disease control across the continent. [Health briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · Source: [africacdc.org](#)

AU Peace and Security Council

The African Union's 15-member body for conflicts. It can authorise African peace missions and suspend governments that take power by force. [Security and conflict briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

Regional economic communities

Africa's regional groupings of states, such as ECOWAS in West Africa, the East African Community, SADC in southern Africa and IGAD in the Horn. They carry out many African Union policies. [Glossary](#)

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left it in January 2025. [Politics and governance briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

East African Community

A bloc of eastern and central African states, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [Glossary](#)

SADC

The Southern African Development Community, 16 states from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Africa. [Glossary](#) · Source: [sadc.int](#)

IGAD

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development, a bloc of eight states in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. Glossary · Source: igad.int

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Africa's second-largest country by area, in central Africa. Its east has seen armed conflict for three decades, and it holds much of the world's cobalt. Security and conflict briefing · Glossary

The Ezulwini Consensus

Africa's shared position on Security Council reform, agreed in Eswatini in 2005. It asks for two permanent seats with the veto and five elected seats for Africa. It does not say which countries would take them. Our recommendation on this · The UN and diplomacy briefing · Glossary

Bilateral and multilateral

Bilateral means between two governments only. Multilateral means through a shared body such as the UN, the World Bank or a global fund, where many countries decide together. Glossary

The Global Fund

An international fund that pays for HIV, tuberculosis and malaria programmes. It raises money from governments and private donors every three years. Health briefing · Glossary · Source: theglobalfund.org

IDA and the African Development Fund

The World Bank's and the African Development Bank's funds for the poorest countries. They give grants and very cheap loans, and donors refill them every three years. Development cooperation briefing · Glossary · Source: ida.worldbank.org

European Union (EU)

A union of 27 European countries with shared laws, a single market and a large aid budget. Glossary

Pension and insurance funds

Funds that hold workers' retirement savings and insurance premiums. In most African countries they put most of their money into government bonds. Our recommendation on this · Philanthropy briefing · Glossary