



Global Guardians: A voice for future generations

1. Our Commitment to Future Generations

There is a moral imperative to ensure that future generations of humanity can live full and healthy lives, underpinned by the dignity and rights promised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, due to climate change, unsustainable resource exploitation and worsening global inequality, the window of opportunity to leave a safe and fair world to future generations is rapidly closing. In order to consider their needs, we must look upon the decisions we take today through the eyes of future generations and allow our actions to be guided by the concept of intergenerational equity.

Intergenerational equity, understood as fairness between generations, is a universal concept across the world and across cultures. It is a principle that informs constitutions, international treaties, economies, religious beliefs, traditions and customs¹. Sustainable development is grounded in the concept of fairness between generations, meaning that the needs of present generations are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs². Within the UN System, the need to safeguard the wellbeing of future generations is well established and is recognised as a guiding principle in many fora including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the Declaration of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (2012), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015). In total, the needs of future generations are recognised in as many as 203 UN General

¹ UN Secretary General (2013) *Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations. Report of the Secretary-General*. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2006future.pdf> (Accessed 24 May 2017).

² World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future*, Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press

Assembly Resolutions³. Despite these commitments, there is currently no mechanism in the UN system through which the needs of future generations is represented in decision making processes.

Advancing climate justice means ensuring that present generations can enjoy the full realisation of their rights while safeguarding the earth’s resources for future generations.

When viewed through an intergenerational lens, it becomes clear that decisions taken today on sustainable development and climate action will have far-reaching consequences and will determine the quality of resources available to future generations.

In the seminal *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*⁴, the commissioners recognised that future generations’ lack of influence over decision making facilitates harmful, short-term policies which risks undermining their future wellbeing:

“We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying. They may damn us for our spendthrift ways, but they can never collect on our debt to them. We act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions.”

- Our Common Future, paragraph 25

2. Protecting future generations starts with fairness and equality in the present

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a transformative framework for national and international efforts to achieve sustainable development and end poverty. In securing the social and development needs of all people alive today, as defined by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2030 Agenda can establish a global social floor for all people. This would provide the foundations for a safe and vibrant future for those generations yet to be born. To achieve this vision, developing countries will need support to

³ Based on a key word search of the UN Official Document System, available at: documents.un.org.

⁴ World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future*, Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press

pioneer new sustainable development pathways while developed countries rapidly transition to low-carbon economies.

Balancing the needs of present generations in an equitable way, while also safeguarding the rights of future generations to enjoy similar or improved opportunities, will be the true measure of success for the 2030 Agenda. This is consistent with climate justice and means, for example, that by 2030, in addition to having provided for the social and development needs of all people, the world must be on track to accomplish the goal set out in the Paris Agreement – to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C. If not, any development gains achieved during the SDG years will be at risk from an unstable climate system. Figure 1 below shows some examples of how the implementation of the SDGs can intentionally consider the needs of future generations.

Figure 1: Implementing the SDGs for Present and Future Generations



Access to sustainable energy for all would lift millions of people of the present generation out of energy poverty, increasing productivity and creating new jobs and livelihood opportunities. Meeting energy needs through sustainable, renewable energy sources would also benefit future generations by avoiding greenhouse gas emissions associated with fossil fuel powered energy and ensure that clean air is inherited by future generations.



Reducing current inequalities (intra-generational inequality) and improving the lives of all people today is a precondition to protecting the opportunities of future generations. Eliminating poverty and ensuring human dignity for all is an important step towards intergenerational equity and recognises the need to carefully balance current and future needs.



Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts is consistent with poverty eradication and the achievement of the SDGs. In so doing it will support the right to development of people alive today as well as ensuring the wellbeing of future generations, consistent with the Principles of Climate Justice⁵.



Conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources will ensure their role in human well-being and social and economic development worldwide, now and into the future. 37 per cent of the global population lived in coastal communities in 2010 and this is projected to increase as urbanisation intensifies in cities largely located on the coast, making sustainable marine resources key for the well-being of future generations⁶.



By managing our soil and our forests sustainably and restoring degraded land we can reduce soil erosion and deforestation now, providing benefits to present generations in terms of increased food security and reduced desertification, while also providing benefits to future generations in terms of carbon sequestration and biodiversity.

3. Global Guardians for future generations

“We agree governing requires a dual vision: a commitment to address current needs and to build the foundations for vibrant generations in the decades ahead.”

- Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations⁷

Future generations require representation if their needs are to be given consideration in today's decision making. One way of ensuring that the commitments made to intergenerational equity in international agreements and UN resolutions are applied in

⁵ The Principles of Climate Justice are available at <http://www.mrfcj.org/principles-of-climate-justice> [Accessed 13/04/2017]

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/352)*

⁷ Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations (2013) *Now For the Long Term*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

practice is to provide representation of future generations under the United Nations. In the lead up to the Rio+20 summit in 2012, the establishment of a Commissioner for Future Generations under the UN to represent and advocate for future generations gained some support. However, the proposal was not adopted due to concerns about the capacity of one individual to represent the needs of countries at different levels of development. National Institutions for future generations already exist in several countries around the world and could provide a model for the representation of future generations at the international level⁸.

The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice proposes that *Global Guardians* be appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to provide a voice for future generations and to help achieve fairness between generations in the context of sustainable development.

Global Guardians would represent, advocate for and give voice to, future generations. The Guardians could represent countries at different levels of development and in so doing help to balance the needs of current generations living in poverty and underdevelopment with the economic, social and environmental needs of future generations. The Foundation is working with member states, the UN system and civil society to build momentum and support for Global Guardians and to determine options for their establishment under the UN.

⁸ For example: Hungary, New Zealand, Israel, Wales; Source - Roundtable of Institutions for Future Generations. Available at: <http://futureroundtable.org/en/web/roundtable-of-institutions-for-a-sustainable-future/welcome/> (Accessed 3 June 2016).

Figure 2: A brief history of references to future generations under the United Nations

