

# Global Guardians:

## A voice for future generations

Policy Brief

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**Mary Robinson  
Foundation**  
■ Climate Justice

This document was produced in consultation with the Group of Friends of Future Generations. The Group of Friends of Future Generations was established following a series of meetings organised by the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice during 2017. At the time of publication, the group is co-chaired by Ambassador Kamau, Kenya, and Ambassador Byrne Nason, Ireland, and comprises over 20 New York based Permanent Representatives to the UN. The Group of Friends of Future Generations recognise that the decisions taken today can have significant ramifications on the wellbeing of future generations. The members believe that decisions taken today must systematically consider the needs of future generations. In order to advance long term decision making in the UN System and ensure that the UN membership balance the needs of present and future generations in policy making, the Group of Friends of Future Generations proposes the establishment of the Global Guardians for Future Generations under the UN System.

# 1. Our Commitment to Future Generations<sup>1</sup>

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.



<sup>1</sup> The establishment of the Global Guardians for Future Generations was informed by the position paper “Global Guardians: A Voice for Future Generations” published in April 2017. This position paper can be found at <https://www.mrfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Global-Guardians-A-Voice-for-Future-Generations-April-2017.pdf>. (Accessed: 20 November 2017)

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 customs. 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 needs. 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 over 200 UN General Assembly Resolutions. Despite these commitments, there is currently no mechanism in the UN system through which the needs of future generations are 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. In the seminal Report of the *World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, 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<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> GH, Brundtland. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission On Environment and Development*. Oxford University, 1987

## 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. 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.

## 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 Justice<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The Principles of Climate Justice are available at <http://www.mrfcj.org/principles-of-climate-justice> (Accessed: 31 January 2018)

**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 generations<sup>4</sup>.

**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.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/352)*

### 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.”*

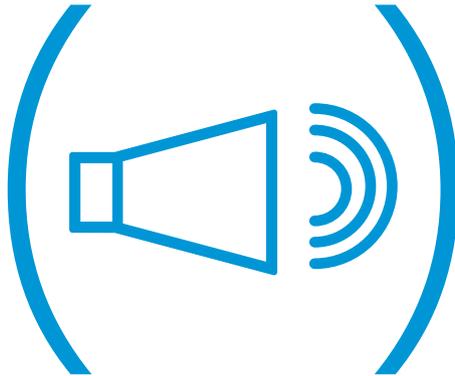
*Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations<sup>5</sup>*

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 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 level<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations (2013) *Now For the Long Term*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>6</sup> 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)

The Group of Friends of Future Generations proposes that Global Guardians for Future Generations 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.



The Global Guardians for Future Generations will represent, advocate for and give voice to future generations. In so doing, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will add value to and accelerate ongoing efforts to re-position the UN Development System to deliver the 2030 Agenda, enhance civil society and people’s participation in UN process, and establish the UN as a thought-leader on long-term policy making. Specifically, responding to the needs raised by Secretary-General António Guterres in his report *‘Repositioning the UN development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda – Ensuring a Better Future for All’*<sup>7</sup>, Global Guardians for Future Generations will:

- Enhance mutual **trust** between Member States, as well as between the UN system and civil society, by adopting a “development-first” approach to issues of intergenerational equity
- Provide integrated, practical and implementable **policy advice** to Member States on advancing intergenerational equity through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda
- Facilitate greater **oversight, transparency and accountability** through interactive dialogues on long-term thinking within the UN system.

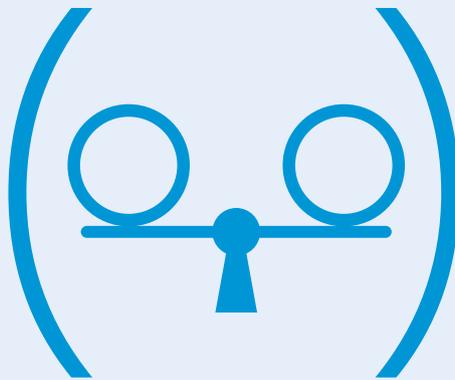
By viewing contemporary challenges through an intergenerational lens, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will contribute towards the realisation of the overarching aim stated in the Secretary-General’s report, *“to work better together across the United Nations system and with a greater emphasis on prevention to address the root causes of instability, vulnerability, exclusion and conflict”*. The innovative nature and normative legitimacy of the Global Guardians for Future Generations will allow the office to play an important role in complementing existing efforts to make the UN development system more inclusive, impactful and coherent. The Guardians will be intentionally chosen to 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.

<sup>7</sup> UN ECOSOC (2017) Report of the Secretary General. Available at: <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/sg-report-on-unds-qcpr-june-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 7 September 2017)

## 4. Objectives of the Global Guardians for Future Generations

The Global Guardians for Future Generations will safeguard the well-being of future generations and ensure the needs of present and future generations are given balanced consideration at the global level by:

- a) Giving voice to the needs of future generations in UN decision-making processes
- b) Facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue on issues pertaining to intergenerational equity
- c) Providing compelling advocacy on sustainable development and intergenerational equity within and beyond the UN System



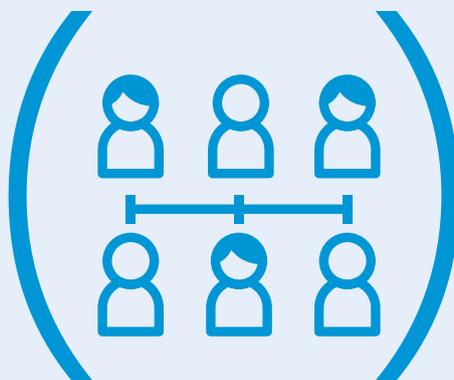
## 5. Structure of the Global Guardians for Future Generations

The Global Guardians for Future Generations would comprise:

- a light-touch representation provided by three individuals appointed by the UN Secretary-General
- representatives intentionally selected to provide representation for developed and developing countries, gender balance and diversity of age
- one member of the Global Guardians will be under 30 years of age.

The Global Guardians for Future Generations will:

- report to the Secretary-General through the Deputy Secretary-General
- be supported by a small Secretariat team
- provide briefings on the operationalisation of intergenerational equity in the UN to the Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-General and the Heads of UN Agencies twice annually.



## 5.1 Legitimacy and Effectiveness

The Global Guardians for Future Generations must have credibility through their individual credentials and legitimacy through formal recognition by the UN. In addition, the success of the appointees will depend on having the scope to conduct their work in a manner that is:

- **Authoritative:** Having sufficient expertise and gravitas to have their message heard and respected. Placing the Guardians under the auspices of the UN would help to provide this international standing.
- **Representative:** Both geographically and demographically and in terms of gender and age.
- **Independent:** Able to deliver their message from a neutral perspective without the perception of bias.
- **Inclusive and transparent:** Have transparent processes that engender both trust and inclusiveness.
- **Accessible:** Actively enable citizen engagement through traditional and innovative channels.

With these conditions in place, the Global Guardians for Future Generations can help to foster deeper accountability, enhanced transparency and stronger oversight within the UN System.

## 6. Role of the Global Guardians for Future Generations

By facilitating decision-making informed by intergenerational perspectives, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will respond to the Secretary-General's call for the UN to position itself as a 21<sup>st</sup> century thought leader and position the organisation at the forefront of innovative policy-making for coherent and effective sustainable development. This will be achieved through a number of interrelated activities undertaken by the Global Guardians as follows.



### 6.1. Provide representation for Future Generations

Future Generations are the only cohort mentioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development who do not currently have a voice within the UN System. Specifically, the Global Guardians will provide meaningful representation for the concerns of future generations by:

- I. Participating in processes of policy design, implementation, monitoring, follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related processes at the global level. These include, but are not limited to, intergovernmental deliberations, reviews and reporting, substantive deliberation, briefings, special forums, UN reports and UN system wide policy pertinent to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
- II. Advising entities in the UN System on policy and substantive matters related to intergenerational equity in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related processes
- III. Identifying and flagging emerging threats to the wellbeing of future generations. The intergenerational approach of the Global Guardians will lead to enhanced planning, foresight, risk management and advocacy on emerging issues that pose a threat to sustainable development
- IV. Providing a platform for dialogue on cross-cutting issues within the UN development system of relevance to present and future generations in order to contribute to more holistic approaches to sustainable development.

## OUTCOME

Decisions taken under the 2030 Agenda are grounded in the prevention of present and future harm by addressing the root causes of vulnerability, inequality, exclusion and injustice. As a result, these decisions pre-emptively address the needs of future generations in an integrated and cohesive manner.

## **6.2. Build Trust between Stakeholders through inclusive dialogue**

The Global Guardians for Future Generations will help to nurture and maintain the atmosphere of trust in which the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed and, in so doing, enhance opportunities for success in the implementation of the agenda. This will be achieved by balancing intra- and intergenerational concerns and facilitating inclusive public discourse in matters related to sustainable development.

- **Balancing the needs of present and future generations**

Addressing the needs of future generations cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of those generations alive today. Improving the intergenerational welfare of people alive today is a pre condition for meeting the needs of future generations. Hence the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 is essential for intergenerational equity. The fair and equitable distribution of benefits and opportunities among the current generations is one of the world's most difficult challenges and it is the challenge that the 2030 Agenda seeks to address. Cognisant of this, the work of the Global Guardians for Future Generations will complement the ongoing efforts under the 2030 Agenda and aid the consideration of intra- and intergenerational equity by facilitating open and transparent decision-making regarding the allocation of burdens and benefits between present and future generations. As part of this process, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will seek to identify and articulate, as precisely as possible, the needs of future generations. They will also offer guidance that ensures the current generations do not forego benefits, unless it seems clear that these short-term benefits would be outweighed by the large losses incurred by future generations as a result.

- **Provide an inclusive and participative platform for public dialogue**

The Global Guardians for Future Generations will facilitate dialogue to enable more inclusive and robust people's participation in the UN Development processes. By working to create an environment that enables civil society to substantively engage in decision-making processes that impact upon the wellbeing of present and future generations, the Global Guardians will help to improve the legitimacy and credibility of the UN in the eyes of people around the world. The independence and transparency of the Global Guardians will be further enhanced by providing an entry point for citizens to engage with the UN system by way of virtual participation and in multi-stakeholder dialogues on issues relating to intergenerational equity. Furthermore, the Global Guardians will disseminate their work to the general public in a manner that is accessible and appealing.

## **OUTCOME**

The salience, credibility and legitimacy of the UN is enhanced as trust, both within the intergovernmental process and between that process and other stakeholders, including citizens, is built through multi-stakeholder dialogues.

### 6.3 Disseminate Innovative Policy Advice

The Global Guardians for Future Generations will help to strengthen the ‘policy backbone’ of the UN system and assist the UN in furthering its standing as a source of trusted, impartial advice for Governments. By working with academic institutions and policy think tanks, civil society and national institutions for future generations, the Global Guardians will catalyse research on issues relating to intergenerational equity. In turn, this will inform evidence-based, practical and implementable policy recommendations to mitigate risks to future generations and seize opportunities to ensure the wellbeing of present and future generations.

In addition, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will work with international and national bodies such as the Network of Institutions for Future Generations to learn from national efforts to incorporate intergenerational equity into national decision-making. References to future generations are found in a range of legal instruments, including an increasing number of national constitutions. National institutions have been established in various jurisdictions with mandates that relate to the protection of interests of future generations. Such institutions help national governments to systematically consider the long-term impact of their decisions, to work with people and communities, and to tackle persistent problems such as poverty, inequality and climate change. These institutions and legal frameworks offer important learning and information for the Global Guardians.

## **OUTCOME**

The work of the Global Guardians for Future Generations will disseminate the global knowledge base on issues of intergenerational concern and provide advice on ways to protect the needs of future generations. By working with Governments, UN Agencies, think tanks, academics, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, the Global Guardians will:

- i) Develop evidence-based, practical and implementable policy recommendations that are integrated into the Sustainable Development Goal framework
- ii) Provide advice and guidance to help governments adapt these recommendations to national priorities and development objectives consistent with the emphasis on country ownership in the 2030 Agenda
- iii) Share the learning and good practices generated by national level institutions for sustainable development and future generations.

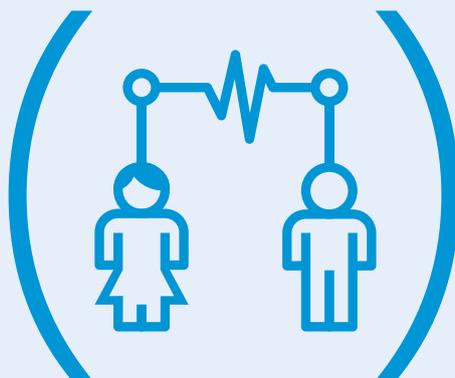
## 7. Avenues for Engagement

The current range of formal engagement avenues within the UN for the work of the Global Guardians for Future Generations include, but are not limited to, intergovernmental processes, policy processes, coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and UN entity specific engagement at all levels. In addition, the Global Guardians will leverage large public facing events to bring greater attention to issues of intergenerational equity and sustainable development. The Global Guardians for Future Generations will advocate on behalf of future generations through avenues\* such as:

PROCESSES		
INTERGOVERNMENTAL	POLICY	MULTI-STAKEHOLDER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United Nations General Assembly</li> <li>• United Nations Economic and Social Council</li> <li>• High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development</li> <li>• United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</li> <li>• United Nations Environment Assembly</li> <li>• Financing for Development (FfD) and FfD Follow-Up Forum</li> <li>• Human Rights Council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President of the General Assembly Dialogues and Events</li> <li>• Ad Hoc Thematic High-Level Meetings of the United Nations General Assembly, ECOSOC Sessions and Functional Commissions</li> <li>• Ad Hoc processes facilitated by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development and other UN entities</li> <li>• Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major Groups and Other Stakeholders HLPF Coordination Mechanism</li> <li>• Sustainable Energy for All</li> <li>• World Water Forum</li> <li>• Scaling Up Nutrition Movement</li> </ul>

\* This list of engagement possibilities is illustrative, not exhaustive.

In addition, The Global Guardians for Future Generations will compile a report for the Secretary-General of the UN on a biennial basis. These reports will seek to identify the challenges and opportunities related to intergenerational equity arising from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and related processes under the UN.



## **OUTCOME**

The intergenerational perspective adopted by the Global Guardians for Future Generations will provide a unique oversight as to how the Sustainable Development Goals interact and interrelate and will assist the UN in pre-emptively addressing emerging issues to maximise benefits for present and future generations.

## 8. Conclusion

The needs of future generations will not be considered in contemporary decision making unless they are represented so that their views can be considered and addressed in balance with the needs of current generations. By representing future generations in the UN system, the Global Guardians for Future Generations will help to operationalise existing commitments to future generations in UN treaties and resolutions, recalibrating intergenerational equity and filling the gap between intent and practice, while advancing sustainable development and climate justice.





■ [www.mrfcj.org](http://www.mrfcj.org)