



Chief Executives Board for Coordination

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Summary of deliberations

United Nations System Common Principles on Future Generations

Summary

In his report entitled “Our Common Agenda”, launched in September 2021, the Secretary-General called for an acceleration of efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and a “profound deepening of solidarity between generations”. The report contained a number of suggested activities that could be considered by Member States and the United Nations system to help strengthen commitments to future generations and longer-term human and planetary well-being.

In October 2021, in support of the efforts called for in Our Common Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) agreed on three thematic pillars to guide its work in the coming years.^a A core group consisting of 16 United Nations system entities was formed to implement a prioritized set of actions under thematic pillar 1 (duties to the future), which had been approved by HLCP at its forty-third session held on 31 March and 1 April 2022.

In parallel, in the summer of 2022, Member States began an intergovernmental process to develop a Declaration for Future Generations. A policy brief entitled “To think and act for future generations” was issued by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General in early March 2023 as an input to the intergovernmental consultations.

Advancing the workstream on duties to the future, HLCP, at its forty-fourth session, held in September 2022, welcomed the proposal that the core group develop a set of common principles for the United Nations system to serve as a basis for a shared understanding of future generations and intergenerational equity. Subsequently, in February 2023, representatives of the Development Coordination Office, the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations University, as well as an external expert from the Office of the Future Generations



Commissioner for Wales, met over a two-day period to draft a set of concise principles to help guide and inform the United Nations system in its work on future generations, drawing on inputs received from core group members. The resulting draft was reviewed by the full core group before being finalized for consideration and approval by HLCP at its forty-fifth session. In May 2023, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination endorsed the Common Principles on Future Generations.

A key goal of the principles is to ensure greater clarity on terminology and agreement on a set of common values across the United Nations system for use in various contexts (e.g. strategic planning, policy advice, programming). However, the way in which entities implement the principles will depend on their respective mandates, regulations and procedures.

^a See <https://unsceb.org/high-level-committee-programmes-strategic-narrative>.

Preamble

1. Future generations are “all those generations that do not yet exist, are yet to come and who will eventually inherit this planet”.¹ While children and youth are part of present generations and not future generations, their lives extend further into the future than those of adults and they will be more affected by the short-term thinking and poor decisions being made today than the adults making them. This proximity to future generations means that children and youth are oftentimes referred to as “future decision makers” or “future leaders”, but they alone should not bear the burden of representing future generations.
2. Just like present generations, future generations will include people of all ages, from children and youth to older persons, and hence it is important to consider people’s needs and rights across the life course.
3. Focusing on future generations does not imply focusing only on humanity – the lives of humans today and those of succeeding generations are intimately connected with the quality and integrity of the environment and Earth’s ecosystems. Humanity has a responsibility to strive for sustainable development that safeguards biodiversity and natural resources and respects planetary boundaries.
4. Concern for future generations does not imply less of a focus on present generations or efforts to address the Sustainable Development Goals. Upholding the rights and meeting the needs of present generations are preconditions for a better shared future.
5. The future cannot be predicted. The future may not look the same for people across the globe who, already today, face very different realities. This plurality, along with the impossibility of knowing what future generations may need or think, requires that the United Nations system embrace approaches that foster anticipation, adaptation and sustainability, including by investing in participatory foresight and future-focused planning that allow for flexibility and adaptability.
6. The principles build on a long history at the United Nations of acknowledging the importance of future generations, which dates back to the Charter of the United Nations, including, in particular, the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, adopted by the States members of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1997; and the 2013 report of the Secretary-General, entitled “Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations”,² which contained options for institutionalizing concern for future generations at the United Nations, a number of which have been carried forward into the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”. The United Nations has a unique history and a mandate to promote global, long-term governance, and this focus can help to anchor long-term thinking as a guiding principle for policy choices, programming and governance at all United Nations system entities so they can move forward in a context of multiple crises and heightened risks.

Principles

1. Promote a vision for future generations based on human rights and equity

Human rights provide a universal vision and obligation to uphold human dignity and gender equality – for both present and future generations. The basis for our moral

¹ Permanent Missions of the Fiji and the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations, “Elements paper for the Declaration for Future Generations” (2022).

² [A/68/322](#).

obligation to future generations and gender equality lies in the concern and respect that we owe to all humans regardless of where or when they may be born. The United Nations system should support the pursuit of a more explicit normative basis to strengthen rights-based approaches in legal frameworks that help to safeguard the rights, needs and interests of future generations as well as support the pursuit of efforts to ensure equal legal rights and protections for women and girls in order to accelerate the attainment of gender equality.

2. Pursue fairness between present and future generations

Fairness between generations is embedded in the concept of sustainable development: the needs of present generations must not be met at the expense of generations to come.³ Similarly, the needs of future generations should not be met at the expense of people living today and must not come at the expense of people who are living in poverty or who are otherwise vulnerable. The United Nations system should aim to promote an equitable and just distribution of benefits, risks and costs in all sectors, including socioeconomic sectors, between present and future generations. International agreements, including those related to children, young people and older persons, call for ensuring an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities both within and between generations.

3. Recognize and foster an interconnected world

The world is complex and dynamic. The United Nations system should actively explore opportunities to recognize, strengthen, and foster an integrated and interdisciplinary approach throughout its work to maximize its contribution towards the interests and capabilities of future generations, particularly in advocating for the provision of global public goods and the management of the global commons. Such an integrated approach will help accelerate support to urgently address the triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, which undermine the ability of future generations to fulfil their needs and interests and which threaten their survival. Global solidarity and global responsibility are key values to foster in order to ensure that the United Nations system continues to reflect and respond to a changing world.

4. Think, plan and act with future generations in mind

Adopting a good ancestor policy⁴ would help to infuse strategic foresight, long-term thinking and the precautionary principle into all stages of planning and programming, from design and budgeting to implementation and evaluation. The United Nations system should exercise due diligence and therefore purposefully shift to a more systematic understanding of global risks and long-term trends; collect and leverage disaggregated data and use evidence-based modelling and scenario-based foresight to develop anticipatory policy; transform systems for national and global accounting; promote the use of rigorous future impact assessments and support Member States in planning and acting for the future. Where uncertainties persist, the United Nations system should take a precautionary approach to risks, acknowledging that the actions of present generations can cause significant and irreversible damage to future generations and that a lack of scientific clarity on such risks should not be used as a reason to postpone measures that prevent potential harm.

³ See General Assembly resolution [42/187](#) and the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development ([A/42/427](#)).

⁴ The term “good ancestor policy” helps to capture the concepts of intergenerational equity and justice and long-term planning in more straightforward terms, avoiding jargon while still evoking the concept that present generations have a responsibility towards future generations.

5. Ensure meaningful representation of future generations and their interests

The interests of future generations as rights holders must be reflected in present day decision-making processes. A variety of mechanisms and models for meaningful representation of the interests of future generations already exist in corporate, national and subnational contexts. The United Nations system should explore such mechanisms and mainstream them across its work and decision-making processes, including governance, policymaking and partnerships. These mechanisms should be inclusive of relevant stakeholders of all ages in the present who are thinking and acting with the interests of future generations in mind. The United Nations system should also aim to support Member States in developing mechanisms at the local and regional levels, to ensure that the interests of future generations are represented across all levels.

6. Foster open science, data and knowledge for the future

The United Nations system should ensure that its approach to future generations is firmly underpinned by science and innovation, treating data, education and knowledge as global public goods shared across generations. This means that the United Nations system should prioritize interdisciplinary knowledge, including research into the long-term impacts of today's actions; build transparent, inclusive and accessible sources of scientific information on key global trends (including those related to the environment, demographics and technologies); foster open science, data and knowledge to reduce global digital, technological and knowledge divides; and link interdisciplinary knowledge more firmly to policy and action, enabling evidence-based programming and anticipatory policymaking that will strive to safeguard the interests of future generations and preserve their abilities to uphold their human rights. It also means that the United Nations system should invest in transformative education policies that foster open knowledge as central to shaping more just, peaceful and sustainable futures.

7. Foster a future-oriented organizational culture and capabilities

The United Nations system should seek to adopt a more future-oriented organizational culture and ways of working by developing diverse capabilities, including foresight and futures literacy, and by systematically promoting long-term and intergenerational thinking at all levels. The United Nations system should seek to operationalize future-fit governance and accountability, including by: reviewing and strengthening existing United Nations rules, policies and procedures to better identify and account for future generations; developing and strengthening tools that measure impact in terms of immediate and long-term objectives; designing institutions and processes that are agile and can evolve with changing circumstances and emerging risks and opportunities; and taking meaningful steps to include the views and needs of future generations at all stages of decision-making.

8. Strengthen inclusive partnerships and global cooperation

Recognizing the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration to respond to the rights, needs and interests of future generations, the United Nations system should play a role in systematically building partnerships centred on inclusion and meaningful participation. Partnerships to support the implementation of these key principles would enable the United Nations system to reduce siloes, incentivize joint long-term outcomes and contribute to accelerating a broader societal shift towards better accounting for the needs and interests of future generations. Inclusive multilateralism and partnerships should leverage collaborations with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, to foster a movement of change that is agile, diverse, responsive, and inclusive, both within and beyond the United Nations system.