



**CEB**  
Chief Executives Board  
for Coordination

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High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP)

**United Nations System**  
**Common Principles on Future Generations**

## United Nations System

### Common Principles on Future Generations

The Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report, which was launched in September 2021, calls for an acceleration of efforts to meet the SDGs and a '*profound deepening of solidarity between generations.*' It lays out 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 Our Common Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) agreed on three thematic areas to guide its work in the coming years (see the [HLCP strategic narrative](#)). A core group consisting of 16 United Nations system entities is now working to implement a prioritized set of actions under the second thematic pillar on "duties to the future", which had been approved by HLCP at its 43<sup>rd</sup> session in March 2022.

In parallel, in the summer of 2022, Member States began an intergovernmental process to develop a Declaration for Future Generations, which is expected to be presented at the preparatory Ministerial meeting for the Summit of the Future in September 2023. A policy brief "[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 duties to the future workstream, HLCP, at its 44<sup>th</sup> session 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 the concept of future generations and intergenerational equity. Subsequently, in February 2023, representatives from DCO, OSGEY, UNDESA, UNEP, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNU, 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 HLCP's consideration and approval at its 45<sup>th</sup> session. In May 2023, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination endorsed the Common Principles on Future Generations.

A key goal of these principles is to ensure greater clarity on terminology and agree a set of common values across the United Nations system for use across various contexts (e.g., strategic planning, policy advice, programming, etc.). However, how each entity implements these principles will depend on their respective mandates, regulations and procedures.

## Preamble

Future generations are “*all those generations that do not yet exist, are yet to come and who will eventually inherit this planet.*”<sup>1</sup> While children and youth are part of present generations and not future generations, their lives extend further into the future than that of adults and they will be more impacted by 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.

Just like present generations, future generations will include people of all ages from children and youth through older persons, and hence it is important to consider people’s needs and rights across the life course.

Focusing on future generations does not imply a focus only on humanity – the lives of humans today and that 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.

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 is a precondition for a better shared future.

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 UN system embrace approaches that foster anticipation, adaptation and sustainability – including investing in participatory foresight and future-focused planning that allow for flexibility and adaptability.

These principles build on the UN’s long history of acknowledging the importance of future generations, dating back to the UN Charter including, in particular, the adoption in 1997 by UNESCO Member States of the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations towards Future Generations<sup>2</sup> and the 2013 report to the Secretary General<sup>3</sup> which set out options for institutionalizing concerns for future generations at the UN, a number of which have been carried forward into Our Common Agenda. The UN has a unique history and mandate for promoting global, long-term governance, and this focus can help anchor long-term thinking as a guiding principle in the policy choices, programming and governance of all UN system entities to 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 obligation to future generations and gender equality lies in the concern and respect that we owe to all humans regardless of where and when they may be born. The UN system should support the pursuit of a more explicit normative basis to strengthen rights-based approaches in legal frameworks that help safeguard the rights, needs and interests of future generations as well as of efforts to ensure equal legal rights and protections for women and girls in order to accelerate the attainment of gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Permanent Missions of the Netherlands and Fiji to the UN, *Elements Paper for the Declaration for Future Generations* (2022), <https://www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/09/Elements-Paper-Declaration-for-Future-Generations-09092022.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, *Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations* (1997), <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/declaration-responsibilities-present-generations-towards-future-generations>.

<sup>3</sup> Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations: report of the Secretary General (2013), A/68/322

## **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.<sup>4</sup> 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 living in poverty or who are otherwise vulnerable. The UN system should aim to promote an equitable and just distribution of benefits, risks, and costs in all sectors, including socio-economic, between present and future generations. International agreements, including those related to children, youth 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 UN 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 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 future generations' abilities to fulfil their needs and interests and threaten their survival. Fostering global solidarity and global responsibility are key values to ensure the UN system continues to reflect and respond to a changing world.

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

Adopting a good ancestor policy<sup>5</sup> would help 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 UN system should pursue 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 for development of anticipatory policy; transform systems of national and global accounting; promote the use of rigorous future impact assessments and support Member States to plan and act for the future. Where uncertainties persist, the UN 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 for postponing measures to prevent potential harm.

## **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 sub-national contexts. The UN 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 that are thinking and acting with the interests of future generations in mind. The UN system should also aim to support Member States in developing mechanisms at the local and regional levels, to ensure the interests of future generations are represented across all levels.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 11 December 1987, 42/187. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (New York, United States of America, United Nations Document, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> The term good ancestor policies helps capture the concepts of intergenerational equity and justice, and long-term planning in more layperson terms. It avoids jargon while still evoking the concept of present generations having a responsibility towards future generations.

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

The UN system should ensure 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 UN 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 about key global trends (including 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 the UN 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 UN 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 systematically promoting long-term and intergenerational thinking at all levels. The UN system should seek to operationalize future fit governance and accountability including: reviewing and strengthening existing UN 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 multistakeholder collaboration to respond to the rights, needs, and interests of future generations, the UN system should play a role in systematically building partnerships centered on inclusion and meaningful participation. Partnerships to support the implementation of these key principles would enable the UN 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 UN system.