

THE PACT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Ahead of the United Nations Summit of the Future, the main goal of which is to transform global governance and renew confidence in the multilateral institutions, the secretary-general of the organisation, António Guterres, has stressed the importance of taking the long-term view. The Declaration on Future Generations aims to incorporate the perspective of these generations into global governance by attending to their rights, interests and concerns, with a commitment to intergenerational justice as the overarching principle.



Anna Ayuso,
Senior Research Fellow,
CIDOB

Waldo Swart,
Research Assistant,
CIDOB

CIDOB REPORT
12- 2024

Concern about ensuring a better future for humanity was at the root of the creation of the United Nations in 1945. The first sentence of the founding charter's **preamble** sets out the determination to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war", and its purposes speak of equality, social development and respect for human rights. That long-term idea is also incorporated into the concept of "sustainable development". Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), defined the concept as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The idea of intergenerational justice, which focuses on ensuring that the decisions of the current generation do not harm succeeding generations by promoting sustainability and a responsible use of natural resources, has been integrated through other instruments like the UNESCO **Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations** (1997).

During the gestation period of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement of 2015, foresight methodologies and tools were incorporated into the decision-making

process to analyse their impact on the generations that will experience them. Mechanisms to encourage the participation of civil society and other actors were also developed. In September 2018, the [UN Youth Strategy](#) was launched with a view to increasing young people's participation in the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. And in September 2022, the United Nations Youth Office was established in order to (among other matters) facilitate intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, collaboration and solidarity. The Summit of the Future in September 2024 again makes the crucial connection between future generations and global governance.

THE SDGS AND THE PARIS AGREEMENT OF 2015 INCORPORATED FORESIGHT METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS INTO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS TO ANALYSE THEIR IMPACT ON FUTURE GENERATIONS. MECHANISMS TO ENCOURAGE CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION WERE ALSO DEVELOPED.

The [Declaration on Future Generations](#), which is to be included as an annex to the Pact for the Future, offers the opportunity to open new debates on the institutionalisation of long-term thinking with the inclusion of young people's voices. Similarly, it incorporates foresight as a tool to shape the future, civil society participation channels and intergenerational justice, and it points to the need for fundamental changes to address longstanding inequities.

The debate on foresight as a look towards the future

Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1, published by the secretary-general's office and entitled "[To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)" (United Nations, 2023a), expands on long-term thinking and foresight methodology. The brief includes proposals to define and make concrete the duties to future generations, such as the appointment of a special envoy for future generations and better use of foresight and data. Other subsequent briefs like "[Valuing What Counts: Framework to Progress Beyond Gross Domestic Product](#)" (United Nations, 2023c) and "[Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes](#)" (United Nations, 2023b) also follow the line of seeking a paradigm shift in the way we measure and evaluate what is important, placing the emphasis on the best use of science and data. This new boom in foresight methodology at present can be put down to the urgent need to get to grips with the volatility, uncertainty and complexity of a world marked by polycrisis.

The desire to reduce risks and threats means foresight is a useful tool to give space to new actors with a view to trying to solve problems that compromise the interests of future generations. There is, however, tension between foresight linked more to anticipatory governance and one that focuses on

seizing opportunities to transform the international system. While both try to reduce risks, one is more geared towards improving current governance, whereas the other seeks to better understand the impact of unsustainable models of production and is driven by the urge to transform.

There is a call from civil society for a more critical approach to the status quo and a demand for transformation. In addition, given the bulk of future generations will largely be in the Global South, the debates are closely connected to developing countries' traditional role in multilateral spaces. These countries advocate for a large-scale reform of the system, but often lack institutional capabilities that incorporate the foresight tool. The countries that have incorporated the tool are usually from the Global North and they have done so more with the intention of navigating uncertainty. The prospects for the way we integrate future generations into the institutions depend, to a large extent, on how the tension between transformative and conservative views plays out and to what extent we can move beyond the perspective of short-term national interests.

THERE IS TENSION BETWEEN FORESIGHT LINKED MORE TO ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND ONE THAT FOCUSES ON SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES TO TRANSFORM THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM.

Channels of participation

The policy brief on youth participation (United Nations, 2023a) highlights that as the largest generation in history and the predominant one in countries of the South, young people today play a crucial role as agents of positive change. Yet millions of young people face adverse conditions that limit their potential. In the same terms, Chapter 4 of the first revision of the [draft for the Pact for the Future](#) highlights the need to invest in young people's skills to equip them with the tools to enable them to thrive in a changing world, pledging to strengthen participatory processes at both the national and international level.

Young people have been able to take part in several initiatives in the process of the Summit of the Future negotiations. These include the [ECOSOC Youth Forum](#) held on April 16th-18th, 2024, in New York; or the [United Nations Civil Society Conference](#), which took place on May 9th-10th, 2024, in Nairobi and was structured around [ImPACT](#) coalition sessions, based on the idea of multiple stakeholders, one of which was devoted to "[youth and intergenerational engagement](#)". A parliamentary summit of Committees of the Future was held in 2022. The [joint statement](#) at the close of the summit

committed parliaments to increasing future-orientation in decision-making. Young people will also be able to take part in the Summit of the Future as part of the member states' official delegations or as representatives of bodies that have a standing invitation to participate as observers.

But there are doubts about whether these channels really are securing representation for the diverse perspectives of young people. There are critical voices that note that the proliferation of summits and greater participation by civil society do not necessarily mean better results, since the representatives of the states and social organisations are nearly always the same. Some young people have the perception they have been exploited by other interests of private and state actors or interest groups, which take charge of selecting the participants in such forums. They have also expressed frustration over the gap between inputs and impact (United Nations, 2023b).

This raises the dilemma of what is best to enhance the legitimacy of and people's confidence in the system: continue with the proliferation of mechanisms for young people's participation in UN forums and summits or pursue concrete results through the incorporation of youth views in existing negotiating spaces. Global North countries appear comfortable with the multistakeholder participation process within the existing mechanisms, even though institutional change is very slow. Policy Brief 3 (United Nations, 2023b) establishes some core principles for meaningful engagement, which include such engagement being rights-based, institutionally mandated, designated, resourced, transparent, accessible, voluntary, diverse and inclusive. The idea is to make the shift from quantity to quality.

In terms of outcomes for global governance, the risks of corporate capture of participatory spaces (where actors with different powers and ends sit at the same table) diminish the negotiating capacity of some states and of civil society in general. There is, then, some concern over the outcomes of the Summit of the Future because most decisions will be made by consensus. In the current climate of polarisation it may mean a decline in standards that have already been accepted by most states. For this reason, Policy Brief 1 (United Nations, 2023a) proposes incorporating a document with commitments already made to future generations and recognition of the duty to protect those generations.

The limits of intergenerational justice: interests and rights

In parallel to the UN processes, in July 2023, a prestigious [group of experts](#) drew up the [Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations](#) (2023). They sought to clarify the current state of international law as it relates to the rights of future generations, consolidating the legal

framework, stating the binding obligations of states and fostering the progress of human rights. In a way, it is an attempt to limit the power of current generations over the future of those who cannot speak today. Again, the question arises over who speaks on behalf of those future generations. The idea of appointing a special envoy for future generations in an advisory role and to defend their interests across the system, prepare reports and share best practices is one of the proposals for the declaration to be included as an annex to the pact. The envoy would also be responsible for monitoring the agreements adopted. A new initiative is to create a subsidiary body of a forum for future generations that guarantees stakeholder participation.

Another concern is whether the declaration should also include the need to redress the inequalities of the past that determine the present. In some quarters of Global North countries, there is little desire to relinquish privileges and they consider it unnecessary to extend the time frame for the rights perspective from the past into the future. Yet a large part of civil society, including indigenous peoples, young people and social activists, see the declaration as a major opportunity to establish a binding legal principle on the rights of future generations in international relations. The success of the Pact for the Future in bringing about the changes that the international financial architecture, digital regulation and corporate legal accountability require depends to a large extent on whether such a pact is read from the perspective of future generations and the need to redress inequalities that will otherwise inhibit succeeding generations from being able to exercise their rights. The **revised version** of the draft Declaration on Future Generations acknowledges the interconnectedness of past, present and future and the need to eliminate historical and structural inequalities. But in the negotiations the focus on the rights of future generations appears to be given a back seat to concentrate more on interests.

THE RISKS OF CORPORATE CAPTURE OF PARTICIPATORY SPACES (WHERE ACTORS WITH DIFFERENT POWERS AND ENDS SIT AT THE SAME TABLE) DIMINISH THE NEGOTIATING CAPACITY OF SOME STATES AND OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN GENERAL.

In conclusion, the incorporation of future generations into global governance is crucial to the legitimacy of the process, but it presents challenges. Intergenerational justice requires a genuine commitment to redressing the inequalities of the past and the present, ensuring that future generations do not inherit a world plagued by injustice and inequality. Only through inclusive and transformative global governance that truly considers the needs and rights of those who follow us will we be able to build an equitable and sustainable future for all.

Bibliographical references

United Nations "To Think and Act for Future Generations" *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 11*: Office of the Secretary-General (March 2023a), p. 24 (online) [To Think and Act for Future Generations | United Nations iLibrary \(un-ilibrary.org\)](#)

United Nations. "Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes" *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3* " Office of the Secretary-General (April 2023b), p. 24. (online) [Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes | United Nations iLibrary \(un-ilibrary.org\)](#)

United Nations. Valuing What Counts: Framework to Progress Beyond Gross Domestic Product" *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 4* Office of the Secretary-General (May 2023c), p.16. (online) [Valuing What Counts: Framework to Progress Beyond Gross Domestic Product | United Nations iLibrary \(un-ilibrary.org\)](#)

WCED (1987) "Our Common Future" Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, p. 247 <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/en/home/media/publications/sustainable-development/brundtland-report.html>