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# TOWARD A DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

War. A pandemic. Floods, droughts, storms, fires, and other climate impacts. Not to mention the persistence of extreme poverty and widespread lack of access to energy, food, and education. These challenges threaten to swamp even our medium-term plans — and highlight pressing shortcomings in our local, national, and global governance systems.

A landmark United Nations report, [Our Common Agenda](#), commissioned for the international body's 75th anniversary, considers ways through and beyond the stream of present crises. One of its key proposals is for states to issue a **Declaration on Future Generations** and commit to institutional reforms that give it weight. If successful, it could mark an inflection point in longstanding multilateral efforts to manage crises and place long-term sustainable development on secure foundations.

The point of departure for any Declaration on Future Generations must be the ongoing, urgent, overlapping crises of the present. Efforts around pandemic recovery, war, energy and food shocks, and other pressing concerns must be redoubled. At the same time, we need to recognise the longer-term processes fundamentally linked to these challenges, such as climate change, technological and demographic transitions, and persistent underdevelopment. There is no sustainable solution to present crises, or the ones to follow, that does not also address these deeper drivers. Building on the Sustainable Development Goals, a broader governance transformation is needed.

Indeed, it is perhaps precisely because the links between present crises and longer-term risks and trends are increasingly recognised that attention to the protection of future generations has grown. Across nearly all human value systems, the fundamental moral value of future people is widely recognised. Around 40 per cent of national constitutions recognise it explicitly. But our local, national, and international systems of governance are beset by short-termism. The present—and coming—age of crises demands that we improve these systems to better meet the needs of both present and future people.

To be effective, a Declaration on Future Generations should firstly define future generations, and secondly delimit a parsimonious list of issues that affect them. These fall into four categories: sustainability, responsible development of emerging technology, management of existential risks, and long-term development.

Furthermore, a Declaration on Future Generations requires accompanying institutionalisation. Specifically, countries should create a 'voice' for future generations in the UN system, such as a Special Envoy or High Commissioner, as well as a forum in

which nations can share experiences regarding how to better safeguard future generations in their domestic systems.

In no way is a Declaration on Future Generations a panacea for the dilemmas of short-termism or the structural challenges we face. To address both long-term trends and the sharp, immediate crises they drive, a bigger, broader transformation of human governance is needed. Still, a Declaration on Future Generations and its institutionalisation can serve as a critical catalyst for these broader changes.

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## INTRODUCTION

War. A pandemic. Floods, droughts, storms, fires, and other climate impacts. Not to mention the persistence of extreme poverty and widespread lack of access to energy, food, and education. These challenges threaten to swamp even our medium-term plans — and highlight pressing shortcomings in our local, national, and global governance systems. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has set back progress towards many of the 2030 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) in many countries, particularly those relating to the poorest and most vulnerable, by several years<sup>1,2</sup>.

Buffeted by an ongoing series of shocks, it would be understandable to focus exclusively on responding to particular crises as they emerge. Yet as crisis layers onto crisis, policymakers and populations have increasingly realised that a merely reactive approach can only fail. While we must redouble our efforts against present crises, we need to simultaneously tackle their deeper, longer-term roots, preventing future crises.

A landmark United Nations report, [Our Common Agenda](#), commissioned for the international body's 75th anniversary, considers ways through and beyond the stream of present crises. One of its key proposals is for states to issue a **Declaration on Future Generations** and commit to institutional reforms that give it weight. If successful, it could mark an inflection point in longstanding multilateral efforts to manage crises and place long-term sustainable development on secure foundations.

Nearly eight decades ago, the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations began: “We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...”. Today, there is an urgent need to reinforce the multilateral system as a bulwark against the many crises we face; now and into the foreseeable future.

To be sure, UN declarations are not silver bullets, but at their best they play a critical normative and agenda-setting role. An effective Declaration on Future Generations should focus clearly and parsimoniously on the issues that matter most for our collective future: **ensuring planetary sustainability, responsible stewardship of emerging technologies, managing and monitoring broader existential risks, and long-term development** toward a thriving society. A Declaration on Future Generations will also need appropriate institutionalisation to have impact: **creating a voice for future generations** in the multilateral system, developing instruments to **collect expert foresight** on issues and technologies affecting future generations, and **establishing a forum** for

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), '[UN report finds COVID-19 is reversing decades of progress on poverty, healthcare and education](#)'

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2020), '[COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021](#)'

governments and other stakeholders to advance the principles the Declaration sets forth.

A common commitment to safeguarding the future runs from the [1945 UN Charter](#), to the [1987 Our Common Future report](#), which institutionalised the concept of sustainable development, to the [Millennium Development Goals](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), and now the proposals in 2021's [Our Common Agenda](#). Adopting and institutionalising a Declaration of Future Generations could thus renew and clarify the United Nations' core mission for the 21st century and beyond. Fully realised, the mainstreaming of long-term governance in the multilateral system will make it more effective at addressing challenges today and into the future, while supporting more effective, future-proof policymaking at the national and local levels.

Governments have begun to discuss potential elements of a Declaration on Future Generations<sup>3</sup>, and are expected to ramp up their deliberations on the subject in advance of the Summit for the Future to be held in September 2024. To support the design of an effective Declaration on Future Generations, this policy brief draws on the current academic literature to outline:

1. Why a Declaration on Future Generations bolsters efforts to address present crises;
2. Key principles a Declaration on Future Generations should advance;
3. A survey of existing international and national legal instruments on Future Generations;
4. Concrete options for institutionalising and operationalising a Declaration on Future Generations.

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<sup>3</sup> [Elements Paper for the Declaration for Future Generations](#), prepared by the co-facilitators (Fiji and Netherlands).

# 1. WHY A DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS IS NEEDED NOW

Humanity faces an array of present-day crises. These include, at the time of writing: the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, food and energy supply issues and accompanying inflation shocks, and [at least 27](#) ongoing armed conflicts. Alongside these acute crises, the longstanding challenges of poverty, disease, repression and conflict, extreme weather, fire, and drought and many others dominate policymakers' agendas — most of them directly or indirectly exacerbated by climate change or other environmental and other stresses on planetary systems. We may therefore ask: why should we invest scarce time and effort to protect future generations, when we in the present are so in need?

Two major reasons combine to answer this question. Pragmatically, prevention is typically superior to treatment. Ethically, in nearly all human value systems future people – our descendants – hold moral value.

## Preventing crises, now and tomorrow

First, it is critical to recognise that many crises of the moment can be linked to longer-term drivers. While it typically isn't possible to forecast the exact time and place of acute crises, understanding and anticipating root causes is key to managing them. A flood exacerbated by climate change matters here and now, but we can be confident that the accumulation of greenhouse gases over many decades makes such events more likely. A debt crisis can flash up overnight, but it is likely rooted in longer-term patterns of underdevelopment and fiscal governance.

Prevention is the best form of crisis management, because the cost of recovering from disasters typically far exceeds the cost of anticipating and preparing for them long in advance. Indeed, in some cases, such as climate change or breakthrough new technologies, prevention is the only way to secure desirable outcomes. Once things have reached the point of crisis, only second- or third-best solutions remain. Perhaps for these reasons, prevention is gaining urgency and political salience from, not in spite of, the accelerating pace of challenges the world faces today — because we might reasonably expect the root causes of these challenges to accelerate further. These causes include new demographic trends, shifts in planetary systems, and especially emerging technological powers with the potential for destruction or destabilisation. Governance must adapt in time.

Consider the example of pandemic preparedness. Before COVID-19, the US invested less than [\\$10bn annually](#)<sup>4</sup> on preventing the next pandemic — global spending likely

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<sup>4</sup> Based on reports of [US Federal Funding for Health Security](#) from 2010 to 2019, and annualising over the ten-year period.

was not much more than twice this figure. Yet projections of the lasting economic toll of COVID-19<sup>5</sup> give figures upwards of \$50tn — surely hundreds of times more than what the world invested on pandemic preparedness over the entire decade of 2010–2019. That's not to mention the vast cost to human lives: estimates<sup>67</sup> suggest the excess mortality from COVID amounts to around 20 million. Yet, well before 2019, we had all the scientific evidence<sup>8</sup> we needed to suggest that investing significantly more in pandemic preparedness would more than pay for itself over the course of decades. Although we had no way to predict exactly when and where the pandemic would emerge, we knew enough about the chance of a pandemic for any given year or decade; and we knew that such an outcome would be devastating. Finally, it is clear how to take steps now to prevent or mitigate the effects of the next pandemic: steps we could have taken, and can still take. Just as we might now regret not taking this evidence more seriously in the past, future generations might reasonably wish for us to do better now: to identify the root causes of present and future crises, and take bold steps to address them.

## Recognising the interests of future generations

The second major reason for considering future generations is that, as a normative matter, it is clear that future generations deserve explicit consideration in our institutions and frameworks of governance. A strikingly wide range of ethical frameworks converge on this idea.

To a large extent, a system of governance derives legitimacy by adequately including all those whose lives it predictably influences in its decision-making. Especially at the international level, future generations evidently number among such people. Yet they are 'voiceless', insofar as they cannot advocate for their own interests. Consider by analogy the case of young children, or aspects of the natural environment. Although neither young children nor the natural environment can advocate on their own behalf, our institutions of governance would still do well to represent their interests. We cannot rely on them to do so — we must instead install protections and measures on their behalf. In the same way, declarations such as the proposed Declaration on Future Generations are required to make explicit provision for future generations — another group that is predictably affected by governance decisions, but voiceless to have a say over them.

Another perspective on this point is the more general observation that future generations matter morally. In many ways, this basic claim does not require any

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<sup>5</sup> VoxEU / Centre for Economic Policy Research (2021), '[Pandemic divergence: The social and economic costs of Covid-19](#)'

<sup>6</sup> Economist (2022), '[The pandemic's true death toll](#)'

<sup>7</sup> Our World in Data (2022), '[Excess mortality during the Coronavirus pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#)'

<sup>8</sup> For an overview, see 80,000 Hours (2017), '[Howie Lempel on why we aren't worried enough about the next pandemic — and specifically what we can do to stop it.](#)'

sophisticated philosophical arguments: after all, everyone living today once belonged to a future generation. For instance, young people in many of the most vulnerable regions in the world are today suffering the consequences of extreme weather events<sup>9</sup> exacerbated by actions (or inaction) taken when these people were not yet born. Yet it still stands to reason that these consequences could and should have counted as major considerations in setting aspects of climate policy.

Concern for future generations marks a common thread through a great number of cultures, religions, philosophies, and other value systems. To give one example, the constitution of the Iroquois Nations of North America advises leaders to “[l]ook and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground — the unborn of the future[.]”<sup>10</sup> Another example might be Confucian attitudes to intergenerational responsibilities, which derive from conceptions of a “ceaseless life-generating future world”<sup>11</sup>.

Moreover, UN demographic projections indicate that the majority of people yet to be born this century will be born and live in the Global South. In particular, Africa is projected to see the largest increases in fertility<sup>12</sup>. A call to consider future generations in international governance is, then, in large part a call to consider the Global South — bolstering existing efforts to adequately represent Global South interests on the international stage.

These projections also suggest that most people who will live in the 21st century belong to future generations. Indeed, projecting even further forward, it appears entirely plausible<sup>13</sup> that future generations far outnumber all those who have ever lived: that the great majority of people have yet to be born.

These various considerations, linking present and future, already inform the core framework for the multilateral system as a whole. The 1987 [Our Common Future](#) report captures a core guiding principle to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Put another way, addressing urgent challenges is a necessary step towards improving the world for future generations, and the interests of future generations provide further reason and grounding for addressing urgent, present-day challenges.

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<sup>9</sup> Carbon Brief (2022), [‘Mapped: How climate change affects extreme weather around the world’](#)

<sup>10</sup> Article 28 of the Constitution of the Iroquois people (‘Great Law of Peace’)

<sup>11</sup> Teng, F. (2018), [‘Moral Responsibilities to Future Generations: A Comparative Study on Human Rights Theory and Confucianism’](#)

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Population Division, [‘World Population Prospects’](#)

<sup>13</sup> Toby Newberry (2021), [‘How many lives does the future hold?’](#)



In sum, improving the world for future generations is an urgent challenge, fit for the present moment. The Sustainable Development Goals create a powerful starting point for this sentiment, and a Declaration on Future Generations can further advance and institutionalise this central aspect of the spirit of the SDGs (and their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals), by putting attention to future generations at the heart of the multilateral agenda. As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development notes: “[t]he future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands.”

## 2. WHAT SHOULD A DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS CONTAIN?

To be effective, a Declaration on Future Generations should contain:

1. An affirmation of the value of future generations and a commitment to promote and protect their interests alongside our own.
2. A clear statement of the challenges they face.

This section explores the content of these elements in more detail, while the final section turns to the broader institutionalisation of the Declaration.

A critical point of departure is parsimony. A clear, focused approach is critical to the success of any multilateral declaration. For example, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) consists of fewer than 1800 words (in English), spanning just 30 short articles of a few sentences each. For as expansive a subject as 'future generations', a key challenge is therefore to communicate a substantive and compelling set of principles in concise, accessible terms. To achieve an effective result, drafters will need to overcome the inevitable incentives and pressures to string together a long list of parochial interests and pet issues which may not stand the test of time. Following the Universal Declaration, the text should be made inclusive through explicitly generalist language.

Given this need for both concision and precision, it is imperative that a Declaration on Future Generations do two things: present a **clear understanding of future generations** and their relationship to the present, and hone in on the **core challenges that affect future generations**. We suggest four interconnected areas of substantive focus: a sustainable planet, responsible development of technology, existential risk, and long-term development.

### Understanding 'future generations'

Those who belong to 'future generations' are those who will one day live — in the generations that come after ours. These people are not yet born, but their lives will one day be as real as anyone else's.

Young people have a special affinity with future generations, because they most recently belonged to a future generation, and because — like future generations — their promise lies ahead. In both lacking important kinds of enfranchisement, and in some cases being separated only by a matter of years, young people and future generations often make natural allies. At the same time, it is important to understand that 'future generations' does not refer to young people alive today. Rather, it captures all those people who do not yet live, but will. For this reason, 'future generations' should be understood not in the literal sense of demographic strata, but rather as a way of

referring to all people yet to be born. While it is important to recognise the affinities between young people today and those who will follow them, lumping future generations and young people into the same category risks diminishing the special needs of both groups. Both deserve specific consideration.

In the year 1945 — the year the United Nations was founded — most people now alive belonged to future generations. Similarly, even limiting our time horizon to 2100, there are considerably more people yet to be born in the 21st century than are alive today<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup>; and our actions are already decisively influencing the lives of these children and grandchildren of present generations.

Yet future generations also extend beyond our future children, or grandchildren. Our species is more than 200,000 years old<sup>16</sup><sup>17</sup>. We belong to roughly the 10,000<sup>th</sup> generation of humans<sup>18</sup>. Looking ahead, there are no clear reasons to rule out similar numbers of future generations. If future generations extend far into the future, their lives will outnumber ours many times over<sup>19</sup>.

The question of what responsibilities we have toward future generations is similar to the question of what past generations did for us. Just as we celebrate past generations for their foresight in making choices which improved the world today<sup>20</sup>, so we should consider how to pass that kind of consideration forward, toward the future. In the long succession of human generations, each generation inherits an obligation to preserve what is best of the past; and to steward the present on behalf of those yet to come. In this way, concern for future generations can be grounded in a concern to build a better future, and also to preserve and steward the past.

Therefore: for a Declaration on Future Generations, it is imperative that we define the object accurately as encompassing all future people, yet to be born. Properly drafted and implemented, a Declaration on Future Generations could be amongst the most important inheritances humanity can create for our successors many centuries hence, while also refocusing effort on doing what is needed *today* to steer in the right direction.

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), '[World Fertility and Family Planning 2020](#)'

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Population Division, '[World Population Prospects](#)'

<sup>16</sup> Vidal et al. (2022), '[Age of the oldest known Homo sapiens from eastern Africa](#)'

<sup>17</sup> Hublin et al. (2017), '[New fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the pan-African origin of Homo sapiens](#)'

<sup>18</sup> Chris Stringer and Julia Galway-Witham (2018), '[When did modern humans leave Africa?](#)'

<sup>19</sup> Our World in Data (2022), '[The Future is Vast: Longtermism's perspective on humanity's past, present, and future](#)'

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the international effort to eradicate smallpox, or the '[Green Revolution](#)' in agriculture.

## Which policy issues particularly concern future generations?

Countless issues addressed by the United Nations influence future generations in some way. For instance, addressing climate change matters not just because of its impacts on living people, but also people who will one day be born into a world which may be more or less hospitable — contingent on our decisions today. In many cases, *most* of the people who will be affected by such decisions belong to future generations.

But effective declarations have force when they are clear about their scope and remit: when they focus most squarely on those issues which are essential to their subject. A Declaration on Future Generations should therefore focus on those themes that markedly concern future generations. Effectively representing future generations may not be a matter of giving them *some* say in every issue, but in giving them *substantial* say in the issues that would affect them *most*.

What are these issues? We argue that the issues that matter most for the lives of future generations are those where our choices about them last far into the future, have an important effect on that future, and which we, collectively, have control over. Such issues are difficult to identify, and so we propose four key perspectives with which to view and discover them: long-term **sustainability**, stewardship of **emerging technology**, **existential risk** (including those that relate to sustainability and technology, but also others), and long-term **development**.

### Sustainable planet

Since the [Brundtland Declaration](#), [Millennium Development Goals](#), and later the [SDGs](#), the sustainability of all human activity with regard to the health of the planet has been established as a central guiding principle of the United Nations.

Building on this theme, a Declaration on Future Generations should reinforce the meaning of 'sustainability' as grounded in the interests of future generations, while preserving the vital link to the ongoing needs of the present — particularly those suffering from structural inequalities and underdevelopment. This doesn't just mean repeating well-established language, but rather linking the concept to a more concrete conceptualisation of the needs of future generations and our duties toward them. Doing so opens up new perspectives on *why* sustainability matters, and helps avoid short-sighted mistakes in interpreting what sustainability should mean.

A useful guiding principle is *long-term sustainability*, which can be understood as *acting to protect and enhance the autonomy of present and future generations over their own futures*. In this way, protecting the long-term future is a key form of sustainability. But because the coming decades may see a time of heightened risks<sup>21</sup>, reaching long-term sustainability involves charting the best *path* into the future — judiciously

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<sup>21</sup> Such as from powerful but poorly managed technologies.

navigating through those risks — rather than simply aiming to sustain an unstable status quo.

Consider the concept of ‘intertemporal freedom’ as developed by the German Federal Court in [Neubauer et al versus Germany](#), discussed in the context of climate change. Part of the decision reads: “...one generation must not be allowed to consume large portions of the CO2 budget while bearing a relatively minor share of the reduction effort if this would involve leaving subsequent generations with a drastic reduction burden and expose their lives to comprehensive losses of freedom [...] the objective duty of protection arising from Art. 20a GG encompasses the necessity to treat the natural foundations of life with such care and to leave them in such condition that future generations who wish to continue preserving these foundations are not forced to engage in radical abstinence.”<sup>22</sup> While the decision concerns climate change, a more general lesson might be drawn from it: that long-term sustainability might be constructively framed around sustaining freedoms and autonomies, now and into future generations. In turn, this framing suggests a guiding reason to care about sustainability as applied to particular resources and practices.

### Responsible stewardship of emerging technology

The considerations above point towards an ethic of *sustainable technological progress*. Technological advances deliver new and more accessible creative capabilities to ever-increasing numbers of people: abundant energy, medical advances, labor-saving devices, and access to the internet. But advances can also enable destructive capabilities: we only need consider the development of the atomic bomb. In the coming century, the frontiers of technological progress may open ever more powerful creative and destructive potential. An ethic of sustainable technological progress requires ensuring that such progress does not risk undermining its own gains through misuse or accident; and is instead safe enough to continue to benefit generations to come.

Why include emerging technologies as a central theme of a Declaration on Future Generations? As mentioned above, we suggest that the issues which matter most for the lives of future generations are those where our choices about them last far into the future, have an important effect on that future, and which we, collectively, have control over. Few issues meet all three conditions, but questions around how we collectively navigate the arrival of powerful new technologies in the coming decades stand out<sup>23</sup>. This is because in the coming decades, certain emerging technologies may

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<sup>22</sup> Federal Constitutional Court of Germany (2021), [Judgment on Neubauer et al versus Germany](#) (English translation)

<sup>23</sup> Toby Ord and Nick Beckstead, [Managing existential risk from emerging technologies](#). In M Walport (ed.) *Annual report of the government chief scientific advisor 2014. Innovation: Managing Risk, Not Avoiding It. Evidence and Case Studies*. (London: Government Office for Science), 115–120, 2014.

come to pose unprecedented and potentially large global risks<sup>24</sup>, some potentially existential (see below). These can be managed through careful foresight and coordinated action. In particular, experts scanning the horizon for such technologies have identified advanced artificial intelligence<sup>25</sup> and (synthetic) biotechnology<sup>26</sup> as areas of special concern. These new powers might well threaten great disruptions, and could even pose the risk of catastrophe that persists long into the future or even causes human extinction. Or they might otherwise dramatically shape the world the future generations inherit.

In nuclear weaponry, we already have a clear example of a once-novel technology with the power to shape the long-term future. We should only expect the transformative power of technology to increase over time. Experts on advanced biotechnology and artificial intelligence warn about the power of those technologies to shape the lives of future generations, often in irreversible or destructive ways. Although such warnings must necessarily be speculative in advance of these technologies properly materialising, it is still prudent to take notice.

Today, little serious effort is spent on anticipating long-term futures and on the forces that are likely to influence the lives of future people. Shorter-term considerations are often simply more pressing. Yet the longer the time horizon considered, the less we can assume stasis, and the more important are diligent attempts to anticipate new technological developments.

The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) shows how expert knowledge can be constructively combined and presented in a way that shapes the most important decisions around climate change. In a similar way, we would do well to draw on the expertise of the scientists and researchers across the world already trying to identify trends and developments in technology that may crucially affect future generations. This is no small ask: mere speculation or fanciful guesswork is not likely to be useful. Rather, we must make a pointed and serious effort to integrate the best available evidence, quantify and compare the trends which appear most significant, and produce reports which carry genuine credibility.

This might involve new institutions for information gathering and reporting, making use of our growing understanding of forecasting tools and best practices<sup>27</sup>. These best practices are especially crucial in the case of risks which, by their nature, do not admit of second chances. This is a great challenge for a species that often learns about new

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<sup>24</sup> From eg accidents or unforeseen consequences.

<sup>25</sup> [The Reith Lectures](#) (2021)

<sup>26</sup> Greg Lewis (2020), '[Reducing global catastrophic biological risks](#)'

<sup>27</sup> See Philip Tetlock and Ezra Karger (2022), '[Improving Judgments of Existential Risk: Better Forecasts, Questions, Explanations, Policies](#)', Barbera Mellers et al. (2014), '[Identifying and Cultivating Superforecasters as a Method of Improving Probabilistic Predictions](#)', and Tetlock, P. E. & Gardner, D. (2015), *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*.

hazards through trial and error. In this domain of risks that could threaten every future generation to come, we must instead apply careful and rigorous foresight. Yet the success of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) demonstrates the great promise — indeed, necessity — of international institutions for aggregating knowledge about such critical issues.

Foresight should in turn guide action to ensure that future generations benefit from and are safeguarded against the new powers of emerging technologies. Currently, too few efforts are being diverted to this end, compared to the end of simply advancing technological capabilities. For instance, the [Biological Weapons Convention](#) has a modest yearly budget comparable to a single fast-food restaurant<sup>28</sup>. The world still appears to spend more on ice cream than on securing life for future generations through reducing risks from emerging technologies<sup>29</sup>.

### Managing and monitoring existential risks

The cases where considering future generations is most crucial are those where our choices stand to have very significant and very long-lasting effects. The clearest such cases are called *existential risks*<sup>30</sup>.

Existential risks are global risks that threaten to permanently curtail humanity's long-term potential to continue a desirable existence — eliminating opportunities for flourishing and autonomy for *all* generations hence<sup>31</sup>. Human extinction is one clear example of such a catastrophe, but so is an unrecoverable collapse of civilisation. In general, an existential risk is any risk that threatens the permanent destruction of the possibility for future generations to survive and flourish long into the future.

Challenges of sustainability and managing technology could rise to the level of existential risks (and as discussed above, even if they do not, their impacts on future generations are profound). But existential risks need not be limited to these spheres.

It is important to stress that this definition should explicitly encompass even low-probability risks. The rationale is straightforward. As individuals, it pays for us to (for instance) consider the risk of a traffic accident each time we enter a vehicle, and accordingly to wear a seat belt — even if the chance of a life-endangering accident for each particular drive is less than one percent. Similarly, because so much is at stake, it would be reckless not to consider even those risks which, on balance, appear very unlikely.

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<sup>28</sup> BWC ISU (2019). [Biological Weapons Convention—Budgetary and Financial Matters](#) (January 21, 2019, Letter from BWC Implementation Support Unit to BWC Representatives).

<sup>29</sup> Toby Ord (2020), *The Precipice*, fn. 56, pp. 312–313

<sup>30</sup> Toby Ord (2020), *The Precipice* p. 6, Introduction

<sup>31</sup> Nick Bostrom, '[Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority](#)' (2013)

One such risk is the threat of nuclear war. The 1945 [Trinity test](#) marked the first moment in our history where humanity acquired the power to destroy itself; months before the United Nations was founded. Indeed, the [UN Charter](#) begins with a commitment to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”; and the very first resolution adopted by the General Assembly calls for a commission “to deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy”<sup>32</sup>. Yet the risk from nuclear war<sup>33 34</sup> remains with us<sup>35</sup>.

Extreme climate change may pose a similar threat. A large amount of warming, perhaps caused by runaway mechanisms we do not yet fully understand, might cause comparable long-lasting devastation<sup>36</sup>. Yet even if extreme climate change does not prove enough to threaten all future generations irrecoverably, it might yet act as a risk *factor*, destabilising humanity at a time where security against other existential risks is needed most. By exacerbating other risks, like pandemics or conflict, climate change's aggregate impact may be truly existential.

A growing number of researchers and academics<sup>37</sup> across the world now work on understanding which issues, like nuclear war, deadly pathogens, or climate change, pose the greatest threat to humanity's prospects<sup>38</sup>. They have suggested that the most concerning risks may come from emerging technologies, such as advanced biotechnology<sup>39</sup>, and in particular from powerful artificial intelligence systems which are not aligned with human values<sup>40 41</sup>. Yet we cannot be confident that we have fully mapped the most significant existential risks — we should also make explicit provision for the possibility of as-yet unknown risks.

Existential risks pose a global challenge. Protections against such risks are *global public goods*, because the present and future generations of every nation benefit from protections from any single actor. This gives a reason to expect that individual nations are under-rewarded for such protections and hence are not incentivised to adequately supply them, because they capture a small fraction of the benefits. By providing a

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations, [Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy \(1946\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> Carl Sagan (1983), '[Nuclear War and Climatic Catastrophe: Some Policy Implications](#)'

<sup>34</sup> Robock et al. (2007), '[Nuclear winter revisited with a modern climate model and current nuclear arsenals: Still catastrophic consequences](#)'

<sup>35</sup> Our World In Data (2022), '[Estimated nuclear warhead stockpiles, 1945 to 2022](#)'

<sup>36</sup> Yew-Kwang Ng (2016), '[The Importance of Global Extinction in Climate Change Policy](#)'

<sup>37</sup> Such as at the [Future of Humanity Institute](#), the [Centre for the Study of Existential Risk](#), the [Nuclear Threat Initiative](#), the [Center for Human Compatible AI](#), the [Future of Life Institute](#), and the [Stanford Existential Risks Initiative](#).

<sup>38</sup> Toby Ord, *The Precipice* (2020) p. 71, Table 3.1.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Snyder-Beattie and Piers Millett, '[Existential Risk and Cost-Effective Biosecurity](#)'

<sup>40</sup> Joe Carlsmith (2022), '[Is Power-Seeking AI an Existential Risk?](#)'

<sup>41</sup> Kelsey Piper (2020), '[The case for taking AI seriously as a threat to humanity](#)'



forum for coordination at the highest level, the United Nations could significantly address this systemic and civilisation-scale problem<sup>42</sup>.

More significantly for our purposes, existential risks pose an intergenerational challenge. By failing to protect against existential risks, ours is not the only generation to pay the price — so does every succeeding future generation. There is a power imbalance here: while we may influence whether future generations get to live and flourish at all, future generations are voiceless<sup>43</sup> to stand up for their own right to life. This is why existential risks ought to be a central priority when considering the interests of future generations.

While the year-on-year probabilities of such risks may appear modest on short timescales, the cumulative risk often becomes unacceptably high when considered over the lifetimes of our children, and their children after that. The COVID-19 pandemic is, unfortunately, an ideal illustration: while the chance of a natural global pandemic in a single political cycle may have appeared sufficiently low to ignore, we learned that we cannot, eventually, ignore such risks. An attitude which more seriously considered the interest of future generations might not have made such a grave mistake.<sup>44</sup>

That said, however, we do not aim to suggest that existential risks only become a priority once we consider the interests of many successive future generations, nor that the total risk is especially small. Even limiting our concern to those alive today, the total efforts being directed towards mitigating very large-scale risks seems imprudently small, by a large and frightening margin<sup>45</sup>.

A Declaration on Future Generations should not assume that future generations have the opportunity to live and thrive, but acknowledge our collective responsibility to ensure that they do. That is why the management of existential risks must be a priority within it. Concern for future generations does not just mean concern for the generations that we can be sure will come after us, but also a concern for ensuring generations have the opportunity to live in the first place.

## Long-term development

Benefitting future generations means safely and sustainably building a thriving world for people born into future generations to inhabit. The previous three themes — **existential risks**, **sustainable planet**, and **responsible stewardship of emerging technology** —

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<sup>42</sup>Toby Ord, [Existential risks to humanity](#). In P Conceicao (ed.) *Human Development Report 2020*. (New York: The United Nations Development Programme), 106–11. 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Tyler John and William MacAskill (2020), '[Longtermist institutional reform](#)'

<sup>44</sup> For instance, we might have bolstered the staffing, funding, or global mandate for [teams](#) like the [Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network](#) within the WHO to enable them to rapidly respond to new outbreaks — even if the chance of a pandemic-potential outbreak each year is low.

<sup>45</sup> 80,000 Hours (2021), '[Carl Shulman on the common-sense case for existential risk work and its practical implications](#)'

highlighted conditions for sustained progress to be possible at all. These themes lay the groundwork for long-term human development.

The number of people living in extreme poverty across the world fell from 36% in 1990 to 10% in 2015<sup>46</sup>. But more than 700 million people still live in extreme poverty today<sup>47</sup>. We made progress on this first Sustainable Development Goal through proactively responding to human deprivation by humanitarian means, and through the diffuse benefits of long-run economic growth. Although the benefits of world economic growth might feel imperceptible on short timescales, improvements wrought by steady, sustainable growth are unignorable on timescales that include future generations. Even at a modest global growth rate of [two per cent per year](#), the world economy doubles every 35 years, and quadruples every 70. Adopting the perspective of future generations further brings into focus the benefits of long-run economic growth — provided the gains from growth are disbursed fairly and equitably<sup>48</sup>.

Yet long-term *economic growth* is not sufficient for long-term *development*. For example, when growth is highly concentrated in the hands of a narrow part of a population it may contribute little to broader development, or even come at the expense of better wellbeing for others. We should take a holistic definition of human development and human security, encompassing material wellbeing, but also physical and mental health, resource security, peace, and security within and across borders.

At current rates, we are leaving future generations with problems that may be worse tomorrow than they are today. But this should not obscure the recognition that we can and should pass on a world that is in many respects much brighter than it is today. And so on across multiple generations: there is room for *many* great strides of progress. *That* succeeding future generations will inhabit and build upon whatever world we leave to them should be a great motivation to make stubborn progress on the SDGs even in the face of acute crises like COVID-19.

So as not to lose sight of the possibility of long-term progress, we might consider some major examples:

- In the late 1960s, the World Health Organization agreed on a bold plan to eradicate [smallpox](#), a disease which had claimed some 500 million lives up to that point. In December 1979, a commission declared success: smallpox was the first human disease ever to have been eradicated.
- In the 1980s, atmospheric scientists raised the alarm that various human-manufactured substances were damaging the earth's ozone layer. The Montreal protocol was adopted in 1987, and the treaty (alongside subsequent revisions) is

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<sup>46</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals, [1: No Poverty](#)

<sup>47</sup> World Bank (2018), ['Decline of Global Extreme Poverty Continues but Has Slowed'](#)

<sup>48</sup> Tyler Cowen (2007), ['Caring about the Distant Future: Why It Matters and What It Means'](#)

now universally ratified. Ozone-depleting emissions [declined dramatically](#), averting the worst effects of ozone depletion.

- The fraction of people living in [extreme poverty](#) fell from around 75% in 1900 to less than 10% in 2015 (and the absolute numbers are declining also). Over the same period, [child mortality](#) fell from over 35% to less than 5%, and the number of people living in a [democracy](#) increased from around 10% to more than 50 percent globally.

That we can choose to continue making progress well into the future should inspire and ground present-day efforts to work on the biggest challenges of the present, and ensure for posterity that those challenges never recur.

It may be worth noting that we have not suggested trying to understand the precise needs, preferences, or values of future generations. That is not because these questions don't matter, but rather because the themes we have emphasised are compatible with a wide range of answers. Therefore, as long as we do face significant existential risks and other threats to the autonomy of succeeding generations to choose their own futures, then we might prioritise a focus on mitigating these threats over efforts to anticipate the needs or values of future generations with precision.

Equally, it is critical to emphasise that a concern for future generations applies to *all* those who belong to future generations, without discrimination or distinction of any kind, such as by race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, or age. For present generations, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) is non-discriminatory and truly universal in extent. A Declaration on Future Generations should strive to be the same. No group should feel such a document does not encompass their own future members.

### 3. BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS

Future generations have already been considered in national and international legal instruments. As such, a Declaration on Future Generations would be legitimising a real and growing interest in representing future generations, not fabricating an issue without firm precedent and popular support.

One survey<sup>49</sup> found that the number of national written constitutions that constitutionalised future generations “went from a handful to 41% of all constitutions as of 2021 (81 out of 196)”. For instance, Tunisia’s constitution of 2014 references future

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<sup>49</sup> Leonie Koessler and Renan Araújo, ‘[The Rise of the Constitutional Protection of Future Generations](#)’ (2021)

generations three times<sup>50</sup>, including in a provision creating a Commission for Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations. It mentions “the necessity of [...] bequeathing a secure life to future generations” and asserts “The state shall protect cultural heritage and guarantees it for future generations.” Article 20a of Germany's constitution<sup>51</sup> underlines “its responsibility toward future generations”, which in 2021 the Federal Constitutional Court ruled was justiciable, suggesting the extension of a right to life and health to future generations. The constitutions of both Niger<sup>52</sup> and South Sudan<sup>53</sup> establish funds explicitly dedicated to future generations.

And the protection of future generations is not only a formality: courts worldwide have enforced it on multiple occasions. Recently, the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany used Article 20a to impose obligations on the German government related to curbing climate change.<sup>54 55</sup> Or consider Brazil, where the Federal Supreme Court has recognised several rights of future generations, such as to a healthy environment and life.<sup>56</sup>

Beyond written constitutions, offices and other legal instruments are becoming increasingly widespread. To list some examples: the [Finnish Parliamentary Committee for the Future](#), the [Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) and [Future Generations Commissioner](#), and the [Singapore Center for Strategic Futures](#).

Provisions for future generations already exist at the *international* level also. We have already referenced the 1987 Brundtland Report. The UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations<sup>57</sup> affirms that “at this point in history, the very existence of humankind and its environment are threatened”<sup>58</sup>; that “present generations should strive to ensure the maintenance and perpetuation of humankind”<sup>59</sup>; and that “[s]cientific and technological progress should not in any way impair or compromise the preservation of the human and other species”<sup>60</sup>. Very recently, a resolution passed “[r]ecognising that sustainable

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<sup>50</sup> [Constitution of Tunisia](#), 2014, preamble; id., art. 42; id., art. 129

<sup>51</sup> [Constitution of Germany](#), 1949, art. 20a (article added in 1994)

<sup>52</sup> [Constitution of Niger](#), 2010, art. 153

<sup>53</sup> [Constitution of South Sudan](#), 2011, art. 178, 3

<sup>54</sup> Renan Araújo and Leonie Koessler, “[A Novel German Precedent for Protecting Future Generations](#)” (2021)

<sup>55</sup> German Federal Constitutional Court, [1 BvR 2656/18](#), [1 BvR 288/20](#), [1 BvR 96/20](#), [1 BvR 78/20](#) (2021)

<sup>56</sup> Brazilian Federal Supreme Court, ADPF n.º 101/DF (2012), REsp n.º 1.071.741/SP (2010).

<sup>57</sup> UNESCO, [Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations](#), 1997

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, preamble

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 3

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 6

development [...] and the protection of the environment[...] promote human well-being and the full enjoyment of all human rights, for present and future generations”<sup>61</sup>.

As a foundation for the theme of existential risks, the Sendai framework<sup>62</sup> underlines that “[e]ach State has the primary responsibility to prevent and reduce disaster risk”<sup>63</sup>, including the “[r]isk of causing significant transboundary harm”<sup>64</sup> and “based on an understanding of disaster risk in all its dimensions”<sup>65</sup>. Of course, the [Our Common Agenda](#) report itself mentions “existential risk” on three occasions, and suggests: “An effort is warranted to better define and identify the extreme, catastrophic and existential risks that we face.”

And although the number of protections is growing, legal experts across the world see scope for considerably more representation of future generations. One survey of legal academics<sup>66</sup> found that a large global sample of law professors “widely consider the protection of future generations to be an issue of utmost importance that can be addressed through legal intervention”; that they “desire more than three times the perceived current protection for humans living in the far future”, and that “the gap between the average desired and perceived current level of protection was higher for humans living in the far future than for any other group surveyed”.

A Declaration on Future Generations would mark the culmination of a long series of precedents — lending legitimacy to existing instruments, and perhaps inspiring more. In turn, these precedents show that protections for future generations are not special or unusual, though they do require greater reinforcement and operationalization.

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<sup>61</sup> [The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#), United Nations (2022)

<sup>62</sup> UN Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, 14-18 March 2015, para 15. Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 3 June 2015 via resolution A/RES/69/283.

<sup>63</sup> UN Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, 14-18 March 2015, para 15. Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 3 June 2015 via resolution A/RES/69/283.

<sup>64</sup> International Law Commission, Articles on Prevention of Transboundary Harm from Hazardous Activities, 23 April-1 June and 2 July-10 August 2001. Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 January 2002 via resolution A/RES/56/82.

<sup>65</sup> Para 24(a).

<sup>66</sup> Eric Martinez and Christoph Winter, ‘[Protecting Future Generations: A Global Survey of Legal Academics](#)’ (2021)

## 4. INSTITUTIONAL ELEMENTS OF A DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS AND WHAT THEY CAN ACHIEVE

Declarations are not panaceas. Adjusting the tools human societies use to govern themselves in order to account properly for long-term challenges and future generations is a monumental transformation, akin to the advent of multilateralism itself. Governments at all levels, as well as other parts of society, will need to invest more time and energy in understanding long-term processes and risks, and develop institutions and approaches that help them avoid the traps of short-termism. For example, we may expect governments to embed foresight into decision-making processes, create new institutions that serve as trustees for future generations, or set more long-term goals. Other multilateral processes, especially in areas related to development, the environment, technology, and risk, may refer to the declaration as a way to bolster the long-term robustness of their own decisions.

But while a larger transformation will ultimately be needed across the multilateral, regional, national, and subnational levels, and across society as a whole, a Declaration on Future Generations can provide both a critical catalyst and guidestar. It both points to what is needed and sets up institutions that can over time build up toward the realisation of its objectives. We identify three institutional elements a Declaration could advance and outline what substantive outcomes each could achieve over time.

### A set of principles charting a dynamic compact between present and future generations

The core of a Declaration on Future Generations would be a set of principles that create a dynamic compact between present generations and future generations in perpetuity. These high-level principles could include the following elements:

1. A recognition of the moral worth of future generations.
2. A corresponding duty of present generations to act in a way that protects future generations.
3. Specific principles regarding how this duty should manifest with respect to the core topics identified above, viz:
  - a. Sustainable planet
  - b. Responsible stewardship of emerging technology
  - c. Managing and monitoring existential risks
  - d. Long-term development
4. A commitment to perpetually review and reaffirm the principles once per generation (say, every 25 years) allowing for updating of the principles within (3) while maintaining continuity in (1) and (2). This reflexive feature would make the Declaration a highly innovative international legal document, helping it balance endurance with adaptability.

A compelling and authoritative set of principles can be expected to have political, normative, and legal effects.

*Politically*, the Declaration would show that the world is responding to the urgency of present crises in a way that goes beyond mere fire-fighting. It would raise the salience of the long-term aspects of present challenges. By doing so, it would serve to empower policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates to advance more effective solutions to, for example, present challenges around pandemic preparedness, debt restructuring, or climate action. A Declaration on Future Generations could bolster such efforts by making them not just piecemeal responses to a wide array of present challenges, but part of a longer-term project of creating a positive legacy for future people.

*Normatively*, the Declaration would consolidate the emerging ethical consensus, deeply rooted in the moral traditions of human societies, on the value of human life in the future. Just as national constitutions have brought people together around a shared endeavor bound by mutual moral obligations, and international human rights documents have identified the intrinsic value of all human beings across countries, so can a Declaration on Future Generations solidify our ethical commitments to future people. By making these commitments explicit, a Declaration on Future Generations sends an important signal to governments, to stakeholders, and ultimately to individuals that we *should* extend our moral horizons into the future. Indeed, as noted above, this idea is already found in numerous human value systems and embedded in over 40 per cent of national constitutions.

As more and more people and institutions take on this extended perspective — already immanent in so many of our moral intuitions and traditions across the world — we can expect individuals, organisations, and countries to increasingly act in a way consistent with the interests of future generations. While normative shifts of this kind are certainly not panaceas (for example, the widespread acceptance and internalisation of human rights norms over the last decades does not automatically prevent violations of those norms), they nonetheless create a powerful influence on individual and collective behavior, particularly as they aggregate and solidify over time. In this way, a Declaration on Future Generations could be an important part of a “norm cascade”<sup>67</sup> advancing the welfare of future generations.

*Legally*, a Declaration on Future Generations could create an important building block for greater institutionalisation of future generations at all levels of governance. As the previous section documented, provisions regarding future generations are a common feature of international and national legal instruments. The legal rights of future generations are also an increasing subject of jurisprudence in a range of legal systems. Building on these bodies of law, a Declaration on Future Generations could codify and

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<sup>67</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics and Political Change’ (1998)

reaffirm the importance of future generations. While a declaration would not itself create new substantive legal obligations on countries or other entities, it could serve as a source of inspiration and a reference point for efforts to embed legal protections for future generations in treaties, laws, constitutions, specific legal rulings, or other instruments, decisions, and fora.<sup>68</sup>

## An institutionalised voice for future generations in the UN system

To operationalise the principles in the Declaration, a wide array of governance reforms will ultimately be needed at all scales. Amongst these, perhaps the top priority in the near term is to institutionalise a voice for future generations into the UN system, establishing a designated individual and office charged with advancing the principles of the Declaration. Many parts of the UN system are already working on matters relevant to future generations. A voice for future generations would not duplicate these, but rather seek to connect them and galvanise greater action toward the interests of future generations across all policy domains.

An institutionalised voice for future generations in the UN could hold the following roles and responsibilities:

1. Generate regular reports and other accessible knowledge products (eg videos) to enhance present understanding of future risks and challenges, and outline different options for the multilateral system, governments, and other stakeholders to address them. Draw on domain experts and up-to-date evidence to evaluate major risks to future generations. Embrace the multidisciplinary nature of the problem by facilitating communication between research specialists.
2. Provide a degree of accountability by reviewing key UN decisions and outputs and reporting on where the needs of future generations are / are not well addressed, informed by (1). This would help to ensure that the interests of future generations are represented in multilateral decision-making.
3. Advocate for all UN member states and other stakeholders to mainstream the principles of the Declaration, including supporting them to do so via capacity-building and peer exchanges, serving as a catalyst for the ideas in the Declaration.

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<sup>68</sup> In this sense the trajectory of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) offers a useful analogy. Emerging in response to the horrors of the Second World War, the UDHR captured the powerful sense at the time that the moral worth of human beings required consolidation and reinforcement. The principles embedded in the document were universally agreed by governments of all kinds as a common set of moral responsibilities, despite the sharp geopolitical tensions emerging around the postwar order. Though the drafters of the UDHR could not anticipate it at the time, the document would become a key building block for the entire modern human rights regime, now consisting of dozens of international treaties, courts, and uncountable national laws and institutions.



4. Convene peer institutions (eg national or sub-national representatives of future generations) around questions of shared interests to exchange and collect information, and collaborate on common projects, serving as a focal point for these efforts in the multilateral system.
5. Develop and diffuse a common vocabulary and set of concepts to support discussion, institutionalisation, and application of the principles.

There are various options for how a voice for future generations could be institutionalised in the UN. For example, the Secretary-General could appoint a Special Representative or Special Envoy. We believe this model would be less effective than creating a more independent and robustly institutionalised model, a High Commissioner for Future Generations. There are only two other such offices in the UN system (for human rights and for refugees). Given the expansive scope of work required to address future generations, their voice within the UN system requires substantial resources and standing.

## A forum for future generations in the UN

Alongside a set of principles and an institutionalised voice, a dedicated multilateral forum is needed to give substance to the Declaration. As noted above, attention to future generations is needed across all levels of governance, and by all entities and stakeholders. A forum provides an ongoing multilateral process and 'space' for countries and other actors to continue working together on instantiating the declaration in their own individual work, and also collectively. It would provide a body to which the representatives for future generations in the UN system could report, and otherwise serve as a focal point for discussion of future generations in the international system. Such would advance the objectives of the Declaration in three primary ways.

1. **Peer learning and exchange.** A forum on future generations would provide a valuable way for member states and stakeholders to enhance their capacities to advance the interests of future generations. Countries and other actors could share the approaches, institutions, and commitments they are taking to advance the interests of future generations. This information would facilitate the exchange of best practices and help identify common challenges or blockages. At the same time, such a forum could function as an interface between countries and domain experts, who can share research and insight into solutions for emerging risks and navigate powerful emerging technologies. In this way the forum would serve as a tool for countries to learn from and share with each other to promote their common project of protecting future generations. Such exchange occurs regularly in other domains, for example through multilateral fora like the High-level Political Forum for the SDGs, or through less formal intergovernmental networks like the Open Government Network (for data transparency), the International Network for Environmental Compliance and

Enforcement (for environmental regulation), the International Competition Network (for antitrust policy).

2. **Collective action for future generations.** While the forum on future generations would not be a decision-making body, it could serve as an important venue for countries to develop cooperative approaches around the needs and interests of future generations. These could take the form of standalone statements or recommendations to the General Assembly or other UN bodies. While more specialised fora would be more appropriate for decision-making (eg climate issues are dealt with in the UNFCCC, health issues in the WHO, etc) the forum on future generation could provide an important complement by considering especially 1) cross-cutting issues that cover more than one functional domain; 2) gaps in the current array of multilateral fora. The latter may be particularly critical for the interests of future generations, as it creates a capacity to address new or emerging issues beyond those current governance instruments are designed to address.

There are various ways a forum on future generations could be implemented. Perhaps the most weighty institutional form would be to repurpose the UN Trusteeship Council, one of the original six primary organs of the UN, to the cause of future generations. Conceived to oversee the process of decolonisation that followed World War II, the Trusteeship Council ceased operations in 1994. A renewed Trusteeship Council dedicated to future generations, or including future generations as one of several elements of its mandate, would place the long term at the heart of the multilateral system.

Alternatively, a forum on future generations could be created as a subsidiary of the General Assembly, as a new standalone council (like the Human Rights Council), or even as an informal grouping of interested member states. The forum may also grow through different institutional forms over time, for example beginning as a network and then growing into a more formalised multilateral body over time.

Finally, an existing intergovernmental body could expand its mandate to become a general purpose forum for future generations. For example, the High-level Political Forum was created to oversee development of the SDGs through 2030. Looking beyond 2030, it could be upgraded to include a longer-term mandate for future generations overall, while also expanding the scope of its work.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In an era of present-day 'polycrisis', and future crises that are unprecedented in their nature and gravity, we require new governance tools. A Declaration on Future Generations could spur renewed efforts to address present crises because they are rooted in longer-term trends like climate change or underdevelopment, and because we need to overcome them to build a more sustainable future for our successors. A Declaration could also catalyze broader governance reforms that could, over time, increase our collective ability to navigate toward a better future for all.

To be effective, such a Declaration should go beyond a simple list of familiar issues, extended straightforwardly toward future generations. To avoid irrelevance as just another exhortative statement, the Declaration must provide a concrete basis for further institutionalising attention to the needs of future generations in the multilateral system and across society as a whole. To this end, a Declaration should:

1. Establish a dynamic compact between present and future generations.
2. Highlight the issues and perspectives which matter most distinctively for future generations, which we suggest include: a new perspective on long-term sustainability, the stewardship of emerging technology, existential risks, and a renewed emphasis on long-term development.
3. Come with institutions to operationalise its goals, namely a voice and a forum for future generations in the multilateral system.

The ideas expressed in the Declaration will not be unprecedented, but rather continuous with a rich seam of thought that spans cultures. Yet the principles the Declaration embodies have not yet been adequately expressed at the international level, much less operationalised into our governance systems.

If successful, a Declaration on Future Generations could mark a significant and vital new purpose for the multilateral system and United Nations: to represent and embrace the interests of all those future generations that stand before us, and who depend on our decisions as a collective humanity.