



The Alliance for Future Generations Rio+20 working group

Rio+20: Open Challenge Paper

The Alliance for Future Generations

The Alliance for Future Generations is a group of individuals and organisations who have agreed to work to ensure that long-termism and the needs of future generations are brought into the heart of UK democracy and policy processes, in order to safeguard the earth and secure intergenerational justice.

This Open Challenge Paper has been developed by members of the Alliance's Rio +20 working group for further discussion within the Alliance and as a basis for the possible development of an overall Alliance position on the process leading to the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD; also referred to as 'Rio + 20') in Rio de Janeiro.

Overview

Sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Commission (1987) is "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*"¹ This open challenge paper suggests that the needs of future generations have been, in recent years, greatly overlooked. These needs must be brought into the heart of the UNCSD, also known as Rio+20, in order to safeguard the earth and secure intergenerational justice.

We propose the establishment of a UN High Commissioner for Future Generations as a mechanism to safeguard long-termism and the needs of future generations at the global level. We also support the urgent appointment of an Assistant Secretary General (ASG) on Youth and Future Generations within the UN as an interim measure until the position of the UN High Commissioner for Future Generations and an associated Commission for Future Generations are established, building on the work of the ASG. At the regional, national and subnational levels, we consider that sustainable development itself demands that every individual nation as well as regional groupings (e.g. the European Union) commit themselves to setting up strategies, mechanisms and institutions to promote long-termism and give due consideration to the needs of future generations.

Context

Since the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, the concept of sustainable development has been incorporated into many UN instruments and its implementation has been taken up by the international community. However, current assessments signal the increasing vulnerability and precariousness of the Earth's ecosystems now and into the future and consequently the lives of both people alive today and those who have yet to be born. We have already breached the safe operating space (or boundaries) for three of nine key planetary systems (climate change, biodiversity loss and excess nitrogen and phosphorus production).² Operating within planetary boundaries is a necessary precondition for sustainability.

Our actions as human beings impact not just other people and our local environment, but the planet and the conditions of life for centuries to come. We have raised global temperatures, destroyed habitats and made countless species extinct. Our consumption patterns underscore a view of

¹Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, United Nations, July 1987 - <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-cf.htm>

²Rockström, J et al. Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society* [online] 14, 32 (2009). www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32.

ecosystems and the planet's natural environment as little more than unlimited and disposable resources. Worse, predicted accelerated consumption will lead inexorably to a series of 'resource peaks' as we use "natural capitals" beyond sustainable levels and further degradation of the ecosystems on which all life depends.

It is commonly agreed that the impacts humans have on the planet are not only growing in magnitude, but they are also growing in consequence. For all their positive achievements, human beings may now have become a negative force on a par with Earth-rending volcanic eruptions.

Spikes in food and energy prices, together with accelerating anthropogenic climate change and rapid global population growth are among the evolving risks that threaten to bring sustainable development to a crisis point. Our current activities: that is our consumption of fossil fuels and water, our uses of chemicals, and the uses to which we put land, are reducing the planet's ability to sustain life. We stand to leave future generations with an impoverished common inheritance.

Humanity faces a situation of gross intergenerational injustice. Future generations will question hardships they face and the sacrifices they are forced to make due to their ancestors' careless, short-termist lifestyles. Likewise, the world's poor people will also question their privations when they observe a widening disparity between their lifestyles and the lifestyles of the rich; generation upon generation. Inequality, over consumption, loneliness, isolation and greed threaten our current collective well-being and threaten greater intergenerational injustice in the future.

Our Challenge to Rio+20

Our challenge to participants in the Rio+20 process is to view the 2012 Conference as a milestone in a global effort to deliver higher regard for the longer-term and the needs of future generations through the way in which they conduct the business of politics and the governance of our nations.

There are already some examples of good practice in national governance approaches. Since 2008, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations has been one of four ombudsmen elected by the unicameral Hungarian Parliament. Around the world, nineteen constitutions refer explicitly to future generations, including those of South Africa, Argentina, Germany, Bolivia and Iran.³ The constitution of the Confederation of the Six Nations of the Iroquois requires leaders to make decisions with the 'Seventh Generation to come' in mind.⁴

These examples of institutional and constitutional trailblazing offer inspiration; building on this there is much more to be done from the local to the global level. A commitment to bring long-termism and future generations into policy processes needs institutional, political and cultural foundations. Any innovation at the national and subnational levels needs support from global institutions and internationally agreed commitments. Rio+20 is the time to demonstrate and craft that support.

People and their representatives must drive the process of transformation that is now so urgently needed to set the world on course for sustainable development. Renewed commitments to public participation and to public right of access to information must therefore be a prominent part of the Rio+20 process and outcomes.

We need international laws, policies and agreements to support long-termism and the needs of future generations. We need highest-level representatives to make decisions with a focus on the long-term, the interests of our children, and the needs of generations yet to be born – wherever in the world they might be.

³Peter Roderick, *Taking the Longer View: UK Governance Options for a Finite Planet*, WWF-UK/FDSD, December 2010, p 22. <http://www.fdsd.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Taking-the-longer-view-December-2010.pdf>

⁴Science and Environmental Health Network/The International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, *Models for Protecting the Environment for Future Generations*, October 2008, http://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/fileadmin/user_upload/papers/Models_for_Protecting_the_Environment_for_Future_Generations.pdf

In so much as we take inspiration from the achievements of past generations and the key decisions that shape our lives, our aspiration is to create the conditions in which future generations may come to see Rio+20 as a significant turning point towards sustainable development.

Rio+20 - A turning point

Three objectives and two themes have been agreed for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. We comment on each in turn below.

1 Objectives

11 Securing Renewed Commitment to Sustainable Development - Putting long-termism and future generations at the heart of Rio+20 is a key element in securing renewed political commitment for sustainable development as defined by the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland report).

- **The nature and content of the renewed political commitment to sustainable development must be clear and unequivocal. It must incorporate a clear recognition that intergenerational justice is an essential component of sustainable development. And it must recognise the biophysical reality of the imperative to remain within overall planetary boundaries. Environment, economy and society must be recognised as the pillars of sustainable development, but against a non-negotiable backdrop of the limits of our planet.**

12 Assessing Progress and Exploring Gaps - Taking a long-term view can support the framing of our assessment of the progress to date and the gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development so far. Many visions for the Earth already exist. A commitment to taking a longer view can underpin efforts to develop a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); to bring the needs of future generations into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and thereby to act on an understanding of longer-term trends, instead of simply taking snapshots of the current situation. We concur with the many critics, including the Sarkozy Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress,⁵ which pointed out that GDP is an inadequate metric through which to gauge well-being over time. There is an important distinction between assessing *current well-being* and assessing *sustainability*. Well-being measures generally portray a snapshot in time, while sustainability shows the trend over time.

- **Preparations for Rio+20 must assess progress on sustainable development to date in terms of a broad set of indicators of well-being and underlying trends over time. Goals and indicators must be developed that give a richer picture of both the current situation and what the future might hold. Only then can appropriate decisions be made on what needs to be done to improve the lives of people in the future as well as the lives of people now.**

13 Address New and Emerging Challenges – Intergenerational justice is very much about building foresight through futures-awareness analysis.⁶ An appropriate focus on the needs of future generations would give us a lens through which we can identify and address new and emerging challenges to sustainability. The risks of past failure to take account of the needs of future generations are arguably illustrated by recent events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, urban unrest in England and rising uneasiness about youth unemployment across the globe.

⁵<http://www.stiglitz-se-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm>

⁶Pentti Malaska, (2000) "Knowledge and information in futurology", foresight, Vol. 2 Iss: 2, pp.237 - 244

- **Rio+20 should provide political recognition that short-termism and lack of regard for the needs of future generations in political processes and decision-making are themselves emerging challenges that need to be addressed at political, institutional and cultural levels. In addition, both short-termism and lack of regard for the needs of future generations undermine efforts to effectively address other new and emerging challenges, such as those highlighted by Rio+20 Secretary General Mr Sha Zukang which include sound water management, improved resilience and disaster preparedness and food security.⁷**

2 Themes

21 Green Economy and Poverty Eradication

Decisions regarding our global economic system should not prioritise current well-being over future well-being. The imperative of eradicating poverty world-wide as soon as possible should not be achieved at the expense of future generations who – left with an impoverished common inheritance – may simply fall back into a poverty trap not of their own making. Furthermore, it is possible to have a 'green', low-carbon economy that allows a minority of the population to live highly affluent but eco-resilient lives, whilst forcing the majority of the population to live on the margins. Such a model would not capture an essential element of sustainability; that of fairness, now and into the future.

Rio+20 must provide a milestone in the development of an ecologically-friendly economy that respects planetary boundaries and actively helps to secure both intergenerational and intragenerational justice.

In support of such a transformed economy, the legal and constitutional frameworks within which businesses operate must not incentivise a focus on short-term financial returns. Instead, they should actively support the adoption of long-term perspectives on business contributions to sustainable development; on long-term benefits of action to achieve sustainability, not only short-term costs.

Assumptions about the future in policy tools applied by governments and others to support economic decision-making should be transparent and publicly accessible. Economic policy tools should never discount future costs and values in such a way as to undermine the potential for future generations to meet their needs.

- **Rio+20 must recast the 'Green Economy' as the 'Green and *Fair* Economy'. For these purposes, fairness must be considered both spatially and temporally.**
- **Rio+20 is an opportunity to formally recognise key environmental limits - such as planetary boundaries - within which we must remain, and the thresholds that we must respect in order to maintain the sustainability of our planet. The signing at Rio + 20 of a 'Declaration on Planetary Boundaries' outlining key principles would show political commitment by attendees to this concept.**
- **International financial and economic institutions must be equipped to take a long-term perspective and play their part in meeting the needs of future generations in ways that maximise their contribution to overall indicators of well-being and sustainability over time.**
- **Governments and businesses participating in Rio+20 must commit to work to remove legal and other obstacles that prevent business managers and workers from acting on long-term perspectives or hamper efforts to develop and implement sustainable development policies.**
- **Governments must commit at Rio+20 to a) transparency about assumptions**

⁷<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?page=view&nr=179&type=8&menu=41&template=356>

on future prices and rates of return that are applied in economic evaluations and other economic policy tools, and b) not discounting the future in ways that undermine the potential for future generations to meet their needs in line with sustainability principles.

22 The Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

Frameworks for the delivery of sustainable development from the international through to the national and down to the local level call for strategies, governance, performance management frameworks and appropriate monitoring and reporting. More qualitatively, but equally important, strong leadership and meaningful accountability from top to bottom are also essential. Due regard for the needs and well-being of future generations needs to be hard-wired into this architecture to ensure that long-termism becomes a matter of course and that appropriate checks and balances are in place.

Regional, national and subnational governments and institutions should use Rio+20 as an opportunity to share ideas on how best to incorporate long-termism and the needs of future generations into regional and domestic policy decisions, including the policy tools and institutional settings that could help to achieve this in ways that respect principles of sustainable development. Examples could include exploring the idea of **guardians for future generations**; applying sustainable development-oriented **foresight or futures methodologies** to public policy decisions; and development of **futures impact assessment tools** that adopt longer time-horizons than those associated with existing impact assessment approaches. The adoption of Sustainable Development Goals at the global level would also provide an underpinning for long-term decision-making and regard for future generations.

- **Rio+20 should mark the beginning of discussions to develop a successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); a broader framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These SDGs should reflect emerging evidence of planetary boundaries and other key long-term trends and projections.**
- **As part of the Declaration on Planetary Boundaries, a Planetary Boundaries Institution should be given the job of promoting and developing the principles of the Declaration.**
- **The political outcomes of Rio+20 need to incorporate a commitment on the part of UN members to develop mechanisms to incorporate long-term thinking and regard for the needs of future generations into decision-making processes. This will not necessarily be achieved through current proposals for strengthening of UNEP, or even the creation of a World Environment Organisation, and must be considered separately.**
- **UN members should commit at Rio+20 to improve governance in order to ensure long-termism and regard for the needs of future generations. For example, a UN High Commissioner for Future Generations would provide a mechanism to safeguard long-termism and the needs of future generations at global level.** However given the urgency of related issues, an Assistant Secretary General (ASG) on Youth and Future Generations should immediately be appointed. This ASG should lead a review of the achievements and shortcomings of UN programmes designed to support youth and future generations, and champion recommendations on how to more effectively address the challenges hindering the development and participation of youth. The creation of such roles would be an enabling and positive step towards providing assurance that long-term care for the earth and its people is at the core of global governance. The UN High Commissioner for Future Generations and an associated Commission on Future Generations would build on this work of the ASG for Youth and Future Generations.

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This Open Challenge Paper has been endorsed as a basis for further discussion by the following individuals and organizations. Save where indicated, all are members of the Alliance for Future Generations.

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