



Why should we care about future generations?



What obligation do we have (if any) to take account of the well-being and rights of people who will be alive in the future when we make our decisions in the present?

This question is one of the primary concerns of intergenerational justice, a branch of philosophy which is relevant to many of today's key political debates, including those surrounding the environment, the economy and the national debt.

Most people would agree that it is not fair to saddle young and future generations with the consequences of the extravagance and profligacy of a living, older generation.

These might seem like vague, unwritten rules of good conduct that we should aspire to, but in fact there are also a number of philosophical theories that underpin such concepts of intergenerational justice. Let us take just one. The American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) approached the subject by applying the “veil of ignorance”. This asks how you would choose to regulate society if you entered the world knowing nothing of your own position in it: your status, wealth, intelligence,

class, gender, abilities and so on. Not knowing if you had any vulnerable disadvantages, you would hope at least to be treated fairly once the veil is lifted – and by extension you would choose principles of justice that are fair for all. That would apply also to justice between generations.

In terms of intergenerational justice, Rawls developed the principle of “just savings”. Society would use enough resources to live comfortably, while being careful to save and pass on enough, so that future generations could do the same.

SUSTAINABILITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

A similar argument can be found in approaches to sustainable development. The 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (also known as the Brundtland Report) came up with this famous definition: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

It is acceptable that there are some differences in status and wealth between living generations: older generations have lived and worked longer, and they might be expected to live in bigger, or more valuable houses. What is not fair is if one generation has easy access to something when young (such as affordable housing, higher education, or generous pension schemes) then later makes it difficult for a younger generation to acquire these same benefits. This is an offence against “distributive justice”: the fair distribution of benefits between generations.

The trouble is that, these days, young people are likely to be significantly worse off than their parents were over the course of their lives, indicating that the older generation have failed in their duties and obligations towards “just savings” and “distributive justice” – and intergenerational justice.



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INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE

We might all agree on the principle of intergenerational justice, but how is this put into practice in today’s world? The answer, too often, is “Badly”.

Despite more than 40 years of warnings from scientists about global warming, so little effective action has been taken that we are now facing a “climate emergency”; young generations are worried about the future of the planet.

Democratic governments tend to be short-sighted, because they focus on winning the next election – a horizon not of generations, but of four or five years at most. Environmental policy, housing, pensions, the health service, prisons, education: too often policies are short-term fixes.

But it is not all bad news. For example, a campaign group called the Goa Foundation, in the Indian state of Goa, has had considerable success in placing Goa’s natural resources under the trusteeship of the state.

Who exactly owns the natural resources of a country – the minerals, the water, the air that we



breathe, the beaches and the sea? Many would argue that these do not belong to individuals or companies, but to the people – and not just people living now, but to their future generations. Goa’s lead has been taken up by the Indian government. In India’s National Mineral Policy 2019, we read: “There is a need to understand that natural resources, including minerals, are a shared inheritance where the state is the trustee on behalf of the people to ensure that future generations receive the benefit of inheritance.”

COMMISSIONERS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Governments can indeed act on behalf of future generations, and create institutions that look across generations to the long-term future.

Wales has a Commissioner for Future Generations, whose job it is to undertake intergenerational impact assessments on all major policy and draft legislation. Many people believe that the UK’s Westminster parliament should – like Wales – have a Commissioner for Future Generations, and that a similar role should be created

at the United Nations.

Sources

- Rawls, John (1971, revised 1999): *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- United Nations (1987): *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (Chair: Gro Harlem Brundtland) (online)
- Government of India: *India’s National Mineral Policy 2019* (online)
- Kingman, David (2013): *Will Young People be Poorer than their Parents? Intergenerational Foundation* (online)

Recommended Online Reading

- Basu, Rahul (*The Future We Need*) (2019): *India: Minerals are a Shared Inheritance*
- Tozer, Thomas (2019): *A New Intergenerational Contract: Intergenerational justice in principle and policy*. Intergenerational Foundation
- House of Lords (2019): *Protecting and Representing Future Generations in Policymaking*