

Policy Memo

Preparing a UN Declaration on Future Generations:

What is needed from the September 2023
Preparatory Ministerial Meeting of the
Summit of the Future

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Summary

Adopting a strong Declaration on Future Generations ahead of the Summit of the Future in 2024 represents an important opportunity to advance the sustainable development agenda as part of a broader “[upgrade](#)” to build the resilience of the multilateral system as a whole. This memo outlines how the upcoming Preparatory Ministerial Meeting for the Summit of the Future, to be held at the United Nations in New York on 21 September 2023, can concretely advance this goal. Building on the SDG Summit, Ministers have a key opportunity to signal support for, and to offer guidance to, negotiations on the Declaration.

What is the Summit of the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations?

The Summit of the Future, to be held 22-23 September 2024, represents a significant window of opportunity for the multilateral system. Coming out of the UN’s landmark [Our Common Agenda](#) report, the Summit creates a moment for governments to address core challenges and weaknesses in global governance following the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader “polycrisis.” The Summit will work across various [policy tracks](#) toward a Pact For the Future which currently has five [agreed chapters](#) including sustainable development and financing, peace and security, science and digital cooperation, transforming global governance, and youth and **future generations**.

The proposal for a Declaration on Future Generations emerges from the *Our Common Agenda* report, and was further discussed by the Secretary General’s [High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism](#). *Our Common Agenda* [calls for increased solidarity](#) between generations, both those alive today and those to come. The Office of the Secretary General also produced a [policy brief](#) on the subject to support governmental discussions, and in May the UN High-Level Committee on Programs adopted a set of “[Common Principles on Future Generations](#).” Overall, the concept builds on and extends decades of work to develop and operationalize the sustainable development framework, including the 2030 Agenda.

Notably, proposals include not only adoption of a Declaration, but related reforms such as establishing a representative for future generations in the multilateral system, as well as a forum in which stakeholders can coordinate across initiatives and discuss evolving issues related to future generations. For example, some groups have proposed that the Secretary General nominate a Special Envoy on Future Generations.

Over the past 18 months, countries have had an opportunity to discuss the idea of a Declaration and related reforms under the auspices of the President of the General Assembly, who had asked the Netherlands and Fiji, and, subsequently, the Netherlands and Jamaica ([summary](#)), to facilitate a series of [discussions](#) on this topic. The conclusion of this saw an [issue brief](#) released by the co-facilitators. Under the guidance of the incoming President of the General Assembly, negotiations are expected to proceed in 2023-2024 in the run up to the Summit.

Why are a Declaration on Future Generations and related reforms needed?

Current crises present enormous challenges to sustainable development, even as long-term trends like climate change and technology change create growing risks into the future. At the same time, delivering on current, medium-, and long-term goals presents an enormous opportunity to create increasingly sustainable, resilient, healthy, and prosperous societies for present and future generations.

In this context, a successful and effective Declaration on Future Generations and related reforms could mark an inflection point in longstanding multilateral efforts to manage crises and risks, and to place long-term sustainable development on secure foundations, accelerating progress toward the opportunities countries have identified. It responds to the urgency of the present moment in two fundamental ways.

Present crises are linked to longer-term challenges and risks, and future opportunities require early action to unlock. 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. As part of this, we need to recognise the longer-term processes fundamentally linked to these challenges, such as climate change, technological and demographic transitions, and persistent underdevelopment. Present crises stem, in part, from previous failures to look ahead. Consequently, there is no sustainable solution to current challenges, or the ones to follow, that does not also address these deeper drivers, as the UN recognized as early as the 1986 Brundtland Commission, which established the idea of sustainable development as seeking “to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future.”

In a similar way, future opportunities can only be seized with better tools to look ahead and act to ensure the wellbeing of future generations. Action on future generations is critical especially for [young countries and countries where the majority of future generations will be born](#). Most of these countries are in the Global South. By delivering the SDGs --for example, investing in the mothers and grandmothers of future generations, doing the patient work of building institutions, tackling the intergenerational impacts of conflict and violence, and of course safeguarding the climate, biodiversity, etc.--we make a down payment for the wellbeing of our descendants. For this reason, tools that help governments recognize and prioritize the interests of future generations [are observed to assist with implementation of the SDGs](#).

Conversely, a failure to act on future generations perpetuates existing economic, social, and political inequalities - including in the international system, where young countries are poorly represented in current power structures.

Intergenerational fairness is a fundamental shared value. Across nearly all human value systems, the fundamental moral value and wellbeing of future people is widely recognised.

Around [40 per cent of national constitutions](#) recognise it explicitly, as do several decades of multilateral documents and agreements. Previous international agreements, such as, recently, the Countries from all parts of the world, as well as local governments, community organizations, indigenous groups, and other parts of society, have established [a variety of institutions and mechanisms](#), tailored to their own conditions, to seek to operationalize this common goal. But the majority of local, national, and international systems of governance are still beset by short-termism. Governments and stakeholders are therefore seeking additional tools to ensure policy decisions take longer-term perspectives into account. The present—and coming—age of crises demands that we improve these systems to better meet the needs of both present and future people.

While a Declaration and its related potential institutions—a voice for future generations in the multilateral system, and a multilateral forum on future generations—cannot by themselves address the shift toward more effective long-term governance that is needed, they can be a powerful catalyst for the broader reforms needed at every level of governance, from the multilateral system to local communities, to better manage the risks and challenges the world faces.

What could make a Declaration on Future Generations and related reforms effective?

The content of a Declaration on Future Generations, and the shape of any associated reforms, remains for states to negotiate. As these discussions intensify, delegates can be informed by several considerations that have emerged from expert and stakeholder consultations.

The centrality of sustainable development. Since the 1986 Brundtland Commission established the idea of sustainable development in the UN system, the concepts of future generations and sustainable development are intrinsically linked. In the present, delivering the 2030 SDGs represents the most important immediate step toward addressing long-term challenges. At the same time, challenges like climate change, technology, or other risks force us to look beyond 2030 as well in order to protect future generations.

Defining future generations -- related to, but distinct from, youth. Future generations are those people to be born in the future.¹ Young people alive today are, by definition, close to future generations, but also distinct from them. Young people play an important bridging role across generations (all generations are young before they are older), so empowering and engaging youth can have a positive impact on generations to come, but there is a definitional distinction between youth and future generations. This conceptual clarity is important because 1) youth deserve recognition and representation in their own right, not merely as proxies of future people, 2) concern for future generations is not limited to youth groups, but to a wide range of cross-cutting constituencies. For example, associations of elderly people and

¹ For example, the recently launched Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations define future generations as “those generations that do not yet exist but will exist and who will inherit the Earth”. <<https://www.rightsoffuturegenerations.org/the-principles>>

indigenous groups have been strong advocates of intergenerational justice, often supporting recognition of and representation of future generations.

Supporting implementation: a voice and a forum for future generations in the multilateral system. While recognizing the moral value of future people is widely seen as important, the real challenge is to implement policies that make a positive difference for future generations. In this regard, it is critical to consider how governments can be supported to operationalize the Declaration. Proposed ideas include creating a voice for future generations in the UN system, such as Special Envoy or High Commissioner, and also to create a multilateral forum for governments and stakeholders to exchange best practices and support mutual implementation of the Declaration.

How does the Declaration on Future Generations relate to the broader outcomes of the Summit?

Countries are currently considering the broad scope and shape of the Summit of the Future, as well as the outcomes. In the most recent framing, youth and future generations has been proposed as the [fourth chapter](#) in the Pact for the Future, whereas previously these agenda items were under the ‘transforming global governance cluster.’ While this dedicated recognition raises ambitions for the agenda, it is critically important to meaningfully push forward the Declaration on Future Generations—and associated representative, and forum—at the ministerial meeting to generate momentum for ratification ahead of the Summit of the Future. This allows the Declaration to be implemented at the Summit, avoiding the common risk of commitments on paper falling down at the implementation stage. Indeed, this theme and package of outcomes could help consensus grow around the broader Summit agenda, given the greater degree of alignment across countries on themes related to future generations than on some of the other components of the Summit.

Looking beyond the Summit of the Future, a Declaration can provide continuity and momentum toward upcoming events planned in future years, such as the 6th United Nations Environment Assembly, taking place in 2024, the proposed World Social Summit, and further milestones as we enter the final years of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

What is needed from the September 2023 Ministerial meeting? Key messages.

It is critical for the September ministerial to put the negotiations toward the Pact for the Future on a sound footing. With respect to the Declaration on Future Generations and related reforms, ministers can support a strong outcome by:

1. **Signaling support for a Declaration on Future Generations and related reforms.** While there is broad support for the idea of a Declaration, linked to widely supported norms around intergenerational fairness, political engagement and ownership is needed to ensure a robust outcome.

2. **Affirming the fundamental link between the Declaration on Future Generations and the 2030 Agenda.** With the SDG Summit taking place alongside the preparatory ministerial, countries will be looking toward next steps in the work of advancing the 2030 Agenda. Putting a strong orientation toward future generations into the Summit of the Future helps to ensure consistency and follow up, while also building continuity with past events such as the 2022 Transforming Education Summit.
3. **Providing high-level guidance for negotiators.** To move negotiations forward, ministers can clarify what key points should be prioritized in negotiations leading up to the Summit. A focus on definitional clarity regarding future generations and support for implementation tools like a voice and a forum for future generations in the multilateral system are key.

To advance these goals, ministers may wish to consider several key messages:

1. A Declaration on Future Generations responds to the crises of today by recognizing the long-term challenges, like underdevelopment, the triple planetary crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution), or technology, that drive the urgent needs of the present.
2. To unlock the opportunities of tomorrow—for example, in rapidly growing countries—we need to deliver policies today that speak to the needs of future generations.
3. Intergenerational fairness is a fundamental principle that should be reflected in all tracks of the Summit of the Future.
4. Delivering the 2030 Agenda is the most important step we can take now to protect future generations, but we also need to look further into the future to address emerging challenges and how we can renew multilateral institutions to help us collectively achieve more goals.
5. Decision-making must include the voices of youth, but they cannot carry the burden of protecting future generations alone. Rather, it is a commitment for all of society.
6. Implementation is fundamental. Future generations need us not just to recognize them, but to act in a way that protects them. Creating a voice for future generations, such as a Special Envoy, and a forum for future generations in the multilateral system can help governments deliver on the imperative of intergenerational fairness.

Further Reading

- [Policy Brief 1: To Think and Act for Future Generations](#) (Office of the Secretary General)
- [Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations](#)
- [The intuitive appeal of legal protection for future generations](#) (Eric Martínez & Christoph Winter)
- [The rise of the constitutional protection of future generations](#) (Renan Araújo & Leonie Koessler)
- [Empowering future people by empowering the young?](#) (Tyler M. John)

- [Toward a Declaration on Future Generations](#) (Thomas Hale, Finlay Moore, Toby Ord, Anne-Marie Slaughter)
- [A Breakthrough for People and Planet](#) (High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism)
- [Looking to 2030 and Beyond: How Institutions for Future Generations can Assist in SDG Implementation](#) (Network of Institutions and Leaders for Future Generations)
- [Rethinking Global Cooperation: Three New Frameworks for Collective Action in an Age of Uncertainty](#) (Global Governance Innovation Network)