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**Strengthening of the United Nations system: strengthening
of the United Nations system**

Our Common Agenda

Policy brief 1: to think and act for future generations

Summary

The challenges we face can only be addressed through stronger international cooperation. The Summit of the Future in 2024 is an opportunity to agree on multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow, strengthening global governance for both present and future generations (General Assembly resolution [76/307](#)). In my capacity as Secretary-General, I have been invited to provide inputs to the preparations for the Summit in the form of action-oriented recommendations, building on the proposals contained in my report entitled “Our Common Agenda” ([A/75/982](#)), which was itself a response to the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations (General Assembly resolution [75/1](#)). The present policy brief is one such input. It elaborates on the ideas first proposed in Our Common Agenda, taking into account subsequent guidance from Member States and over one year of intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultations, and rooted in the purposes and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments.

The present policy brief contains suggestions for practical steps to fulfil our long-standing commitment to meet the demands of the present in a way that safeguards the interests of future generations and preserves their ability to effectively enjoy all human rights. These include: (a) an envoy to serve as a voice for future generations at the global level; (b) better use of foresight, science and data; (c) a declaration to define and make concrete our duties to future generations; and (d) a dedicated intergovernmental forum to advance implementation of the declaration and share best practices.

These suggestions build on Our Common Agenda and subsequent intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultations, reflected in the “Elements paper for the declaration for future generations”, prepared by the Permanent Missions of Fiji and the Netherlands to the United Nations.^a The brief responds to the questions



raised by Member States during the consultations, including how to define future generations, how to balance our commitment to them with our duties to present generations, how the proposals advance our existing goals for sustainable development, gender and human rights, and what outcomes are recommended for the Summit of the Future on this issue.

The logic underpinning these proposals is simple. What we do for future generations is also what we need to do for ourselves, which is to take challenges and opportunities that lie in the future far more seriously than we currently do. We know we are capable of far-sighted collective action, as the successful restoration of the ozone layer demonstrates. On the other hand, we would be much closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals today if we had taken more serious action to limit global temperature rise or invest in pandemic preparedness. There is no trade-off between meeting the needs of the present and taking into account the needs of the future. On the contrary: there is no solution to the problems of the present that does not take a longer-term perspective.^b Conscious efforts to consider the future will leave all generations better off.

^a Available at www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/09/Elements-Paper-Declaration-for-Future-Generations-09092022.pdf.

^b This was a common point in the inputs received during the consultations on the elements paper, captured in particular in Thomas Hale and others, “Toward a Declaration on Future Generations”, August 2022.

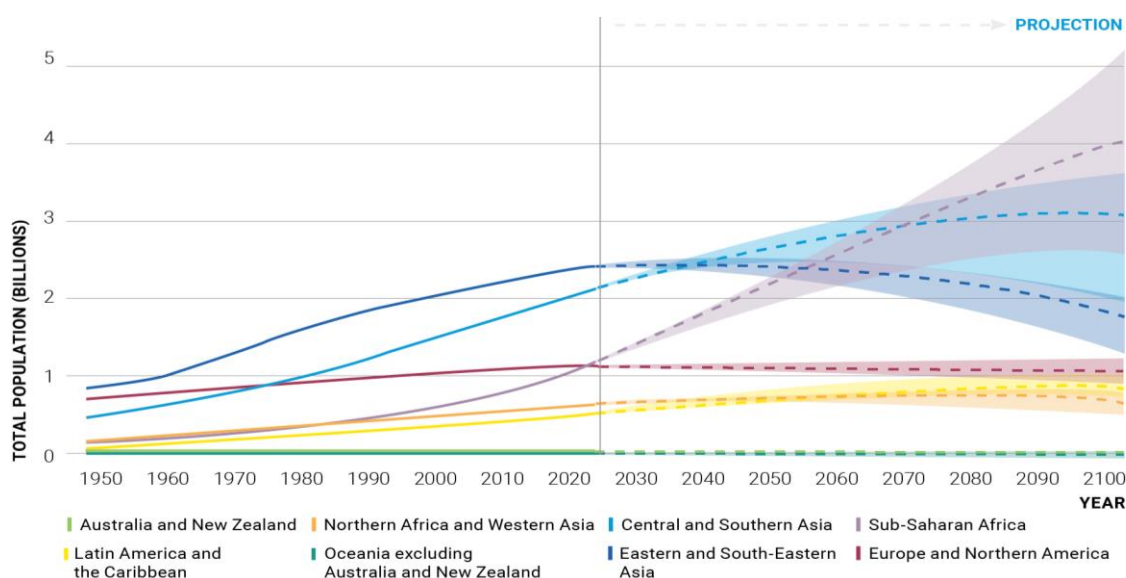
I. Who are future generations and why do our actions matter to them?

1. The term “future generations” refers to all people who will come after us.¹ Their lives and eventual ability to effectively enjoy all human rights and meet their needs are already being influenced by our actions today. These people are distinct from and – by current demographic projections – will be vastly more numerous than present generations. More than 10 billion people are projected to be born before the end of this century alone, predominantly in countries that are currently low- or middle-income.²

2. While children and young people alive today may have overlapping interests and a special affinity with future generations, they are not the same. Young people alive today should not bear the burden of advocating for our descendants, but they are deserving of a separate and dedicated place at the table.³

Figure I

Population by region: estimates, 1950–2022, and medium projection with 95 per cent prediction intervals, 2022–2100⁴



¹ This is consistent with the definition provided in the “Elements paper for the declaration for future generations”, available at www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/09/Elements-Paper-Declaration-for-Future-Generations-09092022.pdf: “For the purpose of this Elements Paper, ‘future generations’ have been defined as all those generations that do not yet exist, are yet to come and who will eventually inherit this planet.” A generation is a cohort born at the same time and shaped by the experience to its members. If future generations numbers are based on future birth cohorts, this number is expected to be about 2.9 billion by 2100. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Generations”, *Report on the World Social Situation 2001*, available at www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2001/5%20Generations.pdf.

² The global population is projected to reach 10.4 billion people by 2100. The 46 least developed countries are among the world’s fastest growing. Many are projected to double in population between 2022 and 2050. Countries of sub-Saharan Africa are expected to continue to grow through 2100 and to contribute more than half of the global population increase anticipated through 2050. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Summary of results”, *World Population Prospects 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022), available at www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org/development/desa/pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2022* dataset, available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

³ This will be the subject of a forthcoming, separate policy brief. Although there is some overlap between the terms young people and children in terms of age, there are also specific obligations arising under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially on child participation.

⁴ For data by region, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Total births: 1950–2100”, available at <https://population.un.org/dataportal/data/indicators/57/locations/1834,1831,1832,1829,1830,1833,1835,947/start/1950/end/2100/line/linetimeplot>.

3. The point of a focus on future generations is that they are not yet alive to tell us what they need or think. There is a great deal about them that we cannot presume to know. But we do know that an obligation to act in a way that preserves their ability to effectively enjoy all human rights and determine their own needs in the future has already been enshrined in countless international agreements and in the very concept of sustainable development, defined as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.⁵ And yet, we violate this principle daily as we sleepwalk towards the breakdown scenario laid out in Our Common Agenda.

4. Many aspects of how we live today will have consequences well into the future. Some will negatively affect future generations, whose welfare or very survival may be permanently compromised by climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, inadequate stewardship of emerging technologies, backsliding on human rights, persistent inequalities and exclusion, unsustainable consumption and production patterns, insufficient attention to sustainable development needs in countries where most future generations will be born, poor management of extinction-level threats and catastrophic risks to humanity, and many other developments, including those laid out in the “Elements paper for the declaration for future generations”.⁶

5. At the same time, with advances in science, humanities and technology, there are enormous opportunities that could be harnessed for the good of all humanity, present and future. Moreover, our capacity to foresee, assess and mitigate the long-term impact of our present decisions is without parallel in history.⁷ But we have yet to effectively link science to policymaking. Most consequential decisions are taken without regard for the long term, even though it is now widely accepted that the interests of future generations “should be considered at all levels of decision-making”.⁸ Present generations have a responsibility to “halt and prevent developments that could threaten the survival of future generations ... [including] climate change, conflict and new technologies”.⁹

6. Delivering on our commitment to take future generations into account need not come at the expense of those currently living. On the contrary, it starts with redoubled efforts to achieve peace, sustainability, human rights, fairness, inclusion, and equality in the present. A fair and equitable distribution of opportunities and resources today means better and more equal opportunities and outcomes for future generations. Most of today’s biggest problems are shaped by deeply complex long-term social, economic, political, technological, and natural transformations that defy easy or quick solutions within single budget or electoral cycles. Indeed, solutions can only be delivered by taking a long-term perspective. Business as usual is not working, neither for those alive today nor for those to come. In sum, to take the future into account is an increasingly practical, urgent necessity, as much as it is an ethical obligation, for the sake of those already alive and those still to be born. Yet, despite repeated commitments, there is no dedicated mechanism within the United Nations to do so.

⁵ Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (A/42/427, annex, chap. 2, para. 1).

⁶ Elements paper, sects. 1 and 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

II. We have committed to taking future generations into account

7. Commitments to future generations are integral to customs, cultures and religions around the world, including Indigenous knowledge systems.¹⁰ Such commitments are increasingly referenced in national constitutions, legislation and judicial decisions, especially on the environment and safeguarding cultural and biological diversity.

8. Future generations are also embedded in a multitude of international agreements.¹¹ Commitments to them and acknowledgements of their worth date back to the Charter of the United Nations, with its promise to save “succeeding generations” from the scourge of war. They are also referenced in early international environmental and human rights instruments (see figure II and annex II). References became more frequent from 1972, especially in agreements on sustainable development.¹² Throughout the 1990s, a series of landmark agreements cemented the commitment.¹³ Also of note is the adoption by member States of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1997 of a Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, the first international declaration on the issue.¹⁴ In 2013, in response to a request from Member States, my predecessor issued a report setting out options for institutionalizing concern for future generations at the United Nations (A/68/322).¹⁵

9. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change both clearly acknowledge future generations and, as concerns about sustainability and climate justice have mounted, the duties of current generations to future ones have been invoked more often and with more urgency.¹⁶ To date, nearly

¹⁰ The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues generates futures-oriented multigenerational intergovernmental dialogue and serves as a platform to share knowledge, values and information on governance structures.

¹¹ See A/68/322. The report was requested in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled “The future we want”, which was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 66/288 of 27 July 2012.

¹² In the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling of 1946, the “interest of the nations of the world in safeguarding for future generations the great natural resources” was recognized. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 looked forward to the advent of a world in which human beings would enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want. In the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, several references were made, in the preamble and in principles I and II, to the need to “defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations”. The World Commission on Environment and Development, held in 1987, provided the seminal definition of sustainable development, pointing out that: “We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying ... We act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions.” (A/42/427, annex, para. 25).

¹³ These included the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993) and the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995).

¹⁴ In the Declaration, it was confirmed that “present generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded”.

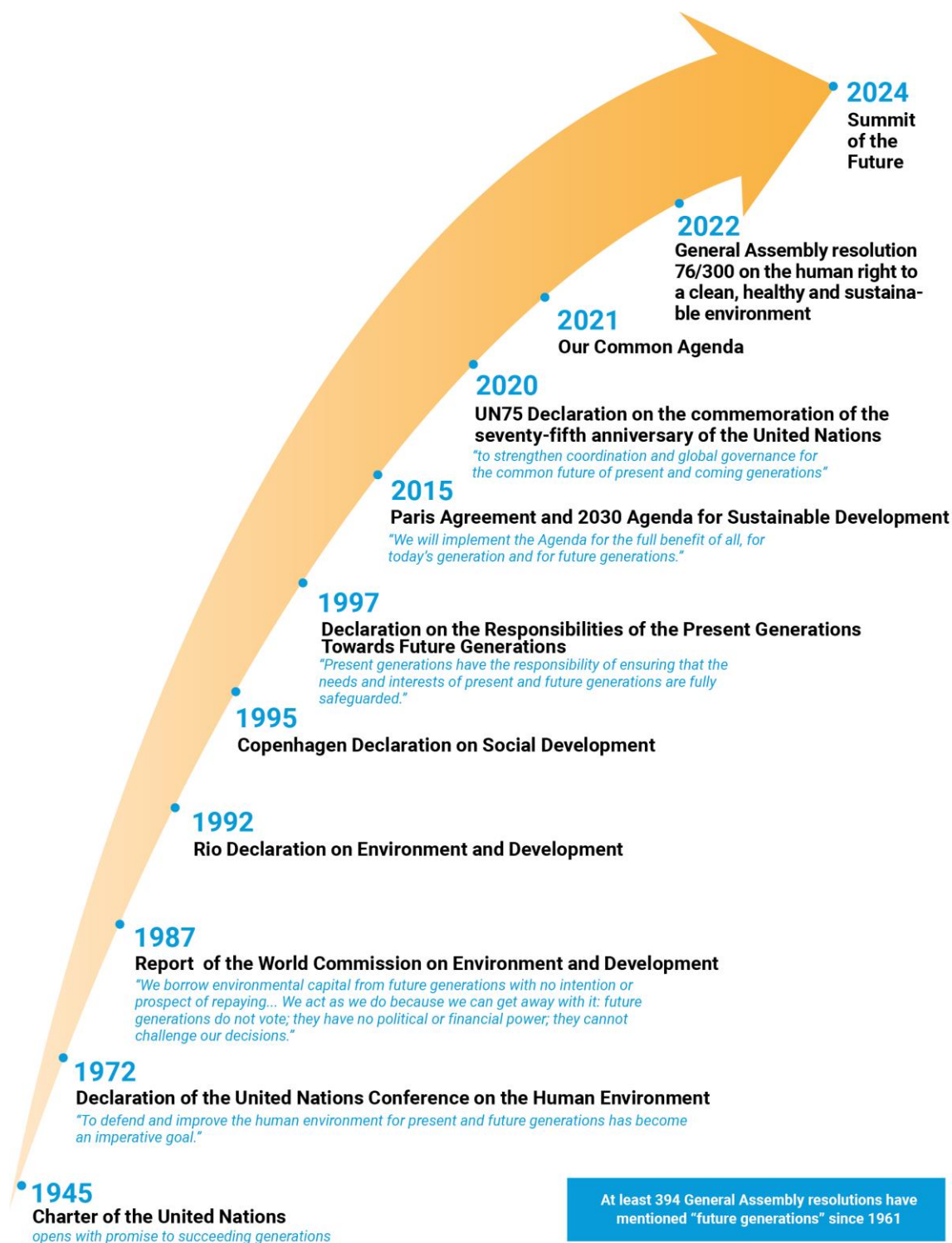
¹⁵ These included a proposal for a high commissioner or special envoy; a standing item on the agenda of the high-level political forum on sustainable development; and inter-agency coordination through the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. Ultimately, progress was made only on inter-agency coordination. The other proposals were not pursued.

¹⁶ In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States expressly committed to a transformative vision that would lay the foundations for the well-being of future, as well as present, generations, and the Paris Agreement explicitly referred to “intergenerational equity” in connection with the need to take action to address climate change.

400 General Assembly resolutions have explicitly referenced future generations. In addition, a group of States is currently considering submitting a request to the General Assembly for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the obligations of States in respect of climate change.¹⁷ In the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, Member States committed to strengthening “global governance for the common future of present and coming generations” and it was in response to that commitment that, in Our Common Agenda, I called for concrete steps to make our commitments a reality. In “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights”, it was recognized that safeguarding the rights of future generations, especially in the context of climate justice, is one of our more pressing challenges. The elements paper also captured the latest reflections of Member States on these issues.

¹⁷ As at January 2023, there were at least 394 separate General Assembly resolutions that included “future generations” in the body of the text. The first was resolution 1629 (XVI) of 27 October 1961. In 2022, Vanuatu initiated an international campaign to seek an advisory opinion on climate change from the International Court of Justice, which included specific references to obligations towards future generations (see www.vanuatuicj.com/resolution).

Figure II
A history of the commitment to future generations



10. At the national and subnational levels, countries across the world have put in place arrangements to safeguard the future. By some estimates, nearly half of all

written constitutions now contain references to future generations.¹⁸ Courts are increasingly reinforcing the protection of future generations, especially in cases concerning the environment and nuclear testing.¹⁹ Future generations are often cited in policies to reduce carbon emissions or divest public funds from fossil fuels, and there is a growing number of systems for green and environmental accounting. Governments have long used population forecasts to determine public pension finances, and some are now extending such practices to education and health-care budgets. Many governments have established bodies to preserve the environment, cultural heritage, and natural resources for present and future generations. Others have mechanisms to understand the future impact of all public policy decisions and to embed long-term thinking into their policymaking processes.²⁰ Countries have passed legislation acknowledging the responsibility to safeguard the future and, in some cases, creating institutions with explicit mandates to represent the future or establishing ombudspersons²¹ or parliamentary committees or commissions with explicit mandates to advocate for or act on behalf of future generations.²²

¹⁸ Albania; Algeria; Andorra; Angola; Argentina; Armenia; Austria; Azerbaijan; Bhutan; Bolivia (Plurinational State of); Brazil; Burundi; Republic of the Congo; Côte d'Ivoire; Cuba; Czechia; Dominican Republic; Ecuador; Egypt; Eritrea; Estonia; Eswatini; Fiji; France; Gambia; Georgia; Germany; Ghana; Guyana; Hungary; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Jamaica; Japan; Kazakhstan; Kenya; Latvia; Lesotho; Liberia; Libya; Luxembourg; Madagascar; Malawi; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Moldova; Morocco; Mozambique; Nepal; Niger; North Macedonia; Norway; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Poland; Portugal; Qatar; Republic of Korea; Russian Federation; Senegal; Seychelles; Slovakia; South Africa; South Sudan; Sri Lanka; Sudan; Sweden; Switzerland; Tajikistan; Timor Leste; Tunisia; Uganda; Ukraine; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; United States of America; Uruguay; Uzbekistan; Vanuatu; Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of); Zambia; and Zimbabwe. Renan Araújo and Leonie Koessler, "The rise of the constitutional protection of future generations", Legal Priorities Project Working Paper Series No. 7 (2021), available at www.legalpriorities.org/research/constitutional-protection-future-generations.html.

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Global Climate Litigation Report: 2020 Status Review* (Nairobi, 2020).

²⁰ Countries that have established institutions or mechanisms to embed long-term thinking into their policymaking processes include Costa Rica, Finland, Ecuador, Hungary, Jamaica and Singapore. On the African continent alone, there are more than 100 distinct committees, departments and agencies established across various levels of government with mandates to preserve the environment, cultural heritage and natural resources for present and next generations. Elizabeth Dirth and Nicole Kormann da Silva, "Building our common future: the role of the Network of Institutions for Future Generations in safeguarding the future" (Cologne, ZOE Institute for Future-fit Economies, 2022), available at https://futureroundtable.org/documents/2238847/0/NIFG+Publication_VFFINAL.pdf.

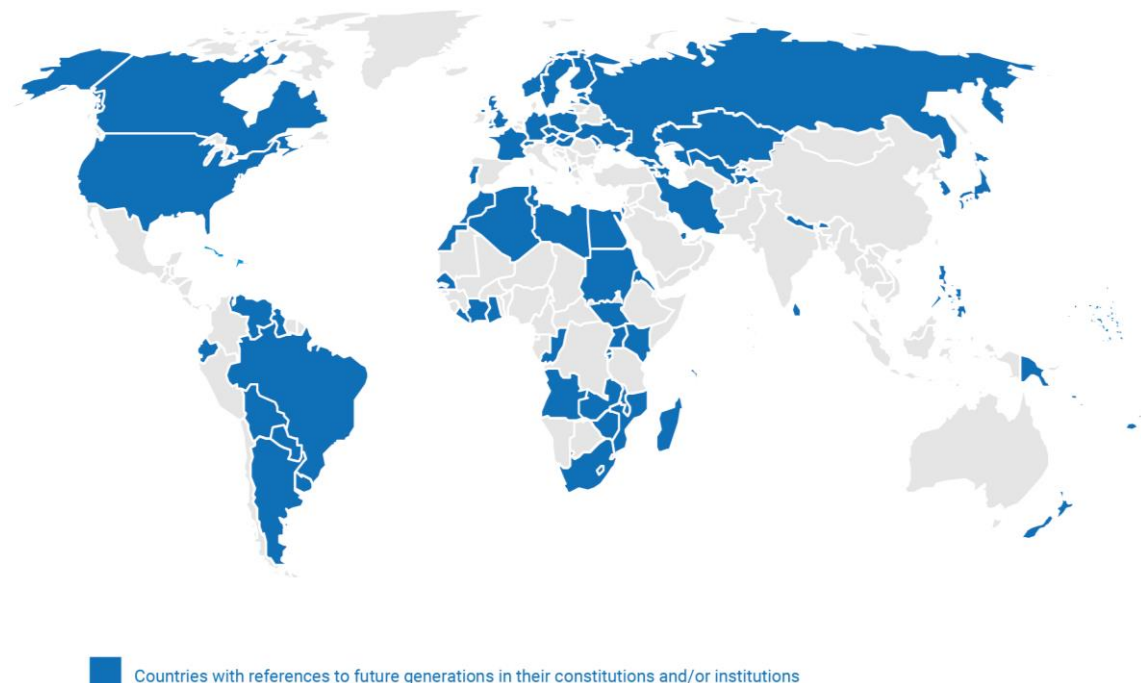
²¹ In Hungary, a Future Generations Ombudsman is entrusted with a number of special powers provided under the Fundamental Law and the Ombudsman Act to foster the interests and needs of future generations.

²² Such countries include: Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Lithuania, Norway, New Zealand, Paraguay, Philippines, Scotland (United Kingdom), Wales (United Kingdom) and Sweden. Dedicated bodies include: Committee of the Future, Parliament of Finland; Committee of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, Parliament of Austria; House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry and Technology, Parliament of Canada; Committee of the Future, Science, Technology and Innovation, National Congress of Chile; Economic Affairs Committee, Parliament of Estonia; Future Committee, Parliament of Iceland; Committee for the Future, Parliament of Lithuania; Special Committee for the Future, Congress of Paraguay; Committee of Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking, Congress of the Philippines; Committee for Digitalization, Innovation and Modern Technology, Parliament of Poland; Committee of Science, Technology, Research and Innovation, National Assembly of Thailand; Special Futures Committee, Parliament of Uruguay; and Committee for Science, Technology and Environment, National Assembly of Viet Nam. In Finland, a standing parliamentary Committee for the Future is tasked with generating dialogue with the Government on major future problems and opportunities. The United Arab Emirates has developed a plan entitled "UAE Centennial 2071" that is aimed at investing in future generations by providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to face rapid changes.

11. In recent years, as the number of countries engaged in this work has grown, efforts have begun to bring them together at the international level. There is a Network of Institutions for Future Generations, which shares best practices and supports efforts elsewhere to replicate these models, and a new international forum for parliamentary discussion on future policy that brings together the parliamentary committees for the future from around the world.²³

Figure III

Some countries with references to future generations in their constitutions and/or institutions in place to safeguard their interests



Note: The boundaries used on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

12. What most of these models have in common is that they seek to combine knowledge with action, by attempting to understand the future impact of our choices today, and to put that understanding at the service of decision makers. Some attempt to represent future generations so they are “heard” in debates. It is these practices that we could now pursue at the international level to translate our long-standing global commitments into practical action, and to foster and support additional efforts at the national level in a broader range of countries.

III. Acting for future generations contributes to achieving sustainable development, gender and human rights goals

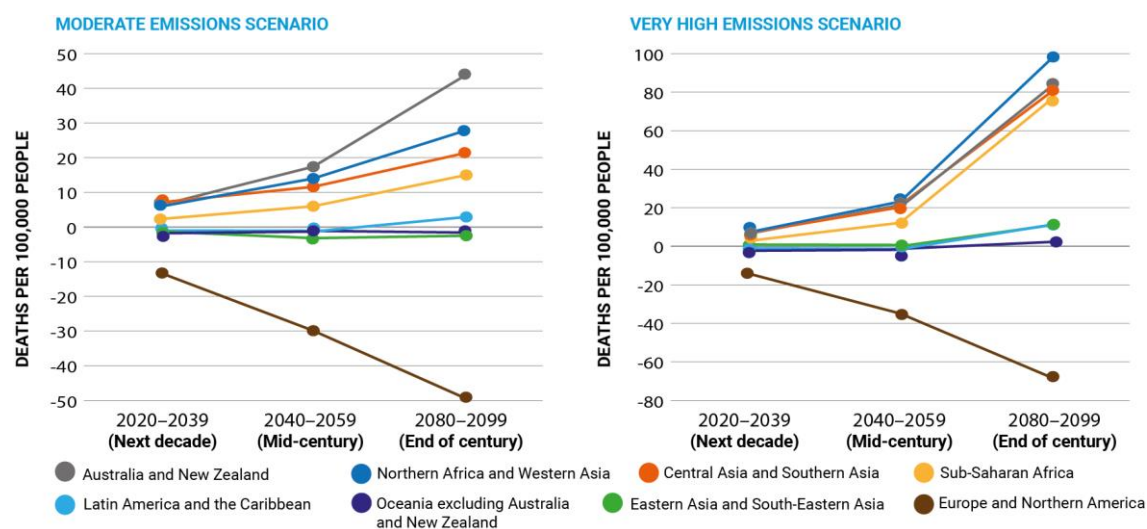
13. Upholding the rights and meeting the needs of those alive today is a precondition for securing a better future. Our first action on behalf of future generations must therefore be to fulfil the commitments to those currently alive, in a sustainable way and with more emphasis on long-term thinking. Both present and future generations will

²³ Dirth and Kormann da Silva, “Building our common future”; and Parliament of Finland, The World Summit of the Committees of the Future, available at www.eduskunta.fi/world-summit-committees-future.

benefit from stronger global systems that put sustainable development at their centre.²⁴ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change provide a blueprint for meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the future.²⁵ Many of the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets have strong intergenerational relevance (see figure V). Intergenerational inequities in terms of the impacts of climate change are already being seen and are only likely to increase.²⁶ Most members of future generations will be born in countries that are currently low- or middle-income. Many will live in coastal cities. These are among the most climate change-vulnerable places on Earth. Steps to support the development of people in those countries today will also benefit future generations. Investments in social and basic services, reforming the international financial architecture to tackle inequalities within and between countries and creating decent work opportunities will ensure sustainable development for the benefit of both current and future generations.

Figure IV

Changes in death rates due to global warming, by region, 2020–2099



Source: Calculations based on data from United Nations Development Programme, Human Climate Horizons.

Available at <https://horizons.hdr.undp.org> (accessed on 9 February 2023).

Note: Moderate emissions scenario corresponds to representative concentration pathway (RCP) 4.5; the very high emissions scenario corresponds to RCP 8.5.

14. Full regard for the ongoing disparities between women and men is important, so as not to entrench a future where one half of society wields power to the exclusion of the other and the detriment of all. The intergenerational transmission of inequality, including gender inequality, is well documented.²⁷ The achievement of gender equality is one of the decisive factors in ensuring that future generations will enjoy a life of dignity and rights. The equal representation and participation of women sit at the heart of transforming political, social and economic models that have historically been designed based on exclusion and exploitation. Moreover, the rights of women and girls function as force multipliers for long-term sustainable development. We

²⁴ Elements paper, sect. 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Younger generations (born in 2020) will be four to seven times more exposed to heatwaves in their lifetimes than older generations (born in 1960). United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2021–2022: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World* (United Nations publication, 2022).

²⁷ Elements paper.

know that when women and girls are able to access education and lifelong learning, economic opportunities, culture and a life free of violence, the benefits, including for future generations, are enormous.²⁸ In spite of the progress made on many fronts, including in laws and policies globally, gender discrimination and pushback on gender equality in practice is a worrying trend. Preserving the ability of future generations to enjoy their rights and determine their own needs is dependent on urgent action to strengthen gender equality, including through the five transformative actions set out in Our Common Agenda.

15. If the human rights of present generations were fully realized, we would be much better positioned to safeguard the future. Recognizing our duty to preserve the ability of future generations to enjoy their human rights provides clear benchmarks to inform decision-making on their behalf. This responsibility applies to the full spectrum of human rights, including the recently recognized right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, which is the foundation for the enjoyment of a wide range of other rights, such as the rights to life, health, food, housing, water and sanitation, and self-determination (General Assembly resolution [76/300](#)). Bold action is required to ensure that this recognition translates into transformative economic, social and environmental policies. Similarly, investing more in the realization of rights, such as the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress, would allow better anticipation and mitigation of the adverse effects of scientific and technological developments, and foster decision-making based on scientific evidence.

²⁸ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Girls' education", available at www.unicef.org/education/girls-education; and Theirworld, "Girls' education", available at <https://theirworld.org/resources/girls-education/>.

Figure V
Future generations and the Sustainable Development Goals²⁹

	<p>Parents' advantages in income, health and education shape their children's path over time, often leading to persistent "hoarding" of opportunities across generations. The greater the inequality in human development, the lower the intergenerational social mobility in income—and vice versa.</p>		<p>Inequality begins at birth, defines the freedom and opportunities of children, adults and older persons, and permeates those of the next generation. Policies to prevent inequalities can follow the life cycle. Reducing horizontal inequalities is key to breaking socioenvironmental traps for future generations.</p>
	<p>Hunger at a young age undermines well-being throughout one's life, with intergenerational impacts. Future generations face food insecurity due to climate change, biodiversity loss and unsustainable agricultural practices.</p>		<p>Sustainable cities can unlock economic opportunities for a green urban transition, shifting urban social development towards new lifestyle choices and behaviours that are environmentally sustainable, just, inclusive and prosperous for all.</p>
	<p>Parents' advantages in health lead to persistent "hoarding" of opportunities across generations. Inadequate health care and health systems in the present, in particular for women's and maternal health, impair the life chances of children and their children.</p>		<p>Promoting the circular economy, boosting zero waste initiatives with adequate infrastructure in support of responsible consumption and enforcing sustainable production measures for efficient resource use and reuse for future generations.</p>
	<p>Gaps in learning can become a trap with life-time and even intergenerational implications. Investments in education systems have demonstrated intergenerational impacts.</p>		<p>Climate change will expose future generations to multiple, unequal and life-long health problems, an increase in natural disasters, food and water disruptions and the irreversible destruction of natural ecosystems, impacting people's livelihoods and well-being.</p>
	<p>Empowering women leads to greater equality and life chances in the next generation, with children more likely to attend school. Women's participation in the workforce contributes to economic growth that will benefit future generations.</p>		<p>Conservation and sustainable use of marine resources will benefit future generations who will predominantly live in coastal, urban areas in the global South.</p>
	<p>Investment in resilient infrastructure to guarantee access for all to clean and safe water prevents long-term diseases and epidemics, while contributing to sustainable urban and rural environments.</p>		<p>Human well-being is intrinsically related to nature and a healthy planet. Reduced biodiversity erodes nature's resilience to climate change and natural hazards, and exposes zoonotic and health risks, while affecting agriculture and freshwater systems and future opportunities for green job creation.</p>
	<p>Accessible, affordable and clean energy will lift present generations out of poverty, contribute to climate action and zero pollution, while creating green employment opportunities.</p>		<p>Meaningful participation, access to justice, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions prepare the ground for governance for future generations. Effective institutions are more likely to adopt a long-term perspective.</p>
	<p>Preparing people and youth for the economy of the future, and enabling inclusive economic growth, requires investments in decent job creation, including in the green, care and digital economies, and in skills development.</p>		<p>By developing and strengthening multi-stakeholder partnership and sharing of skills, resources and perspectives, we can collectively contribute to improving life chances for future generations.</p>
	<p>Digital inclusion and equality will contribute to more equitable benefits from digital connectivity through the generations. Lack of infrastructure hinders development and perpetuates poverty.</p>		

²⁹ See, in particular, United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2019: Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st century* (United Nations publication, 2019); United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (United Nations publication, 2020); and United Nations Development Programme, *Human Climate Horizons*, available at <https://horizons.hdr.undp.org> (accessed on 9 February 2023).

IV. From commitment to reality: steps for the United Nations system

16. In Our Common Agenda, I urged the United Nations system and Member States to take steps to account for future generations in our work. In view of the above, my proposals are set out below.

A Special Envoy for Future Generations

17. As a first step, I intend to appoint a Special Envoy for Future Generations to serve as a voice for future generations in the United Nations system. This proposal is not new, but I believe it is one whose time has now come, with many precedents at the national level and considerable appetite at the global level, in addition to ample evidence that advocates for the future can help us to reach more sustainable decisions.³⁰

18. The Envoy would not be operational but would perform advisory and advocacy functions, such as:

(a) Representing and advocating for the interests of future generations across the United Nations system and in intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder processes as appropriate;

(b) Supporting Member States and the United Nations system in raising awareness of and advising on the likely intergenerational or future impacts of policies and programmes under consideration, building on national examples and lessons learned, through research and the production of high-quality information, assessments and recommendations, as well as participation in relevant discussions;

(c) Facilitating efforts to collaborate and share lessons and best practices among peer institutions, committees and networks for future generations, including those at the national and subnational levels;

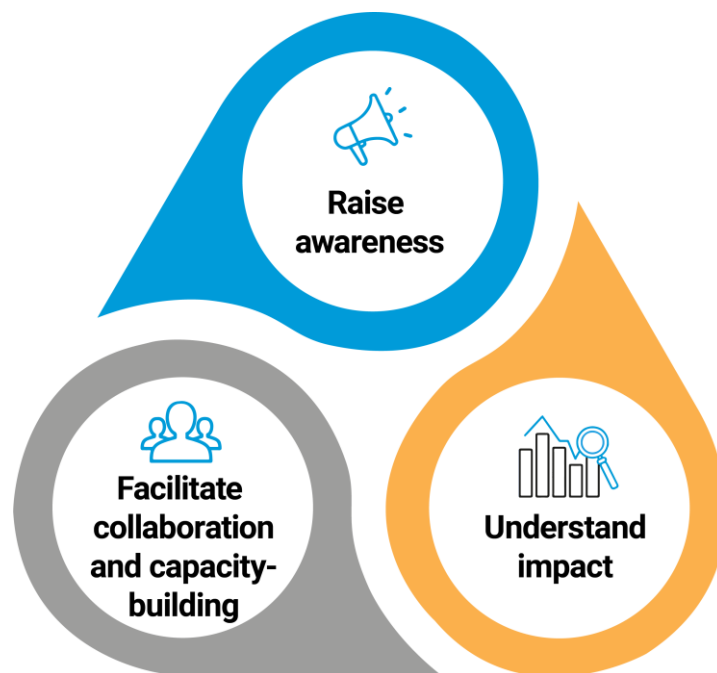
(d) Supporting Member States collectively and individually, on request, by serving as a focal point for efforts to embed future generations and long-term thinking in global, national and subnational policymaking processes and channelling capacity-building resources to that end;

(e) Facilitating long-term thinking and better use of foresight and understanding of future risks, challenges and opportunities by the United Nations system, in support of Member States, leveraging the Futures Lab network and science advisory mechanism, among other resources.

19. The Envoy could also be mandated to report annually to the General Assembly and/or a dedicated intergovernmental forum if such a forum is established or identified.

³⁰ Other functions that have been proposed in the past for an envoy include international agenda-setting and leadership; monitoring, early warning and review; public participation; capacity for innovation at the national and subnational levels; public understanding and evidence; and reporting (see [A/68/322](#)). Studies on intergenerational sustainability tend to show that the inclusion of such advocates for future generations enhances the likelihood of taking sustainable decisions. Mostafa E. Shahan, Koji Kotani and Tatsuyoshi Saijo, "Intergenerational sustainability is enhanced by taking the perspective of future generations", *Scientific Reports* 11 (2021).

Figure VI
Key functions of a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Future Generations



Better use of foresight, science and data

20. An Envoy, once appointed, would be in a position to leverage other efforts already under way within the United Nations system in the context of Our Common Agenda to understand the future impact of today's actions and to systematically act on those insights. The capacity to generate meaningful knowledge about future impacts has improved enormously in recent decades. Today's climate science, for instance, is vastly more sophisticated than in the past and is made available to decision makers in an actionable way through the regular reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Several proposals in Our Common Agenda have set in motion or accelerated efforts to harness data and scientific knowledge more systematically, for instance, through the Data Strategy of the Secretary-General, the Futures Lab network, a new scientific advisory mechanism, the regular production of a global risks report, and the Strategic Foresight Network of the High-level Committee on Programmes.

21. However, as laid out in the elements paper, more could be done to build a strong, integrated evidence base on future impact and to develop the practice of systematically "future-proofing" key policies and programmes by taking that evidence into account.³¹ Some stakeholders have proposed future impact assessments or "generational tests" on those decisions most likely to have long-term impact, such as on the environment, education, culture, technology, health or sustainable development.³² Others have suggested that an Envoy could galvanize United Nations

³¹ Future-proofing could be defined as improving institutions, policies and processes' capacity to enhance the long-term survival of humanity, by accounting for the interests of future generations and addressing extreme risks. As one example, the Simon Institute for Longterm Governance is developing a definition and framework for future-proofing that incorporates such elements as prioritization, representation, extension, preservation, anticipation, referencing and evaluation. Simon Institute for Longterm Governance, "Frameworks & methods", available at www.simoninstitute.ch/project/public-policy-making-longterm-future/.

³² Elements paper.

efforts to better take into account long-term demographic projections or accelerated urbanization. Strategic foresight capacities and tools, such as intergenerational solidarity indices, could allow for monitoring the implementation of decisions over time and for building a stronger sense of connection to future generations.³³ Stocktakes of existing policies and programmes could also be initiated, building on the work already undertaken by the High-level Committee on Programmes.³⁴ The Envoy could facilitate linkages between existing national future generations institutions and United Nations mechanisms and processes, such as the voluntary national reviews, the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, the universal periodic review and treaty bodies.

V. From commitment to reality: recommendations for Member States

22. At the intergovernmental level, I urge Member States to take meaningful steps to safeguard the interests of future generations and to preserve their ability to effectively enjoy their human rights, drawing on the models that now exist at the national level and the strong commitments already made. I invite Member States to consider two specific steps in this regard, namely: (a) to adopt a declaration making concrete the commitment to future generations; and (b) to establish a dedicated intergovernmental mechanism for debating and sharing best practices. Both steps would build on the important consultations that have already taken place, ably facilitated by the Permanent Representatives of Fiji and the Netherlands and captured in their elements paper.

A declaration for future generations

23. A declaration for future generations could clarify and help to consolidate the collective commitment that Member States have already made, while adding detail to how this would find practical expression. Some States have indicated that such a declaration should make a firm commitment to securing the interests of future generations in all decision-making, by identifying, managing and monitoring global existential risks, and by focusing policies and programmes on long-term sustainable development.³⁵

24. To that end, building on the elements paper and intergovernmental discussions to date, the declaration could define and make concrete our duties to future generations by:

- (a) Recalling and consolidating in one clear international instrument the commitments we have already made to future generations (as partially listed in annex II);
- (b) Pledging to adapt these commitments to a new era and set of challenges;

³³ The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs conducted work on immersive experiences of potential futures (and generations) yet to come, meant to remind interlocutors of the consequences of their actions. See United Nations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, “Futuring peace”, available at <https://futuringpeace.org/> (accessed on 9 February 2023).

³⁴ The core group, co-led by UNICEF, UNEP and the United Nations University, consists of 16 United Nations system entities and has issued a discussion paper entitled “Duties to the future through an intergenerational equity lens”, defining key concepts and outlining major challenges and opportunities in going forward, including demographic, institutional, technological and ecological challenges, knowledge and data challenges, inequalities, skewed political and economic incentives and legal opportunities. United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination, “Duties to the future through an intergenerational equity lens”, available at <https://unsceb.org/topics/duties-future>.

³⁵ Elements paper.

(c) Recognizing the worth of the needs, interests and freedom of choice of future generations (building on articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations);

(d) Reaching a clear understanding of who future generations are (not yet born, distinct from young people alive today) and their relationship to the present;

(e) Recognizing that we are in an era of existential threats, catastrophic risks, unsustainable practices, deepening inequalities, and unprecedented opportunities, all with intergenerational consequences;

(f) Further recognizing that we have a duty to protect future generations from foreseeable harms brought about by the actions or inaction we take today;

(g) Reconfirming that we owe it to future generations to meet our needs without compromising their ability to meet theirs;

(h) Committing to take future generations into account in decision-making at the international and national levels;

(i) Enumerating the issues that may most affect future generations, where their interests should be consciously safeguarded, building on the prerequisites for a sustainable future set out in the elements paper, including planetary well-being, a safe and peaceful world and the safe development of technology;

(j) Agreeing to set a common standard of ambition and to put in place practical mechanisms for safeguarding the interests and preserving the rights of future generations at all levels;

(k) Committing to the continued existence of humanity and preservation of the human species (building on articles 3, 4 and 5 of the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations);

(l) Endorsing the appointment of a Special Envoy for Future Generations, with awareness-raising, advisory and advocacy functions, and to support the work of the multilateral system on long-term thinking and foresight, and inviting the Envoy to report regularly to the General Assembly;

(m) Welcoming steps to establish a network of capabilities across the United Nations system for more forward-looking focus in policymaking and for steps towards future impact assessments on key policies and programmes;

(n) Welcoming the initiative to issue a global risks report on a regular basis and identifying opportunities to avoid or mitigate risk;

(o) Establishing a commission or a forum for future generations as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly and/or regularly convening an informal meeting of the General Assembly to share national and local-level experiences with the provision for engaging with many stakeholders, including national commissioners, institutions or bodies for future generations, as appropriate;

(p) Agreeing to review the above decisions at a future date with a view to determining whether they have had the desired impact or inviting Member States to submit a draft resolution on the implementation of the declaration for future generations.

A dedicated forum for future generations

25. Declarations are especially effective when they inspire and link to concrete means of implementation at all levels of governance. As Member States seek to operationalize protections for future generations in their national contexts, a dedicated intergovernmental forum would give them an invaluable tool to share

experiences and innovations. To provide a space for Member States and other stakeholders to come together to advance the objectives of the declaration, consideration could be given to creating a standing intergovernmental forum for future generations under the auspices of the General Assembly. This forum would not be a decision-making body but would provide a locus for debate and collaboration. While the proposal contained in Our Common Agenda to repurpose the Trusteeship Council did not find favour among Member States, the idea of a dedicated forum for future generations nonetheless gained considerable traction during the consultations on Our Common Agenda.³⁶

26. There are many options that could be considered in this regard, ranging from a new standing forum to a recurring agenda item in an existing body. A standing forum is thought by many to be the most appropriate solution that will enable implementation of the declaration as well as send a strong message to the world that we take seriously our commitment to future generations. Anything less risks a continuation of our previous pattern, with strong rhetoric not backed by any practical means of implementation. As such, I recommend that serious consideration be given to the establishment of a new subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, in the form of a commission on future generations that reports to the Assembly. The functions that such a forum could perform include:

- (a) Deliberating and providing guidance on how the principles agreed in the declaration could be operationalized;
- (b) Receiving assessments from the Envoy for Future Generations and other stakeholders on the impact of decisions on future generations;
- (c) Exchanging best practices based on national and subnational experience, and providing a locus at the global level for the growing number of national and regional level bodies, as well as representatives of the private sector, civil society, local authorities and young people to come together;
- (d) Ensuring meaningful participation of all relevant stakeholders, in particular children and young people as current and future decision makers with the greatest affinity for future generations;
- (e) Mainstreaming future-proofing, which could be defined as improving the capacity of institutions, policies and processes to enhance the long-term survival of humanity, by accounting for the interests of future generations and addressing extreme risks.

VI. Conclusion

27. The pledge to bequeath a liveable world to those who will follow us is not new. Actions taken now to deliver on this pledge will also benefit those living today. We have a growing body of national and subnational experience on which to build, as well as repeated international commitments to future generations. These should now be brought together and put into practice at the global level, where some of the most consequential decisions for humanity are taken.

28. In the Charter of the United Nations, we committed to saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we looked forward to the advent of a world in which human beings would enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want as the highest aspiration of the common people. Let us now make this a reality.

³⁶ [A/50/142](#), General Assembly resolution [50/55](#) and [A/50/1011](#).

Annex I

Consultations with Member States and other relevant stakeholders

1. The ideas in the present policy brief draw on a rich, decades-long debate on how to safeguard the interests of future generations, captured in a growing body of international agreements, General Assembly resolutions, national constitutions and other documents, including the 2013 report of the Secretary-General ([A/68/322](#)) and the plethora of international instruments listed in annex II. The issue emerged as a priority concern during the consultations and dialogues held within the framework of the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, reaching more than 1.5 million people in 193 countries. Member States pledged to strengthen global governance for the sake of “present and coming generations” (declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations). Our Common Agenda benefited from extensive additional consultations with Member States, the United Nations system, thought leaders, young people and civil society actors from all around the world, including many for whom future generations was the primary concern. The report contained concrete recommendations for how to make the commitment to future generations a reality.

2. The present policy brief responds in particular to the rich and detailed reflections of Member States and other stakeholders on Our Common Agenda, over the course of more than 26 discussions held by the General Assembly. Those were captured in particular in the thematic consultations of February-March 2022, organized by the President of the General Assembly, with a specific request for more detailed information on the proposals for future generations and taking into account reservations expressed by several delegations regarding the specific proposal of repurposing the Trusteeship Council (not included in the present brief). Most notably, the brief builds on the dedicated consultations on a declaration on future generations co-facilitated by the Permanent Representatives of Fiji, H.E. Dr. Satyendra Prasad, and the Netherlands, H.E. Ms. Yoka Brandt, in June-September 2022 and resulting in the “Elements paper for the declaration for future generations”. In-depth consultations have also taken place with the key United Nations system actors, including the Senior Management Group, the task team on future generations established within the framework of “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights” and the Core Group on Duties to the Future of the High-level Committee on Programmes. External stakeholders with experience on these issues have also been consulted, including the Network of Institutions for Future Generations.

Annex II

Partial list of existing international instruments that refer to future generations

- Charter of the United Nations (1945)
- International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (1946)
- 394 General Assembly resolutions (since 1961)
- African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (1968)
- Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)
- Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972)
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1973)
- Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (1978)
- Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (1979)
- Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979)
- Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (1979)
- World Charter for Nature (1982)
- Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (1985)
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (1985)
- Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (also known as the Brundtland Report, 1987)
- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992)
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992)
- Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992)
- Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (1992)
- Convention on Biological Diversity (1992)
- Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents (1992)
- North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (1993)
- Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993)
- Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994)
- United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa (1994)
- Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development (1995)
- Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations (1997)

- Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights (1997)
 - Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management (1997)
 - Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998)
 - Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000)
 - Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (2001)
 - Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)
 - Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002)
 - New Delhi Declaration of Principles of International Law Relating to Sustainable Development (2002)
 - Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002)
 - World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (2003)
 - Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)
 - Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)
 - Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005)
 - United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)
 - Outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled “The future we want” (2012)
 - SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (2014)
 - Paris Agreement (2015)
 - 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)
 - Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017)
 - Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations (2020)
 - Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021)
 - Human Rights Council resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (Human Rights Council resolution [48/13](#) of 8 October 2021)
 - General Assembly resolution [76/300](#) on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (2022)
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