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POLICY BRIEF

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A VOICE AND FORUM FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS IN THE UNITED NATIONS

TOOLS TO SUPPORT COUNTRIES TO IMPLEMENT THE
DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2024, countries will likely commit to safeguard future generations through a Declaration on Future Generations, annexed to the Pact for the Future to be adopted at the UN Summit of the Future.

The purpose of the Declaration is not simply symbolic. Its success depends on its ability to catalyse a wide range of strategies and reforms at the national and subnational levels to help countries address current and long-term challenges such as development, environmental protection, or changes in technology and demography¹. Across the world, countries have developed numerous tools that help them serve the interests of future generations, but every government needs more support to operationalise and implement the core commitment to safeguard future generations.

As we stand at a critical moment in human history, the Declaration on Future Generations would be a renewed commitment of Member States to act on the intergenerational transmission of injustice, and reinvigorate the principles of sustainable development: responding to the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to do so.

This policy brief outlines how a **Special Envoy for Future Generations and a UN Forum on Future Generations** could support countries to implement the Declaration. It suggests how these tools could work, including how they could strengthen and link to existing mechanisms, and through what process they could be created. Working in tandem, the core functions of these tools are to:

1. Support countries' capacity to operationalise the commitment to safeguard future generations,
2. Support exchange knowledge and best practices between countries and between different parts of society,
3. Review progress toward the commitment of stakeholders to actively safeguard future generations,
4. Create a multilateral focal point that complements work on future generations across the UN system.

The Declaration, the Envoy, and the Forum work together as a set of complementary catalytic tools. By supporting not just a strong Declaration on Future Generations, but also this critical implementation work, Member States can use the Summit of the Future to boost their efforts to meet both immediate and long-term challenges.

¹ For information on a range of tools countries are already using to safeguard future generations, see: "[Implementing a Declaration on Future Generations.](#)"



THE DECLARATION ON FUTURE GENERATIONS AS A CATALYST FOR NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL EFFORTS

As a political and normative statement, the Declaration on Future Generations can show that **the world is responding to the urgency of present crises in a way that goes beyond mere fire-fighting**. It can raise the salience of the long-term aspects of present challenges and consolidate the existing normative consensus on the value of future generations and the responsibility of present generations to safeguard their interests. By doing so, it would serve to empower policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates to advance more effective solutions to, for example, present challenges around pandemic preparedness, debt restructuring, or climate action. A Declaration on Future Generations could bolster such efforts by making them not just piecemeal responses to a wide array of present challenges, but part of a longer-term project of creating a positive legacy for the future.²

While the signalling effect of a strong Declaration could be significant, the true test of success is the extent to which countries, subnational governments, and other decision-makers are able to implement and operationalise its principles in the years to come. This work will take many different forms as countries and communities devise the institutions, strategies, policies, and measures appropriate for their own contexts.³

Prior UN summits and declarations have proven to be important catalysts for broader changes in governance. For example, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human rights spurred the development of systems to protect human rights around the world. Similarly, the 1971 UN Conference on the Human Environment drove the creation of national environmental ministries around the world. The Summit of the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations now have a similar potential to support further innovations to safeguard future generations. But while a Declaration by itself can help to inspire decision-makers to adopt these kinds of tools, implementation will not be automatic.

For this reason, it is critical for a Declaration to be complemented by practical multilateral tools to support implementation. A voice for future generations in the form of a Special Envoy, as well as a Forum in which countries can exchange ideas regarding future generations, will greatly bolster the practical effect of the

² For further discussion of what benefit a Declaration could have, see [Toward a Declaration on Future Generations](#).

³ For a further discussion of the types of tools and institutions countries are using to implement commitments to safeguard generations, see [Implementing the Declaration for Future Generations](#), and the [Wales Protocol for Future Generations](#).



Declaration on the outcomes it seeks to promote by giving the principals an animating force going forward.

A SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Role and responsibilities

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

1. Advocate for all UN member states and other stakeholders to mainstream the principles of the Declaration, including supporting them to do so via capacity-building and peer exchanges, serving as a catalyst for the principles in the Declaration.
2. Convene national and sub-national representatives or other institutions (e.g. parliamentary committees) on future generations from around the world, around to examine questions of shared interests to exchange and collect information, and collaborate on common projects, serving as a focal point for these efforts in the multilateral system.
3. Publish a regular review of efforts to implement the Declaration, highlighting positive examples that can be replicated and scaled up and identifying barriers to overcome.
4. Work with the UN Futures Lab and other relevant offices across the multilateral system to generate and/or amplify reports and other knowledge products (e.g. videos) to enhance present understanding of future risks and challenges, and outline different options for the multilateral system, governments, and other stakeholders to address them. Draw on domain experts and up-to-date evidence to evaluate major risks to future generations. Embrace the multidisciplinary nature of the problem by facilitating communication between research specialists.
5. In collaboration with other UN organs, review key UN decisions and outputs and report on where the needs of future generations are / are not well addressed, informed by (1). This would help to ensure that the interests of future generations are represented in multilateral decision-making.

Appointing a Special Envoy for Future Generations

The authority to appointment a Special Envoy for Future Generations rests with the UN Secretary General. Indeed, in a policy brief the Secretary General has stated,



*“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”.*⁴

It is important for member states to welcome this decision, both in public statements and potentially in the text of the Pact or the Future and/or the Declaration on Future Generations. Furthermore, member states, as well as philanthropic organisations, can give substance to this role by ensuring adequate resourcing of the Envoy's work.

During the first consultations for the Declaration on Future Generations, civil society organisations have largely endorsed the appointment of the Special Envoy⁵, stressing the necessity of its role to account for progress and implementation of the Declaration. While many stressed the need to not duplicate efforts elsewhere, there was widespread agreement that future generations require some kind of tangible 'landing zone' in the UN. Organisations also highlighted the value of appointing the Envoy [ahead of the Summit of the Future](#) in order to rapidly advance the implementation agenda.⁶

A UN FORUM FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Purpose and mandate

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

Such a forum would advance the objectives of the Declaration in three primary ways.

1. **Peer learning and exchange.** A Forum on future generations would provide a valuable way for Member states and stakeholders to enhance their capacities to advance the interests of future generations. Countries and other actors could share the approaches, institutions, and commitments they are taking to advance the interests of future generations. This information

⁴ Our Common Agenda Policy Brief No. 1, [“To Think and Act for Future Generations,”](#) March 2023.

⁵ UN Summit of the Future, [Summary of stakeholder consultations.](#)

⁶ Yusuf, N and Day, A (2024), “The UN needs to embrace the F-word”, Stimson Centre.



would facilitate the exchange of best practices and help identify common challenges or blockages. At the same time, such a Forum could function as an interface between countries and domain experts, who can share research and insight into solutions for emerging risks and navigate powerful emerging technologies. In this way the Forum would serve as a tool for countries to learn from and share with each other to promote their common project of protecting future generations. Such exchange occurs regularly in other domains, for example through multilateral fora like the High-level Political Forum for the SDGs, or through less formal intergovernmental networks like the Open Government Network (for data transparency), the International Network for Environmental Compliance and Enforcement (for environmental regulation), the International Competition Network (for antitrust policy).

2. **Review progress on implementation.** Implementation is key to the success of the Declaration. Countries therefore need the Forum as a way to communicate how they are advancing on this commitment. A regular Forum on future generations helps build a regular cycle of action, reporting, and learning that supports implementation.
3. **Collective action for future generations.** While the Forum on future generations would not be a decision-making body, it could serve as an important venue for countries to develop cooperative approaches around strategies and data to protect the needs and interests of future generations. These could take the form of standalone statements or recommendations to the General Assembly or other UN bodies. While more specialised fora would be more appropriate for decision-making (e.g. climate issues are dealt with in the UNFCCC, health issues in the WHO, etc) the Forum on future generation could provide an important complement by considering especially 1) cross-cutting issues that cover more than one functional domain; 2) gaps in the current array of multilateral fora. The latter may be particularly critical for the interests of future generations, as it creates a capacity to address new or emerging issues beyond those current governance instruments are designed to address.

Institutional considerations

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

Alternatively, a Forum on future generations could be created as a subsidiary of the General Assembly, as a new standalone council (like the Human Rights Council), or even as an informal grouping of interested member states. The Forum may also grow



through different institutional forms over time, for example beginning as a network and then growing into a more formalised multilateral body.

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

Regardless of the specific Forum chosen, adding future generations as a standing agenda item for the General Assembly is necessary to create another platform ensuring that the commitments contained in the Declaration live beyond the Summit of the Future.