

## Global Conference on Implementing Intergenerational Equity:

Bringing Future Perspectives to the Status Quo, July 2013

### Conference Synopsis

*"We are made wise not by the recollection of our past but by the responsibility for our future."* George Bernard Shaw.

The two day conference, organised by the UN Environment Programme and the World Future Council was attended by leading philosophers, academics, lawyers, human rights specialists, civil society organisation representatives, senior UN officials, practitioners and youth representatives from around the world, with delegates from some Geneva based Missions.

**The imperative for action was emphasised throughout the proceedings.** We have two obligations, the first is to leave the natural and human environment in at least as good condition as it was received and the second, to end poverty. We are reaching critical moments, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of lost opportunity, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is our last opportunity. The human and ecological worlds are suffering from our misguided actions: the damage to the natural world shows how far we have lost our connection to and relation with the environment around us.

**Tackling poverty remains central to consideration for future generations.** We cannot expect impoverished people to be able to care for future generations - it is simply impossible to invest in the future when the present is a fight for survival. It remains an obligation to maintain the robustness of the human environment as a key to addressing issues in the anthropocene. Improving the lives of current generations is therefore pertinent for generations to come, not just environmentally but socially and economically.

A broader acceptance and expression of the key concept of the common heritage of humankind in relation to the present and future generations is evident, i.e. that justice, including intergenerational justice is a matter of equal access to common resources (such as clean air and water, stable climate etc). The critical shortcoming of international law is that the system operates far behind the challenges it needs to meet: current international law has better language addressing private ownership than dealing with common heritage.

We are plundering the birth right of future generations, yet we do not have a mechanism or methodology to prevent this. **We need to recognise the effects of what we do on future generations and assess our political acts through an intergenerational lens. We need to create values of responsibility and foster such values and empathy in current generations and develop ourselves into a 'morally mature culture'.** This embodies the principle of trusteeship; the principle of duty towards our children and future generations.

People are more likely to respond to a hopeful, optimistic message rather than a situation of fear, doom, gloom and sacrifice. This is a cyclical approach rather than a process of physically handing something over – thus removing entirely the unhelpful 'them versus us' concept. Perhaps more should be done to emphasise that sustainable development benefits current *and* future generations *and* the environment. None of these three actors are mutually exclusive. **We overestimate uncertainty – i.e. that future generations' values and needs will be massively different to ours. This uncertainty is being used as an excuse for inaction, but it should not be the case - we can safely assume that future generations will have the same basic needs as us, while we have no basis to suppose that they will be able to fall back on a dramatically impoverished nature and on lack of vital resources.**

This is more about rights with the future generation, meaning the law of sharing/commons rather than to something. We as current generations enjoy certain rights but we should be obliged to extend consideration of future generations in their ability to enjoy their rights when their time comes. This is a logical and necessary extension of the concepts of democracy and human rights. None of the pillars of our civilisation seem to have only temporary meaning.

The argument that "no rights holders = no rights" was the same argument used against initiating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and is now being used almost verbatim in the future generations debate.

It was pointed out that intergenerational solidarity is not the same as intergenerational justice. The former refers to shared resources and affections between generations close to each other, while, although the latter is not without emotional ties either, it is more generally about the division of benefits and costs between people living now and in the undetermined future. In other words, intergenerational justice is about survival of our civilisation.

**We need a specific institution/function and representation for future generations.** However, since it is simply not possible for future generations to represent themselves, we need institutions/organisations that in an epistemic manner can put themselves in the position of future generations and work on an adequate representation of those rights and interests. Furthermore, this function can play a fundamental role in genuinely integrating the elements of sustainable development – it is not happening without intervention and it can no longer be a bolt on or a tick box exercise. Especially given the right to a healthy environment is the key fundament under the three dimensions of sustainable development.

**An official, tasked with representing and advocating for future generations was regarded as essential to promote this agenda.** There were significant debates on the nature and mandate of a representative for future generations, internationally, nationally, regionally, locally (all levels were regarded as important). It was widely recognised that the institution/organisation/representative would require a well-defined, broad and effective mandate set out under a specific treaty or law. They would be independent, transparent, democratically legitimate, with access to information, open to external assessment and proficient. Overtime the office would become a service for integrated policy making and expertise in wellbeing.

Its role is very different to a spokesperson for youth. Those who fight for this institution realise the formalistic debates on the rights of future generations, or their interests or needs. Naturally this is a debate that follows the establishment of the institution. **The breadth of the role was emphasised by many, to reach beyond the environment, to ensure social justice and economic framing.** At the national level, the advantage of statutory recognition, to ensure permanence to this institution, to survive political changes was raised. Could the representative convene truth and reconciliation commissions charged with changing the behaviour of current generations and make peace with future generations? A right of appearance before the court of law is appropriate at the national level, but must also be able to get a decree in their favour.

**If introduced at the UN, this function offers compelling direction and impetus to national, local, regional governments to introduce counterparts, and encourages vertical alignment, helping to drive implementation from international to local levels.** Establishing a network of recognised representatives would help to build visibility and profile and co-ordination on efforts to build a long term view. A national representative would be a useful complement to national SD or FG Councils in terms of providing a watchdog role and a more operative organisation that would add the practical implementation element to the wisdom of the councils. Several remarks touched upon the semantics, or terminology of the role providing subtle differences: a guardian could act as a proxy (and perhaps best encapsulates the concept of trusteeship), an ombudsperson would be an advocate of the rights of future generations (and has rich institutional history of over 200 years).

A number of tools and tasks for this role were identified, including, undertaking an audit or mapping of the commons, cultural heritage and natural environment, with a legacy analysis of how we hand it over to future generations and compiling the notion of the common heritage from the mosaic of the different states' national heritage. The use of indicators were recognised as excellent tools to measure or set thresholds on the work and substance. A certification standard could also be developed, to help provide legal recognition and ensure the quality and accountability of the mandate and mission, also helping to add greater visibility to their role. Culture and education should also be emphasised through this role: long-termism needs to become a cultural norm and this concept should be taught from a young age.

**Presentations and discussions were thoroughly constructive and positive, demonstrating the interest and momentum behind this issue. Many look to the UNSG report as a key tool to set out strong recommendations and drive forward clear, decisive action at all levels.**