



CEB
Chief Executives Board
for Coordination

High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP)

Core Group on Duties to the Future

Duties to the future through an intergenerational equity lens:
Frequently Asked Questions

Background

Recognizing the importance of re-committing to intergenerational solidarity and more seriously addressing questions of equity, the [High-level Committee on Programmes \(HLCP\)](#) of the [UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination \(CEB\)](#) identified the topic of “[duties to the future](#)” as one of its [three thematic focus areas](#) in October 2021. Work under this theme has been taken forward by a Core Group of 19 UN system entities, co-led by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN University (UNU).

The Core Group developed a set of eight concise principles to help guide and inform the UN system in its work on future generations – the [United Nations System Common Principles on Future Generations](#) – approved by HLCP at its [45th session](#) and endorsed by CEB in May 2023. The aim is to ensure greater clarity on terminology regarding duties to future generations and agree on a set of common values for use in various contexts. The preamble of the principles emphasizes that upholding the rights and meeting the needs of present generations are preconditions for a better shared future. This aligns with the need to accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As part of the Core Group's efforts to help unpack the Common Principles, this set of “Frequently Asked Questions” was developed with a view to supporting the operationalization of the principles within UN system entities by providing conceptual clarity and supporting a common understanding of foundational concepts and principles associated with duties to the future, including concepts of intergenerational equity, the rights of future generations, and how duties to future generations can be fulfilled.

Introduction

1. In March 2023, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) of the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) approved the [United Nations System Common Principles on Future Generations](#)¹ and supported the Core Group's recommendation to unpack the Common Principles, with a view to supporting their operationalization in UN system entities. The "**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on Duties to the Future through an Intergenerational Equity Lens**" document has been developed to support this effort.
2. This document aims to provide clarity on key terminology and other issues related to future generations, drawing on existing scholarship and initiatives. While the document does not aim to provide definitive positions, it presents an overview of concepts related to duties to the future and intergenerational equity. By providing a compilation of current definitions, parameters and proposals on key questions and issues relevant to future generations, the FAQ document is meant to serve two main purposes. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the creation of a common understanding within the UN system of the Common Principles and better support UN system entities to integrate the Common Principles into their work, which should be tailored to each entity's mandate, rules and procedures. Secondly, it intends to help support ongoing processes, intergovernmental or otherwise, such as the process for the Declaration on Future Generations or the Summit of the Future, among others.
3. The document includes nine key questions structured across three parts. Part One explores foundational concepts and principles associated with duties to the future through an intergenerational equity lens. Part Two considers the rights of future generations. Part Three then unpacks ideas on how duties to future generations can be fulfilled.
4. This is a living document that will be revisited as needed to track and reflect developments and advances on the topic of duties to the future. These include, but are not limited to, the outcomes of ongoing intergovernmental or other processes, such as the upcoming [Advisory Opinion from the International Court of Justice \(ICJ\) on Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change](#), and the [Summit of the Future](#).

I. Part one: Foundational concepts and principles

Q1: Who are future generations?

5. **For the purpose of the UN System Common Principles on Future Generations and this accompanying FAQ, future generations are defined as "all those generations that do not yet exist, are yet to come and who will eventually inherit this planet."² By this definition, future generations represent a huge number of people, possibly infinite. And, "(j)ust like present generations, future generations will include people of all ages from children and youth to older persons, and hence it is important to consider people's needs and rights across the life course."³**
6. While future generations can indeed represent an infinite number of people and extend into a distant future, another way future generations are understood covers a much shorter span of time. The UN Secretary-General reported in 2013 that "[i]t is plausible — and squares with our intuition — that people's concern for what happens in the future and those living in the future tends to be attenuated the further into the future we go."⁴ As a result of this, duties to the future are commonly expressed in terms of the present day's responsibilities and obligations, and what present generations owe to our children and grandchildren,

¹ Endorsed by the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) in May 2023.

² Definition presented in UN System Common Principles on Future Generations (2023), [United Nations System Common Principles on Future Generations | United Nations - CEB \(unsceb.org\)](#).

³ UN System Common Principles on Future Generations (2023), Op. cit., which note "A key goal of the principles is to ensure greater clarity on terminology."

⁴ A/68/322, Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations, Report of the Secretary-General, 2013, Para 12, [A/68/322 - Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(un.org\)](#)

whether or not they are born,⁵ reflecting a more immediate concern rooted in the limitations of human foresight and emotional investment.

7. Children and youth are part of present generations and distinctly different from future generations. Their lives will extend further into the future in the age groups of adults and older persons as future generations, with corresponding rights, needs and interests. Indeed, “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”.⁶ More than a space at the table, this engagement with decision and policymaking processes needs to be meaningful and effective.⁷ This will ensure the strengthening of intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs and preferences of both the older and the younger in discussions around future generations.
8. In the context of defining future generations, it should be understood that there is no right of human embryos or fetuses to be born, nor any obligation on any individual to give birth to another. This understanding should not be interpreted as accepting any interferences with the bodily autonomy of women, girls, and others who can become pregnant, including their actions and decisions around pregnancy or abortion and other sexual and reproductive health and rights⁸.

Q2: What is intergenerational equity?

9. **The principle of intergenerational equity has been described as a concept of fairness among generations.**⁹ Intergenerational equity, as defined in the Common Principles, underscores the duty of concern and respect “to all humans regardless of where and when they may be born” (Common Principle 1).¹⁰ The existing and established rights-based principles aimed at present generations, as set out in the international human rights framework and the UN Charter, are also in support of future generations, as they have not been prescribed a time limit.
10. This duty is operationalized through the pursuit of, as Common Principle 2 notes, an “equitable and just distribution of benefits, risks and costs in all sectors, including socioeconomic sectors, between present and future generations.” This characterizes the concept of intergenerational equity, which has been defined by one of the most widely recognized scholars in the field as integrating two basic “fiduciary duties”. First, “an *intergenerational* duty owed by each generation to its successors”; and second, “an *intragenerational* duty owed to members of the same generation.”¹¹
11. The concept of intergenerational equity is also found in numerous instruments of international environmental law as a key legal principle. Relevant instruments include the 1972 Stockholm Declaration, the 1992 Rio Declaration, and the Paris Agreement.¹² Subsequent intergovernmental instruments have continued to affirm it as a legal principle.¹³

⁵ See United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination “[Discussion Paper: Duties to the Future Through an Intergenerational Equity Lens](#)”, 13 February 2023, para 4.

⁶ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1: To think and Act for Future Generations](#)

⁷ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 2: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-making Processes](#)

⁸ Adapted from the [Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations](#), 2023.

⁹ Edith Brown Weiss, “Intergenerational Equity”, 2021, Max Planck Encyclopaedias of International Law

¹⁰ Further references to the Common Principles will be based on the document UN System Common Principles on Future Generations (2023), Op. cit.

¹¹ Edith Brown Weiss, “The Planetary Trust: Conservation & Intergenerational Equity,” Georgetown University Law Center, vol. 11, No.4 (1984), p. 495-582 (emphasis added).

¹² See “[Discussion Paper: Duties to the Future Through an Intergenerational Equity Lens](#)”, Op. cit., para 6.

¹³ Ibid.

12. In 1987, sustainable development was formulated by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹⁴ In 2013, the Secretary-General’s Report on International Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations¹⁵ took a further step in helping to articulate more clearly what the United Nations’ position on intergenerational equity is – emphasizing the importance of solidarity both between the young and the old and between present and future people.¹⁶ Most recently, Stockholm+50, a commemoration of the 50 years since the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment, and its outcomes gave a specific focus to intergenerational equity and, in particular, on intergenerational responsibility as a cornerstone of sound policymaking, especially in the engagement with youth.¹⁷
13. Accepting and acting on the principles of intergenerational equity today lays the foundations for future generations to ensure equity among them, between present generations and between present and future generations (the different relationships are described in Q4).

Q3: How is intergenerational equity linked to intergenerational solidarity, intergenerational responsibility, and intergenerational justice? What is the difference between them?

14. Intergenerational equity seeks fairness; an equitable and just distribution of benefits, risks and costs in all sectors, including socioeconomic sectors, between present and future generations (see Common Principle 2), as highlighted above. As such, it is instrumental for the distributional effects of development and policy, and links to the more nuanced interrelated concepts of intergenerational justice, intergenerational solidarity, and intergenerational responsibility.¹⁸
15. **Intergenerational justice** refers to accountability and distributive, procedural, restorative and retributive actions to ameliorate the negative effects of inequality. This premise recalls Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 “Reduce inequality within and among countries” elaborated across 10 targets. It also refers to addressing past injustices and inequities or historical harms, which impact the rights, needs and interests of present and future generations. Addressing the past, through truth and reconciliation, and other measures, can ensure that intergenerational trauma is not carried to future generations and can prevent continuation of a vicious cycle of inequity.
16. **Intergenerational solidarity** has long been embedded in the definition of sustainable development, and in addressing the needs of present and future generations. These generations have social relationships with one another, and solidarity animates the imperative of equity and justice. The Political Declaration of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing recognizes intergenerational solidarity as “keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger [generations], and to encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations.”¹⁹ In other words, “intergenerational solidarity is widely understood as social cohesion between generations”.²⁰
17. Another aspect to highlight on intergenerational solidarity is the need to contribute, according to everyone’s capacities, to those in situations of need or vulnerability. By the same token, intergenerational solidarity

¹⁴ United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 11 December 1987, 42/187. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (New York, United States of America, United Nations Document, 1987)

¹⁵ [Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations: report of the Secretary General](#) (2013), A/68/322

¹⁶ See United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination “[Discussion Paper: Duties to the Future Through an Intergenerational Equity Lens](#)”, 13 February 2023, para 19.

¹⁷ [Presidents’ Final Remarks to Plenary, Key recommendations for accelerating action towards a healthy planet for the prosperity of all](#), 3 June 2022

¹⁸ See Duties to the Future Through an Intergenerational Equity Lens, Op. cit., para 4.

¹⁹ Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, [Political Declaration](#)

²⁰ [Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future generations: report of the Secretary General](#), Op. cit.

means that present generations should contribute, according to their capacities, to prevent situations of need or vulnerability of future generations.

18. Finally, **intergenerational responsibility** has been most recognizably set out in UNESCO’s Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations.²¹ It proclaims that “[t]he present generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded.”²²

Q4: How does the principle of intergenerational equity apply to the relationships between...:

19. Understanding how the principle of intergenerational equity applies to the relationships between different generations is critical for fulfilling duties to the future. **Only through distinguishing the nuanced interplay of and between different generations can policy and decision-making processes better take into account the rights, needs and interests of present and future generations, while recognizing that there is no trade-off between meeting the needs of the present and taking into account the needs of the future. Any solutions to the challenges of today will have a long-term impact and can therefore potentially leave all generations better off.** As the preamble of the Common Principles states “[u]pholding the rights and meeting the needs of present generations are preconditions for a better shared future.”²³

i. ...present generations (alive today)?

20. Those six-to-seven present generations alive today²⁴ are made up of persons of all ages and of equal value, and intergenerational equity dictates that each living generation should share in the costs and benefits of society according to their capacity and needs.

ii. ...present and future generations (alive today and those who do not yet exist)?

21. This relationship is the focus of the HLCP’s work on duties to the future and intergenerational equity. The principle of intergenerational equity between generations alive today and all of those who do not yet exist is based in the concern and respect owed to all humans regardless of where and when they may be born, and it must be applied by present generations to “safeguard the rights, needs and interests of future generations,” as noted in Common Principle 1. It strives to close the gap in power asymmetry between present and future generations, which is increasingly larger the more distant they are from the present. Closing this gap can also support improving trust in public institutions, ensuring more effective decision-making and renewing the social contract between peoples and societies.
22. With equity, solidarity, responsibility, justice and sustainability at the forefront, there must be synergies, rather than trade-offs, between the well-being of people of all ages today and those in the future. This thinking must underpin current day policies, plans, and integrated approaches to sustainable development efforts across the board. It is noteworthy to stress that inequity in access and opportunity across generations alive today will spill over and negatively impact those future generations that are yet to be born, so equitable access to resources and opportunity in the present will have positive spillover effects for future generations. For example, ensuring access to adequate food, health, quality education, decent work and social protection for present generations will have far-reaching effects on future children, youth, middle-aged persons and older persons.²⁵
23. Therefore, upholding the rights and meeting the needs of those alive today, including all present generations, represents a moral responsibility towards future generations and is a precondition for securing a better

²¹ [Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations | UNESCO](#)

²² Ibid, Article 1.

²³ UN System Common Principles on Future Generations (2023), Op. cit.

²⁴ [Defining Our Six Generations | The Pew Charitable Trusts \(pewtrusts.org\)](#)

²⁵ See [DESA Policy Brief no. 147: “Old-age inequality begins at birth”](#), 4 January 2023

future.²⁶ Starting with fulfilling the commitments to those currently alive can further reclaim a balance between trust and power, giving an opportunity to renew the social contracts of today, as addressed above, with benefits to both present and future generations.

24. For instance, true sustainability requires pursuing development efforts through an intergenerational equity lens. Gender inequality, if unaddressed, undermines the rights of both present and future generations; supporting efforts to ensure equal legal rights and protections for women and girls in order to accelerate the attainment of gender equality should be pursued, aligned with the advancement of a framework on future generations. Furthermore, diverse belief systems and cultures of present generations already anticipate and provide for the rights of future generations, for example Indigenous knowledge systems,²⁷ and can be used to advance these efforts.

iii. ...future generations (all those generations (young and old) that do not yet exist)?

25. The principle of intergenerational equity between co-existing generations in the future will likely remain the same, adapted to the specific needs of those generations. Older and younger future generations will likely continue to have obligations to pursue intergenerational equity in their present and future context. As knowledge of the future is limited, for now, only an assumption can be made on what principles and values will be at play but, ultimately, this will have to be a choice made by the future generations.

II. Part two: Rights of future generations

Q5: Are future generations holders of human rights?²⁸

26. **Future generations are both rights-holders and duty-bearers. Each generation should act as the custodian and carer of the society and the planet its descendants will inherit. In this sense, future generations have a claim on rights that present-day generations should seek to preserve and expand for them to enjoy. They, in turn, will have duties and obligations to do the same with respect to the generations that will succeed them.**
27. Common Principle 1 calls for the promotion of a vision for future generations based on human rights and equity. Giving a moral lens to the consideration of future generations, it says that “the basis for our moral obligation to future generations and gender equality lies in the concern and respect that we owe to all humans regardless of where or when they may be born”.
28. Decisions taken today will have an impact – positive or negative – on an array of internationally-recognized human rights. For instance, as the Our Common Agenda Policy Brief on Future Generations states, “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).”²⁹
29. Common Principle 1 also affirms that the UN system should support all possible opportunities to “strengthen rights-based approaches in legal frameworks that would help safeguard the rights, needs and interests of future generations”. This means that decisions affecting future generations should be guided by the cross-

²⁶ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1: To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)

²⁷ Also referenced in the [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1: To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)

²⁸ Given the critical need for greater clarity on the rights held by future generations, and the contributions from civil society, i.e. the Maastricht Principles, the HLCP Core Group on duties to the future will work on developing a commentary on Common Principle 1 and other human rights aspects of the Common Principles.

²⁹ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1: To think and Act for Future Generations](#)

cutting principles that inform the human rights-based approach to development, namely equality and non-discrimination, participation, accountability, and non-retrogression.

30. The discussion of what exactly are the rights of future generations is not new, as can be seen through the dispersion of references to future generations in different international instruments throughout the last century. In the last few years, a new momentum has surfaced within intergovernmental processes, the UN system and civil society to provide further clarification on the exact scope of their rights. In particular, a group of academic and civil society experts recently completed the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations, detailing human rights for future generations founded in existing international law, and emphasizing that human rights have no temporal limitation.³⁰

Q6: Are present generations subject to a duty to respect the foreseeable human rights of future generations?

31. **The idea of duties to the future is often understood as multi-sectoral and cross-cultural; it is commonly expressed in terms of what is owed to our children and grandchildren and as solidarity and accountability to younger and future generations.**³¹ There are key instruments that clarify the responsibilities of current generations towards future generations, such as the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the Rio Conventions, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, among others.
32. Duties towards future generations are inextricably linked with sustainable development, given its definition. Common Principle 2 notes “the needs of presents generations must not be met at the expense of generations to come. Similarly, the needs of future generations should not be met at the expense of people living today and must not come at the expense of people who are living in poverty or who are otherwise vulnerable”.³² It would therefore appear that to respect the principle of intergenerational equity and duties to the future, a balance must be struck between meeting the needs of present and future generations. However, sustainable development (that is universally applicable per the 2030 Agenda and other key multilateral agreements) not only requires a balance across the social, environmental and economic pillars, but also requires a respect for ecosystems, and planetary boundaries and limitations, and therefore any and all policies and approaches that aim towards sustainable development must be cognizant of bequeathing a sustainable world to future generations.
33. Halfway towards the deadline for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), harnessing the interlinkages between sustainable development and protecting the rights, interests and needs of future generations is vital. All SDGs have intergenerational relevance.³³ The provision of conceptual clarity around the rights, needs and interests of future generations, the contribution to its normative advancement and the application of foresight methods can support capacity-building at all levels and the achievement of the SDGs. Putting sustainable development at the heart of the multilateral agenda is also thinking with future generations in mind.
34. Two examples can illustrate the scope of these duties. First, the need to act on those policies and practices that aggravate the scarcity of natural resources – such as water, arable land, biodiversity, clear air, among many others. And second, the sustainability of public systems that are instrumental to the realization of human rights, and that rely on intergenerational contributions, including the health system, the social security system, the educational system, the agrifood system and the water and sanitation system, among many others.

³⁰ [Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations](#), 2023

³¹ See *Duties to the Future Through an Intergenerational Lens* (2022), Op. cit.

³² See General Assembly Resolution 42/187 and the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (A/42/427).

³³ See Policy Brief 1, Op. cit., page 12, for the specific interlinkages.

35. The recognition of human rights of future generations, and corresponding duties, will also be affected by whether an anthropocentric and/or eco-centric approach is applied to policymaking. The relationship that humanity has with the natural world will necessarily have implications for the rights and duties framework. Beyond the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the growing recognition of rights of nature at national or subnational levels, as well as increasingly valuing other non-formal knowledge systems, for instance from Indigenous Peoples, local or traditional communities, can support keeping future generations at the heart of the rights and duties framework.
36. Duties to the future will emerge and be shaped around the issues for which there are choices and control over their direction. Along with sustainable development, addressing emerging technologies and present inequities, such as economic and gender inequalities, will be crucial to safeguard the interests and needs of future generations. For instance, improving livelihoods and the resilience of families, including eliminating child labor, has the potential to ultimately break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, in a gender equitable manner.³⁴
37. The present generations' duties to the future also imply dealing with the past and identifying lessons learned. Because of present people's ability to learn from past choices, it can be said that a duty to steward, steer and being a good ancestor in the direction of the future exists. Mechanisms to ensure accountability of the present, including institutionalizing good ancestry, and towards fulfilling the duties to the future can and should be put in place, which will help support long-term sustainability and the achievement of the SDGs.

III. Part three: Fulfilling duties to future generations

Q7: What is the difference between futures literacy, strategic foresight, futures thinking, systems thinking and scenario planning, and how can these concepts help fulfill duties to future generations?

38. While underscoring that the broader normative and cross-cutting function of the UN in advancing duties to the future is an essential starting point, there are some key operational building blocks.
39. Common Principle 4 notes that “adopting a good ancestor policy would help to infuse strategic foresight, long-term thinking and the precautionary principle into all stages of planning and programming, from design and budgeting to implementation and evaluation”.
40. With regard to implementing efforts and operationalizing the duties to the future, a future-focused or future-oriented approach to sustainable development efforts that leverages the field of future studies and utilizes a range of relevant approaches (some of which are defined below) is necessary, and upscaling capacities in this regard across the UN system is key.
41. **Futures literacy, (strategic) foresight, and systems thinking, all refer either to capabilities, competences and skills, or approaches, applied methods and tools that help individuals, organizations, and communities to better navigate today's volatile, highly uncertain and complex environment. Futures literacy, strategic foresight and systems thinking help us escape short-termism and strive for long-term policies that address the interests and needs of present and future generations.**
42. **Futures thinking** is a creative and exploratory process that uses divergent thinking, seeking many possible answers and acknowledging uncertainty. It is a different mindset to analytical thinking, which uses convergent thinking to seek the right answer and reduce uncertainty.³⁵

³⁴ FAO, [FAO framework on ending child labour in agriculture](#), 2020, Rome.

³⁵ New Zealand, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, [“Futures thinking”](#)

43. **Futures literacy** refers to the capability to expand, diversify, reflect and make conscious choices on the ways and purposes people engage with the future. Futures literacy is considered by UNESCO an essential competence of the 21st century as it allows people to better understand how they connect with the future and change, as well as to realize the pivotal role that future ideas, images and emotions play in what they see and do in the present.³⁶
44. **Foresight** refers to the systematic and pragmatic application of futures methods and tools including horizon-scanning, scenarios, and visioning, to support long-term preparation, planning, and strategizing as well as efforts for deliberate transformation. It is a structured and systematic way of using ideas about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. This can support policymaking through better anticipation, policy innovation, and future-proofing.³⁷
45. Futures literacy as a competence that can be nurtured and learned can effectively support the conduct of applied foresight as the pragmatic, action-oriented application of futures methods and tools for preparation. While conducting foresight requires technical knowledge and prior experience, futures literacy is accessible to all, drawing on humankind’s innate capability for imagining. Futures literacy and foresight combined enable a capability-based approach to futures, which leverages the power of imagination to shift away from dominant narratives or constraints and envision new possibilities for transformative action.
46. **Systems thinking** refers to a holistic approach that looks at the interconnectedness of the various components and feedback loops that cause change within a complex system. Several futures methods employed within the realm of strategic foresight advocate for or amplify systems thinking. The systems framework allows policymakers and stakeholders to shift from a conventional, siloed and linear policy and decision-making approach towards integrated planning scenarios.³⁸
47. When applied to future generations, futures literacy, strategic foresight and systems thinking help individuals, organizations and communities to take a more responsible, explorative and proactive approach to envision and take action that is inclusive, sustainable, and supportive of the well-being of generations to come.
48. Accompanying these concepts should be the pursuit of a human rights-based approach with the aim to leave no one behind, in the designing, planning, implementing and strategizing cycle, within the framework of international human rights standards and principles and international law, and by improving the capacities of both rights-holders to claim their rights and duty-bearers to meet their obligations. Working within this framework – ensuring participation and inclusion, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and agency, and rule of law – can form part of a good ancestor policy and support informed and effective strategic foresight.
49. These concepts are increasingly being put in practice within the UN system, as well as national, regional and local developments. They are complemented by an increasing trend of setting up innovative, interdisciplinary and future-looking mechanisms, like the [UN Futures Lab](#).

Q8: What role can be played by science, technologies and data in promoting and protecting the rights of future generations?

50. In today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape, governments, economies and communities are going through rapid changes. “Science, technology and innovation are seen to present transformative opportunities but also as potentially disruptive and destructive. Bridging the digital divide and better sharing of knowledge and technology, along with more data-driven approaches are crucial to accelerate development globally.”³⁹

³⁶ UNESCO, [Futures Literacy](#)

³⁷ OECD, “[What is Strategic Foresight](#)”

³⁸ Sustainable Development Goals Helpdesk, UN ESCAP, [Sustainability Outlook Tool, Systems Thinking](#)

³⁹ Ibid

51. Access to digital technologies and meaningful connectivity is vital for safeguarding the rights of present and future generations. These technologies enable access to information, education, healthcare, economic opportunities, civic participation, and environmental protection, fostering a more equitable and sustainable world. Innovation, technology, and digitalization offer great potential for improvement of livelihoods of the most vulnerable.
52. Nonetheless, enduring and evolving challenges such as the digital divide, cybersecurity issues, and data privacy concerns have the potential to hinder social progress and economic development. The impacts are already felt today, and unaddressed will only perpetuate uncertainty and inequality for future generations. The choices made today will significantly influence the quality of education, job opportunities, and the state of the environment for the next generation. Failure to take action now jeopardizes the transformative potential of the digital age and places future generations at a disadvantage.⁴⁰
53. Furthermore, there are considerable risks associated with technology and digitalization, including exclusionary factors such as lack of financial resources, discrimination, illiteracy, or digital isolation, which can prevent certain groups and individuals from benefiting from it. This can lead to increased inequalities in present generations, passed to future generations. A human rights-based approach can help to ensure that such interventions will be inclusive and thus benefit all fairly, equally and equitably. Future research and gathering evidence are needed in order to better understand ways of exclusion and how to design inclusive and targeted interventions.
54. “Globally, 75% of people aged 15 to 24 use the Internet. They're the engine of connectivity – and so many are already driving positive change with tech. But not every young person has the same opportunities [...] In the Least Developed Countries, less than half of young people were using the Internet in 2022, even if they are getting online faster than the rest of the population. They live in digital darkness.”⁴¹ The rural digital divide is still a harsh reality even for the present younger generations. In both developed and developing countries, rural areas remain seriously underserved in terms of broadband coverage⁴². In addition to physical and technological barriers caused by remoteness, poor quality of infrastructure, cost of connectivity, low functionality of mobile devices, and lower average levels of education and skills in rural communities can exacerbate the gap.⁴³ Addressing the digital gap between young and older persons will also empower older persons of today and of the future to continue to actively engage in their societies and economies⁴⁴. Recognizing and acting today on these challenges will support approaches that ensure that future generations do not go through the same.
55. Cities are on the frontline of several global challenges⁴⁵, but are also hubs of creativity and innovation that can have an impact at scale. New technologies can make cities more inclusive, safer, and more sustainable and resilient, but concerted effort is needed to make sure that the benefits of technological progress are shared widely, equally and leaving no one behind.⁴⁶ As the 2022 World Cities Report notes, “the future of humanity is undoubtedly urban”,⁴⁷ taking into account the expected significant urban shift of populations,

⁴⁰ [Generation Connect, Youth Call to Action “My Digital Future”, 2022](#)

⁴¹ [Digital Technologies and Youth Empowerment: A conversation with the Secretary-General of ITU](#), Geneva, Switzerland, 19 April 2023

⁴² OECD, [The Future of Rural Youth in Developing Countries: Tapping the Potential of Local Value Chains](#), 2018

⁴³ Saleminck, K., Strijker, D. & Bosworth, G., [Rural development in the digital age: A systematic literature review on unequal ICT availability, adoption, and use in rural areas](#), 2017, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54: 360–371.

⁴⁴ Report of the Secretary-General, [“Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: Second World Assembly on Ageing”](#) (2021), A/76/156.

⁴⁵ UN-Habitat, World Cities Report 2022, [“Envisaging the Future of Cities”](#), page xvi.

⁴⁶ [Changing the World: Innovations and a Better Life for Future Generations](#), Key Messages for World Cities Day, October 31, 2019, UN-Habitat

⁴⁷ UN-Habitat, World Cities Report 2022, [“Envisaging the Future of Cities”](#), Op. cit. page xvi.

which means that cities - current and future - will have to be designed, planned and managed to adapt to future generations' needs.

56. Prioritization of global issues and challenges can be facilitated by future looking and futures thinking, included, but not limited to, turning to science and evidence-based risk assessment and management, guided by the principle of sustainable development. Science can facilitate the interplay between present and future generations and with their surrounding environment, providing methods, instruments and tools for better decision-making and capacity-building. It is crucial to revamp policies, governance models, and implementation methods. These can benefit from enhancements through the use of digital tools and the Internet, promoting social engagement, informed decision-making, and inclusive leadership. The Futures Lab network and other inclusive mechanisms can support the transition from traditional practices towards more evidence-based decision-making processes that respect the rights and needs of future generations.
57. Science should be guided by a human rights-based approach, as it can lead to a broader, more inclusive science and technology impact, as well as systematic collection of disaggregated data, ensuring science and technology represent and benefit all, especially groups in vulnerable situations. It also can lead to globally agreed and strengthened oversight/governance in technology, as well as promote further developments and outreach.
58. Using science, technology and data can also be utilized to address risks, either those known or unknown. The capacity to deal with risks that were created in the past might be limited today due to their widespread and profound impacts. Increasing the use of existing relevant resources, like foresight tools and data, can build capacity and resilience to address present and future risks and avoid risk-blind policymaking, especially as some of the unintended consequences of these types of policies can only be felt and understood in the future.
59. For some risks, mechanisms have been put in place to deal with their impacts and to avoid repetition. Examples include the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and its warnings on the threat of climate change, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction which underlines that “[e]ach State has the primary responsibility to prevent and reduce disaster risk”, based on an understanding of disaster risk in all its dimensions to address existing and future challenges. Most recently, the Secretary-General’s call for the establishment of “[Early Warnings for All](#)” aims at developing a global system to enhance knowledge on risks, impacts, consequences and available response options, as well as to develop capacities to anticipate and manage disaster risks across scales. Nevertheless, many risks and threats are in need of more exploration and addressing - such as in relation to artificial intelligence - and there will always be new risks and threats emerging.

Q9: What is the role of the UN system in this area?

60. The UN system is well-positioned to offer both conceptual clarity and a platform for normative advancement of the framework on future generations. Its organizations have a pivotal role in shaping the global discourse on intergenerational equity and advancing the rights of future generations, by leveraging their unique mandates and specialized knowledge, and by harnessing their expertise and resources to address the evolving challenges of the modern digital world. Whether it’s through ensuring access to education, healthcare, adequate food, environmental conservation, or sustainable economic development, the organizations of the UN system collectively strive to create a better future for all, guided by their respective areas of competence and responsibility.
61. By creating spaces for the voices of future generations and of the present younger generations to be meaningfully represented, the UN system paves the way for better and more targeted policy decisions. As Common Principle 7 notes, “[t]he United Nations system should seek to adopt a more future-oriented organizational culture and ways of working by developing diverse capabilities, including foresight and futures literacy, and by systematically promoting long-term and intergenerational thinking at all levels”.

62. This forward-thinking culture should be fostered across various levels of engagement. The UN system can monitor how governance systems address long-term challenges and the rights, needs, and interests of future generations, and can facilitate the sharing of best-practices. Internally, the UN system can promote the integration of future-oriented responsibilities into global, regional and national policy guidance, including through the efforts of Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams. Externally, the UN system can also promote the building of partnerships to support the implementation and dissemination of the Common Principles and their underlying objectives.
63. One important recent and practical development on stepping up efforts towards recognizing the rights, needs and interests of future generations is the Secretary-General's Policy Brief 1 "To Think and Act for Future Generations",⁴⁸ which builds on the proposals contained in the "Our Common Agenda" report⁴⁹. In this policy brief, there is a call for galvanizing efforts to meet the demands of the present in a way that safeguards the interests of future generations and, in particular, the Secretary-General offers some specific steps for the UN system. The establishment of a Special Envoy for Future Generations accompanied by the better use of foresight, science and data, would aim to ensure advocacy for future generations while facilitating long-term thinking and better use of foresight and understanding of future risks, challenges and opportunities by the UN system.

Further Reading

[Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights](#)

In 2020, the UN Secretary-General launched the Call to Action for Human Rights, a transformative vision for human rights, that underscores that human rights are essential to addressing broad causes and impacts of all complex crises, and to building sustainable, safe, and peaceful societies. The Call to Action recognizes human rights as central to the most pressing issues by focusing on seven thematic areas: (1) rights at the core of sustainable development; (2) rights in times of crisis; (3) gender equality and equal rights for women; (4) public participation and civic space; (5) rights of future generations, especially climate justice; (6) rights at the heart of collective action; and (7) new frontiers of human rights. In particular, thematic area five focuses on the "Rights of Future Generations",⁵⁰ highlighting the profound impacts of the interlinked environmental crises of climate change, nature loss and pollution, and calling to jointly promote the right to a healthy environment for present and future generations.

[Our Common Agenda](#)

In commemorating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, Member States pledged to strengthen global governance for present and future generations. They requested that the UN Secretary-General report back with recommendations to respond to current and future challenges.⁵¹ In September 2021, the Secretary-General responded with his report, Our Common Agenda. In it, the Secretary-General offers key proposals across 12 commitments, most of which have an impact on futures generations, intergenerational equity and futures-thinking. Specifically, Commitment 11 "Listen to and Work with Youth" includes proposals for the convening of a Summit of the Future; ensuring long-term thinking, including through a UN Futures Lab; and representing

⁴⁸ Our Common Agenda, [Policy Brief 1: To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)

⁴⁹ United Nations (2021), [Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General](#)

⁵⁰ United Nations, Info Sheet, Call to Action for Human Rights, ["Rights of Future Generations"](#)

⁵¹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution on [Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations](#) (A/RES/75/1).

succeeding generations, including through a repurposed Trusteeship Council, a Declaration on Future Generations, and a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations.

[Summit of the Future](#)

The Summit of the Future is a high-level event that will bring world leaders together in September 2024 in New York. Its importance is recognized in terms of the role of the Summit in reaffirming the Charter of the United Nations, reinvigorating multilateralism, boosting implementation of existing commitments, agreeing on concrete solutions to challenges and restoring trust among Member States.⁵² The Summit will aim to adopt an intergovernmental outcome document called the Pact for the Future.

At the invitation of Member States and in the context of this high-level event, the Secretary-General issued a series of Policy Briefs to provide more detail on certain proposals contained in “Our Common Agenda” and to support them in their deliberations as they prepare for the Summit of the Future. Policy Brief 1 is called “[To Think and Act for Future Generations](#)”. In this document, the Secretary-General goes into more detail on his proposals to meet the demands of the present in a way that safeguards the interests of future generations, including on the establishment of a Special Envoy for Future Generations; promoting the better use of foresight, science and data; the negotiation of a Declaration for Future Generations; and the establishment of a dedicated Forum for Future Generations.

[Declaration on Future Generations](#)

The intergovernmental process for a Declaration on Future Generations started in June 2022. In 2023, informal consultations with stakeholders were organized, and in July 2023 the co-facilitators further circulated an “[Issues Paper on the Intergovernmental Process for the Declaration on Future Generations](#)”, which reflects the work undertaken to advance this process and presents a set of Guiding Principles for the Declaration. In December 2023, the co-facilitators also shared the [Declaration on Future Generations Roadmap](#), where they share their plan for the intergovernmental negotiations. The Declaration is thus expected to be negotiated throughout the 78th session of the UN General Assembly and, if intergovernmentally agreed, will be annexed to the Pact of the Future and will form one of the outcomes of the Summit of the Future.

[The Maastricht Principles on The Human Rights of Future Generations](#)

The Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations were adopted in Maastricht on 3 February 2023. They represent the result of a six-year-long process of research, dialogue, and analysis, drawing on the expertise, experience, and perspectives of around 200 legal and human rights researchers and practitioners, national and regional current or former human rights mandate holders, members of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities, and representatives from civil society organizations and social movements. The Maastricht Principles seek, inter alia, to clarify the present state of international law as it applies to the human rights of future generations, affirm binding obligations of States and other actors as prescribed under international and human rights law, and provide a progressive interpretation and development of existing human rights standards in the context of the human rights of future generations.

[The ICJ Advisory Opinion on Obligations of States in respect to Climate Change](#)

While other developments exist at international, regional and national levels in respect to advancing future generations and intergenerational equity, the ongoing proceeding at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for an Advisory Opinion on Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change is noteworthy. One of the questions asked

⁵² United Nations General Assembly on [Modalities for the Summit of the Future](#), 2022 (A/RES/76/307)

by the General Assembly in Resolution 77/276⁵³ focuses on what are the legal consequences for States where they, by their acts and omissions, have caused significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment, with respect to peoples and individuals of the present and future generations have been affected by the adverse effects of climate change.

⁵³ United Nations General Assembly Resolution on [Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the obligations of States in respect of climate change](#) (A/RES/77/276).