

Guarding our Future

How to include future generations in policy making

As for the future,
your task is not
to foresee it,
but to enable it.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



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The World Future Council

The World Future Council brings the interests of future generations to the centre of policy making. Its up to 50 eminent members from around the globe have already successfully promoted change. The Council addresses challenges to our common future and provides decision-makers with effective policy solutions. In-depth research underpins advocacy work for international agreements, regional policy frameworks and national lawmaking and thus produces practical and tangible results. The World Future Council is registered as a charitable foundation in Hamburg, Germany.

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Our Common Future

The quality of life for children in 2050 depends on our decisions today

All over the world climate change, environmental destruction, financial crises, and the widening gap between rich and poor are spreading insecurity and fear. We know that big changes in running our societies are needed. Laudable declarations and inspiring ideas abound. Yet we seem to be experiencing deep inertia. How can we turn fine words into action?

Policy making seems to be stuck in a way of thinking that is inadequate in the face of severe global challenges. We have a collective responsibility to think harder about how to build ambitious sustainable development strategies for an interconnected world of some 9 billion people by 2050.



We believe there is enough wealth on the planet to provide peace and wellbeing for all:

IF we update our policies to protect long-term interests.

IF the rules of engagement are fair and for the common good.

IF we guard diversity of life on this planet.

The World Future Council is advocating a vision of Future Justice – common sense policy solutions that will benefit society as a whole and provide a high quality of life for generations to come.

The integrated and interdependent nature of the new challenges and issues contrasts sharply with the nature of the institutions that exist today. These institutions tend to be independent, fragmented, and working to relatively narrow mandates with closed decision processes. Those responsible for managing natural resources and protecting the environment are institutionally separated from those responsible for managing the economy. The real world of inter-locked economic and ecological systems will not change; the policies and institutions concerned must.¹

Our Common Future, Brundtland Report 1987

Issues and challenges confronting policy makers

It has been twenty years since the first global sustainability summit took place. The world cheered, yet the laudable declarations have done little in practice to bring about the deep changes needed. Despite many international meetings, the level of implementation of far-sighted global policy objectives remains dire. Targets for climate change mitigation; biodiversity protection; ocean protection; poverty eradication; health and social equity are continuously missed.

Looking at how we develop policies and the institutions we have designed to serve us, we can observe the following:

1. The interests of the 'here and now' always take precedence over future interests because of the short-termism of representative democracies that have election cycles typically of three to five years. Short-term business cycles, driven by quarterly earnings reports, aggravate the pressure for immediate rather than long-term returns on investment.
2. Decision-making continues to be divided between and within governing bodies despite a widespread appreciation for integrated policy making. Each single-issue department seeks to deliver on its own targets rather than identifying where long-term trends create policy

convergence. This approach creates policy incoherence between economic, social, and environmental measures and slows implementation. It is inefficient, often ineffectual and limits farsighted policy makers.

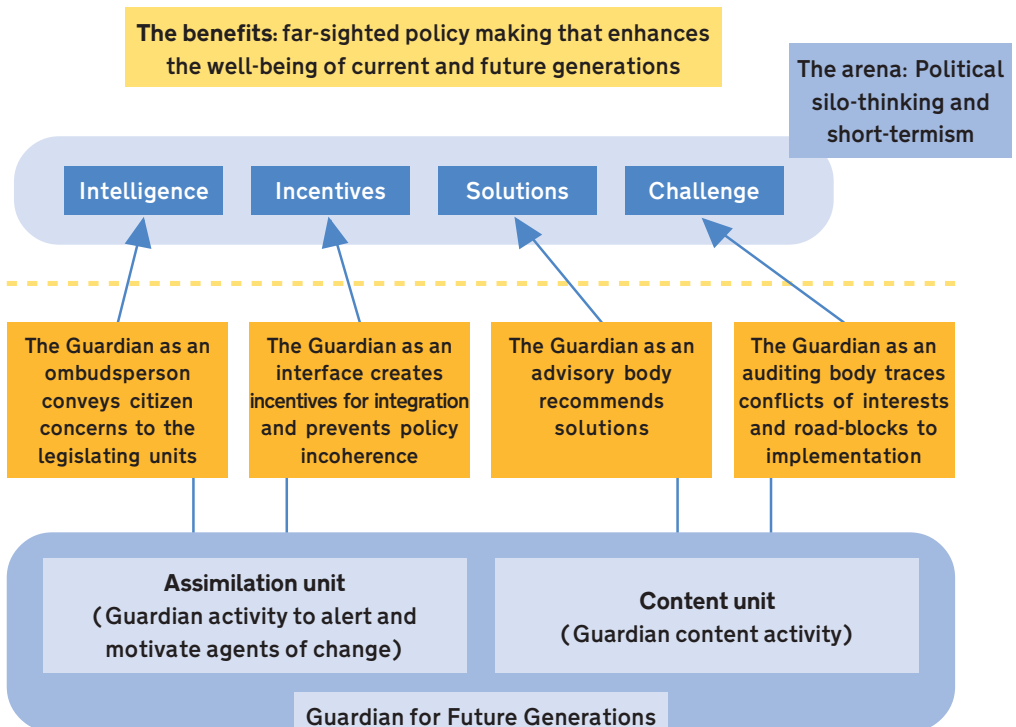
3. The concept of 'welfare' by which policy performance is guided focuses on GDP growth as a measure of success and views societies only as individual consumers. Yet, the wellbeing of people does not necessarily increase beyond a certain income level. It depends on many factors like health, work, social contact, democracy or free time. These factors of quality of life, just as the value nature provides, determine the wellbeing of societies. Yet, they are often sacrificed for economic growth goals.^{2, 3, 4}
4. Our culture of individualism shows its limits in times when the challenges ahead seem to overwhelm people's capacity to cope. Studies show that uncertainty and fear of loss are heavy burdens on peoples' wellbeing. To mobilise people to joint action we need a compelling vision of life in the future and trust in sharing responsibilities to get there. We need "a new common purpose defined by the needs of the current age".⁵

Where there is a will, there is a way

We need to tackle these issues and challenges head on. Bringing the voice of future generations to the negotiating table is fundamental for this. It is the quality of life of our children and grandchildren that we are deciding when we debate issues such as environmental protection, youth

unemployment, pension systems, public debt and so on. It is their wellbeing that is at stake. By appointing a legal representative, a Guardian that actively speaks up in the name of future generations, we can bring 21st century checks and balances to our political institutions.

How would a Guardian for Future Generations work?



Enabling our Future

The 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development recognised inter-generational equity as central for sustainability policy making. The principle of intergenerational equity is now enshrined in the constitutions of many countries. Its practical implementation is however rare.

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.⁶

Our Common Future, Brundtland Report 1987

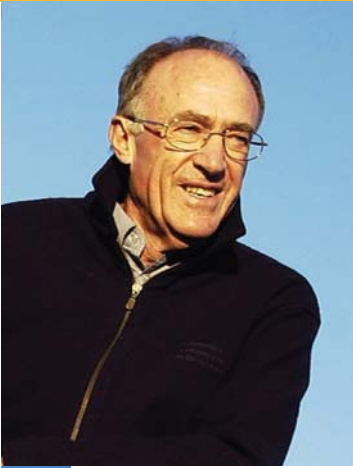
Appointing a real person to represent future citizens means that people who are concerned now about the long-term impacts of policy decisions can have a focal point in government. And with over 70% of Europeans behind the idea that policies should protect future generations even where the interests of current generations are affected⁷, it is clear that a Guardian for Future Generations will help increase people's trust in government.

A Guardian for Future Generations would act as an ombudsperson, filtering public concerns and views directly into the relevant committees and departments. If the Guardian had access to all information in all governmental departments, he or she

could have a clear overview of policy developments and impacts, including unintended consequences, and take remedial action to keep long-term interests at the heart of government. Such a systematic overview of the work of government committees and departments would minimise the risk of policy incoherence. The Guardian for Future Generations would also, by ensuring information flow and exchange, improve the overall effectiveness of policy making.

Building on sustainability assessment mechanisms and wellbeing data (where in place), the Guardian for Future Generations would actively engage with different departments to help decision makers understand the effects of their decisions on the living conditions of future generations, thus helping to avoid significant future adverse effects that would cost much more to clean up than to prevent. Over time, the Guardian's office would become a service for integrated policy making and expertise in wellbeing. Such knowledge could help to inform and advise broader political goals, targets and indicators beyond GDP.

Keeping our common future in view and analysing how single decisions might support or harm that future helps to nurture a new common purpose: the shared responsibility to enable the children of 2050 to lead happy and healthy lives.



Keeper of the Long View

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the first watchdog to oversee the implementation of environmental policy goals was appointed in the midst of the country's environmental reforms in the 1980s. The role of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) is to audit policy formulation and policy implementation in order to preserve ecosystems and improve environmental governance.⁸ The PCE was set up under the Environmental Act of 1986, which established the Commissioner's role as an independent environmental ombudsperson with a five-year mandate.

The Commissioner's authority includes

- investigating 'the effectiveness of environmental planning and management carried out by public authorities'
- investigating 'any matter in respect of which, in the Commissioner's opinion, the environment may be or has been adversely affected'
- reviewing 'the system of agencies and processes established by the Government to manage the allocation, use, and preservation of natural and physical resources'

- if requested by the House of the Representatives, holding enquiries into matters with significant environmental impact.⁹

Reviews and investigations are launched on request from the Commissioner or as a result of complaints by citizen or civil society organisations. Policy areas subject to review and investigated in recent years include: lignite, emissions trading schemes, policy statements and environmental standards for efficient environmental management, water allocation, and business.¹⁰ The Commissioner thus plays an active role in preventing or remedying environmental harms that result from governmental or private activities and that, in turn, have a direct impact on the rights of future generations.

The Commissioner from 1997 to 2007, Morgan Williams, put a lot of emphasis on sustainability education and engagement with business to avoid having environmental concerns perceived as a 'lefty issue'.¹¹ Many of Morgan's reports were commended as visionary and timely. Today, in order to de-personalise the role, there are proposals to change the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment into the Office for Sustainable Development. This also reflects the mainstreaming of environmental concerns across policy areas.¹¹

Vetting Policies for Future Generations

National Commission for Future Generations in Israel

In March 2001, the Knesset – Israel’s parliament – established a Commission for Future Generations.^{12, 13} The idea was to establish an intra-parliamentary body with the resources to carry out an audit of legislation that could impact coming generations. With specific focus on the creation of ‘a dimension of the future that would be included in the primary and secondary legislation of the State of Israel’, the Commission operated with a five-year mandate to defend the needs and the rights of future generations.¹²

One of the first steps in establishing the Commission for Future Generations was the need to define which policy areas were “of particular interest to future generations,” as this was the wording of the law. Even though the Commission’s initiators were apparently not familiar with the concept of sustainability, it ended up with twelve policy areas that matched the principle components of sustainability.

The Commission’s scope therefore included natural resources, education, health, technology, law, development, demography, and any other matter of special concern to future generations as determined by the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee.^{12, 13}



The Commission had the authority to:¹²

- voice opinions on bills, secondary legislation, and regulations of interest to future generations
- provide recommendations on any issue the Commissioner considered relevant to the rights of future generations
- demand information from institutions ‘subject to inspection by the State Controller’ such as ministries, state corporations and local authorities
- request from a parliamentary committee ‘reasonable time’ to collect data and prepare an evaluation regarding certain bills or secondary legislation with particular relevance for future generations.

As long as policies are analysed in the currency of money and power, environmental organisations will be at a disadvantage. That is, until the change in awareness so essential to our world arrives, and we come to hear the voices of environmentalists and sustainable thinkers in all sectors.¹⁴

Shlomo Shoham, first Commissioner for Future Generations, Israel

The Commission might best be described as an advisory or consultative body restricted to the legislative work of the Israeli parliament, with little legal authority to propose bills, carry out enquiries, or pass judgement in the event of dispute. In practice, however, the Commissioner claimed the right to issue an informed opinion even when the Knesset was bound by law to make a decision within a given time frame. This effectively led to the Commission having informal veto power over lawmaking, similar to the impact of a filibuster in the US Congress.¹³

The Israeli Commission for Future Generations was a significant initiative, the first explicit representation of future generations within government. Commissioner Shlomo Shoham 2001–2006 took a systemic and integrated approach in his opinions and challenged business as usual.¹⁴ After Shoham’s term ended, the government changed and for budgetary reasons no new Commissioner was appointed. It is unclear whether ongoing debates in the Knesset will result in the appointment of a second Commissioner.

Balancing the form and nature of the Guardian’s recommendations

Recommendations for minor change. “Win the battle but lose the war”



Recommendations for broad systemic change. Create new solutions



Ombudsperson for Intact Nature and Cultural Heritage

Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations in Hungary

In 2008, as part of an overarching statute that created an Ombudsperson for civil rights, the Hungarian government established a Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations. The Commissioner has the same status as a special Ombudsperson,¹⁴ with the task ‘to ensure the protection of the fundamental right to a healthy environment.’¹⁵

The Commissioner monitors policy developments and legislative proposals to ensure that they will not pose a severe or irreversible threat to the environment. The mandate includes providing opinions to Members of Parliament as well as to other bodies that seek to take actions that may affect the environment. The Commissioner may conduct investigations, and his or her

mandate includes the ability to review the actions of municipal and other local governments and to provide assistance.

After an investigation the Commissioner can order that an action be stopped or modified and can bring a case to court, although to date this has not been necessary.¹⁵ The Commissioner has broad jurisdiction, the ability to investigate and hold public institutions accountable, giving the position a significant degree of independence. Sandor Fülöp, the first Parliamentary Commissioner, explains his mandate as follows: ‘Even if a decision can be interpreted to be true to the letter of the law, we can challenge the constitutional ‘spirit’ of the law in question and suggest that it violates, say, the right of future generations to a healthy environment’.

Hungarians tend to be a rather pessimistic lot, so elections, instead of representing political opportunity, are viewed by many as a just another political tragedy. From the very beginning, our office has attempted to urge rival parties not to bargain or conduct a race to the bottom, but to establish, at the very least, some sort of environmental minimum standard to protect things like climate, biodiversity, drinking water, and agricultural land – for instance, to protect green areas from urban sprawl and so forth.

Sandor Fülöp, first Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations, Hungary



The Commissioner's role in civil society is widely accepted due to the role of the ombudsperson and the frequent exchanges of information with citizens. Careful interdisciplinary analyses support cases in which local or professional groups seek to protect the environment. The form of engagement, also followed by the New Zealand Commissioner, is known as 'reiterative procedure': there is a site visit, conversations with local people and officials who actually work on the case, and before a legal opinion is finalised, a draft statement is sent to the parties concerned. This methodology has proven to be effective in raising credibility of the office and support for the procedures.

Similar to New Zealand, the Commissioner's mandate primarily focuses on environmental concerns, although cultural heritage is another area explicitly mentioned. In Hungary, the role is directly linked to defending the rights of future generations on the same level as the rights of people today – the Commissioner places future generations at the heart of advocacy and investigative powers. Yet, in comparison to the Israeli office, there are clear limits to the Hungarian Commissioner's mandate, especially when it comes to the social and economic concerns of future generations.

Check-list for Impact

If a Guardian for Future Generations is to become a strong mechanism for 21st century checks and balances, the office should have the following characteristics:¹⁶

Independent

The office should be *independent*. The Guardian should not hold another governmental post, such as within a parliamentary committee. Ideally, the Guardian's office should also be legally independent. Of the examples discussed, the Hungarian Commissioner enjoys the most independence, even though the budget depends upon the will of Parliament.

Effective

The Guardian's office should be *effective*, and its decisions legally binding. The Hungarian Commissioner is the only Guardian to enjoy legally binding instruments. The Israeli Commission enjoyed de facto veto power, but this power was unsustainable.

Transparent

The Guardian's office should be *transparent* to increase trust. The office needs a clear and direct mandate and should report regularly about its results. While all the Commissioners presented as examples in this brochure provide regular reports, the Hungarian Commissioner has the most direct mandate for independent communication, whereas the New Zealand

and Israeli Commissioners' opinions have tended to be influenced by executive or legislative bodies or the media.

Legitimate

The Guardian's office should be *legitimate* and should enjoy large public support. The New Zealand and Israeli offices were established by government decree. While the New Zealand Commissioners maintain good relationships with all stakeholders during investigations, and the results of the work of the Israeli Commissioner were communicated widely in the media, the Hungarian Commissioner enjoys more legitimacy. His position was created following an initiative by a civil society organisation.¹⁷

Access to information

The Guardian's office should have *access to information*. The office needs extensive authority to request whatever files it deems relevant. The mandate of the Hungarian Commissioner is most generous in this regard.

Accessible

The Guardian's office should be *accessible* and allow for all inputs from all stakeholders. In New Zealand and Hungary, but not in Israel, the mandate ensures direct access for citizens through petitions.

Guarding what we Value

The three examples of visionaries – from New Zealand, Israel and Hungary – show that the mandate for a Guardian for Future Generations is entirely dependent on a country's legal and cultural reality. Each country has distinct values, rights, duties and goals in its constitution and in its basic laws. In New Zealand and Hungary, mandates are limited to the protection of the environment and cultural heritage; the Israeli Commissioner, on the other hand, oversaw twelve policy areas and was closer to a holistic protection of living conditions for future generations.

On the European level, the World Future Council has developed proposed legislation for a Guardian to protect the overarching aims of the EU as defined in the Lisbon Treaty (similar to a Constitution in its legal status). Article 3 lists three aims: 'to promote peace, its values and the wellbeing of its peoples'.¹⁸ This Article could provide the basis for deciding which policy decisions should be scrutinized for their impact on the wellbeing of future generations'. An EU Guardian for Future Generations with the mandate to represent the voice of future generations would directly support EU commitments on sustainable development: integrated policy making and intergenerational solidarity.



In the early 1990s the Cousteau Society started a campaign for a *Bill of Rights for Future Generations*. Article 1 in the proposed Bill declared that "Future generations have a right to an uncontaminated and undamaged Earth and to its enjoyment as the ground of human history, of culture, and of the social bonds that make each generation and individual a member of one human family" (Cousteau 2010). Over 9 million people in 106 countries signed a petition to which UNESCO became a partner in 1993. This was in the days before the Internet made petition signing easy. In 1997 the UNESCO General Conference **unanimously** adopted the Declaration.

Future Justice starts Today

We believe appointing a Guardian for Future Generations could provide the overview and the impetus to steer policy making in a new direction. Evaluating policy proposals for their effects on the lives of future generations invites a common vision and common responsibility. It reduces the potential for narrow-minded bargaining and oversight: Giving a voice around today's policy making tables to the children of 2050 connects today's proposals with the life of tomorrow.

Changing the way we speak about the challenges we face is helping citizens re-engage with policy making. Choices become more important when the lives of future generations – people's own children and grandchildren – are affected. Such a change of perspective reconciles the current generation's hopes and desires with those of the generations to come. This connecting view into the future is what the World Future Council is promoting and developing with its partners. We call this vision Future Justice.

Future Justice creates fair conditions for future generations by updating policies to reflect new knowledge about the planet and human wellbeing. Common progress implies respect for the dignity and the rights of all generations. Preserving our world and all its life forms becomes a core function of our economies.

The integrity of our ecosystems is as relevant for future generations as the integrity of our social systems. Rebalancing our societies so that the children of 2050 can enjoy happy healthy lives means acting differently today. Reorienting our policies towards the goal of long-term wellbeing for all will lay the foundations for Future Justice. We know where action is overdue. With the help of Guardians for Future Generations, our task will be made easier.

Let's cut through complex technocratic jargon and get to the point. Not achieving sustainability means sacrificing the wellbeing of young and future generations. The lives of the children born in 2050 are quite literally in our hands.

Dr. Maja Göpel, Director Future Justice,
World Future Council



For more information on Future Justice and the Seven Principles for Just Lawmaking, please refer to our website www.worldfuturecouncil.org/future_justice.html

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“In all that we do, we inherently represent not only ourselves but past and future generations. We represent past generations, even while trying to obliterate the past, because we embody what they passed on to us. We represent future generations because the decisions we make today affect the well-being of all persons who come after us and the integrity and robustness of the planet they will inherit.”¹⁹

Edith Brown Weiss