

2030 Agenda: our legacy to future generations?

The WFC Global Policy Action Plan presents a collection of well researched, holistic policy examples that offer a sustainable pathway, embracing a future-just perspective, bringing long-lasting solutions, writes Catherine Pearce

During the painstaking three year process to agree the Sustainable Development Goals, 'leave no one behind' became the assumed headline, adopted by many to help communicate and pledge an underlying commitment to a complex agenda. The poor, the marginalised, people in vulnerable situations and living on the edge of society come to mind. They are typically voiceless and forgotten. Yet, what of future generations? They are also without a voice, and for whom full enjoyment of their human rights looks increasingly uncertain.

*"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. But the results of the present profligacy are rapidly closing the options for future generations."*¹

Claims of the transformational nature of the 2030 Agenda need to be supported by a new mindset which challenges current patterns where short-term interests often override the well-being of future generations. It is after all, the decisions made today that will affect them. Changes are needed to address the challenges posed by climate change, environmental destruction, extreme poverty and the widening gap between rich and poor, all of which pose enormous risks, not only to present generations, but to future generations too.

Ending poverty—a key part of the *2030 Agenda*, is as much about future generations as present day. People cannot think and act long-term if their daily life is an existential struggle. Today, the impacts of climate change are most heavily felt by the poorest, threatening people's basic rights such as the right to food, water and shelter on a daily basis. As a result, much of the world's population is prevented from developing sustainably in a way that doesn't compromise future generations.

The 17 goals and 169 supporting targets agreed at the UN 70th session reflect our global response to a complex set of interlinked and connected challenges. Some would say the agenda is contradictory and incompatible in places. Future generations are recognised early on in the 35 page document:

“We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.”²

The good intention presents nothing new. Since 1946, the international community has marked in numerous international treaties and conventions the need to recognise the interests of future generations. Over 20 national constitutions enshrine the needs of future generations. Yet, the warnings of the *Brundtland Report* are as urgent today as they were in 1987. Additional, innovative and far reaching measures that get beyond the rhetoric will be needed if we are to truly deliver our commitments to future generations.

Our Global Policy Action Plan presents a collection of well researched, holistic policy examples that offer a sustainable pathway, embracing a future-just perspective, bringing long lasting solutions

The future starts now

It is with a keen sense of purpose and urgency that many are looking to how to implement the *2030 Sustainable Development Agenda*. The good news is that policy solutions already exist, so we do not have to start from zero. The World Future Council has identified a range of existing proven policies. Our Global Policy Action Plan³ presents a collection of well researched, holistic policy examples that offer a sustainable pathway, embracing a future-just perspective, bringing long lasting solutions. We can learn from these pioneering policies and replicate and build on their success stories.

It is important to remember that the 2030 Agenda is a universal agenda, applying to all—a marked change from the Millennium Development Goals. Action is as much about domestic policies as it is about external policies or foreign aid budgets. A recent report by the Bertelsmann Foundation, *Sustainable Development Goals: Are the rich countries ready?*⁴ highlights that very many industrialised countries are nowhere near achieving these goals. The greatest deficits lie in far from sustainable production and consumption behaviour. In addition, in many cases their economic systems also exacerbate the trend toward social inequality. When looking to leadership on the global goals, many rich countries have a great deal to do.

Follow up and review

Reviewing progress will be a central aspect to the *2030 Agenda*, in order to be able to measure with any accuracy if we are on track and to help build incentives for improvement. While the commitments are not legally binding, countries will be expected to report on the progress that they are making against the goals at the national, regional and global level.

Tools and architecture at the UN level will provide a key role: UN agencies and institutions will need to help support governments in their efforts, and provide the mechanisms for effective review processes. Much of this is still open

to question. The *2030 Agenda* calls to prepare a report, to include “a proposal on the organizational arrangements for State-led reviews”, and to “clarify institutional responsibilities.”⁵

Many are concerned that the High Level Political Forum, the new UN body and home to help governments implement the Sustainable Development Goals is not equipped to manage this complex process. As many have already noted, the *2030 Agenda* transcends the silo approach and initiates a new interconnected way of identifying and implementing solutions. Current UN structures and systems seem out of step, and slow to reflect this broadening perspective. Unless we seek to improve them, we risk not only not meeting the goals, but also passing on a world with drastically diminished opportunities to the generations to come.

A High Commissioner for Future Generations

The World Future Council is calling for a High Commissioner for Future Generations, working at the UN, to help bring a long-term, coherent perspective to how the international community respond to these challenges of today. Many governments and civil society have supported this call. The UN Secretary-General in his 2013 report, *Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations*,⁶ also recommended to establish a High Commissioner for Future Generations. The report recognises key priorities of the role, including; offering support and advice where requested; undertaking research; fostering expertise on policy practices and interacting with member states, UN entities, and others.

In addition, as part of the broader institutional framework and policy approach, we can see that the High Commissioner would bring added value in working alongside existing UN agencies to help ensure sound delivery of the global goals and effective, applied understanding of how we look to the long-term.

An authorised person acting as an institutional voice can advocate for future generations at the UN level. This representative would highlight the long-term implications of proposed action and present recommendations and remedies. Appointed by member states, the Commissioner would have the power of advocacy only. We are not suggesting a role that would interfere with the national sovereignty of member states or challenge decisions with the power of veto. Rather, this role is focused on problem solving, in order to help facilitate informed decision-making, and place issues in a broader inter-temporal context.

The *2030 Agenda* demands the vision and leadership to begin connecting dots and addressing systemic challenges. A representative for future generations can help institutional arrangements to build that vision. By placing future generations at the heart of advocacy and investigative procedures, it reinforces the interconnections between thematic areas, bringing greater coherence to our global efforts. Policy coherence is increasingly being seen as an important prerequisite for balanced, inclusive and sustainable solutions.

Decisions affecting future generations should be made in a transparent way. This requires making underlying assumptions clear. While transparency by itself does not guarantee appropriate transfers to the future, it should increase awareness that a choice about transfers is being made. A dedicated representative can help to bring this transparency, and in so doing, can contribute a key element of legitimacy and efficiency to how these decisions are made.

A small staff size, dynamic and multi-disciplinary in nature would not be a bureaucratic exercise, the office would be low on administration, high on visibility.

Reflecting innovative action elsewhere

Existing Commissioners or Guardians for Future Generations at regional and national levels have shown to help introduce a long-term perspective into policy making, linking citizens with governments, working as a catalyst for sustainable development implementation and acting as principal advocate for common interests of present and future generations.

Earlier this year, Wales introduced exciting landmark legislation, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. Not least to bring a long-term perspective to policy making, and ensure a 'One Wales, One Planet' outlook, the legislation is introduced to help implement the Sustainable Development Goals. The legislation also establishes a Commissioner for Future Generations, whose role is to act as a guardian for the interests of future generations in Wales, and to support the public bodies listed in the Act to work towards achieving the well-being goals. Their annual report to the Welsh Assembly will help to mark progress and outline the improvements needed in order to better safeguard the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Given that the Welsh Assembly has had a duty to promote sustainable development for the past 15 years, it is notable that the Welsh Government decided that it needed to introduce a law in order to ensure delivery. With its legally-binding goals, its universal approach to sustainable development, and its review processes, this really is a radical and innovative piece of legislation. It shines a light upon other governments – that they may well need additional measures, policies and legislation to deliver the goals at home.

Wales is one of the first countries to take a concerted effort in introducing the Sustainable Development Goals into its domestic policy agenda. It is up to all of us to steer a path onto an equitable and fair framework for a resilient world. Our failure to act now will threaten our past achievements, our civilisation and our future hopes. ■

Catherine Pearce is Director of Future Justice and Co-ordinator of the Global Policy Action Plan at the World Future Council

Endnotes

1. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), *The Brundtland Report, Our Common Future*, 1987
2. Preamble, A/RES/70/1
3. www.futurepolicy.org
4. <http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/sustainable-development-goals-are-the-rich-countries-ready/>
5. A/RES/70/1 Para 90
6. UN (2013) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2006future.pdf>