

Green Party of England and Wales

The Representation of Future Generations in Climate Change Planning A contribution to the UN Talanoa Dialogue

This paper argues that the interests of future generations should be explicitly and independently represented in all planning and decision-making relating to climate change. It suggests practical measures that the Parties might take to ensure this.

The problem

It's widely accepted that decisions should be taken by those most affected or by their representatives. This principle underlies all democratic political systems. It is expressed in electoral law but also in popular slogans. In 1776 the US founding fathers said "No taxation without representation." Today, disability campaigners say "Nothing about us without us". It's the same principle.

In the particular case of decisions that reinforce or mitigate climate change, however, it will be future generations – even centuries from now – that are most affected. Climate change has short-term effects but in most cases the long-term effects are greater. Climate modelling often looks beyond 2050 and sometimes beyond 2100. And the bad effects may be severe indeed – the term 'catastrophic' is widely used.

So it's clear that the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment¹ was right to say that humanity "bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations."

It's inevitable that these important climate-affecting decisions will be taken without the involvement of those most affected. But it's also very regrettable not just on grounds of equity but because almost all human decision-making – even in democracies – is biased to the short-term. Indeed, in democracies the fact that only the voters of today have a say in the make-up of governments creates such a bias.

So something should be done to correct this bias and express the interests of future generations.

But what?

Our view

There are many ways in which future generations might be represented in today's decision-making and there is too little experience to know which would be best. Indeed, it's likely that, given the variety of states and international bodies, there is NO single best way. States and international bodies will have to find their own ways – consistent with their constitutions and political cultures.

However we think that three kinds of measure – laws, a formal representative and secondary institutions – provide a good starting point for a nation or international body.

¹ Weston and Carlson, 1972

A law for future generations

The first requirement is a law or laws requiring everyone making climate-relevant decisions to take account of the interests of future generations. This would, ideally, be in the national constitution. However, given the difficulties in changing constitutions, more probably in a legislative act which might later be given constitutional force.

The law should, as suggested by Edith Weiss², seek to conserve the options for, quality of, and access to environmental resources for future generations.

The decisions covered should include town planning, standards for energy efficiency, land use and biodiversity.

The law should also provide a clear legal basis for any institutions that are needed.

A formal representative of future generations

The leading future generations institution will probably be an independent Representative for Future Generations (RFG) with their own budget and office.

Some existing national Representatives of Future Generations

- The Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations
- The Welsh Commissioner for Future Generations.

The RFG needs a clear legal mandate and independence from the government of the day. But they also need enough connection with the government to make them difficult to ignore. Getting the balance right will be tricky and workable solutions may not be transferable.

The RFG should be chosen by a transparent process and should have a guaranteed period of office, ie the government should not be able to remove an RFG who criticises it. The person chosen should have enough personal authority to resist pressure plus some expertise in long-term planning.

The RFG will often have to consider matters previously neglected by governments and for which reliable information is lacking. The RFG must therefore have enough resources to commission their own research – which might be conducted by a university department, a think-tank or by its own staff.

To avoid excessive closeness to government and Parliament the RFG should be mandated to solicit and reflect views from a wide variety of sources, and especially from young people.

Secondary institutions

There will probably be secondary institutions that will connect the RFG with national and local government, with Parliaments and with Children's Commissioners and Youth Parliaments where they exist. The UK and Finland have parliamentary

² Weiss, 1989

committees for future generations which could serve this need. Indeed, where there is no RFG these committees can raise all the same issues the RFG would have.

Other institutions covering Future Generations

- Finnish Parliamentary Committee for the Future³
- All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Future Generations⁴

Other possibilities include:

- A minister for future generations. This role might be combined with Children's minister. Since the resource they would protect – the future liveable environment – is even more important than money, this minister should have power comparable to a national finance minister. We recognise that that will be very difficult to achieve.
- University-based centres for the study of the future (some of which already exist).

What else?

The initial target for representation of future generations will probably be national and local governments but there is no reason to stop there. The same principles should be applied, in time, to both businesses and to multinational bodies.

This should not apply only to matters labelled 'climate change'. It should also apply to decisions that affect GHG emissions and, indeed other parts of the environment including water and soil. These include decisions about the geoengineering, energy system, building standards, transport, industry, farming and trade.

What next?

In Paris the world recognised the seriousness of the climate change threat and resolved to act on it. The top priority must be to turn those aspirations into actions.

But once we appear to be taking the right actions – and that does not look imminent – all nations will need to institutionalise their commitments. The formal representation of future generations provides one powerful way to do so and we believe this should be recognised in the working and decisions of the UNFCCC.

References

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www.inthelongrun.org/articles/article/representing-future-generations-why-politics-needs-to-look-beyond-the-short

³ See <http://web.eduskunta.fi/Resource.phx/parliament/committees/future.htx>

⁴ See <https://www.appgfuturegenerations.com/>

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