

Expert Panel on Intergenerational Solidarity

Thursday May 9th, 2013, 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm
Conference Room 3, Conference Building
United Nations Headquarters New York

Summary

The *Expert Panel on Intergenerational Solidarity*, organized by the Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSD/DESA), took place in New York on Thursday 9 May 2013. The expert panel aimed at providing an opportunity to exchange views among stakeholders on the topic of intergenerational solidarity and future generations, including conceptual framework and institutional arrangements, with a view to informing continued consideration of this topic, including the Secretary-General's Report on Intergenerational Solidarity, which was mandated by paragraph 86 of the Rio+20 outcome.

Representatives of Member States, UN System entities, as well as Major Groups attended the event. An online audience also followed the discussion live through UN Web TV, engaging actively through social media with questions and comments.

Opening session

Mr. Nikhil Seth, Director of DSD/DESA, opened the session by emphasizing that intergenerational solidarity is deeply embedded in the concept of sustainable development and has appeared in the preambular language of major international instruments and conventions. Concern for future generations has become a well-established guiding principle in international norms. He also pointed out, however, many questions remained to be answered, including:

1. Who are members of future generations, and how do we define their needs and rights?
2. What are the duties of current generations to future generations?
3. What can we do to institutionalize the protection of future generations?
4. Is our current terminology adequate for considering the scope of this topic?
5. For instance, what is the difference between intergenerational solidarity, equity, and justice?

As the moderator of the discussion, Mr. Seth introduced the agenda and the four distinguished panelists. The floor was then opened for their presentations.

Presentations

Prof. Ian Goldin, Professor of Globalization & Development at the University of Oxford and the Deputy Chair of the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations, gave a presentation entitled “*Bridging the Gap between Knowledge and Action: the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations*”.

Prof. Goldin stressed that the issue of intergenerational solidarity is not only about future generations, but also about the present generation. He called for long-termism, for the integration of concerns for future generations into the decision-making processes at all levels. The problem is not an intellectual one, but a practical one of translating the understanding of our duties towards future generations into coherent political action. One of the big challenges is the increasing complexity of a hyper-connected globalized world, which constantly drives people towards short-term and local thinking in order to keep things under control.

He highlighted that Oxford Martin School hosts 35 interdisciplinary research programmes in such areas as climate change, oceans, forests, antibiotic drug resistance, financial crisis, ethics of economics, demography, migration, etc., and concerns for future generations are relevant to all of these various fields. The Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations was launched in September 2012 and is chaired by Mr. Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the World Trade Organization. It brings together leaders from government, business and society to examine the current gridlock in international and national attempts to deal with key global problems. The Commission aims to report around the end of September or October. Prof. Goldin shared with the audience a preliminary outline of the report consisting of three sections: 1) big challenges; 2) examples of success and failures; 3) practical recommendations.

Prof. Edith Brown Weiss, Francis Cabell Brown Professor of International Law from Georgetown University Law Center, brought in the legal perspective with a presentation entitled “*Giving Voice to Future Generations: A Framework for Intergenerational Solidarity*”.

She suggested that humans have become the central force driving natural processes. The world today is a kaleidoscopic world with increasing integration as well as fragmentation. A bottom-up world is emerging. Not only states, but also NGOs, transnational networks, ad hoc coalitions and individuals are able to have an impact. A framework for intergenerational solidarity has to start with a set of shared values and principles that are reasonably clear and flexible enough to be acceptable to different cultures and political norms. Prof. Brown Weiss proposed that the principle of intergenerational equity have three elements: 1) comparable options; 2) comparable quality; 3) equitable (non-discriminatory) access to environment. This could be embodied in a declaration on the rights and obligations to future generations. Prof. Brown Weiss emphasized that R&D is an important instrument for achieving intergenerational equity.

On how to institutionalize the concerns for future generations, Prof. Brown Weiss suggested that raising awareness of the rights of future generations at international, national and local levels is crucial. She also suggested an international body to do the following: 1) to look at trends and warning signs, aggregating and addressing the complex interactions in the biosphere and human environment; 2) to develop an office of accountability or an international bulletin board where concerns could be posted; 3) to serve as a catalyst for local actions and new ideas to protect the welfare of future generations; 4) to identify research issues to protect the robustness and integrity of the planet; 5) to promote education on the effects of our actions on future generations; 6) to send the signal of the importance of the issue and to help forge shared values. She pointed out that tackling poverty remains central to addressing intergenerational solidarity.

Dr. Martin Evans, social policy specialist from UNICEF, presented “*Intergenerational Solidarity & Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty*”, which was based on the findings of a study conducted by the London School of Economic in collaboration with UNICEF to look for empirical evidence of the intergenerational poverty transmission mechanisms between generations. It aimed to contribute to the understanding of the duties of present people to future generations.

The results for developing countries were that the most important factors in poverty transmission were maternal health and education. Dr. Evans noted that these findings should serve as a ground for better investment in these particular areas within a broader context of poverty eradication. For developed countries, an important indicator, among others, was the importance of income as a factor influencing access to education and health. Dr. Evans stressed that the welfare of future generations is in no small part determined by our treatment

of the children of the present generation, which means that caring for future generations should include a special focus on the children of today.

Ms. Kate Offerdahl, Thematic Expert on UNGA and Sustainable Development from the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), delivered a passionate speech on *“Representing Youth and Future Generations in the United Nations”*, based on her experience following intergovernmental processes on sustainable development since Rio+20.

Ms. Offerdahl pointed out that there is a significant lack of inputs from the younger generation in the debates in the decision-making process of the United Nations. She asked whether the policies for sustainable development made for the sake of future generations could really represent the interests of the future people if they do not include opinions of the present young people. It is easy to commit verbally to protecting future generations or including youth in decision-making processes, while it is much harder to transform these words into political actions. Ms. Offerdahl urged the international community to make the new High Level Political Forum strong enough to actually implement the three dimensions of sustainable development, and a High-Level Representative could be central to this mission. She argued that the Representative would need to have sufficient authority to challenge business-as-usual practices, and would need to perform facilitating and problem-solving functions. Furthermore, she called for a more long-term mindset to be fostered at all levels of sustainable development work, local, national and international.

Discussions

Online discussion on intergenerational solidarity and justice started at the beginning of the week. The public was able either to comment under the related post on the official Facebook page of DSD/DESA <https://www.facebook.com/UNSDKP> or tweet to @SustDev using #FutureGenerations by 8 May. The topic attracted much attention and was viewed by more than 4000 people on facebook.

Mr. Seth shared selected social media questions with the panel at the beginning of this session. Social media users in Uganda, Russia, and Switzerland suggested that governments or the UN should establish an Ombudsperson for Future Generations. But critical questions were also raised, such as “How can we be sure that Ombudspersons would not be biased towards the interests of the present generation?” The Intergenerational Foundation UK posted the following comment on Facebook: "Can the panel outline the duties it believes Member States have to safeguard the rights of future generations?"

The Representative of Germany supported the statement by Ms. Kate Offerdahl and reaffirmed its support to the proposal of a High Commissioner, or Ombudsperson, for Future Generations. He suggested that the Secretary-General’s Report should further reflect on the option of a high-level representative for future generations. The representative of Norway asked how intergenerational solidarity is linked to the Special Envoy for Youth of the Secretary-General. Representatives from academia, the Major Group of Children and Youth, the Stakeholder Forum and the World Future Council also actively participated in the discussion. The questions from the floor were diverse, including the following:

1. A clearer definition of the concept of “future generations” was requested;
2. How to make sure policy decisions are not biased towards the current generation?
3. Further elaboration on the problem of managing global commons was requested;
4. It was questioned whether we have a moral right to decide on behalf of and in the interests of future generations. We could focus on fundamental human rights. However, it was also noted that human right for clean environment was not well defined even for the present generation, which raised serious concerns whether it could be applied to future generations;

5. What national experiences could we draw from;
6. What are the duties of Member States to future generations;
7. What are the differences between intergenerational solidarity, intergenerational equity and intergenerational justice?
8. What is the scope of responsibility of the proposed Ombudsperson for Future Generations? Drawing from the experience of Hungary, the Ombudsperson for future generations had to deal a lot with the present-day environmental issues, like factory construction or park conservation. It was noted that the focus on the present pressing environmental issues (aimed to protect the environment and keep it for the future generations) should not detract from a longer-term perspective addressing the interests of future people. It was suggested by one person in audience that the Global Transition scenario could serve as a strategic guide to the work of an Ombudsman.

Answering the questions from social media and the audience, Ms. Offerdahl suggested that the high-level representative for future generations does not overlap with the special envoy of youth, because of the long-term perspective. Dr. Evans re-emphasized that children and youth are the bridge to future generations. However, he believed that meaningful participation of young people in relevant debates is only one element of sufficient representation; more work needs to be done to bring in other elements. Prof. Brown Weiss stressed the importance of a normative basis upon which one can judge. Rights of future generations would be defined by the normative basis. Transparency, accountability and inputs from a range of actors are all important aspects to protect the rights of future generations. The principle of intergenerational equity should have the three components she proposed in her presentation. She pointed out that “intergenerational solidarity” focuses on the commonality of interests while “intergenerational equity” recognizes trade-offs. She believes that morals and ethics would contribute to common values, which lead to common actions. Prof. Goldin pointed out that poverty eradication is a prerequisite for intergenerational solidarity and that management and governance is key to addressing global commons. He believes that common management requires the ability to bring into decision-making process the short-term and long-term spill-over effects of our actions and to internalize externalities.

Closing Session

Mr. Seth concluded the session by thanking participants for a lively and dynamic discussion, which highlighted many gaps and yet common feelings and ideas about incorporating concerns for future generations into decision-making processes at all levels. He urged the international community to get on with implementing what we have promised at Rio+20, which is the minimum we could do.