

Representing Youth and Future Generations in the United Nations

Kate Offerdahl, May 9th 2013

In my role as a reporter with the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), I've been following and reporting on the sustainable development processes in the Second Committee: the follow-up to the Rio+20 Conference; the development of the High Level Political Forum, the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, the post-2015 development agenda; and many other sustainability related efforts here in the GA since last fall. Through my role with IISD, I have been given truly unbridled access to the United Nations, and a viewpoint on the political workings of this global body that most young people will never have.

I'm a young woman of only twenty years old, with most of the same concerns as other young people my age: making it through university exams, finding a good job, learning to support myself, and planning for my future. But because of the unique nature of my job, I also find myself preoccupied with the same issues that Member States and the UN System are trying to determine: the compositions of working groups; issues of consensus and speaking orders and parallel processes; the creation of new institutions, and debates over meeting agendas - issues that most youth are not overly concerned about!

After months of listening to and writing about the statements and consultations of Member States on these issues, I'm surprised and honored to have a chance to respond from up here on this panel. Most young people will never have a chance to do this.

The most glaring problem with these international political processes that I encounter every day is the stark lack of input and voices of younger generations - people who are citizens on this planet just like everyone else. I'll get to the problem of representing future generations of citizens in a minute, but we first need to understand that there are billions of children and youth in the world who are affected by the actions and policies of the United Nations right now, and yet have no ability to affect these processes themselves.

The majority of young faces that you see around the halls of the UN are interns- young people who are doing work and writing speeches, often for little or no pay, with few opportunities to let their own opinions be heard, and certainly no chance to represent themselves at any of these important meetings.

I ask you, how can we ensure that international policies are at all representative of the wants and needs of young people, if they are not even a part of the processes determining them?

This problem of meaningful inclusion is only extrapolated when we look at the problem of bringing the generations of the future into the mix. There is certainly no mechanism available that will allow representatives of the future to give input into today's discussions, and the implementation of this technology will have to be delayed until more funding is allocated to the development of time machines.

So then, how are we to ensure that the policies and initiatives developed in these conference rooms are going to benefit the generations that will inherit them in the future? Even more importantly, how do we save these future generations from the great harms- environmental, economic, and social - that will be caused by misguided actions that we are taking today?

Intergenerational commitments to a better future have long been a feature of our political actions. The UN Charter expresses its dedication to "saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war" in the first line of its preamble.

There are more than thirty international treaties and legal instruments that have been endorsed by the countries of the world that refer to the rights and interests of future generations. The Brundtland Commission first defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Even the Framers of the United States' Constitution wrote, way back in 1787, of the importance of securing liberty for "ourselves and our posterity."

So how do we actually do this? How do our political representatives actually make decisions that balance the demands of current constituents with the murky fate of the future? As the present state of the world's environment and projections for its future show us, they don't do this very well.

Everyone has heard the scientific projections for the disasters that climate change will wreck on the world in the future. Not only will our lands and coastlines be damaged beyond belief, but the economic and political institutions that are in place now will barely be able to handle these shocks to the system. It is doubtful that all of the development that the United Nations has spent decades fostering in the world will be able to withstand the food, water, and energy insecurities, health risks, mass migrations, and economic instabilities that global climatic change will bring about. Yet with all of these scary images of the future in mind, the world is far from a collective international effort to combat them. A "global sustainable development agenda" is only sputtering to life, and will probably not be strong enough to truly prevent the future from having to bear the consequences of present inaction.

I understand that the governments of the world are not intentionally or maliciously holding the livelihoods of future generations hostage, yet that is exactly what is happening. I listen to commitments to "create a better future" and to "ensure global sustainability" every day, but I

do not see any strong actions that match these words. And that gets to the fundamental problem: it is easy to *verbally* commit to making policies that will benefit the future, and it is easy to make speeches on the inclusion of youth and the sweeping needs of future generations, but it is much more difficult to make political decisions and sacrifices that actually ensure their well-being.

Luckily, the young people of the world have stepped in to solve these problems with you.

At the Rio+20 Conference last June, the Major Group of Children and Youth was passionately organized around a proposal that gained broad support from Member States and civil society over the course of the meeting, but that was unceremoniously gutted from the outcome document in the eleventh hour. This is the proposal for a UN High-Level Representative for Future Generations (also conceived as a High Commissioner or Ombudsperson).

This proposal seeks to create a High Level Representative within the UN System that can help bring coherence among bodies and processes on the adequate representation of future generations. By helping to ensure that policy implementation considers the long-term interests of youth and future generations along with short-term concerns, this Representative will help provide the accountability in the international system that our future so desperately needs. A High-Level Representative for Future Generations will strengthen public participation in UN activities by creating a specific focal point for civil society interests and by increasing outreach activities to youth and the wider global public.

As the UN is engaged in broad activities to reform the governance of sustainable development, no area needs more innovative thinking than the long-term institutional oversight for the future. I urge you to make the new High Level Political Forum strong enough to actually implement the three dimensions of sustainable development, and a High-Level Representative can be central to this mission. For those of you concerned that the Representative would take on a harsh role threatening national sovereignty (one of Member States' dearest concerns, I know), I urge you to envision the *facilitating* and *problem-solving* functions that such a Representative can have. A High-Level Representative can not only aid civil society, but can increase the effectiveness of the work that Member States are engaged in every day to put words into action through the numerous agreements that reference future generations, and can increase the productivity of conversations among these different actors.

It is of course important that a more long-term mindset about considering future generations be fostered at all levels of sustainable development work. Imagine how powerful it would be to have Representatives for the future acting in local and national governments around the world (as many countries have already instituted), and communicating with a High-Level

Representative at the international level. In this manner, a new paradigm for multi-level political action that is responsive and accountable to the future can be fostered.

If you have more elaborate or specific ideas for how a High-Level Representative for Future Generations could function in the UN system - let's talk about it! Some of the most meaningful conversations that I had with delegates at Rio+20 were the brainstorming sessions in which we envisioned together how such a position could be effective. That is, after all, what the United Nations is supposed to be about: passionate conversations, imaginative policies, and meaningful debates about the future of our world.

You may think it naïve, coming from the mouth of a young person, but I have always believed that the United Nations is the space where great discussions on the weighty issues of our time are held and where new solutions are created. Though I have sat through endless meetings in these conference rooms, watching delegates read statements but barely listen to each other, I still have hope in the power of this international body to listen - to listen to the voices of youth, and to listen to the not-so-silent pleas of future generations of children and citizens.

We refuse to let the scary narrative of climate change and global decay dominate what should be very bright futures for all of us. We have ideas about how to fix some of the world's most dire problems, so let us come to the table. Let's create structures and institutions together that can allow for the empowerment of young people and for the representation of the future, and we will see how far these steps can take us.

It is up to you to create the framework for a better world right now, and it is up to us to carry it forward for future generations. Wouldn't it be so much better if we all just worked together, now?