



**THINK
2030**

Policy paper

Future generations and intergenerational equity



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THINK 2030

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1 INTRODUCTION

The EU faces an extremely challenging set of circumstances. Beyond immediate health concerns, the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures taken in response to it have seen the EU's GDP and employment [go down](#) by 11.4% and 2.7% respectively in the second quarter of 2020¹. This has exacerbated existing social and regional inequalities. These impacts have also occurred at a time when the EU already faced growing pressures from climate change and environmental degradation, large public debt burdens in some countries and European citizens re-evaluating the benefits of EU membership.

Europe is at the tipping point of no return when it comes to climate change, biodiversity loss, resources depletion, reaching the planetary limits. Europeans are currently dealing with these multiple crises, including the economic and social ones. What is at risk is nothing less than the future of civilisation as we know it.

The five-year mandate of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission will have a crucial role in shaping the lives of the current young generation and future generations. The ecological debt that will be forced on them, if additional significant actions are not taken now, will have unimaginable consequences for the generations to come. Thus, the consequences of further inadequate inaction or lack of sufficient ambition will be their lifelong burden. Therefore, the measures provisioned within the European Green Deal and the recovery plans must thoroughly consider their imminent and potential long-term impacts and reflect on the stakes of the future generations. In the short-term, this can be addressed by meaningfully engaging and letting youth take an active role in decision-making processes.

Many regions across the world are already suffering and experiencing the devastating effects of droughts, coastal flooding and other extreme weather events, caused by the climate crisis. It is important to note that the effects of the climate crisis have a disproportionate impact across generations, with younger generations bearing the burden of the climate crisis in the future.

The people in power since the 1980s can plausibly be held responsible for the present situation of climate emergency, having failed to act effectively against the problem when it became clearly understood. More than half of all historical emissions have been emitted post-1990². The Club of Rome has published in 1972 'The Limits to Growth'³, the Brundtland report⁴ was published in 1987 proving that the problem has been properly understood for a longer time - even before climate change became an issue.

A key question to address is how can be delivered an effective and intergenerational equitable response to the climate emergency and the interconnected crises now?

¹ Eurostat (8 September 2020) 'GDP and employment flash estimates for the second quarter of 2020': <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10545471/2-08092020-AP-EN.pdf/43764613-3547-2e40-7a24-d20c30a20f64>

² Hickel, J. (2020). Quantifying national responsibility for climate breakdown: an equality-based attribution approach for carbon dioxide emissions in excess of the planetary boundary. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 4(9), e399-e404.

³ Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. W. (1972). *The limits to growth*. New York, 102(1972), 27

⁴ WCED. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future.

1.1 KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EC should provide long-term impact assessments of current public policy plans, programmes, proposals and subsequent investments. This needs to be backed by the precautionary principle and latest scientific evidence that does not rely heavily (or at all) on speculative negative emissions technologies (e.g. the only IPCC scenario without NETs is Grubler et al 2018)⁵. The goal of which should be to provide detailed estimates of the social, economic and environmental costs passed onto young and future generations depending on the levels of current climate action. This should be achieved through modelling various policy interactions under a variety of sustainability narratives (i.e. BAU, Green Growth⁶, EU Green Deal, Post-Growth) to identify synergies, trade-offs and co-dependencies (direct or implied).
- As part of the reform of the European semester, the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy process should be complemented by a 2050 Strategy for Sustainable Prosperity, with long-term economic indicators, but also relevant indicators on well-being, sustainability and intergenerational equity, upon which progress from Member States would be assessed.
- Additional attention should be paid to issues concerning inter- and intra-generational social equity. The impact assessments must be co-created by a wide range of stakeholders, with EU youth playing a leading role given their recent momentum in attempting to catalyse change (e.g. FFF). The results should be integrated into the ECs Sustainable Corporate Governance plan (Q2 2021), Zero Emission Action Plans (Q2 2021) and the implementation of the biodiversity, chemicals strategies, EU climate law and EU Green Deal and related instruments. Farm to Fork strategy and the CAP reform should have an explicit objective to protect the right of future generations to have access to healthy ecosystems and sustainable food systems, which will be capable of sustaining their nutrition needs.
- The EC should continue to structurally integrate youth in the policy- and decision-making processes. This must continue to build on the foundations of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the EU Rights of the Child Strategy concerning engagement, connection and empowerment of youth in civic and democratic life. Whilst this is proposed in other funding mechanisms (e.g. Erasmus Programme 2021-2027 Proposal: COM(2018) 0367), further structural integration and trust in youth are recommended. This could take the form of youth advisory bodies or citizen assemblies by coordinating with youth [climate/environmental] networks from each member state (i.e. an extension of the EC Youth Dialogue held in early 2020). Such meaningful and continuous youth participation is in line with strengthening trust and democratic values within the EU and ensuring youth engagement in decision-making.
- The EC should endorse and act in solidarity with the proposal for a Conference on the Future of Europe. This will enable citizens, especially youth, to engage in a wide-ranging debate on

⁵ Grubler et al. (2018) A low energy demand scenario for meeting the 1.5 C target and sustainable development goals without negative emission technologies. *Nature energy*, 3(6), pp.515-527.

⁶ D'Alessandro, S., Cieplinski, A., Distefano, T. and Dittmer, K., 2020. Feasible alternatives to green growth. *Nature Sustainability*, 3(4), pp.329-335.

Future generations and intergenerational equity

Europe's future directions and public policy. Grounded in the ideals of inter- and intra-generational equity, the conference acts as a springboard and forum for deliberation to consider the rights and needs of future generations moving forward.

- The EC should explore the long-term implications on member states regarding the recent Covid-19 (and any subsequent) recovery packages. This should pay particular attention to the issue of long-term debt to ensure it falls in line with the principles of a Just Transition and leaving no one behind. To reduce the debt burden for future generations, progressive tax reform should focus on resource extraction and taxing wealth and extreme incomes more heavily.



2 WHY THE EU ACTION IS REQUIRED AND WHAT IS HAPPENING ALREADY

As highlighted by the European Commission in its reflection *Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030*⁷, the current generation, primarily in the global North, is running an ecological debt that future ones will have to pay back. The European Green Deal presents an opportunity for EU wide action to ensure intergenerational equity is sufficiently embedded within the recovery process following the pandemic, with regards to social, economic and environmental aspects.

Being a cross-cutting issue pertinent horizontally to all the sustainable development goals, it is instrumental to be considered across the goals' implementation to safeguard the rights of future generations to natural resources, a clean environment and a healthy planet for all. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to leave no one behind⁸. Thus, it is paramount that intergenerational justice is embedded within the European Green Deal and related policies and strategies and is an essential aspect for inclusion and review in light of the pandemic recovery measures.

The European Green Deal has the potential to play a critical role within the recovery strategy following the COVID-19 crisis. It provides an opportunity to catalyse a shift away from Europe's previously unsustainable fossil fuel economy. If the former unsustainable recovery pathway persists, Europe's youth and future generations will be locked into a destructive high-carbon and unsustainable recovery pathway.

Before the current crisis, the rise in climate change youth activism meant that issues of intergenerational justice and solidarity rose to the top of the political agenda, in the EU and UN. International campaigns led by climate activist groups and movements such as #FridaysForFuture inspired by Greta Thunberg have engaged and alerted younger generations of the scale and urgency of ambitious climate action.

However, despite the increased consensus around the need to address intergenerational equity, policy responses have so far been inadequate and under ambitious. Diverse participatory democracy approaches have been used to ensure that wide stakeholder groups are informed and consulted. However, these have proven limited to the interest of future generations.

The inclusion of equity, fairness and justice within climate policy/discussions is essential for amplifying the voices of future generations. Institutional change can mitigate the lack of democratic representation for future generations.

To acknowledge activism and concern about long-term issues particularly among younger voters, youth forums should be better integrated. The inadequate reaction to the climate change movement has led to frustration among many young activists. Without reforms that adequately address the concerns of young activists, there is a risk that political participation and frustration about politics will decline further, which might ultimately reduce trust in our institutions. This might also

⁷ European Commission (2019) A Sustainable Europe by 2030. Website.

⁸ UNDP (2018). What does it mean to leave no one behind? A UNDP discussion paper and framework for implementation. United Nations Development Program.

endanger the acceptance and success of new institutions for future generations. Beyond other environmental and social benefits, restoring trust and reconnecting with young voters is, therefore, a key motivation for addressing equity in the Green Deal.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between the interests of young people and future generations. The interests of young people and future generations are not necessarily the same, and ways of influencing the policymaking process that are open to young generations are not open to those who will live in the (far) future. Representing the interests of future generations should not be a task primarily delegated to young people. The danger of 'outsourcing' the topic to youth representatives might be that the issue is seen as 'taken care of' by other participants in decision-making processes and therefore risks being counterproductive. Moreover, it might lead to young people being increasingly perceived as or perceiving themselves as the advocates for the interests of young and future generations. This might put undue pressure on them to focus on certain policy areas or topics over others.

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3 BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The European Green Deal is instrumental for the sustainability of the EU recovery plan and therefore is widely referred to in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Whilst it is paramount to address the current emergency needs, planning for the future and the transformation of our economies needs to proceed accordingly. The new emergency temporary recovery instrument 'Next Generation EU'⁹ should boost the EU budget with €750 billion for 2021-2024, bringing the total financial firepower of the EU budget to €1.85 trill. This acknowledges that the plan for European recovery will need massive public and private investment at the European level to set the Union firmly on the path to a sustainable and resilient recovery, creating jobs and repairing the immediate damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic whilst supporting the Union's green and digital priorities. However, it will need to be closely monitored if these funds are not prioritising quick recovery over long term potential negative impact and indeed prepare for a better future for the next generation as pledged¹⁰ (i.e. and investment in fossil fuels such as coal, oil or gas).

The European Green Deal can also help create new, quality jobs in sustainable sectors in the context of rising unemployment. However, for social benefits to materialise, the Green Deal must be implemented by putting fairness and equity at its very core.

The pandemic will inevitably compound the existing accumulation of challenges that young people face, which extends beyond the concern for the state of the environment and climate. Pre-coronavirus, youth unemployment in Europe was significantly higher than national averages. Despite making progress and decreasing from 24% in 2013 to 15% in 2019, these figures are likely to look very different in the coming months¹¹. Young people in education also face difficulties with disruptions in schools and universities, planned internships and stays abroad. These disruptions are often significant and can have further knock-on effects for careers. The mental health of many young people has also been significantly affected by the pandemic and lockdown measures.¹²

The potential reality of forging a sustainable recovery that is equitable for future generations is evident in the new ways of living and working which have emerged as a result of the pandemic. Unforeseen constraints on mobility have forced many people and businesses to change their habits, many becoming much less carbon-intensive¹³. Some of these practices can offer better pathways to accelerate the sustainable transition and adjust our lifestyles to ensure a better quality of life for all.

To avoid unnecessary trade-offs between the recovery of economies, societies and ecosystems, operationalising the principle of "leaving no one behind" is paramount. This 'mantra' will be particularly important as the economic recession is also likely to affect youth disproportionately, as has

⁹ European Council (2020) Special meeting of the European Council (17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 July 2020) Council Conclusions.

¹⁰ European Commission (2020) The EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe. Factsheet.

¹¹ European Commission (2020) Youth employment. Website.

¹² NHS Digital (2020). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020.

¹³ Millward-Hopkins, J., Steinberger, J. K., Rao, N. D., & Oswald, Y. (2020). Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario. *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 102168

been the case in previous crises, with a rise in youth unemployment, impoverishment or inability to afford tertiary education due to loss of parental income¹⁴.

This requires addressing the intergenerational equity challenges that lie at the heart of the multiple environmental crises:

- Assessment of the cost of delayed/insufficient action to younger and future generations (should be noted that cost-benefit analysis includes future discounting but in any case the costs are not mainly economic);
- Principles of the equitable sharing of past (i.e. ecological and monetary reparation payments) and remaining carbon budget ;
- Wide implementation of the precautionary principle in terms of the effects of long-term pollutants on future generations and the environment;
- Carbon lock-in effects, lack of adaptation and resilience of infrastructure and investments.

3.1 PARTICIPATION, INCLUSION IN DECISION-MAKING, AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

Young people are eager to explore new, alternative, progressive, meaningful and more engaging ways of including the youth in the decision-making process. However, a study on 'New and innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making processes'¹⁵ found that there is a general consensus of concern for the shift in young people's methods of political expression away from voting and engagement with political parties into other forms of participation. The survey explored perceptions, amongst stakeholders, of different forms of participation in decision making. The key findings are that:

- co-management, co-production, digital participation, deliberative participation and for some, the concept of 'participatory spaces' are seen as the more innovative forms of participation;
- youth councils and similar bodies, and youth activism or popular protest are seen as the less innovative forms of participation but historically where social change has stemmed from;
- in general, the 'more innovative forms' are not more or less effective than the 'less innovative forms';
- these more innovative forms are facing similar barriers to those faced by youth councils and forums in terms of young people's views being taken into account by public bodies.

¹⁴ Goldin, N. (2020) If history repeats: Coronavirus' economic danger to youth. Atlantic Council.

¹⁵ Crowley, A. & Moxon, A. (2017) New and innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making processes. European Council.

Barriers include lack of funds and resources, lack of political support, and lack of understanding by public authorities.

The further inclusion of youth councils and citizen's assemblies suggests pro-active participation of youth in European decision-making processes including:

- Promoting the role of young parliamentarians in the European Parliament as well as European programmes to support greater youth involvement in voting and existing democratic processes, starting from the local level.
- Lowering the voting age to 16 (Malta and Austria have lowered the voting age already to 16), which would go in the direction of giving more voice and power to the young generation in the current democratic setting with no new institutions.
- Defining actions that should be taken by the EU, in close partnership with the youth as advocates for the rights and interests of the future generations. This may be done at the early stage of road map development by ensuring targeted participation of the youth and clear response (accountability) giving due consideration to the long-term impact certain policies and legislation can have on the environment and the future generations.

Youth recognises that there will not always be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution in terms of youth engagement and it should be adapted to a specific purpose or local contexts as is the case of the youth assembly in Ireland below.

Case study: Youth assembly Ireland

Ireland is a good example of positive youth involvement in politics¹. More than 150 young people from all 26 counties gathered for the event in the Dáil. Once the debate concluded, they announced their 10 recommendations on climate change.

Ireland has developed a consultative mechanism of citizen assembly. The Citizens' Assembly was an exercise in deliberative democracy, placing the citizen at the heart of important legal and policy issues facing Irish society. With the benefit of expert, impartial and factual advice the 100 citizen Members considered among other issues, climate change. Their conclusions formed the basis of several reports and recommendations that were submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas for further debate by our elected representatives.

3.2 THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF DUTIES/ACCOUNTABILITY TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

Today's democracies are biased towards the present. Election cycles and legislation periods are too short to react to long-term developments and impacts of political decisions. This contributes to the 'presentism' of today's democracies. Future generations do not have a vote, and cannot influence the political process, despite being significantly impacted by today's political decisions. These limits

of current democratic systems are a powerful argument in support of creating institutions that represent future generations.

Building on several institutional precedents¹⁶, clear mechanisms to ensure accountability need to be put in place, to ensure equitable representation in decision-making and to rebuild the trust of the youth in democracy and the European project.

- Full recognition at both EU and MS level of the rights of future generations (including to healthy environment, resources, nature, clean air and water) and mechanisms to ensure the observance of the rights of future generations. A concrete avenue for such recognition would be the integration of intergenerational justice within the framework of the new Climate Law, and the recognition of the importance of irreplaceable biodiversity to future generations.
- Future Generation's Ombudsman: The creation of an EU-level advisory role on the interests of future generations (as well as similar roles at the national level).⁷ The Fridays for Future movement and other recent manifestations of awareness of the problem have made the need for rapid progress in implementing solutions increasingly clear. A merely advisory role, especially if there is a lack of awareness and support in the public and in the political institutions, will not be enough to make a significant contribution to intergenerational justice and will not satisfy the demands for rapid progress made by climate activists and others. To counteract these concerns, the ombudsman should have some legally binding powers, such as being able to initiate investigations; and the role, function, and competencies of the ombudsman should be determined in stakeholder dialogue, in particular with intergenerational justice and climate movements. This would serve to ensure widespread knowledge and acceptance of the new role, which would ideally lead to a sense of ownership of the new role, strengthen its legitimacy and enhance its political powers. In sum, a newly created institution must not lack "teeth", and far-reaching public consultation should accompany any proposals and implementations of EU level institutional changes.
- Include a "future generations" focus in the new climate science advisory body, proposed by the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen¹⁷. Establishing such a body would be an important step to addressing one of the calls of Fridays for Future leaders that politicians should "listen to the scientists"¹⁸. This body should operate based on the identification of a list of areas where intergenerational justice issues need to be addressed. Options could include requiring the body's progress reports to explicitly identify issues where policy choices risk loading costs onto future generations.

¹⁶ Giuseppe Pellegrini-Masini, Fausto Corvino and Alberto Pirni, (2019) "Climate justice in practice: adapting democratic institutions for environmental citizenship" in *A Research Agenda for Climate Justice*, Harris, P. Ed. Edward Elgar Publishing. & Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries. (2016) *Institutions For Future Generations*. Oxford University Publishing.

¹⁷ See, for example, the article in Politico, which records that the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen "told the Renew Europe group that she wanted to set up a scientific council to measure climate progress".

¹⁸ See Fridays for Future (2019) Greta's Speeches. Greta Thunberg Full Speech 2019-02-21 in Brussels: "We want politicians to listen to the scientists".

Case study: Ombudsman for Future Generations Hungary

Hungary's Constitution provides that "natural resources, particularly arable land, forests and the reserves of water, biodiversity, in particular native plant and animal species, as well as cultural assets, shall form the common heritage of the nation; it shall be the obligation of the State and everyone to protect and maintain them, and to preserve them for future generations". In 2007, the Hungarian Parliament created a special Ombudsman for Future Generations¹, which was grouped with other Ombudsmen in 2012 under the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. The Ombudsman for Future Generations holds the status of a Deputy Commissioner and reports annually to the Parliament. The Parliament elects the Ombudsman who has an overarching mandate to protect and monitor the interests of future generations.



4 MAINSTREAMING AND COHERENCE WITH OTHER POLICIES

As part of the “green oath”, the Green Deal framework should ensure a **genuine integration of intergenerational considerations in the policy cycle**. Concrete avenues to do this include:

- “Future-proofing” infrastructure plans within economic recovery plans by integrating discount rates that reflect long-term and future generation’s interest within decision-making.
- As part of the reform of the European semester, the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy process should be complemented by a 2050 Strategy for Sustainable Prosperity, with long-term economic indicators, but also relevant indicators on well-being, sustainability and intergenerational equity, upon which progress from Member States would be assessed.
- Integration into the Better Regulation Guidelines, which are also currently being reviewed to integrate SDGs:¹⁹ To live up to a green oath to ‘do no harm’, the explanatory memorandum accompanying all legislative proposals and delegated acts should include a specific section that explains the potential implications for future generations. Sound methodologies would need to be proposed to assess such impact.
- Mainstreaming into sectoral policies: For instance, the Farm to Fork strategy and the CAP reform should have an explicit objective to protect the right of future generations to have access to healthy ecosystems and sustainable food systems, which will be capable of sustaining their nutrition needs. The annual Semester process, which is currently under review, should be complemented by a 2050 strategy for sustainable prosperity and growth, with relevant indicators on intergenerational equity, upon which progress from Member States would be assessed.

4.1 SYNERGIES WITH EDUCATION, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD POLICIES

- Green jobs training should be integrated into adult learning programmes as part of a just transition and in vocational training for the youth. Up to 60 million new jobs in the green economy could potentially be created by 2030 – if properly managed, green growth can provide an opportunity to address the youth employment challenge while simultaneously preserving the environment and increasing climate resilience²⁰.
- Mainstreaming of sustainability issues within the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. The strategy notes that youth cooperation shall make the most of youth policy’s potential. In the coming years, the strategy strives, among other things, to improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors, notably employment, education, health and social inclusion. However, climate, environment and sustainability are not among the policy areas explicitly mentioned. This should be further addressed and prioritised.

¹⁹ European Commission (2019) Communication on the European Green Deal: p19.

²⁰ Decent Jobs for Youth website.

4.2 INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The concept of intergenerational equity does not only concern the youth and future generations. The COVID-19 pandemic will also disproportionately impact elderly generations. The vulnerability of this demographic is significantly higher than any other, with regard to their resilience to the virus, but also broader aspects of their wellbeing.

Older citizens tend to have low fixed incomes, and they are often dependent on and supported by their children's incomes for subsistence. The elderly are particularly vulnerable to shocks in society such as; economic recessions, natural disaster events, the spread of disease, and inflation. Therefore, it is critical to strengthen the resilience of the elderly, an element that should be held at the core of the recovery strategy following the COVID-19 crisis.

Policy must be tailored to adopt equity-focused and rights-based approaches which are inclusive of intergenerational disparities.



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