

Future Generations in Global Governance: A 2026 Progress Check

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The Principle Behind the Agenda

The idea that today's decisions should account for the interests of people who cannot yet vote, lobby, or even exist is one of the oldest principles in sustainable development thinking, and one of the hardest to put into practice. Democratic institutions are built to respond to those who are alive and enfranchised today; the costs of climate change, biodiversity loss, depleted natural resources and mounting public debt are disproportionately deferred to those who inherit them later.

This is an unfortunate consequence of short political cycles but also a weakness in the way we govern. Our institutions remain much better at responding to immediate pressures than at protecting interests that lie beyond the next election, spending round or strategic plan. Correcting this requires more than good intentions: it requires institutions, foresight tools, budgets and accountability mechanisms capable of representing interests that have no seat at the table when decisions are actually made. The future generations agenda is ultimately about this but also about changing the way decisions are made today so that tomorrow is properly represented within them. Over the past two years, that principle has gained important institutional ground at both the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). The question now is whether the machinery of governance is beginning to catch up with the ambition.

The Declaration on Future Generations and the Pact for the Future

At the UN Summit of the Future on 22 and 23 September 2024, world leaders adopted the Pact for the Future, together with two annexes: the [Global Digital Compact](#) and the [Declaration on Future Generations](#). The Declaration was the first time the interests of those not yet born were formally enshrined in an intergovernmental agreement, committing states "for the first time to taking the interests of our descendants into account in decisions we take today," as Secretary-General António Guterres put it at the time.

Two concrete deliverables anchored the Declaration. First, member states took note of the Secretary-General's proposal to appoint a Special Envoy for Future Generations, tasked with advocating for long-term thinking across the UN system. Second, they decided to convene an inclusive high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on future generations at the start of its eighty-third session, in 2028, to review implementation of the Declaration, informed by a Secretary-General's report prepared for that meeting.

These commitments mattered. They moved the debate beyond the language of aspiration and towards questions of representation and accountability. Almost two years later, however, progress is decidedly mixed.

The Envoy That Wasn't, Yet

Momentum looked strong at first. Weeks after the Summit, Guy Ryder, the Under-Secretary-General for Policy, told the Hamburg Sustainability Conference that the Secretary-General intended to appoint the Envoy "in the coming weeks". By July 2025, terms of reference and a budget proposal for the post had been completed, according to the UN's own tracking of the Declaration's implementation.

That is where the trail currently ends. The same official tracker now records that *'due to ongoing reform efforts and the current financial situation of the United Nations, the appointment of the Special Envoy for Future Generations is temporarily on hold, pending further decisions by Member States, including in the context of the UN80 initiative'*. In June 2025, the member-state-led budgetary committee declined to fund the new post, and it was absent from the 2026 proposed programme budget.

The General Assembly subsequently established an informal ad hoc working group, co-chaired by Jamaica and New Zealand, to consider the wider question of how UN mandates are created and reviewed; it reported back by the end of March 2026, and the Assembly adopted a resulting resolution on the mandate lifecycle on 31 March 2026. None of this has yet unlocked the Envoy's appointment.

There is a lesson here which those working in sustainable development will recognise. Securing agreement on a principle is often considerably easier than changing the institutional arrangements needed to deliver it. Without responsibility, capacity and resources, even landmark commitments can remain exactly that - commitments.

Building the Machinery Behind the Declaration

It would be wrong to conclude that implementation has stopped simply because the Envoy has not been appointed. Some of the less visible work may ultimately prove just as important.

The Secretary-General's Executive Office has been tasked with establishing a system-wide network of Future Generations focal points across UN entities, with its first meeting planned for the first quarter of 2026 to help embed foresight and long-term thinking into the UN's everyday work. Separately, Jamaica and the Netherlands, who co-facilitated the negotiation of the Declaration, have convened a Group of Friends of Future Generations, a member-state-led coalition pushing for implementation.⁹ The Secretary-General's pre-existing UN Futures Lab Network, which builds foresight and futures-literacy capacity across the system, provides a natural institutional home for much of this work. On 14 July

2026, the President of the General Assembly convened an informal meeting to take stock of progress on the Pact for the Future as a whole, reaffirming the path toward the 2028 review.

None of these developments has the visibility of a Special Envoy. Yet this is where institutionalisation actually happens: through people being given responsibility, new expectations entering routine processes, foresight becoming part of decision-making, and governments continuing to hold the issue politically. Whether these mechanisms are strong enough remains to be seen, but they should not be overlooked.

The European Commission Responds: A Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness

The contrast with developments in the European Union is particularly striking. While the UN's most visible institutional commitment remains stalled, the European Commission has moved relatively quickly from principle to policy.

On 4 March 2026, it adopted its first Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, explicitly framed as the EU's contribution to the UN Pact for the Future. The Strategy sits under Commissioner Glenn Micallef's portfolio for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, and asks, in the Commission's own words, whether today's decisions are fair to those who will live with their consequences.

The Strategy introduces what it calls a New Intergenerational Contract, built around three pillars. Fair Policymaking commits the Commission to anticipatory, evidence-based governance, using strategic foresight, impact assessments and genuine participation by those affected by long-term decisions; it also brings the Commission's existing "Youth Check," which screens major policy proposals for their impact on young people, into the EU's formal Better Regulation framework.

Fair Opportunities addresses access to education, stable employment, affordable housing and healthcare, including mental health, and explicitly names wealth distribution and inheritance taxation as mechanisms that shape how advantage and disadvantage pass between generations. Fair Places recognises that where a person lives, whether in a thriving city or a region in decline, shapes their life chances, and calls for place-based action delivered with local and regional authorities.

The Strategy further commits to finalising an Intergenerational Fairness Index, a 'beyond GDP' measure intended to track inequality across generations over time.

These may sound like procedural changes, but procedure matters. If intergenerational fairness is to influence real decisions, it has to move from speeches and declarations into the everyday architecture of policy: who is consulted, what evidence is considered, what impacts are assessed and who is ultimately held accountable.

The Way Forward

Two implementation clocks are now running in parallel, and, notably, they are set to converge. The Commission's Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness commits to a progress report in early 2028, deliberately aligned with the United Nations' own high-level review of the Declaration on Future Generations at the start of the General Assembly's 83rd session that same year. Before then, the EU's next Youth Strategy is due in March 2027, informed by youth consultations held through 2026. At the UN, much depends on whether the Group of Friends and the incoming Future Generations focal-point network can generate enough political and technical traction to move the Special Envoy off hold before 2028, so that the high-level meeting reviews genuine implementation rather than an unfulfilled promise.

The comparison between the two processes is instructive. The EU has translated a UN-level declaration into a strategy, a named Commissioner and a named accountability mechanism within eighteen months.

At the UN itself, the equivalent commitment remains, in the tracker's own words, "on hold." Declarations create the mandate; institutions and budgets create the delivery. The next two years will show which of these tracks other regions and member states choose to follow.

The Author

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Sources:

[Pact for the Future | United Nations](#)

[Annex II: Declaration on Future Generations | Pact for the Future](#)

[Coming soon: a UN Envoy for Future Generations | United Nations University](#)

[Paragraph 32\(a\): implementation tracker | Pact for the Future](#)

[How a Special Envoy for Future Generations Could Help Rescue UN80 from Itself | United Nations University](#)

[UN80 Initiative and the Environmental Pillar Dimension | Geneva Environment Network](#)

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[Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future](#) (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. For more than 25 years, SF has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the

environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement and participation of stakeholders in these forums, and in the action that flows from their work.

To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building - all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and HLPF processes.

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