

**How can today's Europe better safeguard the needs of the future?
High Level Hearing, European Parliament, Brussels**

What steps can be taken in Europe, to facilitate the shift from short-termism in policy making towards long-term decision making? What is the way forward?

Summary and main outcomes of the event organised by the World Future Council and MEP Benedek Jávor (Greens/EFA), co-hosted with Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP) and Jo Leinen (S&D)

Monday 28 September 2015

The hearing built upon the outcomes of an expert level workshop on the issue held in the European Parliament in April 2015 with the participation of the Cabinets of Karmenu Vella, Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport.

It aimed to provide an overview of existing practices at UN, EU and MS levels as well as to identify options for better integrating the rights of future generations, better implementing intergenerational equity and bringing long-term thinking into EU policy-making with contributions from János Pásztor, UN Assistant Secretary-General & Special Envoy on Climate Change, Karmenu Vella, Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Karl Falkenberg, European Policy Strategy Centre as well as high-level representatives of particular Member States, NGOs and academia.

New, policy-relevant assessments and research results were presented and discussed including that of the Oxford Martin Programme on Human Rights for Future Generations, the Institute for European Environmental Policy and the World Future Council, the latter offering practical, credible options and recommendations for creating and formalising a 'Guardian for Future Generations' role at EU level.

Benedek Jávor opened the event by drawing attention to the close links between the rights of future generations and the recently adopted Agenda 2030 and the climate goals to be set by the COP21 in Paris later this year. Such decisions reflect the need for long-term thinking and integrating the interests of future generations in policy-making, which are indispensable for addressing challenges like climate change or biodiversity loss. Action at the EU level might influence other countries to follow the positive example. Mr Jávor reminded participants that despite efforts to improve governance in the EU, the interests of future generations are systematically underestimated in current decisions for a number of reasons. He made it clear that bridging the needs of present and future generations is possible and practical solutions are highly needed.

In his video message, János Pásztor, UN Assistant Secretary-General warned that climate change will have the most encompassing impact on future generations. Therefore, the Paris Agreement is crucial and could mark a historic turning point, if everyone, including all sectors and all levels of society are on board.

Commissioner Karmenu Vella called for the EU to live up to the UN commitments and fully implement the SDGs, keeping in mind that 2030 is around the corner. He mentioned the upcoming proposal from the Commission on the circular economy as one of the tools to do so.

Neil Kerr, deputy Permanent Representative of Malta offered a historic perspective on the role his country played in promoting the concept of a 'guardian of future generations' at the international level since the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 1992. In particular, he talked about the science-policy interface and the importance of a cross-sectoral and participatory approach.

The founder of the World Future Council, Jakob von Uexkull reminded the audience that climate change is not the sole issue affecting future generations, but it will have the most drastic impacts across all areas of life. In his opinion, we have enslaved future generations by our current lifestyles and it would be absolutely necessary to redesign policies (including education, security, energy and biodiversity protection) and create a Guardian at EU level.

Karl Falkenberg warned us about various unprecedented environmental challenges, argued for a conservative approach, namely the duty of handing a liveable planet to the next generations. He called for policy coherence, a holistic and collective approach, mentioning examples of sustainable agriculture and cities. In his view institutions such as national level sustainable development councils to embed the concept of long-termism are more justifiable than giving a voice to future generations through a single representative due to difficulties in anticipating intents and attitudes that will prevail in the future. He also mentioned the value of mainstreaming such principles across existing work and processes.

Session 2 offered insight into current practices with possible lessons to be learnt at the EU level. As explained by Rita Singh, Director of Policy at Cynnal Cymru/Sustain Wales, in Wales the role of the Commissioner for Sustainable Futures is to bring attention to interconnectedness of policies and promote sustainability. This is achieved through a collaborative approach, including consultations with key stakeholders and social groups on their vision for 2050, with the overall aim of engaging citizens. Tools to support such work include a specific checklist for public service providers, making sure their decisions are sustainable in the economic, social, environmental and cultural sense. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, introduced into law earlier this year has proven instrumental into prioritising attention, of both Government and public bodies to the long-term.

Another concrete example was presented by Dr. Marcel Szabó, Deputy Ombudsman for Future Generations in Hungary. Here the focus lies more on the question of constitutionality and

checking whether government actions are compliant with environmental law, either on the Ombudsman's own initiative or based on citizens' claims in order to ensure that future generations have appropriate life conditions. Dr. Szabó listed success stories in the fields of awareness raising and education, as well as cooperation with academia.

Catherine Pearce from the World Future Council also draw the attention to inspiring institutions from various countries and provided a few common characteristics of these. The key functions include policy evaluation, mediation to achieve policy coherence, balancing the interests of current and future generations. In terms of underlying principles to ensure impact, inter alia independence, effectiveness, transparency, legitimacy, accountability and accessibility were mentioned. She argued that representing future generations at EU level would reinforce European values, support implementation and close governance gaps, and allow performance assessment of EU institutions.

Ms. Pearce also analysed the pros and cons of six different pathways to establish a Guardian at EU level, keeping in mind the desired scope of competence of this role and stressing that these options were not mutually exclusive:

- Treaty change
- Adapting an existing EU role (eg. EU ombudsman or European Fundamental Rights Agency)
- Stand alone legislation/new institution
- Separate sectoral legislation (eg. 7 Environment Action Programme)
- Ad hoc administrative arrangement
- Inter-institutional agreement, this being the stronger and preferred option going forward

Professor Simon Caney presented a list of areas where short termism creates problems, such as macroeconomics, housing, pensions, foreign policies and disaster management. He summarised key drivers of short termism including human factors (such as ignorance, self-interest, tendency to focus on vivid risks and identifiable victims) and institutional factors (such as electoral dependence, economic dependence, media coverage, auditing timelines, ill-designed performance indicators). Finally, he offered a five-fold proposal (tailored for the UK context nevertheless providing a source of inspiration for other Member States and the EU):

- Obligation for any incoming government to provide a "Manifesto for the Future" and describe long term vision
- 'State of the Union' speech for the future (a day dedicated to visions for the future in the parliament), where the government defends its manifesto for the future
- Committee for the future to scrutinise policies for the long term
- Independent council for the future with an agenda setting power
- Long-term performance indicators and audit

A number of comments and questions were raised covering the following aspects: providing the freedom of choice to future generations, going beyond advocacy, applying the concept of heritage when defining the role of an EU Guardian, strengthening existing tools such as

environmental impact assessments, making use of an ensemble of governance instruments (complementing one another), a systemic approach with human rights and the precautionary principle at its core, decision makers to better link to academia and lawyers to find innovative and systemic solutions, measuring the sustainability performance of EU policies, using indicators to scrutinize them (possibly with a link to monitoring SDG implementation), taking into account Member State specificities, besides foresight tools (visions, scenarios), the need for backcasting and ability for identifying building blocks of transition putting the economy, institutional representation necessary for vulnerable groups under pressure.

Sirpa Pietikäinen, co-host of the hearing emphasized the importance of creating links with national campaigns (run by citizens or advocacy groups) as well as building on court cases which oblige national governments to protect their citizens from environmental threats, including climate change.

The event concluded with Benedek Jávör's comments which included his intention to launch an EP written declaration on intergenerational justice to prompt action by the European Commission and Member States, suggesting also to establish an intergovernmental panel for future generations.

Further information is available at:

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