

Future Thinking and Future Generations

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The founding charter of the United Nations aims to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Given the rapid pace of technological change, and the global scale and severity of challenges and risks faced by our planet and humanity, this commitment needs to be reinterpreted and translated into a coherent agenda for understanding, acting for, and representing future generations.

The Demographic Lens

More people are yet to be born this century than are currently alive.

However, the future is unevenly distributed: future generations will largely be born in the global south. 85% of people yet to be born this century will live in Africa or Asia and 71% will be born in what are currently low or lower-middle income countries.

Takeaways

- 🌐 Targeted investments in human development today will reduce the size of future generations but provide fewer people with better prospects and opportunities (the paradox of future generations).
- 🌐 Youth will become an increasingly precious and unevenly distributed resource, raising the question of whether economic opportunities will move to young countries or if young people will be allowed to migrate to economies that need them.
- 🌐 The political imbalances between living and future generations can only be understood from a global perspective. Today's *Living Majority* countries are richer and have more geopolitical power, while *Future Majority* countries have fewer levers to represent citizens already alive, let alone those yet to be born (see page 3).

The Knowledge Lens

Whilst all societies have a concept of the future, its systematic study is embryonic: knowledge about future generations remains fragmented across sectors and disciplines.

Environmental issues have forced policymakers to grapple with the long term, but fewer resources have been devoted to studying other intergenerational issues, such as violence, inequality, and education, especially in parts of the world where most future generations will be born.

Takeaways

The international system should act as a hub for an integrated and coherent science of the future by:

- 🌐 Investing in the assessment of risks and opportunities facing future generations, especially by boosting cross-disciplinary research, to help us be proactive – not reactive – about global and intergenerational challenges
- 🌐 Supporting the development of an economics of the future, illuminating the value of intergenerational global public goods

The Institutional Lens

Future generations are unable to articulate their needs or exert power in today's decision-making structures, so they require a proxy to represent them.

A variety of institutional mechanisms have been set up (nationally) and proposed (globally) to represent future generations. But many of the former have struggled to deliver on their ambitious mandates, while the latter are yet to mobilize.

Whilst specialist institutions can play an important role, future generations also have a broader interest in our ability to maintain effective institutions; these can take decades or centuries to build, but can be destroyed in years or months.

Finally, a range of mechanisms – such as constitutions, frameworks for protecting nature and endangered species, and bodies to manage nuclear waste – can also help societies prepare for and shape the future.

Takeaways

Strengthened governance for the future is needed at three levels:

1. Broad improvements in governance in *Future Majority* countries and a greater leadership role for these countries in the international system.
2. More far-sighted and future-proofed institutions that can help societies achieve impact over generations, whilst combatting pressures that derail long-term thinking, such as polarization and disinformation.

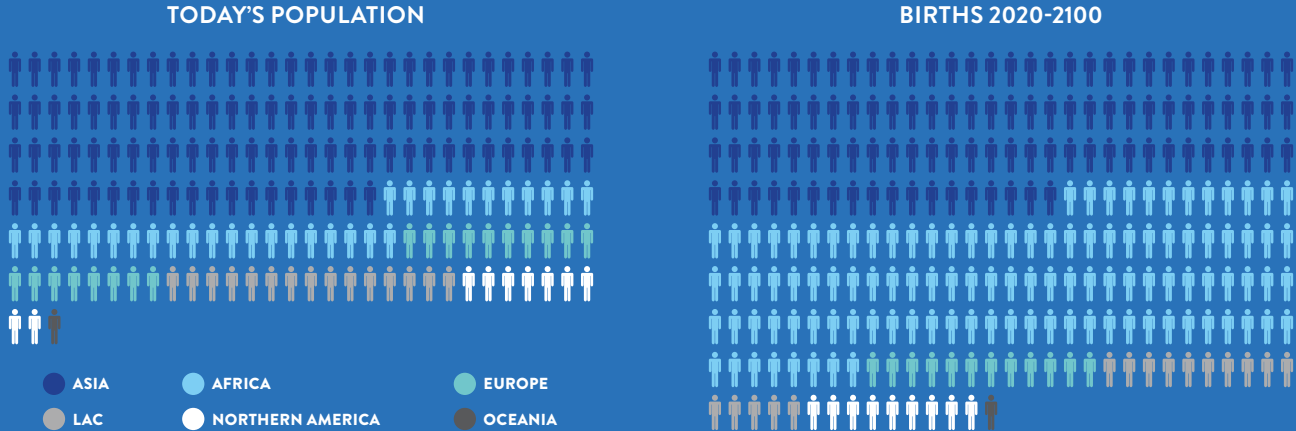
3. Specialist institutions that are repositioned to play a catalytic role, championing strategies and actions through other institutions and holding them accountable.

The UN now has the opportunity to build a global platform for future generations. As a universal and inclusive body, it can expand understanding of *We the Peoples* to include all the people of the 21st century – both living and yet to be born – and it can help *Future Majority* countries strengthen their voice and identify policies that will protect their stake in the future.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

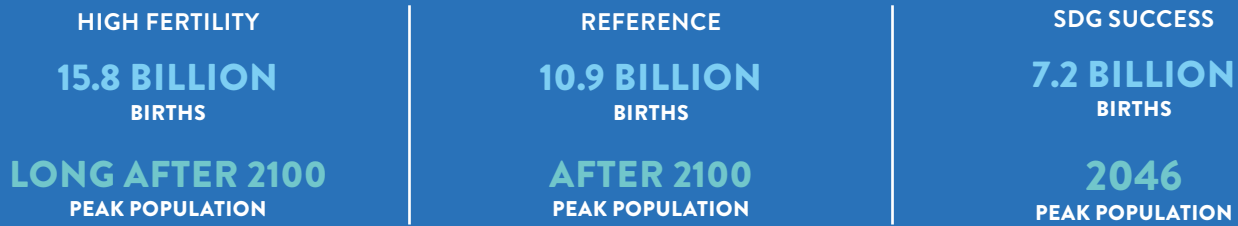
LIVING AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

In the 21st century, future generations are a majority. 10.9 billion people are likely to be born this century – many more than are currently alive. The future is heavily concentrated in Africa and Asia.



THE PARADOX OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

In an SDG Success scenario, more sustainable and equitable patterns of development lead to billions fewer people being born in the 21st century. If fertility stays high, a larger future generation will have fewer opportunities and faces greater risks.



LIVING AND FUTURE MAJORITY COUNTRIES

The world has 110 Future Majority countries, where less people are alive today than will be born this century, and 91 Living Majority countries, where a majority of the 21st century population is already alive.

