

# ESDN Policy Note

## Addressing Intergenerational Equity

### Introduction

Intergenerational equity is a core tenant of sustainable development, having its roots in the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future, which is also known as the Brundtland Report. The definition of sustainable development that was put forth in this report, is still one that is, almost 40 years later, still in use. The Report defines **sustainable development** as, “**development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.**”

Governments are still struggling to address challenges related to sustainable development. According to the Global Sustainable Development Report (2023), no country is on track to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by 2030. Not being on track should not cause countries to lose focus on the main aims of sustainable development in ensuring people alive today can meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Instead, intergenerational equity should be at the heart of policies today, in order to safeguard the future.

“The current triple planetary crisis presents the most urgent challenge of our time. One of its defining characteristics is its threat to the well-being of both present and future humanity. Its consequences will undoubtedly be felt by many generations to come. However, the importance of fairness across generations and of intergenerational equity in driving sustainable development often gets sidelined or is treated as a footnote. Solving the puzzle of sustainable development relies on the awareness for intergenerational equity and the ethical responsibility to leave a habitable planet for future generations.”

To address the issue of intergenerational equity in sustainable development policymaking, the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) organized its first ever Young Civil Servants Workshop in Vienna on 15-16 April 2024. The target group of this particular workshop were young civil servants, aged 35 years or younger, who work on sustainable development issues and the SDGs. The Workshop brought together 28 young civil servants and sustainable development experts to discuss the topic of intergenerational equity and find answers to the questions of the challenges in taking intergenerational equity into account in policymaking, how young civil servants can use intergenerational equity as a resource in policymaking, the extent to which the SDGs provide and support intergenerational equity, how can intergenerational equity be elevated even further in a post-2030 policy framework, as well as how young civil servants can support this process.

The following recommendations provide answers to those questions and are the results from expert inputs and interactive discussions between young civil servants from Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, and Romania.

### Recommendations for Addressing Intergenerational Equity

#### 1) Foster a cultural change in production and consumption patterns

- Reduce significantly the material and carbon footprint but increase quality of life by re-prioritizing personal fulfillment and happiness over material goods based on resources and energy.
- Rethink and redefine mindsets around the definition of success and

value creation, such as well-being over GDP, or focusing on benefits to stakeholders rather than profit maximization for shareholders.

- Identify what is truly important and what should be kept, as well as the things that need to be let go in order to live a good life within ecological limits.

#### How does change happen?

Change can happen along four entry points.

The first level is at the level of events for sustainable development, such as sustainability weeks, cycle-to-work days, item swap events, etc., which attempt to draw attention to an issue and focus very briefly on positive change.

The second level is the pattern level, in which taking individual actions for sustainable development become recurrent, such as limiting the consumption of meat during the work week.

The third level of change comes at the structural level with legislation that aims to change something within the system, such as legislation that is climate friendly or promote well-being over economic profit.

The fourth level of change represents the mental shift in priorities, such as quality of life over standard of living linked to material possessions.

## 2) Solutions for sustainable development need careful and long-term thought

- Exercise caution regarding simple solutions for sustainable development problems, as simple solutions are not necessarily the best.
- Use systems thinking to find answers to questions and problems in order to find good solutions, rather than easy ones, as easy ones can end up causing more problems, such as the

case in the 1950s of parachuting cats into Borneo to correct for the many issues created by spraying DDT to kill malaria carrying mosquitos.

- Use long-term thinking when developing policies that go beyond legislative periods, as the effects of sustainable development policies may only be seen many years later.
- Acquire more detailed policy advice on the direction governments should move, as well as concrete actions that head in that direction, such as for a post-2030 agenda.

## 3) Institutionalize intergenerational equity

- Ensure policies that are developed consider sustainable development within current generations and with future generations.
- Support this institutionalization process through a generational envoy or committee that will provide knowledge and draw attention to laws that do not comply.
- Enforce consequences for laws that are not compliant, as this helps to create a system of accountability.
- Bring young people into the policymaking process, as policies made today will affect them well into the future.
- Provide trainings for government officials on sustainable development issues, one of which can be the introduction of intergenerational equity into checks on legislation.
- Recognize the difference between intra-generational equity, as being grounded more in the present and the inequity between current generations from different parts of the world, and inter-generational equity, as making sure current generations take future generations into account in meeting their needs, and that both aspects are important in sustainable development.

### Examples of Institutionalizing Intergenerational Equity

#### Austria – Regulatory Impact Assessment

In 2013, a systematic ex ante Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) mechanism was introduced in Austria by the joint initiative of the Ministry of Finance and the Federal Chancellery, which aimed at establishing principles of better regulation, which should ensure that new bills / regulations with significant societal impacts are adequately assessed before being introduced.

Regarding intergenerational equity, any ministry proposing new legislation needs to answer the question “What is the impact of the proposed legislation on young people?”.

The youth check creates clarity about the intentions as well as about the undesirable side effects of laws on children and young adults, it brings transparency and better comprehensibility of political decisions.

### Examples of Institutionalizing Intergenerational Equity

#### Finnish Agenda 2030 Youth Group

The Finnish Agenda 2030 Youth Group was founded in 2017 under the National Commission for Sustainable Development, which itself is an influential forum that was founded in 1993, gathering the significant societal actors together. The Commission promotes cooperation in order to achieve the sustainable development goals and strives to integrate the strategic objectives of sustainable development into the national policy, administration, and social practices.

The main goals of the Youth Group are to:

- Promote the SDGs
- Participate in the planning and implementation of measures for sustainable development, such as the [Strategy of the National Commission for Sustainable Development](#)

### Examples of Institutionalizing Intergenerational Equity

#### Dutch Approach to Intergenerational Equity

The Netherlands strongly believes in meaningful youth participation to ensure young generations today have a say in policy development and implementation. This has been structurally integrated in the work of various ministries, for example by having young climate advisors and a youth advisory commission on foreign policy.

Furthermore, the introduction of a regulatory policy tool strives to improve the quality of policies by analyzing new policies through the lens of different dimensions: here, now, elsewhere, and later. NL is currently developing a ‘generational test’. This test will enable policy makers to think about the long-term impact of their policy, both for current as well as for future generations.

Secondly, NL works to strengthen its focus on the concept of future generations. The SDG Team aims to strengthen interdepartmental cooperation on this topic and has, for example, brought ‘future generation chairs’ to all ministries. In addition, NL will be co-facilitator of the Declaration on Future Generations at the upcoming Summit of the Future.

#### 4) Empower Young Civil Servants

- Enable young civil servants to rotate in different fields, as sustainable development requires interdisciplinary thinking and experiences.
- Develop mentoring programs for young civil servants within the government and rethink hierarchies within ministries so that trust can be built up.
- Use young civil servants as ambassadors of current and future generations in policy preparation, as they prepare the policymakers and work on policies long before politicians see them, and to raise issues of intergenerational equity.
- Utilize the motivation, passion, and drive of young civil servants to make change.

**The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN)** is a non-profit, pan-European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies, and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national, and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.