

The Future - what future?

Abstract: *At last: a UN Summit of the Future, to be held in September 2024. The summit promises a ‘global pact for the future’, but will it match the historic challenges that humanity is facing?. It is glaringly evident that we need new perspectives on protecting the future against the pressures of the here and now. Many decisions made today are not just affecting the next century, but millennial or even geological time spans. How can we assure a sustainable ecological base for human development, and fairness in the conduct of world affairs? Science tells us that we cannot continue on the current, suicidal path. We cannot allow decision makers to inflict the impacts of unrelenting economic growth on a finite planet, putting economic freedoms first, with ethical perspectives as an afterthought. The 2024 UN Summit is putting the need to safeguard the future of people and planet on the global agenda as never before. It is up to the global NGO community to help assure that the agenda of the summit matches the huge challenges we are facing.*

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Author(s):	Professor Herbert Girardet	Fact checking:	Helen Banks
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Affiliations:	Girardet is a visiting professor at the University of the West of England, a founder of the World Future Council and member of the Club of Rome.		
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The first ever ‘summit of the future’ will be staged by the United Nations in September 2024. This brings to mind Mahatma Gandhi’s insightful comment: “The future depends on what you do today.” [1]

The UN website calls for a summit “to forge a new global consensus on multilateral solutions to current and future problems.” The summit is a most timely initiative as we face unprecedented challenges, both in their globality and in their vast time horizon.

As never before, our decisions are affecting not just the next century or two, but millennial or even geological time spans. How can we protect the future from the unprecedented pressures of the here and now?

Let us trust that the UN’s intentions are ambitious enough, with many alarm signals flashing globally. The multiple, global ecological and social emergency facing us is probably the greatest challenge ever faced by humanity.

It is up to all of us to assure that the UN Summit comes up with an appropriate, action-oriented Pact for the Future, striving for justice between present and future generations.

What is the state of play? In preparation for the Summit, a 60-member UN commission has drawn up and published the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations. [2] The 21-page text summarises existing, binding legal obligations of states and other actors.

“The foundations for international law to address the rights of future generations are established in international instruments in an array of subject areas spanning nearly a century; in constitutions and legislative acts adopted by the majority of the World’s States; in the laws, traditions, and cosmologies of Indigenous Peoples from every continent; and in the doctrine of major faith traditions representing the majority of the world’s people.”

So far so good, but in reality we see little effort to protect future generations from the onslaught of the here and now, particularly regarding environmental impacts. Will the summit try and get to grips with the actual causes of the existential crisis facing humanity?

Critically, the Maastricht Principles state that: “Human development must be decoupled from the destruction of

Nature and the overconsumption of natural resources to achieve the realisation of the human rights of present and future generations and the integrity of nature and natural systems.”

But after 50 years of UN-led conferences on aspects of sustainable development little has actually been done to safeguard the rights of future generations. They will inherit technological progress, but much of it at the expense of environmental damage.

The Maastricht text suggests that “appropriate compensation must be provided for any damage that cannot be prevented or repaired, including when restitution is not possible”. Further: “Compensation may be made in kind, or in the form of monetary compensation committed to victims.”

Really? Who will compensate future generations for the harm already done, given the vast amounts required to undo this damage? We are supposed to live according to the principle that ‘polluters pay’, but in reality it is the future that is paying.

Preparations for the summit of the future are now well under way. The United Nations has agreed on seven themes to be deliberated at the summit:

- Global Economic and Financial Architecture,
- Human Rights and Participation,
- Sustainable Development Goals,
- a Global Digital Compact,
- Effective Environmental Governance,
- Peace and Security, and
- UN and Global Governance Innovation.

In addition, it is also likely to establish a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations.

But is this agenda ambitious enough? It seems to me that the UN is seeking to mould the conference to fit its existing procedures and agreements rather than trying to answer the fundamental question: will governments and companies be prepared to limit their ambitions for unending economic growth and territorial expansion on a finite planet?

The challenges we face, particularly regarding our impacts on the world’s climate and ecosystems, are now reported almost daily, as temperature records tumble, with fires and floods in many places, and with swamps and tropical forests being obliterated.

Making infinite demands on a finite planet is threatening to render it increasingly hostile to life. But sustainable alternatives – in land use, industrial production and energy provision – have yet to be followed up to an appropriate degree.

We need new voices in this discussion. Future generations must be represented meaningfully and effectively in decision-making that may impact their lives.

Now is the time for NGOs across the world to come together to help shape the summit’s agenda. It can draw on a large reservoir of studies and projections regarding the long-term impacts of our decisions and actions.

The conclusions are unavoidable: global consumer society is continuing to expand at the expense of the Earth’s ecological integrity.

Meanwhile, global inequalities are leaving billions of people across the world hungry, angry and frustrated. Institutions defending the status quo are well established, yet the future

now urgently needs comparable initiatives.

Whilst we have many powerful tools to harness Nature as never before, ethical considerations regarding the consequences of our actions are only brought in as an afterthought. Decisions taken today have longer-term impacts than ever before, yet short-termism prevails.

The UN Summit of the Future should surely be tasked with conceiving a comprehensive framework for a ‘futureproof’ world, assuring a firm ecological base for humanity, as well as fairness in the conduct of world affairs.

What is the primary issue that affects ‘the shape of the future’? It is surely the fact that, by and large, global resource depletion and pollution are not accounted for in our economic balance sheets, and environmental externalities barely feature in the price of products available on the market. In a downward spiral of entropy, we are burdening future generations with ever larger unpaid bills that we cannot be bothered to pay.

Opinion surveys show that cultures across the world have shared value priorities: we all want a good life for our children, mutual trust and respect, good personal health, educational and economic opportunities, and a life free from violence. But much of what affects us daily is beyond our personal scope of influence. Global megatrends keep tending in the wrong direction, and a yawning gap needs to be closed between where we are heading and where we really want to be.

It is now glaringly apparent that there can be no viable future for humanity without a healthy planet. Its water, carbon and nutrient cycles support an immensely complex living system, powered by the sun. Mountain ranges, rainforests, wetlands, savannahs and coral reefs form the basis for a vast web of life. Humanity is part of this web, and Nature’s ‘ecosystem services’ are vital to all our lives. Their monetary value, estimated at an average of US\$33 trillion per year, exceeds the value of the entire global economy. [3]

These are surely the key issues to be addressed at the Summit of the Future. Neglect of these ecosystem services by a globalised economy controlled by a tiny, self-interested minority is central to the problems we face.

Bold new international agreements, financial instruments and technology options are all urgently needed, particularly regarding the transition away from our systemic dependence on fossil fuels.

Precedents and decision making

The Summit follows on from a proliferation of international reports, conferences and agreements on aspects of sustainable development, starting with the 1987 Brundtland report, Our Common Future.

From the 1992 Rio Earth Summit onwards, UN commissions and conferences have sought to address many urgent ecological and social issues.

Most recently, at the UN Environment Programme Stockholm+50 conference in June 2022, relations between humans and Nature were top of the agenda.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, called on world leaders to end a “senseless and suicidal war against nature”. He added: “We know what to do. And, increasingly, we have the tools to do it ... I appeal to leaders in all sectors:

lead us out of this mess.” [4]

Fortunately there is growing high-level awareness that in our war against Nature we may find ourselves on the losing side. Pope Francis goes further: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” [5]

In one way or another all the recent UN conferences have addressed the deeply problematic relationship between present and future generations. Yet, so far, even minimal systemic changes seem to exceed the maximal political implementation capacity.

The UN summit of the future will offer an unprecedented opportunity to address this impasse and bring all these themes together into one overarching global event.

The world’s many NGOs focused on global ecological and social matters must surely play a key role in conceptualising the content of the summit.

Much useful work has already been done, but institutional blockages have been delaying appropriate action, often due to a lack of clarity about the huge challenges we face.

A key factor is that decision making is mostly focused on immediate concerns: politicians have their eyes on the next election, and business leaders are fixated by quarterly balance sheets. This kind of short-termism invariably leads to compromised values and ethics.

Another reason why many crucial issues affecting the long-term prospects of humanity have not so far been adequately addressed is the fact that those benefiting most from the status quo are also best able to escape any negative consequences.

Meanwhile low-income countries, which did the least to cause climate change or other environmental impacts, will face the biggest costs as more and more of their land becomes infertile. A third of the world’s soil is moderately to highly degraded, threatening global food supplies, increasing carbon emissions and foreshadowing forced mass migration. [7] The primary problem we need to deal with at the summit is our failure to respond to the great challenges of our time, despite having knowledge to do so.

But as the damaging effects of unrelenting material progress are evidently compromising the future, we are compelled to assure that long-term thinking goes centre stage.

For 25 years, sustainable development has been held up as the remedy for the world’s problems.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals agreed by the world’s governments are a well-established framework for global collective action. But we have seen ever more pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change.

The term ‘sustainable development’ has been widely abused, particularly by commercial interests. It is time to think not just about sustaining the world’s badly damaged ecosystems, but about regenerating them instead.

Learning from Indigenous knowledge

“We have not inherited the Earth from our parents. We have borrowed it from our children.” This saying, attributed to Indigenous Americans, could be a useful motto for the summit of the future. Its wisdom is striking and self-evident,

and it has become popular amongst the ecology movement. It is also widely quoted in speeches by politicians who want to establish their green credentials. But paying lip service to posterity is one thing: actually organising society with the needs of future generations firmly in mind is quite another. There is much we can learn from traditional, pre-industrial cultures, where ‘seventh generation thinking’ and respect for Nature’s ways assured continuity, and living was essentially ‘circular’: With only limited innovation from generation to generation, the future was much the same as the past.

Tribal societies seem to find caring for the continuity of life as natural as breathing. Children are the future adults whose own children will perpetuate the life and culture of the tribe. Generations long dead are as much part of the life of the tribe as those as yet unborn. Without significant technological change or population growth, the interests of future generations could be easily assessed: their needs could be predicted according to current lifestyles, and assured by careful husbanding of local resources.

Life was based on the self-renewing bounty of Nature, which living generations had a duty not to destroy. Without significant outside interference, the tribe’s existence could be anticipated with a high degree of certainty.

This sense of continuity at the heart of traditional cultures is of great relevance as we face an uncertain future: we need to relearn the art of living with Nature as a self-renewing, circular system.

As tribal societies are pushed back by conquest by nation states and commercial enterprises, their traditions are often turned into cute folklore.

But tribal wisdom is also an important source of knowledge that may help us overcome the ecological crisis of industrial civilisation.

When Native Americans state that all decisions should take into account the interests of descendants seven generations ahead, we habitually short-term thinkers should bow our heads as we examine our own record.

The amplified man

Humans have always had some impacts on the natural environment from which they have drawn their sustenance. The limited use of fire by our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and the land use systems of pre-industrial, agricultural societies, have modified their natural habitat to some degree.

But the impacts of our current, global urban-industrial society are of a different dimension. By drawing on resources from living Nature as well as from within the Earth’s crust, we dominate our host planet as never before.

The Industrial Revolution is widely cited as the start of the Anthropocene. As fossil fuel energy came to take the place of muscle power, a new world started to emerge, spawning a multitude of new technologies.

This turned night into day, gave rise to vehicular transport and conveyor belt production, and made us into ‘amplified’ creatures with enormous power and vast environmental impacts, worshipping the here and now as never before.

In the last century, human populations have quadrupled, and resource consumption has increased sixteen-fold. Half of us have become an industrialised and urbanised species. Within a few generations we are exhausting many of the

Earth's stored resources, particularly fossil fuels. Their transfer from the Earth's crust into the atmosphere is significantly altering its composition.

From our ever-expanding urban centres, our tentacles now spread across the world. Today our globalising economic system is destabilising the planet's life support systems, and also long-established local economies.

But the benefits are not distributed equally. A small minority, using a vast arsenal of new technologies, have acquired unprecedented powers and benefits.

Inequality of global income is greater today than ever before. The poorest 50 per cent of the global population share just eight per cent of total income whilst the richest 10 per cent earn over 50 per cent of total income.

Since 2020, the top one per cent have managed to seize nearly two-thirds of the US\$42 trillion in newly created wealth. [8] Will our descendants face a future where a tiny minority live in utter wealth and comfort while vast numbers of people linger in destitution?

Creating regenerative economies

Science tells us that we cannot continue inflicting the impacts of unrelenting economic growth on a finite planet. Our modern experiment of putting economic freedoms first, with ethical perspectives as an afterthought, is a tangible threat to the future, and we must urgently explore and pursue alternative pathways.

Young people are affected by today's decisions as never before. They recognise that the future is ecological, or not at all. With an acute state of emergency on Earth, imperilling its climate, its life support systems and the lives of billions of people, can we create a better conceptual framework to ensure a plausible future for people and planet?

At the summit, the existential crisis now facing humanity must surely come centre stage, helping to initiate profound, systemic changes in the relationship between people and planet.

Human activities since the industrial revolution have been essentially linear, with ever more resources being taken from Nature, and toxic wastes being discharged into it.

In contrast, natural systems have an essentially circular metabolism, in which all wastes become nourishment for future life. It is inescapable that the ecological redesign of the modern world and its production systems is a key challenge to be addressed at the summit.

Food production needs to be given a renewed priority. We urgently need to take bold and well-funded measures to regenerate the health of soils, forests and watercourses.

We need to mainstream regenerative farming and land use systems. We have the know-how to make renewables our main energy source. And we urgently need to regenerate local communities and economies that have fallen by the wayside under the pressure of globalisation.

The concept of regenerative development means that we need to establish comprehensive rules for an environmentally enhancing, restorative relationship between humanity and the ecosystems from which we draw resources for our sustenance.

Development cannot be at the expense of the health of the world's ecosystems, and the summit needs to ensure that

their protection and continuous regeneration become a guiding principle for human action. It is also high time that these realisations were embedded in the teaching in schools and colleges across the world.

A regenerative world will not come about without very substantial funding. Yet vital funds are still going in the opposite direction.

As things stand, humanity is spending vast sums, not on regenerating life on Earth, but on tools of annihilation, with global military budgets now at over US\$2 trillion per year. [9] The governments of a few countries, claiming to be interested in fostering world peace, are equipping their armies with ever more sophisticated and expensive weapons of mass destruction.

President Eisenhower said on his retirement in 1961: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." [10]

A major task for the summit will be to explore, and indeed ensure, that appropriate moneys are found to help restore the Earth's damaged ecosystems.

There are already many foundations across the world that fund such activities, but much, much more is needed, particularly regarding the capacity of Nature to deal with our continuing carbon emissions. Yet in 2022 subsidies for fossil fuel consumption skyrocketed to more than US\$1 trillion. [11]

The summit

The task of the UN Summit is to put the future of people and planet on the global agenda as never before – ensuring that long-term thinking and decision-making take centre stage.

The World Future Council (WFC) is one of many organisations now focussing their attention on the summit for the future, having focused on the rights of future generations as its main task since its launch 15 years ago.

In particular, the WFC has long pleaded for Representatives/Guardians of Future Generations to be installed at international, national and local levels, with the authority to scrutinise and propose policies to uphold their interests, including the right to peace, intergenerational justice, and a healthy, sustainable environment.

The primary task of the Summit must surely be to initiate innovative measures to stop humanity from foreclosing its own future – for regenerating damaged ecosystems and human habitats, and for ensuring justice for future generations.

The success of the summit crucially depends on thinking deeply about the long-term prospects for humanity.

Half-hearted measures no longer suffice, and it is up to the global community to ensure that the summit rises to the huge challenges facing us, taking a global crisis as an opportunity for the regeneration of both ecosystems and human communities across the world. "We can hope for the future" George Harrison once remarked. "But we don't know if there is one."

The World Future Council proposes priority for the following steps:

- *Establish Representatives of Future Generations at international, national, regional and local levels, with authority to design and review policies to uphold their interests, including the right to peace, intergenerational justice, and a healthy, sustainable environment.*

The World Future Council has long argued for this, but so far just one country, Wales, has created the role of a future generations representative in a supervisory capacity...

- *Elevate the concepts of intergenerational equity and trusteeship in legal and political systems and processes, particularly regarding global goods and the global commons.*

The legal basis of our efforts to protect future generations of life needs to be much more clearly defined. What is 'future justice', and which bodies can become its representatives? How can future generations, not yet born, take current decision makers to task?

- *Ensure that youth voices and representatives of future generations are central to the work of the Summit.*

The Summit will be tasked with developing new legal frameworks for ensuring an active role for young people to shape the decisions that affect them.

- *Strengthen legal obligations to protect future generations, including through the campaign to take climate change to the International Court of Justice.*

Support the International Court of Justice case on climate

change, and call for full implementation of international law applicable to climate security.

- *Elevate and implement the UN General Assembly declaration affirming the right to a healthy environment.* [12] "We can no longer ... downplay the impact of climate change and environmental damage on economic growth and employment. Our common future is becoming critically dependent on making health and the environment our top priorities." [13]

- *Advance core goals to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" through better use of UN common security mechanisms.*

It is abhorrent that more money than ever is being spent on weapons of mass destruction and more people are currently affected by war than probably at any time in the past.

- *Elevate and implement the UN Human Rights Committee affirmation that nuclear weapons threaten the right to life of current and future generations.* [15]

The threat or use of nuclear weapons is incompatible with the right to life and may amount to a crime under international law. The complete elimination of nuclear weapons should be achieved no later than 2045, the 100th anniversary of the United Nations.

This Author

Professor Herbert Girardet is a co-founder of the World Future Council, and a member of The Club of Rome.

NOTES

[1] <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>

[2] https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Maastricht-Principles-on-the-Human-Rights-of-Future-Generations_EN.pdf

[3] https://conservationtools.org/library_items/1043/files/961

[4] <https://unric.org/en/guterres-at-stockholm50-end-the-suicidal-war-against-nature/>

[5] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[6] <https://devinit.org/037c41#section-1-7>

[7] <https://www.unep.org/resources/factsheet/land-degradation-factsheet>

[8] <https://devinit.org/resources/inequality-global-trends/>

[9] <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time>

[10] <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>

[11] <https://www.iea.org/reports/fossil-fuels-consumption-subsidies-2022>

[12] <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3982508?ln=en>

[13] https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_857164/lang-en/index.htm

[14] <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble>

[15] <https://www.unfoldzero.org/wp-content/uploads/General-Comment-36.pdf>

THE ECOLOGIST SPECIAL SERIES: MEGAMORPHOSIS

The Ecologist online strategy for 2022/5 includes the publication of three new special series examining economics and the fossil fuel industry from a number of useful perspectives. The first major series is *Megamorphosis*, from Professor Herbert Girardet. The series examines how the economy and the technosphere have come to dominate and degrade the atmosphere, biosphere and geosphere in what is now called the Anthropocene Epoch.

ECOLOGIST WRITERS' FUND

The Ecologist Writers' Fund was launched to support contributors who are from, or who write about, communities and identities that remain marginalised within the environment movement and the journalism industry. This includes, but is not limited to, BAME, LGBTQI+ and disabled people. The fund is supported by readers of *The Ecologist* online and subscribers to our newsletter. *The Ecologist* Special Series is funded by trusts and foundations and not through the EWF. However, we hope those who have read and benefited from the series will consider donating to the writers' fund online.

THE ECOLOGIST

The Ecologist is a news and analysis platform with a focus on environmental, social and economic justice. Our strategic aim for the coming years is to focus on the fossil fuel industry and its impact on people, society and the natural environment. *The Ecologist* is published online. Editor: Brendan Montague. Assistant Editor: Yasmin Dahnoun. We also publish as an integral part of the *Resurgence & Ecologist* print magazine. Editor: Marianne Brown. The Ecologist is a member of the newspaper regulator IMPRESS.

THE RESURGENCE TRUST

The Resurgence Trust is an educational charity (Charity Number: 1120414) that aims to improve our connection to each other and to nature. The charity examines how we can reconnect with the living planet from the perspectives of society, economics, community and individual wellbeing. The trust publishes the *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine, *The Ecologist* online and Resurgence.org, as well as organising events at its centre in Hartland, Devon and in London. The trust is funded through its members and with some donations from a number of trusts and foundations which support environmental and social change. The work of the trust is overseen by its board of trustees.