

Future

Preface

A growing number of intergovernmental institutions, nation states, and organisations around the world are taking increasing interest in foresight. The Secretary General of the UN has called for a forward-looking orientation across the UN system. Strategic foresight’s relevance is prominently reflected in the UN Secretary’s General Our Common Agenda report (2021), especially in areas of work focusing on peace and conflict prevention, future generations, preparedness, risk aversion, and the UN upgrade efforts.

In times of high volatility, uncertainty and complexity, exacerbated by concurrent multiple crises, UNESCO’s Social and Human Sciences Sector (SHS) seeks to enable wider engagement with futures among policymakers to work for just, inclusive, resilient, and peaceful societies through a variety of interdisciplinary approaches. Over the past decade, SHS’s Futures Literacy and Foresight programme has been championing a capability-based approach to futures. This approach complements conventional foresight by encouraging people and communities to become aware of the many roles of futures in the present and develop their skills for imagining and discussing futures to widen options, enhance ownership, and inform actions. This also includes working closely with UN sister entities to develop anticipatory and futures capabilities across the UN system in support of policy design and programming, carried out through UNESCO’s role as Coordinator of the High-Level Committee on Programmes

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(HLCP) Foresight Network, and as Core Group of UN Futures Lab Network along with UN Global Pulse and UNDP.

This work is in line with and aims to contribute to the second recommendation of UN Secretary’s General Our Common Agenda report (2021), which calls for ‘a focus on the future, through a deepening of solidarity with the world’s young people and future generations’; and the HLCP’s thematic pillar ‘Duties to the Future’¹ (CEB, n.d.). UNESCO and UN Global Pulse are collaborating to advance the ‘Duties to the Future’ pillar, which aims to foster new perspectives and approaches for mainstreaming intergenerational equity thinking among UN personnel through the utilisation of futures literacy and foresight inspired techniques. The project is titled “Futures for Intergenerational Equity” and this, its inception report, constitutes its conceptual basis.

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Introduction

Intergenerational equity, solidarity, and justice is a hope for humankind which is deeply encoded in the United Nations. Today, many UN entities and Member States are working toward this aspirational goal. To support these efforts, we need to identify effective ways to produce intergenerational equity. How can intergenerational equity be produced by our actions in the present? What goals should we set? What outcomes should we target?

This inception report aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to advocate and promote intergenerational equity in the world. It proposes taking a futures-inspired capabilities approach via the many programs and specific actions across the United Nations system. It proposes a set of seven (non-exhaustive)

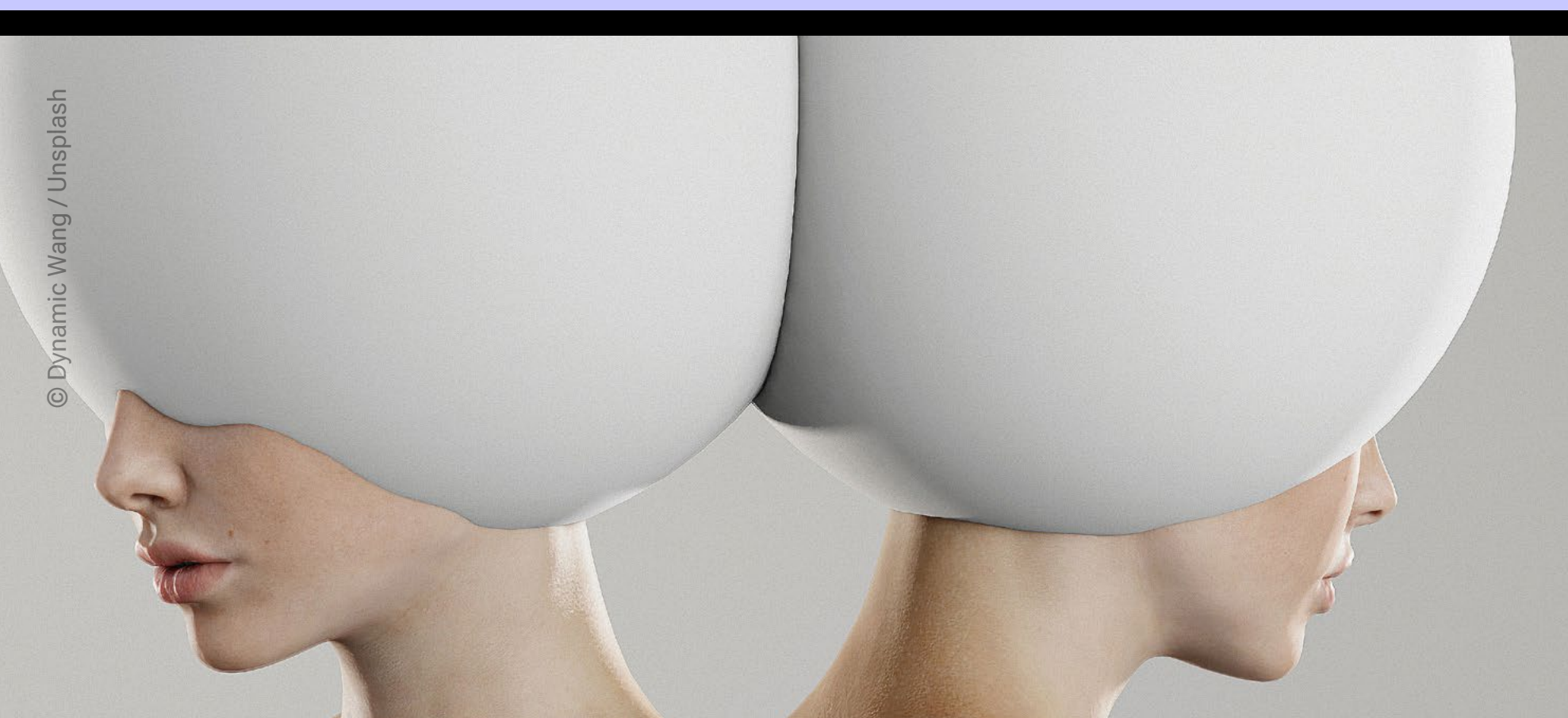
focal areas of capabilities which have high potential to aid any interested person or group seeking to produce intergenerational equity through their work. It then provides an outline of a pilot initiative entitled online collection of “Futures Tools for Intergenerational Equity” that aims to drive self-directed learning processes for the benefit of supporting capabilities growth across the UN. It concludes by indicating potential directions this piloted learning approach could take.

This inception report is part of the UNESCO and UN Global Pulse ‘Futures for Intergenerational Equity’ project, in support of the UN High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP)³ thematic pillar ‘Duties to the Future’ (CEB, n.d.)⁴.

³ The HLCP is tasked with system-wide coordination and policy coherence in the United Nations.

⁴ See, <https://unsceb.org/topics/duties-future>, accessed 31.1.2023

‘Duties to the future’, the UN, and sustainability since the 1900s



Pre-dating the UN, the concept of intergenerational equity was promoted by nature conservationists like John Muir in the early 1900s and over the following decades the term has become increasingly used inside and outside the UN to promote sustainability. In recent years, for example, it is used to mobilise climate action. (Taylor, 2000.) Several academic publications, policy documents and conferences have further explored the parameters and characteristics of intergenerational equity, all raising questions about how the concept can be effectively utilised so that equity between presently living and future people could be conceptualised to inform responsible decisions in the present.

Intergenerational Equity in many ways is a fuzzy concept. It intuitively makes sense, yet somehow remains elusive. It implies leaving things at least as good as they were: rich in biodiversity, unpolluted environments, and ecologically balanced modes of existence.

However, any statement like this – as agreeable as it may be to a wide range of people – is deeply infused with values held by the people making it. Beyond these basic issues concerning passing forward a habitable planet, what future people would want or expect from us is open to interpretation. Based on what we know today, we can make reasonable guesses of what future people may expect from us. However, a simple thought experiment of thinking back 100 years ago will quickly show that societies’ values, interests, and potentials change over time and will likely do so in the future. As future people are only imaginary today, how can we raise their views when there is effectively no way of knowing who they are or what they will value?

Futures Studies and Foresight offer a variety of multi-faceted approaches to answering such questions. While the future does not exist (yet) and cannot be known, imagined futures

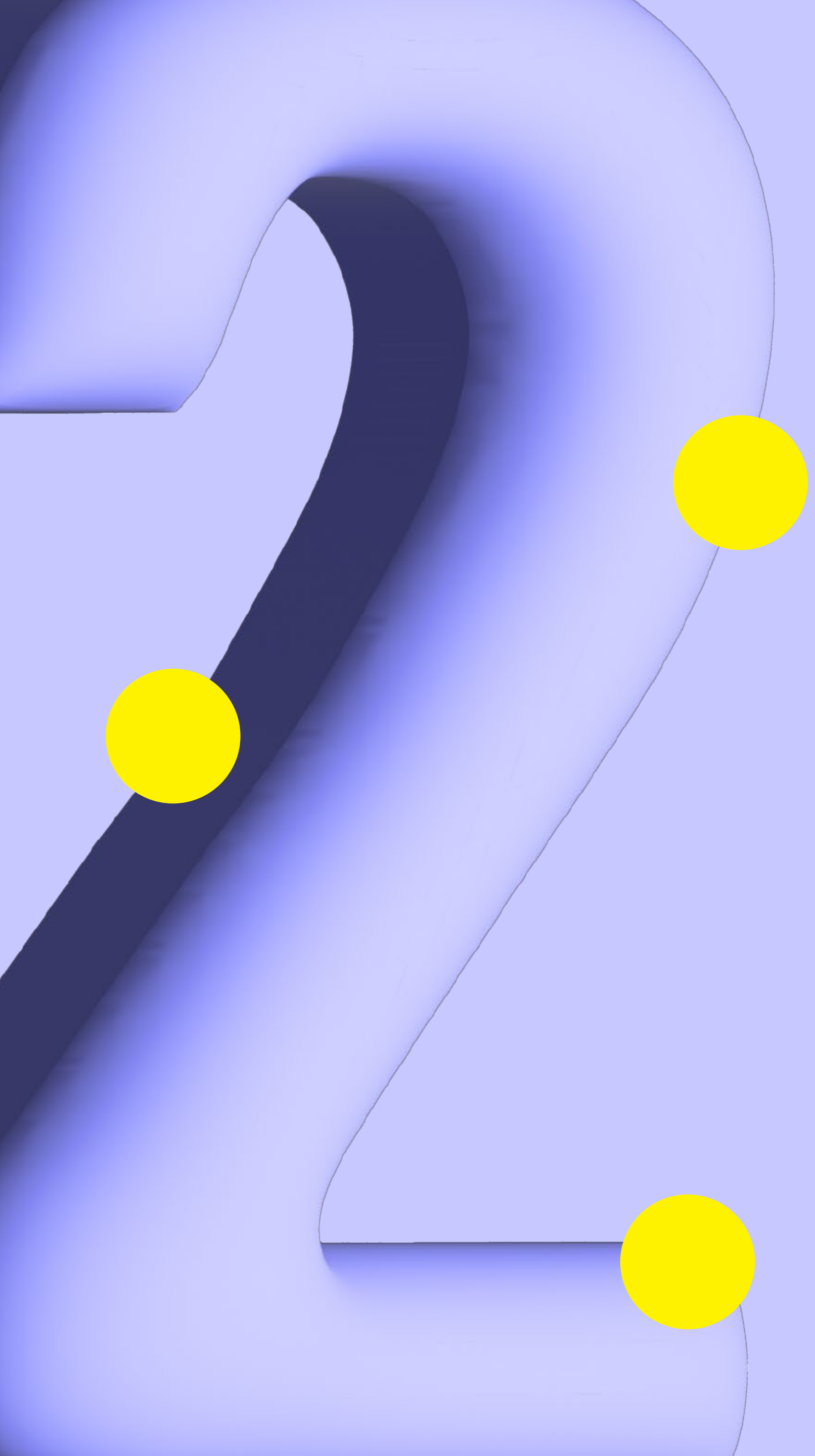
do exist in individual minds and in wider society. As socially held imaginaries, they play a key role in driving how equity is or is not produced in the present.

Since more than a decade, UNESCO is promoting futures literacy⁵ as an approach that encourages the development of skills for engaging and experimenting with diverse ways and purposes of the future.

The role of imagined futures is a longstanding knowledge interest in futures research, with concepts like ‘futuribles’ (De Jouvenel, 1967), ‘imagination and future’ (Jungk, 1969) ‘future images’ (Polak, 1973; Rubin, 2013), ‘imaginaries’ (Castoriadis, 1987; Anderson, 1991; Taylor, 2004; Jasanoff and Kim, 2015) and ‘scenarios’ (Burt and Nair, 2020; Schwartz, 1996) been thoroughly studied. Academic attention on how imagining futures function in society have informed recent interest in Anticipation, which serves as a knowledge-basis for capabilities-based approaches to futures, such as futures literacy.

In the sections that follow, this report proposes that intergenerational equity can best be supported when individuals and groups are more aware of the ways they do and could imagine futures, more capable of changing between modes and purposes for imagining future, more perceptive of the various streams of transformation driving intergenerational equity outcomes, and better positioned to tune their actions toward supporting the production of equity and justness between the now living humans and other living beings on Earth and their future, yet to exist generations.

5 See, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about>, accessed 31.1.2023



Role of imagining our impacts on future people in formulating 'duties to the future'

Throughout the years the UN has been carrying out important work in support of futures generations, focusing on the responsibilities of any ‘current’ generation at a given time towards its succeeding ones⁶. Hundreds of UN General Assembly resolutions have explicit references on future generations ([Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 1](#), UN, 2023). Recently, this responsibility to future generations is conveyed by the phrase ‘duties to the future’ among other concepts and initiatives aiming at the same objective. A particular example is the thematic pillar ‘duties to the future’ of the HLCP’s strategic narrative grounded in the Agenda 2030 and in support of the Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda report, as well as the subsequent establishment of the Core Group on Duties to the Future consisting of 16 UN system entities and co-led by UNICEF, UNEP and UNU ([CEB](#), n.d.).

In general, the phrase ‘duties to the future’ demands decision-makers seriously consider the impacts of their choices on people who will live in the future – even, the ones who we do not know and will live later than all living people today. In other words, ‘duties to the future’ invokes a philosophical and moral stance (CEB, n.d.). It entails production of fairness, equity, and justice among generations. These efforts can be directed toward several challenge areas such as the natural environment, social issues, and distribution of financial resources. However, the foreseen impacts to avoid or encourage which motivate these efforts do not yet exist.

To discuss ‘duties to the future’, people must imagine the future and construct some relationship to it (Pigott, 2018). This kind of imagining can happen at an individual level – ‘what are my responsibilities to myself in the future?’ (see, e.g., Wheelwright, 2003) and can motivate actions like saving money for personal use later or investing time and resources into one’s own education. It can happen at a group level – ‘what are my responsibilities to the future of this community to which I belong?’; or to collective wholes, ranging from ‘what are my responsibilities to society?’ to ‘what are my responsibilities to the futures of Earth and every being who lives here?’

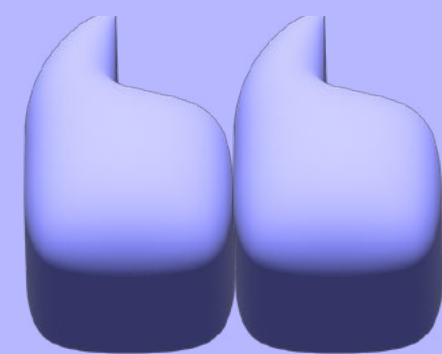
Imagination and responsibility are coupled to produce plausible impacts of our actions on future life. There are a variety of ways these have historically been deployed. Futures thinking along with notions about duty and legacy have preoccupied humanity and have motivated human activity throughout centuries. For example, the pursuit of immortal glory (hysterophēmia) since Homeric times, heroic acts, and (self) sacrifice for a greater cause to be materialised in the future could be seen as manifestations of anticipatory thinking and ethical concerns towards current and future societies. Today, public voices ask, ‘what will our ancestors think of us?’ (e.g., to be the “Good Ancestor”, cf. Krznaric 2021).

People can be highly motivated by a desire to be remembered. For better or worse (from the perspective of future people), we of the present do not want to be forgotten. From cave paintings to policy documents, people leave traces of their lived experiences and intentions and pass forward through time changed conditions that future people will inherit. Throughout time, societies, communities, and individuals around the world have embodied an implicit moral responsibility and aspiration shared across cultures to leave better conditions to their children and the generations to come. Anticipation and capacity for ethics are linked (Ayala, 2010). These human features are motivators of collective action. Regardless of the ethicality of intentions behind an action, the outcomes can be variably positive (e.g., advancing equity) or negative (e.g., causing harm).

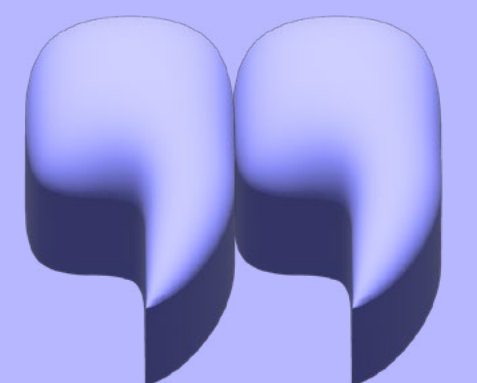
For example, in the 1910s, conserving nature for use by future generations has been advanced by people like the founder of Sierra Club, John Muir (Taylor, 2000); while later that decade, the early industrial era’s world powers ‘waged war’ – killing humans at a scale and efficiency by means of industrial era weapons never seen before. Trench warfare, machine guns, planes, chemical weapons, etc. were used by humans to kill each other, motivated by imagined futures of many kinds. This condition of Industrial-era war making is now a recurring pattern of human behaviour, seen again in WWII, and after in a variety of deadly militarised conflicts including those happening now.

Today, a duality of approaches exists. Nature conservation, habitat preservation (for humans and other lifeforms), and nurturing the rising generations with care and learning opportunities remain ambitions informed by imagined futures which are in contest with deadlier ambitions such as ‘advance our own kind (or way of being)’ through war making and coercion. The latter is clearly a perversion of the notion of ‘duties of the future.’ It is, however, a risk when the purpose of such heuristics as Intergenerational equity (also, like long-termism) are distorted.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the founding document of the United Nations centres on a moral responsibility towards succeeding generations. The [UN Charter](#) begins with a clearly future-focused normative aim to ‘save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’:



We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind [...] and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...”



UN CHARTER - 1945

6 (See, e.g., the UN Charter, the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, the 1997 UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, the 2012 Rio+20 conference, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Our Common Agenda)

Concern for improving the conditions of future people was encoded into the UN System. The past people who signed this charter were clear about their intention: prevent another war.

In 1987, sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Commission⁷ as: “...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

This framing of sustainable development is echoed in the Agenda 2030⁸ with the Member States agreeing to “implement the Agenda for the full benefit of all, for today’s generation and for future generations.” (See paragraph 18).

A comprehensive view of the range of issues to consider for future people is offered by UNESCO’s Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations⁹ adopted in 1997 (UNESCO, 1997).

In its 12 articles, the Declaration covers a variety of issues ranging from the preservation of life on Earth, the environmental protection and the human genome and biodiversity to safeguarding the needs and interests of present and future generations and ensuring human rights, freedom of choice and the maintenance and perpetuation of humankind. It extends also to preservation of cultural diversity and cultural heritage as well as the common heritage of humankind. Reflecting the founding intentions of the United Nations as a whole and UNESCO itself, ensuring peace and avoiding conflict is also prominently featured along with ensuring the conditions of equitable, sustainable, and universal socio-economic development of future generations, education and fostering non-discrimination. The declaration covers several key aspects of human existence and calls for their preservation and safeguarding.

The current emphasis on sustainability and climate action is born out of rising concern following the establishment of the scientific basis for global warming. While the first proposed model of how Global Warming could happen due to industrial activity was introduced by Eunice Foote in 1856 (McNeill, 2016), before the UN was founded, over the past five decades Climate Change has become an

increasingly cross-cutting concern for the UN system, as reflected in UN landmark reflections and policy agendas including the 1987 Brundtland Commission report⁷, 2012 Rio+20 conference¹⁰, and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁸. The emphasis is on preventing disaster for future people.

Recently, the Secretary-General of the UN on Our Common Agenda report and the UN High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) championed a multifaceted framing on our responsibilities toward future generations: “*Just as the founders of the United Nations came together determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, we must now come together to save succeeding generations from war, climate change, pandemics, hunger, poverty, injustice and a host of risks that we may not yet foresee entirely.*” António Guterres Secretary-General of the United Nations, Our Common Agenda report (United Nations, 2021).

Our Common Agenda (United Nations, 2021) emphasizes action in the present, highlighting the importance of choices we make in regard to the future (see page 3) and proposing especially in relation to futures generations among other things a Declaration on and a Special Envoy for Future Generations, along with initiatives to ensure long-term thinking, through the establishment of a new mechanism, the United Nations Futures Lab that is co-led by UNGP, UNESCO and UNDP.

The Core Group on Duties to the Future of the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) was tasked to explore and unpack the concept of intergenerational equity as it was considered an appropriate framing for the work under their strategic narrative thematic pillar one ‘duties to the future’ (CEB, n.d.). The Core Group is working on the development of a set of common principles for the United Nations system to foster a shared understanding of the concept of future generations and intergenerational equity (CEB, n.d.). In a discussion paper, prepared by the Core Group on Duties last year, intergenerational equity was explored through moral, legal and sustainability lenses (HLCP “Duties to the Future” Core Group, 2022). The discussion paper promotes a more comprehensive set of issues to be considered for future generations as in Our Common Agenda report (United Nations, 2021) and the previous Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations (UNESCO, 1997).

7 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>, accessed 31.1.2023

8 <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, accessed 31.1.2023

9 <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/declaration-responsibilities-present-generations-towards-future-generations>, accessed 31.1.2023

10 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/rio20.html>, accessed 31.1.2023



Intergenerational concerns in futures studies

The field of futures studies has frequently taken concern with future generations. Early instances take a narrower focus on the topic and tend to focus on material needs of future people, and later instances widen the topic to raise issues of normativity (e.g., desirable futures and for whom), the roles of power and competing interests, participation and representation, decolonizing futures, and the role of values. Due to its interdisciplinarity, the field has approached the topic of generational relations from a wide range of entry points, perspectives, and modes of inquiry which have developed over time.

The Club of Rome Report, *Limits to Growth*¹¹ (Meadows et al., 1972) is acknowledged in the HLCP Duties to the Future (2022) discussion paper as a contributor to raising sustainability concerns in the UN System. The report was made using a simulation of several connected systems developing over time and was a significant, early demonstration of the potentials of systems thinking. Necessarily, the inherent complexity of the world was simplified into a machine-like model of a set of discrete quantifiable interconnected systems. However, it was a highly popularised systematic production of imagined futures and stirred numerous formative conversations about the impacts of today's consumption on tomorrow's society. The scenarios published in the report raised awareness of how present-day consumption could massively deprive future people of resources.

Leading up to the *Club of Rome* publication and afterward, the futures field was growing and gaining traction in society, governments, companies, militaries, and higher education. More research is needed concerning parallel developments in other parts of the world, but at least from a North American and European perspective, popularisation of futures and futurists was strong in the 1960s. The Congress for Cultural Freedom in Europe, publisher of Encounter magazine (among others), reached its height of popularity in that decade and became active in 35 nations before it was dissolved (Coleman, 1989). The World Future Society was launched by Ed Cornish in the 1960s in reaction to the frightening nuclear standoff between

the USSR and USA in the Cuban Missile Crisis—to advance futures thinking in society and among decision makers to prevent such a crisis from happening again (Cornish, 2004). The Futuribles also enjoyed high popularity in France (De Jouvenel, 1967), attended by a simultaneous growth in La Prospective in higher education (Andersson, 2018). Coupled with this was the launch of several futures studies and foresight programs at universities, which led to the founding of the World Futures Studies Federation in 1973. Notably, its first general assembly convened with help of UNESCO in 1974 (WFSF, n.d.).

By the 1970s and 1980s, the futures field could be called 'institutionalised' and active in fostering a public discourse about global futures and the rise of normative futuring (Son, 2015). Gradually the field of futures studies shifted its initial focus from an emphasis on probable futures to exploring alternative futures, and then to shaping desired futures (Amara, 1981; Bell, 1996; Masini, 1993; Sardar, 1999; Inayatullah, 2013).

As with all the fields across humanities and social sciences, Futures Studies have been influenced by different epistemologies ranging from positivism/empiricism to post-positivism with the latter pointing towards futures plurality and giving rise to distinct strands of futures approaches such as interpretative/cultural futures, critical futures (cf. Richard Slaughter) and participatory futures (Gidley, 2017; Inayatullah, 2013).

For instance, critical futures studies emerged in the 1980s, raising attention to interpretation, negotiation – at a subjective or/and intersubjective level – of futures images and alternatives; the questioning/critiquing of power dynamics around the future; the revealing of their self-reinforcement and reproduction properties (Son, 2015). In its early formation, few members of the futures community raised questions about who futurists serve – those with power (e.g., nation states, big corporations, and militaries) or the collective good.

In contrast to a technocratic, expert-based futures practice, over the last decades, a significant part of futures work focuses on the engagement of non-expert participants in futures processes or broadening the view of who is an expert based on what kinds of experiences or implicit knowledge. In different typologies of futures approaches the participatory strand is affiliated with empowerment and transformation objectives, claiming a distinct position. An early champion of the participatory futures was Robert Jungk who invented and ran several Future Workshops to help less privileged groups express and raise their views about the future and engage in social change (Jungk and Muellert, 1987).

Several futures studies authors between 1970 and 2000 explicitly raise attention to the urgency with which the current generation must act for the benefit of future generations. Bell (1993) drawing on Rawls' theory of justice among others makes grounded arguments for why present generations should care about future generations, even those far in the future who we will never know. Slaughter (1994) argues that caring for generations to come produces benefits for both present and future generations. Dator (2011) calls on present generations to appreciate their 'ethical obligations' – despite the inherent imbalance of reciprocity – to future generations and act accordingly.

As futures studies has grown and diversified its knowledge interests, its resources for contributing to the discussion about intergenerational equity have likewise broadened and evolved. Today, the field is actively engaging theoretical and methodological developments in Anticipation (e.g., as discussed at the first four Anticipation conferences in 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022). From an Anticipation perspective, the world is filled with a wide and diverse set of processes and systems for engaging with futures (cf. Rosen 1999). In the following sections of this report, the Anticipation perspective serves as an analytical lens to further explore 'duties to the future' and Intergenerational Equity.

11 The report presented computer-modelled scenarios of developments of global economy and environment. It is considered by many to be a landmark contribution to the field of Futures Studies (e.g., Son, 2015; Schultz, 2015; Bell 2001).

Concepts for conveying 'duties to the future'

Concepts closely related to the notion of 'duties to future' such as intergenerational equity, intergenerational justice, intergenerational solidarity have emerged and extensively utilised, gaining greater prominence in policy debates at national, regional, and multinational levels.

From a policy making perspective, 'intergenerational justice' can be perceived as a broader concept than the concept of intergenerational equity, encompassing not only inter-temporal distributive dimensions as in the case of intergenerational equity, "but also procedural, restorative, and retributive dimensions" (OECD 2020).

From a legal-philosophical perspective, justice concerns fairness and consequences for wrong actions and compensation for received harms. Equity, on the other hand, concerns addressing unfair treatment and harms to specific groups and seeks their remedy through improving recognition of these harms and correcting unjust conditions (Cottier, 2019).

HLCP "Duties to the Future" Core Group (2022) argues that the concept of intergenerational equity can be approached through different lenses – moral, legal and sustainability – that "offer diverse insights on balancing the rights and aspirations of current and future generations including children and youth".

It is claimed that more work is needed to reach conceptual clarity and elaborate nuances of the above-mentioned terms and reach agreement on shared working definitions – this work is beyond the scope of this inception report.

In summary, parallel to the development of 'duties to the future' inside the UN System, the futures field was promoting a view that people should become more actively interested in the future, and that the purpose of imagining futures was to avoid disasters, open alternatives, or inspire work toward desirable futures. According to Andersson, the future became framed as a 'governable techno-scientific space' (Andersson, 2012). Examining the different strands of Futures Studies vis-à-vis the kinds of futures evoked in relation to duties to the future in multilateral contexts – namely probable and normative futures encompassing critical aspects – it can be argued that there has been a parallel evolution and implicit exchange.

Over its history, the UN has sought to engage anticipatory actions to prevent harm, reduce risks, prepare, plan, and lead transformation efforts toward better futures. These forms of engaging the future would be further enriched by additional forms of anticipation which emphasise acknowledging complexity and taking inspiration from uncertainty. Any operationalisation effort to contribute to Intergenerational Equity could benefit from a holistic use of multiple modes of imagining the needs and expectations of the future people we will never know.

Drawing on the latest advances aiming to produce knowledge about anticipatory systems and processes (Poli, 2019) in Futures Studies, without ignoring important contributions from the post-positivist strand, this report explores the relations of futures as imaginaries existing in the present and intergenerationality as a purpose for imagining futures.



Multiple dimensions of anticipation

Anticipation is seen as an innate property of all living beings, as internal systems which enable lifeforms ‘to change state in an instant’ corresponding to an internal ‘predictive model of itself and its environment’ (Rosen, 2012 [1985]). These systems encompass both predictive elements (forecasts) and foresights (Fuller, 2019). Theories of anticipation claim that all living beings have anticipatory systems (Rosen, 2012 [1985]) and processes (Fuller, 2019) that might be connected to their survival and evolution (Miller, 2018). In Poli’s terms, anticipation occurs “when the future is used in action” (Poli, 2019).

Cognate, deliberate anticipation, in other words, imagining alternatives about the future is considered according to Seligman et al. (2016) as a unique human ability (Fuller, 2019) The ability to anticipate consequences has also been suggested as a necessary condition for the capacity for ethics along with the abilities for value judgements and choosing between different courses of action (Ayala, 2010).

Interestingly, Fuller argues that norms also influence anticipation, the ways we imagine various futures and act. In his words “anticipation has causal powers to change social norms and norms have causal power in framing anticipation” (Fuller, 2019).

Moreover, anticipation has a political dimension that is intertwined with the social and material environment that produces anticipatory ideas. Groves highlights the social and material dimensions of anticipation

in that it “is dependent on capacities of bodies and of socio-technical apparatuses, distributed throughout the environments of social action”. (Groves, 2017.) Arjun Appadurai sees the future as a ‘cultural fact’ formed by the configuration of three human functions, namely: aspiration, anticipation, and imagination. And in the same spirit as Groves, he argues that “capacity to aspire” is unequally distributed and is associated with socio-economic disparities (Appadurai, 2013).

Furthermore, the cultural dimension of anticipation should not be overlooked, especially when operating in a multicultural environment. As bearers of a certain culture, we reflect its value systems, attitudes, and beliefs. Our worldview, inherited from the past, evolving in the present, projected into the future (and influenced by our perception of the future) encompasses all sorts of biases – personal, cognitive, social, cultural. When engaging in deliberate conscious anticipation for the future self-awareness, social and cultural awareness are necessary to operate in a responsible manner. Masini highlights the need to be aware and sensitive to the existence and the value of cultures, attitudes and objectives that differ from our own (Masini, 2006).



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Capabilities-approach for addressing needs of current and future generations

A phrase like ‘leave things better for our great great grandchildren’ conveys the overall gist of intergenerational and intragenerational equity, as well as intergenerational justice.

The academic literature and international rhetoric about intergenerational justice often raises the need for knowing what future people would expect or need. In popular-facing books, like *The Good Ancestor* (Krznaric 2021), readers are invited to imagine future people, later generations, having positive feelings about us who are alive today because we ‘did the right thing’ for their benefit.

A quick thought experiment reflecting upon our own feelings about our ancestors’ efforts problematizes this argument: locally it is plausible, e.g., our own grandparents or even great grandparents. But, going back further, greater mismatches between today’s morals and beliefs are more likely to arise. Go back to some of the very first hominids, and ask, ‘did they ever intentionally do anything to benefit future generations?’ We of course cannot know, but even if they could imagine 8 billion people interacting globally, how could they even guess what would be most useful to us? Yet early hominids passed forward to us many technologies and social patterns – simply by inventing or adopting them and using them themselves (e.g., Schick and Toth 1994; Genta and Riberi 2019).

For policymaking, the typical time horizon invoked for formulating next actions infrequently if ever looks hundreds of years to the future. Yet the difficulty of knowing what to do for people we do not know and cannot know because they don’t exist yet, is exactly the struggle intergenerational equity invites. This struggle can be productive, but with one caveat. Doing so requires imagining futures and making guesses about what future people need.

Today, there is a wide-spread interest and growing belief in humanity’s technologically enhanced capacity to foresee and predict future risks and the implications of our current actions to future generations. Despite significant progress that has been made in this area, for example from advancements in data science, simulation designs, and AI, we need to remember that in a concurrently volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, forecasting and risk analysis based on past and present data have limits.

Behar and Hlatshwayo’s (2021) note IMF’s *How to implement strategic foresight (and why)* thoroughly explain the limitations and dangers of exclusively relying into a ‘predict, plan, prepare’ approach. Humans will always be confronted with blind spots, things they do not know or choose to ignore, and things they cannot know – unknowns (Ale et al., 2020). Focusing only on deploying anticipation for risk aversion or contingency planning, we prevent ourselves from exploring broader opportunities to envision desirable peaceful and sustainable futures. Focusing on both probable and desirable futures can limit inspiration sources for making sense and innovating an ever-evolving, emerging present.

To expand our reference points for transforming with the world, complementary capabilities are needed to allow us to expand and diversify the systems we access when we produce futures images, engage in thought experiments, and draw inspiration for action.



Parents often hear, ‘the best thing you can do is give your child capabilities to do things on their own: your job is to help them one day live independently as adults’. This notion relates to ongoing conversations about the Capabilities Approach for global development (cf. Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Taking a temporal view on capabilities, the capabilities introduced to one generation become part of its overall conditions. For example, Finland invested in ITC education and training in the past; now the nation’s working-age generations generally have computing capabilities they which can be used as they wish, from advancing communications network standards to creating video game companies. The original motives of widely introducing computing skills by the preceding, 20 generation likely didn’t foresee all the specific ways they would want to use them. This is an example of capability passing among generations.

To take this ITC example as a pass forward of intergenerational capability, we would need to look back further – to, e.g., Alan Turing or Ada Lovelace – who built upon the work of their predecessors to give us present-day people the key mathematics behind the existence of any kind of computing capability. Again, they may have envisioned future people cracking the codes of the enemy or programming rocket travel with this new capability of computation they advanced. But people today want to do both serious and playful things with this technology. This capability has become a condition for very many humans today – its motivations for its use range from improving the world to having fun, from bringing people together to tearing them apart, etc.

Taking a capabilities approach to pursuing intergenerational equity requires a kind of ‘letting go of control’. It is important to state our intentions for passing forward capabilities to future people, so that they can know what we meant and can decide for themselves how they would like to develop and apply them.

Perhaps the most beneficial conditions we can pass forward to future people are capabilities to access an expansive array of systems, processes, purposes, and modes for relating to their own futures. These capabilities are what UNESCO calls Futures Literacy which supports the relevance and impact of any foresight approach. Such capabilities could give present and future people greater hope and confidence in their abilities to enter unknown futures, to greet uncertainty and complexity as resources rather than threats, and thrive in whatever kind of world they will inhabit.



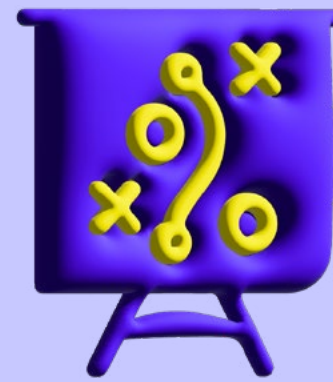


Futures-related capabilities benefitting intergenerational equity

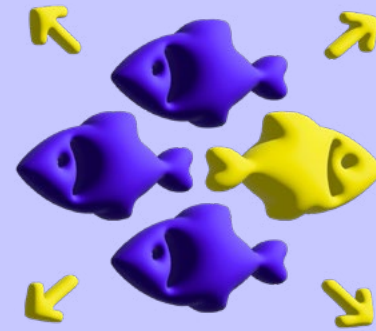
One could imagine quite many capabilities that can help UN staff and stakeholders contribute to intergenerational equity. In the process of preparing this report, several have been considered and seven focal areas have been identified.

The basis of the selection corresponds with the desk research into the meanings of intergenerational equity and advancements in the field of futures studies. All seven are focal areas in which a person can foster capabilities, abilities, skills, and competences which may be beneficial to intergenerational equity. All seven areas require exercising an array of anticipation processes while considering complexity, uncertainty, and any actor's positionality in relation to others.

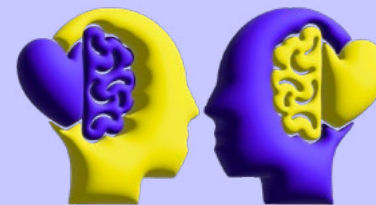
The seven identified focal areas are:



Preparation and Planning: The capability to imagine and discuss probable developments or desirable future states when considering choices, setting priorities, and taking action. Preparation and planning entails being able to distinguish and toggle between probable and desirable modes.



Appreciating Novelty: Appreciating novelty is a capability to make sense of newness arising from complex systems and innovating in relation to change. It helps people be more inventive, resourceful, and agile in the face of the unknown.



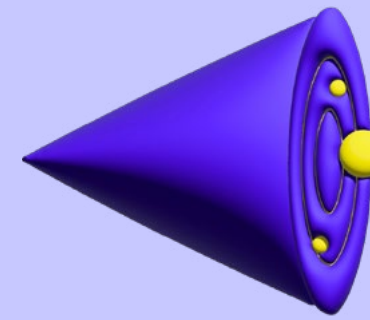
Temporal Empathy: The ability to empathise across time – past, present, and future – to appreciate the perspectives, needs, and priorities of the dead, the living, and the yet to exist. One has empathy for another person's situation and acts accordingly.



Intercultural Awareness: Holding awareness of one's own cultural positionality and intersectionality while engaging with others to produce intergenerational equity. This entails being reflective of your own values and points of view, which are keys to developing competences necessary for adeptly navigating complex contexts with a diversity of people from different cultures and backgrounds.



Enabling Agency: Being able to see with a clear view what you can do in the present to enable changes which may help current and future generations. This sense of agency involves ensuring future generations also have agency and can make their own choices and express their own values.



Long-Term Futuring: The capability to think beyond immediate priorities or short-term futures, to imagine longer time horizons. It also involves appreciating macro-history and the fact that things can change very quickly or slowly on both short and long time scales.



Advancing Equitability: Co-producing equitable conditions for the present, near future, and further future. This entails taking actions today which advance equity in all its forms and contexts, not only among various generations (living or yet to come), but also based on human rights.

These seven focal areas are not exhaustive, there may be other pathways to developing capabilities benefitting intergenerational equity which were not considered or could not be imagined now.

Which focal areas for developing capabilities could best contribute to intergenerational equity can evolve over time based on feedback received from massively distributed experimentation across the UN system and beyond.



Growing futures capabilities for the benefit of intergenerational equity

The preceding chapters build a case for taking a capabilities approach to promote intergenerational equity.

To operationalize these learning processes, a mix of two kinds of processes is needed: self-organisation and arranged learning events. There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach. The benefit of allowing self-organised groups to drive their own learning processes is its potential for higher intrinsic motivation, self-direction, and production of value when a group forms itself and sets out on its own learning journey. The downside of self-organized groups is that they can fade away quickly if they face challenges such as lack of social cohesion or time.

The benefit of arranging learning events is that these make it more convenient for participants to engage with pre-organized learning processes. The downside is that attendance of these learning events may be more driven by extrinsic motivation which would reduce the activeness of learners in deciding what kinds of inquiry, knowledge, and practice sharing are valuable.

Developing capabilities for intergenerational equity across the UN system could be driven by a mix of both kinds of learning processes. Being a pilot, this project is experimentalist at its core. Promoting the idea of small groups engaging in short periodic sessions to develop their capabilities may be the most time-efficient, cost-efficient, and fitting/rewarding ways for individuals and groups to pursue capabilities growth. However, at a practical level, it can be expected that organised events and demonstrations may be needed to garner interest in engaging with such processes. Furthermore, removing perceived extrinsic barriers could enable broader uptake, e.g., if supervisors encourage their staff to form self-organising groups to experiment with the online collection of Futures Tools for Intergenerational Equity.

Thinking of capabilities in relation to larger organisational culture and transformation efforts, the aim would be to first attract champions to then create a critical mass. Drawing on Jenny Brice's and Patricia Kelly's theories of change, if 10 percent of individuals in an organisation start acting as champions of change, then 40 percent of early adopters would follow, with another 40 percent being bystanders not fighting change as long as their needs are met (Inayatullah, 2013). The Futures for Intergenerational Equity project will seek already

interested people to become the first champions of taking a capabilities-based approach to futures and intergenerational equity.

The project's core resource is the online [Collection of Futures Tools for Intergenerational Equity](#). Its main function is to enable people who are interested in intergenerational equity to become active contributors to it via their work in the UN System. This collection will provide online resources to help form small Communities of Practice. The microsite is designed to encourage individuals and small groups to try out a variety of approaches to engaging anticipation to generate new insights. The proposed learning cycle the collection of Futures Tools for Intergenerational Equity is built to support is depicted in Figure 1. However, no individual or group would be mandated to only follow this learning cycle and can choose their own usage patterns.

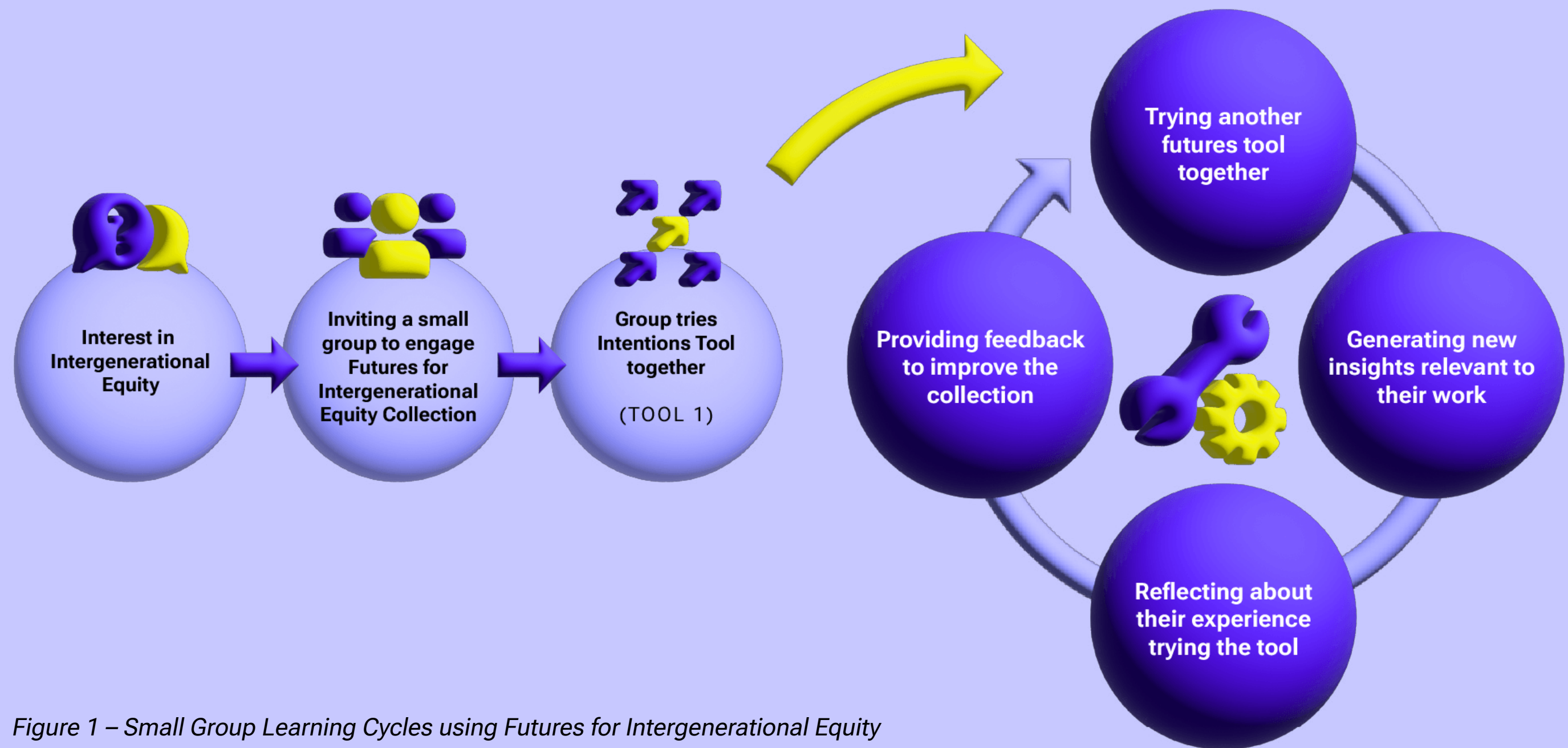


Figure 1 – Small Group Learning Cycles using Futures for Intergenerational Equity



By combining the self-organising Community of Practice groups' model with pre-made learning events and demonstrations model, a broader number of UN personnel can practise taking the interests of future people into account as part of their actual work. In both models, a person's peers become their 'living curriculum' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) as they engage in co-inquiry about how to contribute to intergenerational equity.

The online collection of tools starts out with a small set of initially selected experiments which cover a range of focal areas. Three of them are special tools: to facilitate group formation (Tool 1), to encourage group reflection after engaging with another tool (Tool R), and to invent a tool or process and try it out (Tool X).

The collection is proposed to be self-serve and non-linear. Even though users are encouraged to start by forming a group to try Tool 1, they can alternatively choose to engage with any

of the tools in any order by themselves. Furthermore, if a person needs a tool for some other occasion all together – such as a staff retreat or team meeting, s/he can use the collection of tools to select something suitable to the occasion.

The microsite critically includes two feedback mechanisms. The first invites group experiences engaging with the tools, and this feedback can be used to further adapt the tools. The second invites contributions of new tools or processes – either invented or adapted by the groups in Tool X or found or experienced elsewhere. In later iterations, it would further reinforce organisational learning if the microsite featured stories from its users about their experiences with the tools.

Conclusion

Presently living and future yet-to-exist people are faced with many challenges they have inherited from the past. For the presently living, a non-exhaustive list of these drivers of inequality includes climate change; colonialism's long shadow of racism and extraction; industrialised war making; sexism; wealth inequality; dependence on fossil fuels; etc. If these are left unaddressed, the presently living generations are apt to unconsciously pass forward these many kinds of inequitable conditions – causing harm to many future people.

The capabilities approach to engaging futures proposed in this report can enable today's living generations to take more effective and transformative action on behalf of future people. Seven initial focal areas have been identified which can support intergenerational equity in the present, near, and far future. Crucially, development of capabilities along these multiple focal areas can help the UN System expand its stance

toward futures beyond preparation and planning. By adding capabilities which utilize additional forms of anticipation, intergenerational equity could be better advanced by the UN and its Member States.

Growing capabilities to engage a wider variety of anticipation processes can happen in a variety of formats and contexts. This inception report presented some of the initial design considerations for the pilot version of the Online Collection of Futures Tools for Intergenerational Equity. Effort to grow futures-related capabilities can build, stimulate, and nurture both creativity and capacity for change across the UN system.

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