

Global Climate Governance, Short-Termism, and the Vulnerability of Future Generations

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Many people throughout the world—especially the poor and vulnerable—are experiencing the effects of climate change. Unless the governments of high-emitting countries implement radical mitigation policies, the situation will continue to deteriorate dramatically, and future generations will inherit an increasingly dangerous and degraded climate system. Governments are thus under a duty to effect a just transition to a zero-carbon economy and also to put in place the necessary adaptation policies to enable future societies to cope with the climate changes to which we are already committed. This requires political leaders to govern for the long term.

As for their part, future generations are in a position of considerable vulnerability. They will have to live with the climate system the current generation bequeaths to them. Their situation is aptly described by Hans Jonas in *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Jonas writes:

Only *present* interests make themselves heard and felt and enforce their consideration. It is to them that public agencies are accountable, and this is the way in which concretely the respecting of rights comes about (as distinct from their abstract acknowledgment). But the *future* is not represented, it is not a force that can throw its weight into the scales. The nonexistent has no lobby, and the unborn are powerless. Thus

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accountability to them has no political reality behind it in present decision-making, and when they can make their complaint, then we, the culprits, will no longer be there.¹

This, then, raises the question of how political institutions can be designed to ensure that future generations can enjoy the standard of living to which they are entitled. There is now a burgeoning literature on how domestic political institutions can be reformed to do this.² In addition, a number of countries have introduced reforms to their political systems to try to ensure that the interests of future people are given due protection. For example, Finland has a Committee for the Future, and the Welsh government has recently created a Future Generations Commissioner.³

But what about supra-state institutions and international negotiations? Can global politics be reformed and designed to ensure that climate policies are enacted that give due protection to the interests of future generations? Is it possible to reform existing supra-state institutions or reconfigure the international framework for reaching decisions about climate change—such as the annual conferences of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—in ways that induce the decision-makers to reach agreements that honor responsibilities to future generations?⁴

The questions at the heart of this essay are increasingly being discussed. Indeed, they even feature in contemporary fiction. In 2020, the novelist Kim Stanley Robinson published a novel hypothesizing the creation of a United Nations body that is charged with averting a climate crisis and protecting the human rights of future generations. In Robinson's telling, this institution, dubbed the "Ministry for the Future," is set up at the twenty-ninth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC held in Bogotá.⁵ Robinson's institutional innovation may seem far-fetched to some. However, for several decades a number of different proposals for global institutional reform to better protect future generations have been advanced.

Some have been proposed or discussed by academics, coming from a variety of disciplines including law, political theory, political science, international relations, and development economics.⁶ Some have been advanced by NGOs, think tanks, and political campaigners.⁷ And some have come from within the UN. For example, in his report entitled *Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations*, then secretary-general Ban Ki-moon explored several options for reform.⁸ Most recently, in 2021, the current secretary-general, António

Guterres, published an ambitious and wide-ranging report, *Our Common Agenda*, that argues for several institutional reforms.⁹

There has, however, been little in the way of systematic analysis of the different options available. My aim in this short essay is to contribute to this process of systematic analysis. I do so by first identifying what I take to be the relevant criteria for evaluating any such proposal for institutional reform. Second, I draw together a list of the main proposals that have been advanced and their underlying reasoning. As I have noted above, reforms have been proposed by people from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, but I am not aware of any discussion that collects them together in one article, describes them, and provides an account of their underlying rationales. I do not seek to provide a conclusive verdict on the various proposals. Rather, what I hope to do is provide answers to the questions “What options are there?” and “How should we evaluate them?,” noting some of the proposals’ strengths and weaknesses as I proceed.¹⁰

Before we start, two preliminary points should be made. First, the proposals that follow seek to ensure that current generations honor their responsibilities to future generations. I cannot defend an account of our climate-based duties to future generations here. I shall assume that, at the very least, current generations have duties:

1. to do all that is reasonably possible to ensure that the global mean temperature does not increase by more than 1.5°C from what it was prior to the industrial revolution;¹¹ and
2. to do so on just terms (that is, in ways that do not burden the disadvantaged and that enable them to overcome poverty and enjoy a just standard of living).

These should be understood as one part of a broader set of responsibilities to current and future generations.

This takes us to the second point. The focus of this essay is on how to ensure in a fair and legitimate way that future generations do not inherit a seriously degraded climate system. That said, it is also important to protect future generations from other threats. For this reason, many (but not all) of the proposals to be considered are concerned not just with climate change but with all the ways in which we can affect future generations for good and ill. Forward-looking global governance arrangements are required, among other things, to ensure that current generations preserve biodiversity; to minimize the threat of antimicrobial resistance and global pandemics, and to put in place adequate preparations for

both; to foster and regulate technological innovations so that they contribute to human well-being and do not undermine democracy, liberty, privacy, and social justice; and to leave future generations a world free from poverty, discrimination, and invidious inequalities and divisions. Given the importance of all these goals, it is important when evaluating proposals to consider not just whether they will help bequeath future generations a healthy climate system but also whether they will promote intergenerational justice more generally.

CRITERIA

How should we evaluate such proposals?¹²

Criterion 1: Effectiveness

One obvious criterion for evaluating any proposal is its effectiveness. Judgments of effectiveness are, however, not straightforward. First, we need to be clear on how best to interpret the idea of effectiveness. It can be interpreted in three ways:

1. *Effectiveness₁ (E₁). Absolute Success:* Does proposal *P* eradicate the problem?
2. *Effectiveness₂ (E₂). Comparative Success:* Does proposal *P* do a better job of addressing the problem than other proposals?
3. *Effectiveness₃ (E₃). Absolute Improvement:* How much of a positive difference does proposal *P* make?

It is important to distinguish between these three conceptualizations of effectiveness because each is relevant for some questions but not for others. For example, suppose that a proposal will not solve the problem (that is, it fails to meet *E₁*). Should we not adopt it for this reason? No, that would be a mistake. *E₃* is a more relevant consideration here. Suppose that a proposal makes an improvement but does not fully resolve the problem. If the improvement is significant enough, then (depending on how well it performs according to the other criteria) it may be worth implementing. A proposal may be good (as defined by *E₃*) without perfectly resolving the problem. This is the main reason I emphasize the different kinds of effectiveness.

A further reason for doing so is that in certain circumstances the relevant criterion will be *E₂*. Suppose we must choose between several options. Then we will want to know which proposal (or combination of proposals) does a better job of addressing the problem than the others. What we need in this case is *E₂*.

Does this mean that E_1 is irrelevant? No. Suppose now that we implement various proposals and that they make a positive difference. Should we implement yet more? To answer that, we need to know whether the existing proposals will together eradicate the problem. In other words, our concern is whether they jointly achieve E_1 . If they do not, more needs to be done.

A second point: while the conceptual distinctions are important, just as important, if not more so, is the fact that we lack much in the way of empirical evidence. One important feature of all the proposals is that none of them have been tried before. This should not lead us to reject them, but it means that any judgements about effectiveness should be expressed with an awareness of the limits of our understanding.

It also means that we need other means to identify effectiveness.¹³ In the absence of data (and even with data), one key test that we can, and should, employ is to require a justification for a proposal to satisfy the following conditions: (a) it should be based on an accurate understanding of what causes the problem it is seeking to tackle—in this case, why are political institutions failing to protect future generations; (b) it should specify the mechanism by which the proposal would respond to the causes of the problem and thereby effectively promote a more just treatment of future generations; and, finally, (c) the mechanism should rest on realistic assumptions about human behavior and dispositions and how institutions work—not on wishful thinking.

Assessments of effectiveness might also draw on our understanding of how different proposals that have been implemented in the past have fared. We can, for example, learn from how a similar but different innovation that has been tried at the global level performed (“learning from global analogies”), or we might seek to draw lessons from what has been adopted within states (“learning from the domestic level”). Of course, we need to be extremely cautious in drawing inferences in these cases, and the disanalogies may be so great that little can be learned.

Criterion 2: Political Legitimacy

A second criterion is political legitimacy. We should assess proposals in terms of whether they depart from or realize values such as democratic self-government. For example: Do they grant political power to unelected (and unaccountable) bodies? Are they representative of the people affected? Do they reflect the diversity of views?¹⁴ This criterion has a deontological, or nonconsequentialist, dimension to it: Do the arrangements honor values such as democracy? But it also has a

consequentialist dimension. We might ask whether a proposal is likely to lead in the future to a greater realization of values such as democracy, or a reduction of these values.

Criterion 3: Distributive Justice and Liberty

A third criterion concerns the impact of any proposal on the just entitlements of contemporaries. This criterion has two parts. First, when assessing any proposal we should ask whether implementing it would have positive or negative effects on the realization of a fair distribution of resources among those alive now (distributive justice). For example, might a proposal lead to unjust burdens being imposed on the most disadvantaged? Might it have the opposite effect and bring about a more just distribution among contemporaries? Second, we should also ask whether implementing a proposal would affect the extent to which those alive now enjoy the civil liberties to which they are entitled (liberty). For example, might a proposal lead to draconian restrictions on personal liberty? Proposals should, then, be judged in terms of whether they might (or are likely to) further justice for contemporaries (as well as future generations) or if instead they might impose unjust burdens or illegitimate restrictions on some current generations.

Criterion 4: Attainability

A fourth relevant consideration concerns the prospects of implementing any such proposal. This criterion is drawn from Allen Buchanan's account of "accessibility" and, in particular, its requirement that "there is a practicable route from where we are now to at least a reasonable approximation of the state of affairs that satisfies its principles."¹⁵ This consideration is especially relevant if campaigning for a proposal is costly. Nonetheless, this criterion needs to be handled carefully. It would be rash, for example, to think that if a proposal seems utopian there can be no reason to campaign for it. In the first place, peoples' understanding of what is politically attainable is often flawed. This can be in part because of the unpredictable and capricious nature of political life; but also because those who benefit from the current state of affairs have an incentive and often the ability to manipulate perceptions of what is politically attainable and entrench the view that no change is possible. Second, campaigns for utopian projects can often expand people's political imagination and transform their understanding of what is politically possible, opening up a space for more radical options than would otherwise have been the case.¹⁶ In addition to this, research on social movements reveals that the pursuit of "radical" goals frequently strengthens the campaigns of more "moderate" movements

—producing what Herbert Haines termed the “positive radical flank effect,” and creating more change than would otherwise have been possible.¹⁷

REFORMING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS

With these criteria in mind, let us now consider what institutional remedies might be adopted.

One proposal that has been advanced in different guises for several decades is that there should be a UN guardian of some kind for future generations. A pioneering case for such an institution was made by the Maltese delegation to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.¹⁸ The delegation made a clear and cogent argument, so it is worth setting out its reasoning. The starting point of its proposal is that

future generations are inherently disadvantaged with respect to present generations in three important ways: (a) they are “downstream” in time from us and thus subject to the long-term consequences of our actions; (b) they are “mute”, having no representatives among present generations and so their interests are often neglected in present socio-economic and political planning; and (c) they cannot plea or bargain for reciprocal treatment since they have no voice and nothing they do will affect us.¹⁹

The delegation then adds that, given this, it is important to have an agency charged with acting in the interests of future generations.²⁰ As it notes, we do this for others who are unable to protect their own interests (such as children or those with severe cognitive disabilities). The reasoning that we apply in these cases—namely, that they lack the capacity to campaign for and protect their own interests—applies, it argues, to the case of future generations too.²¹

On this basis, it concludes that there should be a UN “guardian” for future generations that is “entitled to appear before institutions whose decisions could significantly affect the future of the species to argue the case on behalf of future generations, hence bringing out the long-term implications of proposed action and presenting alternatives.”²²

But what kind of guardian should there be? One answer has been the following:

Proposal 1: The UN should create a high commissioner for future generations.

For example, several political campaigners argued for this in 2012 before the Rio +20 conference.²³ As some have noted, the UN already had a high commissioner

for refugees and a high commissioner for human rights, so there were models that this proposal could draw on.²⁴ Moreover, as I indicated above, evidence of how these earlier institutional innovations have performed might provide some insight into how effective such an actor might be.

A different proposal has recently been made by António Guterres in *Our Common Agenda*. There he argues for:

*Proposal 2: The creation of a Special Envoy for Future Generations, who would be charged with campaigning for further institutional reforms.*²⁵

Again, this builds on and extends an existing framework. A special envoy may have less influence than a high commissioner, but this proposal is perhaps more politically feasible (criterion 4) since a secretary-general can create a special envoy for a given policy area so long as the Security Council has authorized the specified focus, but high commissioners need to be established by the UN General Assembly.²⁶

To the above, we ought to add a variation put forward by the Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice. The foundation argued that it was important to have an organization charged with defending future generations. However, it expressed concern about appointing a single individual to perform this role. The foundation called instead for:

*Proposal 3: A “Commission for Future Generations.”*²⁷

It did so for several closely related reasons.²⁸ First, it argued, a commission could, and should, include members from poor as well as affluent countries and thereby ensure that justice for future generations does not impose unjust burdens on the world’s most marginalized and poor now (in line with criterion 3).

Second, a commission is a more politically realistic goal than a high commissioner (in line with criterion 4). Some countries had resisted the creation of a UN high commissioner for future generations out of a fear that the commissioner may not be sufficiently attuned to the difficult circumstances some countries are currently in.

A third point that is hinted at, but which is very important and worth emphasizing, is that a commission is better equipped to reflect the cultural diversity in the world. There are competing visions of the future and it is important to have a mechanism that adequately reflects this (in line with criterion 2).

These, however, are not the only options. In a recent article, Frances Stewart makes several suggestions. In addition to endorsing the idea of a high commissioner for future generations,²⁹ she mentions four other possibilities. These include:

Proposal 4: A UN agency (what Stewart names “UNIFGEN”) designated to campaign for and to advance the interests of future generations.

Stewart suggests that this agency could perform a role similar to UNICEF.³⁰ She also suggests three further reforms:

Proposal 5: Reforming the membership of the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) so that member states send a representative for future generations as well as one for current generations.

Proposal 6: Reforming all UN “specialized agencies” (such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and so on) so that they each have a unit focused on future generations.

Proposal 7: The Security Council should include a “representative” for future people.³¹

One important feature of these proposals is that they “mainstream” a concern for the future, building it into the day-to-day operations of all UN agencies. It is vital that institutions with significant power do consider the long term, and Stewart’s proposals represent one plausible way of doing this. This said, their influence is likely to extend only to the operations of the organizations specified in proposals 5–7. For example, if proposal 5 is implemented, then we might expect the ECOSOC to focus more on the long term. There is no reason to think, however, that these reforms will, for example, ensure that multilateral negotiations such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations, or those of the WTO, will adopt a stronger commitment to intergenerational justice. As Stewart would doubtless agree, they will therefore need supplementing.

This is also an appropriate place to mention another proposal mooted by Guterres in *Our Common Agenda*:

Proposal 8: Reconfiguring the UN Trusteeship Council and reconceiving of its role as that of advocating for future generations.³²

The Trusteeship Council was created in 1945 in order to oversee the governance of what the UN termed “trust territories” (that is, formerly colonized territories that lacked sovereign statehood).³³ As the process of decolonization proceeded and each of the trust territories secured independence in one form or another, the

role of the Trusteeship Council diminished and it ceased its activities in 1994.³⁴ Guterres's proposal is to bring it back to life with a new purpose—"to serve as a deliberative forum to act on behalf of succeeding generations."³⁵ As he notes, he is reviving an idea that has been mooted before.³⁶ Most notably, in 1995 the permanent representative to the United Nations from Malta argued in a submission to the UN General Assembly that it should "transform the Trusteeship Council into a body that safeguards the interests of future generations by enhancing its mandate to include the common heritage of mankind."³⁷ It should continue to serve as a trustee but this time for "the common heritage of mankind," and as such for all humanity, for all current and future people. As the Maltese representative put it, the goal should be "to transform the Trusteeship Council from a guardian of dependent territories to a body that acts as guardian and trustee of the global commons and the common concerns in the interest of present and future generations."³⁸

How effective (criterion 1) would proposal 8 be? To answer this—and indeed to assess the likely effectiveness of any proposal—it is worth asking, first, what reason we would have to think that such a body will be *motivated* to promote intergenerational equity (the motivational requirement), and, second, what powers it would have and *what capacity it would have to effect change* (the capacity requirement). To take the motivational requirement first, we might ask how we can ensure that the members of any new trusteeship council (or indeed the institutions mentioned in proposals 1–7) will have the right motivation. Maybe it could be argued that those who occupy these kinds of roles (such as membership of the Trusteeship Council) will internalize the values inscribed in their roles. Or maybe it could be reasoned that they know the world will judge them by how well they further the interests of future generations and thus a concern for their reputation will impel them to try to do a good job. But we would need supporting evidence for these hypotheses and a comprehensive analysis of how best to ensure that the office holders are appropriately motivated.

If we turn now to the question of how they might bring about change, Guterres writes that the Trusteeship Council "could issue advice and guidance with respect to long-term governance of the global commons, delivery of global public goods and managing global public risks."³⁹ Would providing advice make much of a difference? It might to those who are seeking to realize long-term governance but are unsure how to do it. But it may not change the behavior of those who are not so motivated, such as, for example, countries committed to extracting their coal or oil

reserves. Given this, some might argue that such proposals are too modest, and that more wide-ranging powers are required.

Here, however, we encounter a problem—one that applies to all the proposals countenanced so far—namely, that the more powers we attribute to any such institution, the more it is likely that some will resist attempts to create it. My point here parallels, and is indebted to, an argument made by Scott Barrett about environmental treaties. He notes that we can aim for a treaty with “depth” (by which he means one with ambitious goals and that requires strong action), but he argues that this is likely to come with less “breadth” (by which he means less participation). Alternatively, we can ensure that there is support for a proposal from many member states (“breadth,” in Barrett’s words), but securing this might require that it be modest in its aspirations, so it will come at the cost of less “depth”.⁴⁰ In a similar spirit, there may be a mismatch between, on the one hand, the kind of ambitious changes needed to produce effective change (criterion 1) and, on the other hand, the kinds of proposals that will be politically attainable (criterion 4). In short, a commitment to effectiveness may require radical, far-reaching reforms, but a commitment to feasibility may pull in the opposite direction.

MORE RADICAL INITIATIVES, MORE INCLUSIVE PROCESSES

At this point, another important consideration needs to be introduced. Someone might argue that these innovations, while potentially important, are focused exclusively on empowering high-level institutions—ones in which it is highly likely that the figures appointed to hold positions of authority will be senior figures drawn from political and legal elites. Given this, and bearing in mind criterion 2, there is a very strong case for adopting a more radical and inclusive approach, one that draws more widely and includes voices normally excluded from political life. Doing so would better realize the values of political inclusion and political legitimacy (criterion 2).

With this in mind, it is worth considering youth representation. Under the aegis of YOUNGO (the Children and Youth Constituency to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), the UN negotiations on climate change include youth representatives.⁴¹ Someone might argue, in line with this approach, that a moderate step toward reforming the global climate governance procedures would be to endorse the following:

Proposal 9: Youth associations should have a much more meaningful role in the international negotiations on climate change policy.

Interestingly, Guterres's *Our Common Agenda* proposes strengthening youth involvement. He calls for creating "a dedicated United Nations Youth Office in the Secretariat," and reports that the "Envoy on Youth will prepare recommendations for more meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement in United Nations deliberative and decision-making processes."⁴²

When considering proposal 9, it is worth distinguishing between two versions. One holds that there should be greater inclusion of ordinary people across the world, including young people—a group so often neglected by politicians. A second holds that there is special reason to include younger generations and that the same principles of inclusion should not be extended to other groups.

The first version seems very plausible to me and will be discussed below. But the second one is harder to justify. Why should the young alone receive privileged treatment? One answer might be that they are more vulnerable to climate change than current generations. However, if "vulnerability" is the relevant criterion, then some contemporary citizens of the world are just as vulnerable (if not more so) as some younger generations from certain countries. Inclusion on the basis of vulnerability would not single out *all* young people and *only* those people. Interestingly, an ethnographic study of the youth delegation from the U.K. found that many participants did not emphasize future generations and instead put their focus on the plight of those currently vulnerable—suggesting that they recognized precisely this point.⁴³

Given this, why not consider ways of including ordinary people more generally? Several democratic theorists have advanced a much more radical proposal that seeks to do exactly this. They endorse:

Proposal 10: A global citizens' assembly.

John Dryzek, André Bächtiger, and Karolina Milewicz, for example, have argued that there should be a "Deliberative Global Citizens' Assembly" comprised of randomly selected individuals drawn from all over the world and with representation designed to be representative and proportionate to population size.⁴⁴ Such a body could (and should) be designed to include young people (as per proposal 9), but it goes beyond this and could also include people from *all* groups across the world.

Advocates for the use of citizens' assemblies (and for a global citizens' assembly in particular) can and do make a number of points in their defense. I will highlight three. First, Dryzek and his colleagues argue that a global citizens' assembly will

be likely to adopt policies that give due protection to future generations.⁴⁵ Deliberative citizens' assemblies, it is argued, will have a tendency to adopt just policies for future generations, in part, because the members of these assemblies (unlike politicians) are not constrained by the need to adopt an electorally popular position and are not dependent on funding from powerful private interests with short-term goals (such as companies),⁴⁶ and in part because deliberation has a tendency to produce fairer outcomes.⁴⁷ Furthermore, its defenders argue that citizens' assemblies have been tried throughout the world. This means that there is considerable experience to draw on (so there may be learning from the domestic level).⁴⁸

Of course, this does not in itself show that the assemblies would result in more just climate policy for future (and current) generations (criterion 1). That depends on what role they play. There are several possibilities. In a later book, Dryzek and his coauthors suggest that such a body could be authorized to make international law or to have veto rights over decisions by the General Assembly.⁴⁹ The prospects of these seem remote. However, there are other possibilities. For example, we could expand proposal 10 to say that:

Proposal 10(a): Submission: The global citizens' assembly can submit recommendations to the COP negotiations that they present in person at the negotiations.

These recommendations could serve as a set of benchmarks that people throughout the world could use—and would be likely to use—to compare and evaluate the decisions reached in the COP negotiations.

Or one might propose:

Proposal 10(b): Evaluation: The global citizens' assembly can participate in the "global stocktake" created by Article 14 of the Paris Agreement. In particular, it can evaluate the steps taken by different countries (such as their "nationally determined contributions") with reference to the citizens' assembly's normative framework.⁵⁰

Or:

Proposal 10(c): Public justification: COP negotiators are required to present their proposals at a public forum at which members of the global citizens' assembly are entitled to ask questions on the proposed text and call on negotiators to publicly justify their decisions.⁵¹

All of these recommendations might put some pressure on parties to the UNFCCC to agree to, and to comply with, principles of climate justice for future generations (criterion 1). We might further suggest that a global citizens' assembly

could have similar powers to those affirmed in proposals 10(a), (b), and (c) in relation to other global organizations that affect the planet's sustainability (such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization).

A second consideration in favor of citizens' assemblies is that they are a politically legitimate form of political participation (criterion 2). They are impartial, choosing people randomly (with adjustments made to ensure that they are representative), and following from this, they can represent the diversity of people's views across the world.⁵²

A third consideration in their favor is that their decisions are likely to respect rights and social justice. Given the diverse range of people included, they have an incentive to agree to principles that respect people's rights and take into account people's material needs (criterion 3).⁵³

The proposal of a global citizens' assembly will seem utopian to many (criterion 4). Whether it is depends partly on what kinds of roles and powers would be attributed to it, and to what extent it is expected that institutions like the UNFCCC will formally engage with it. In addition, not all versions are utopian. For example, one variant of proposal 10 was created in 2021 in advance of COP26 in Glasgow.⁵⁴ This initiative (which its creators termed the "global climate citizens' assembly", or "global assembly" for short) has two aspects.⁵⁵ First, the organizers set up a "Core Assembly" comprised of a hundred randomly selected people from across the world. Second, the organizers are seeking to create a network of "Community Assemblies"—citizens' assemblies—all around the world. The members of the Core Assembly agreed on a declaration that was issued at the start of the COP26 negotiations.⁵⁶ The aim is for the Core Assembly and Community Assemblies to issue a report with their recommendations.⁵⁷ This is a bold and innovative plan that may well be able to put some pressure on international negotiators to make more ambitious climate commitments. It would be rash, however, to speculate further on how well it will operate and what difference, if any, it will make on global negotiations. It does, however, suggest that we should not rush to assume that any such venture is infeasible.

CONCLUSION

It is time to conclude. What I hope to have done in this short essay is to give a sense of some of the different ways in which one might reform global politics to better realize climate justice for future generations,⁵⁸ to set out the criteria

we might employ to evaluate them, and to note some of the strengths and weaknesses of various proposals. I will close with two observations.

First, it is striking that although there is considerable variation, many proposals draw inspiration from existing global initiatives (such as high commissioners, special envoys, dedicated agencies like UNICEF) or seek to redeploy existing (if dormant) institutions (such as the Trusteeship Council). As such, they contrast with the last proposal examined in this essay, the global citizens' assembly, which takes its inspiration from what has been tried within societies across the world and which introduces a novel, more radical way of doing global politics.

My second point is this: My focus in this essay has been on global climate governance arrangements. It is important, however, to put these in context. Some may reason that since climate change is a global phenomenon, it follows that the key institutional fora for addressing the challenges of climate change must be global institutions. As a number of political scientists have persuasively argued, however, this rests on a mistaken understanding of political conflicts over climate change. Michaël Aclin and Matto Mildenerger, for example, persuasively challenge the picture of climate change as a global "collective action problem" and convincingly argue that it is rather a "distributive" conflict within states between those who benefit from carbon-based economic systems and those who challenge them.⁵⁹ Jeff Colgan, Jessica Green, and Thomas Hale similarly put the emphasis on the distributive conflicts within states, between those with what they term "climate-forcing assets" (those who benefit from assets that cause climate change) and those with what they term "climate-vulnerable assets" (those with interests jeopardized by climate change), and they criticize the emphasis on climate change as a global collective action problem.⁶⁰ This does not mean that global governance arrangements do not matter. However, it does mean that we should put their role into context, and that attempts to protect future generations should not overlook the central role of the state. It is imperative that reforms are introduced now at all levels of governance—local, state, transnational, and global—to ensure that those living in the future receive the protection to which they are entitled.⁶¹

NOTES

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas with David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 22.

² See Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries, eds., *Institutions for Future Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jonathan Boston, *Governing for the Future: Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow* (Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group, 2017); and Graham Smith, *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2021). For my own contribution, see Simon Caney,

- “Political Institutions for the Future: A Fivefold Package,” in González-Ricoy and Gosseries, eds., *Institutions for Future Generations*, pp. 135–55.
- ³ For the Finnish Committee for the Future see “Committee for the Future,” Parliament of Finland, www.eduskunta.fi/EN/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx. For the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner see the *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* (UK: The Stationery Office, 2015), www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/pdfs/anaw_20150002_en.pdf.
- ⁴ One important actor that I cannot elaborate on here for reasons of space is the European Union.
- ⁵ Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (London: Orbit, 2020); see esp. ch. 3.
- ⁶ See, for example, the contributions made by the legal scholar Edith Brown Weiss in *In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony, and Intergenerational Equity* (Irrington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Transnational, 1989); see esp. ch. 5. See also the following work by the development economist Frances Stewart: Frances Stewart, “The Double Democratic Deficit: Global Governance and Future Generations,” in Lori Keleher and Stacy J. Kosko, eds., *Agency and Democracy in Development Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 325–49; and Frances Stewart, “Overcoming Short-Termism: Incorporating Future Generations into Current Decision-Making,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 31 (2020), pp. 171–87. For a contribution from a political theorist, a political scientist, and an international relations scholar, see John S. Dryzek, André Bächtiger, and Karolina Milewicz, “Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly,” *Global Policy* 2, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 33–42.
- ⁷ See, for example, Halina Ward, Peter Roderick, and Catherine Pearce, *The Mandate of a UN High Commissioner for Future Generations* (London: Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development & World Future Council, February 14, 2012), www.fdsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/UN-High-Commissioner-for-FGs-mandate.pdf; and Halina Ward, “Committing to the Future We Want: A High Commissioner for Future Generations at Rio+20” (discussion paper, Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development & World Future Council, March 2012), www.fdsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Committing-to-the-future-we-want-main-report.pdf; and Marcos Orellana, Catherine Pearce, and Yulia Genin, *The High Commissioner for Future Generations: The Future We Want* (Center for International Environmental Law & World Future Council, June 4, 2012). This is available at: www.worldfuturecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CIEL_WFC_High_Commissioner_for_Future_Generations.pdf.
- ⁸ See United Nations Secretary-General, *Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations: Report of the Secretary-General, A/68/100*, Sixty-Eighth Session of United Nations General Assembly, August 5, 2013, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2006future.pdf. See esp. secs. 3 and 4.
- ⁹ See United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations, 2021), www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf. See esp. ch. 3.
- ¹⁰ My concerns here are thus distinct from those explored by Stephen M. Gardiner in “A Call for a Global Constitutional Convention Focused on Future Generations” (*Ethics & International Affairs* 28, no. 3 [Fall 2014], pp. 299–315). His concerns are more procedural in character and explore the question, By what process should global institutional reform come about?
- ¹¹ This formulation is modeled on the commitment affirmed in Article 2.1(a) of the Paris Agreement (and reiterated in Article 15 of the Glasgow Climate Pact) but is more ambitious, putting greater emphasis on the importance of the 1.5°C target. The Paris Agreement is available here: United Nations, Paris Agreement, 2015, unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf. The Glasgow Climate Pact is available here: Glasgow Climate Pact, advance unedited version, 2021, unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cop26_auv_2f_cover_decision.pdf.
- ¹² The criteria that follow in the text draw on but revise my earlier account in Caney, “Political Institutions for the Future,” pp. 140–42.
- ¹³ Versions of the two suggestions that follow are also made by Jonathan Boston in an instructive discussion in Boston, *Governing for the Future*, pp. 185–97.
- ¹⁴ I owe this point to conversations with Graham Smith. See also his *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?*, pp. 56–57 and 117.
- ¹⁵ Allen E. Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination: Moral Foundations for International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 61.
- ¹⁶ See Leszek Kołakowski, “The Concept of the Left,” in *Toward a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today*, trans. Jane Zielonko Peel (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp. 70–72; and Max Weber, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” in Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, eds., *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994 [1919]), p. 369.

- ¹⁷ See Herbert H. Haines, “Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957–1970,” *Social Problems* 32 no. 1 (October 1984), p. 32 and more generally pp. 31–43. See also Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay, 1975), p. 236; and Todd Schifeling and Andrew J. Hoffman, “Bill McKibben’s Influence on U.S. Climate Change Discourse: Shifting Field-Level Debates through Radical Flank Effects,” *Organization & Environment* 32, no. 3 (September 2019), pp. 213–33.
- ¹⁸ See Delegation of Malta, “Proposal and comments submitted by the Delegation of Malta,” “Principles on General Rights and Obligations, Chairman’s Consolidated Draft, Addendum,” the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Fourth Session, New York, March 2–April 3 1992, Working Group 3, Item 3 of the Provisional Agenda, A/CONF.151/PC/WG. III/L.8/Rev.1/Add.2, February 21 1992 (hereafter “Proposal and comments submitted by the delegation of Malta”), [193.166.3.2/pub/doc/world/UnitedNations/EnvironConf/PreConfDocs/wg3l8addo2](https://www.un.org/Depts/under20/1992/199203/19920303/wg3l8addo2.htm). See, too, the seminal discussion by Weiss in *In Fairness to Future Generations*, pp. 120–26.
- ¹⁹ Delegation of Malta, “Proposal and comments submitted by the delegation of Malta,” para. 6. See also para. 5.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, paras. 10 and 11.
- ²² *Ibid.*, para. 12. See also paras. 13, 15, 16, and 17.
- ²³ See the sources cited in n. 7.
- ²⁴ See Ward, “Committing to the Future We Want”; esp. pp. 8–9.
- ²⁵ See United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, ch. 3, sec. 58, p. 45; and ch. 5, sec. 115, p. 73.
- ²⁶ My understanding of the creation and appointment of envoys comes from “Who are the UN Special and Personal Representatives, Envoys and Advisers of the Secretary-General and How Are They Appointed?,” Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations, ask.un.org/faq/85706.
- ²⁷ See Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice, “A Case for Guardians for Future Generations,” 2nd ed. (position paper, February 2017), p. 5, www.mrfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Position-Paper-The-Case-for-Guardians-for-Future-Generations-Mary-Robinson-Foundation-Climate-Justice-Feb-2017.pdf. For an earlier defense of a commission, see Weiss, *In Fairness to Future Generations*, pp. 148–50. *Disclosure*: I wrote a commissioned paper for the Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice and this (proposal 3) was one of the recommendations.
- ²⁸ For all three points, see Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice, “A Case for Guardians for Future Generations,” p. 5; and Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice, “Global Guardians: A Voice for Future Generations,” 3rd ed. (position paper, April 2017), p. 5, www.mrfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Global-Guardians-A-Voice-for-Future-Generations-April-2017.pdf.
- ²⁹ Stewart, “Overcoming Short-Termism,” p. 185.
- ³⁰ For her discussion of UNIFGEN, see Stewart, “The Double Democratic Deficit,” p. 343; and Stewart, “Overcoming Short-Termism,” p. 185.
- ³¹ For proposals 5, 6, and 7, see Stewart “Overcoming Short-Termism,” p. 185.
- ³² See United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, summary (pp. 4 and 7); ch. 3, sec. 58, p. 45; ch. 4, sec. 102, p. 66; and ch. 5, sec. 125, p. 77.
- ³³ See ch. 13 of the United Nations Charter at “United Nations Charter, Chapter XIII: Trusteeship Council,” United Nations, www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-13.
- ³⁴ See “Trusteeship Council,” United Nations, www.un.org/en/about-us/trusteeship-council. My understanding of the Trusteeship Council is indebted to Ralph Wilde’s instructive discussion in Ralph Wilde, “Trusteeship Council,” in Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 178–89.
- ³⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, ch. 5, sec. 125, p. 77.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, sec. 125, p. 77.
- ³⁷ “Appendix: Transforming the Role of Trusteeship Council,” in “Request for the Inclusion of an Item in the Provisional Agenda of the Fiftieth Session: Review of the Role of the Trusteeship Council,” letter dated June 2 1995 from the permanent representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, United Nations General Assembly, fiftieth session, A/50/142, June 16, 1995, p. 6, digitallibrary.un.org/record/198800?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header.
- ³⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 3. See further, *ibid.*, pp. 3, 5–7.
- ³⁹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, ch. 5, sec. 125, p. 77.
- ⁴⁰ Scott Barrett, *Environment & Statecraft: The Strategy of Environmental Treaty-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); see esp. p. xv; ch. 11; and p. 356.

- ⁴¹ See “YOUNGO: UNFCCC Constituency of Youth Non-Governmental Organizations,” United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/youth/young.
- ⁴² United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, ch. 3, sec. 47, p. 40. See, more generally, ch. 3, secs. 43–51, pp. 39–43.
- ⁴³ Harriet Thew, Lucie Middlemiss, and Jouni Paavola, “‘Youth Is Not a Political Position’: Exploring Justice Claims-Making in the UN Climate Change Negotiations,” *Global Environmental Change* 61 (March 2020), Article 102036 (pp. 1–10).
- ⁴⁴ Dryzek et al., “Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly.”
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ⁴⁶ Smith, *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?*, pp. 97 and 99.
- ⁴⁷ John S. Dryzek, Quinlan Bowman, Jonathan Kuyper, Jonathan Pickering, Jensen Sass, and Hayley Stevenson, *Deliberative Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 10–12. See also Smith, *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?*, pp. 89–93.
- ⁴⁸ On the widespread use of citizens’ assemblies, see Smith’s discussion in *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?* concerning assemblies in Denmark, Canada, Australia, the United States, and the U.K. (pp. 94–96); in Ireland, Spain, and Poland (pp. 102–4); and in Brazil (pp. 107–8). See also Dryzek et al., “Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly,” p. 36. See Dryzek et al., *Deliberative Global Governance*, throughout. For the point that we can also learn from earlier citizens’ assemblies on how to improve them and get the best out of them, see Dryzek et al., “Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly,” pp. 36–37.
- ⁴⁹ Dryzek et al., *Deliberative Global Governance*, pp. 29–30.
- ⁵⁰ See United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement, Article 14.
- ⁵¹ For the concept of “public justification,” see John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 26–29. For its role in global governance, see Simon Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice and Institutional Design: An Egalitarian Liberal Conception of Global Governance,” in “Cosmopolitanism and the State,” special issue, *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 4 (October 2006), pp. 725–56, at p. 750.
- ⁵² On the legitimacy of the procedure, see Dryzek et al., “Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly,” pp. 36 and 39; Dryzek et al., *Deliberative Global Governance*, pp. 7–9; and Smith, *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?*, pp. 96–97.
- ⁵³ For relevant discussion, see Smith, *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?*, pp. 98–99.
- ⁵⁴ Global Assembly, globalassembly.org.
- ⁵⁵ Global Assembly, “How It Works,” globalassembly.org/how-it-works.
- ⁵⁶ Global Assembly, “People’s Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth,” globalassembly.org/declaration.
- ⁵⁷ Global Assembly, “Community Assemblies,” globalassembly.org/community-assemblies.
- ⁵⁸ I stress “some” because space has precluded including other ideas, such as Guterres’s proposals for a “Futures Laboratory” and a “Declaration on Future Generations” (*Our Common Agenda*, ch. 3, sec. 56, p. 45; and ch. 3, sec. 59, p. 45). See also the many suggestions in Hayley Stevenson and John S. Dryzek, *Democratizing Global Climate Governance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), ch. 8; Dryzek et al., *Deliberative Global Governance*, chs. 3 and 4; and John S. Dryzek and Ana Tanasoca, *Democratizing Global Justice: Deliberating Global Goals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), ch. 7.
- ⁵⁹ Michaël Aklin and Matto Mildenerger, “Prisoners of the Wrong Dilemma: Why Distributive Conflict, Not Collective Action, Characterizes the Politics of Climate Change,” *Global Environmental Politics* 20, no. 4 (November 2020), pp. 4–27. See esp. pp. 5, 9–11 and 16–20 (on why it is a distributive problem) and esp. pp. 6–9 and 11–23 (on the limitations of seeing climate change as a global collective action problem).
- ⁶⁰ For the concepts of “climate-forcing assets” and “climate-vulnerable assets,” see Jeff D. Colgan, Jessica F. Green, and Thomas N. Hale, “Asset Revaluation and the Existential Politics of Climate Change,” in “Challenges to the Liberal International Order: International Organization at 75,” special issue, *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 586–610, at p. 587. See also esp. pp. 586–87 and 589 (on why it is misleading to see climate change as a global collective action problem); and pp. 587, 589–92, and esp. 592–601 (for their own theory).
- ⁶¹ On the latter, see Simon Caney, *Democratic Reform, Intergenerational Justice and the Challenges of the Long-Term*, CUSP Essay Series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity 11 (Guildford, U.K.: Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, July 2019), www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/m/m1-11/.

Abstract: Many societies are now having to live with the impacts of climate change and are being confronted with heat waves, wildfires, droughts, and rising sea levels. Without radical action, future generations will inherit an even more degraded planet. This raises the question: How can political institutions be reformed to promote justice for future generations and to leave them an ecologically sustainable world? In this essay, I address a particular version of this question; namely: How can supra-state institutions and transnational political processes be transformed to realize climate justice for future generations? The essay seeks to make two contributions. First, it considers what criteria should guide the evaluation of proposals for reform. It proposes four criteria, and analyzes how they should be interpreted and applied. Second, it considers a raft of different proposals, commenting on their strengths and weaknesses. It presents ten proposals in all, including, among others, establishing a UN high commissioner for future generations, appointing a UN special envoy for future generations, creating a UN agency mandated to protect future generations, instituting representatives for the future in all key UN bodies, ensuring greater youth participation in transnational political decision-making processes, and further developing a global citizens' assembly. In short, my aim is to outline some of the options available and to defend a normative framework that we can use to evaluate them.

Keywords: Short-termism, intergenerational justice, future generations, climate justice, citizens' assembly