



Succeeding generations: shaping the future

III. Succeeding generations: shaping the future

40. In 1945, the promise was to [save “succeeding generations”](#) from the scourge of war. A similar promise today would necessarily encompass a much broader range of threats, including the very viability of human life on earth. Yet we are far from keeping that promise. This current generation of young people sees a world in which their future is compromised in multiple ways. We are already feeling the impacts of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, which will only become more devastating and irreversible in the future. Many young people have a lack of trust in the ability of existing institutions and leadership to meet their concerns. COVID-19 threw these questions into even sharper relief. Any renewal of the social contract must include a profound deepening of solidarity between generations. Young people need to believe that they have a stake in society and a viable future. They also need to see society believe and invest in them.

41. This renewal of solidarity between generations should extend not only to those currently alive but also to their children and grandchildren. Humanity faces a series of long-term challenges that evolve over the course of multiple human life spans: warming and degradation of the planet, as well as managing new technologies such as artificial intelligence and gene editing, demographic shifts towards an older population, urbanization and the evolution of social welfare provision. With the fourth industrial revolution, we are in one of the most important transformational moments in recent history. The way in which people live, work, eat and interact with each other is likely to look very different in the future. Yet our dominant political and economic incentives remain weighted heavily in favour of the short term and status quo, prioritizing immediate gains at the expense of longer-term human and planetary well-being. Decisions made today will shape the course of the planet for centuries. Our understanding of “we the peoples” in the Charter of the United Nations needs

SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Decisions made today will define the future for younger and future generations.



SOLIDARITY WITH YOUNGER GENERATIONS

-  Voice and participation
-  Quality education
-  Sustainable jobs

SOLIDARITY WITH FUTURE GENERATIONS

-  Long-term thinking
-  Represent future generations



SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

-  HEALTHY PLANET
-  STRONG INSTITUTIONS
-  HEALTH, SOCIAL PROTECTION
-  EDUCATION, WORK
-  PREPAREDNESS

to be expanded to protect the interests of all the people of the twenty-first century and to bequeath a liveable world to those who will follow.

42. Young people today, along with future generations, will have to live with the consequences of our action and inaction. Today's generation of young people is distinct from future generations. However, it is time to find ways to give more weight to their collective interests and to make our systems work to safeguard their futures. This renewal of solidarity between generations is an integral part of the other actions identified in this report, otherwise the social contract that shapes the future will be designed exclusively by those who will not live to see it realized.

A. Solidarity with younger generations

43. The world today is home to the largest generation of young people in history at 1.8 billion people, close to 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries. Young people have never been more educated or more connected, yet they continue to face significant obstacles to achieving their full potential. Some [267 million young people](#) (15–24 years old) are not in education, employment or training, two thirds of whom are young women as a result of [gendered expectations](#) of unpaid family work and informal employment. The pandemic has only made this [worse](#). The pandemic also exposed large disparities between developed and least developed countries in the numbers of young people online, notably affecting their capacity to continue education remotely during school closures. Young people tell us that our systems do not listen to them meaningfully and that our systems are short-sighted and do not take their concerns seriously.

44. Delivering on the priorities of young people and meaningfully including them in decision-making are investments that will deliver immediate returns, as well as build human capital and social cohesion for the longer term. The actions below respond to

the priorities identified by young people during the [consultations](#) for Our Common Agenda and the [seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations](#).

Having a voice

45. Some countries have created opportunities for younger generations to have a voice in decisions that affect them, through youth councils, parliaments and ministries. However, these solutions have not always avoided tokenism, often remaining peripheral to core political processes. Youth-led protest movements are frequently driven by deep distrust of today's political classes and desire for proper engagement in decision-making. Yet some authorities have clamped down on peaceful protest, dismissed young people as too inexperienced and treated them as beneficiaries or, worse, as [threats](#) rather than equal partners. At the global level, young people have been formally recognized as critical actors within intergovernmental frameworks on peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, human rights and humanitarian action. Yet here, too, engagement is not always meaningful, nor does it guarantee geographical, gender, income and other forms of diversity.

46. In line with the commitments made by Member States in the [declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations](#) to listen to and work with youth, governments are urged to promote **political representation for youth**, including young women and girls. This could entail lowering the voting age and the eligibility age for standing as a candidate for elected office, as well as strengthening youth participatory bodies. Supporting the political participation of a diverse range of young people may mean challenging social norms and stereotypes, especially in relation to gender, as well as in relation to other forms of marginalization. Young people are also urged to seize the opportunities available to them, including by exercising their right to vote. Together with leading researchers and academic institutions, I will explore a **"youth in politics" index** to track the opening of political space in countries around the world that younger generations are so clearly

demanding, as well as the participation of young people in these processes.

47. Within the United Nations system, the bond with young people can be further strengthened, for instance through regular check-ins, recognizing their diversity and reaching those who are marginalized. Efforts will be stepped up to increase youth participation in our support to electoral processes and in peacebuilding efforts, including by building the capacity of local youth networks and youth-led organizations. While our envoys on youth have increased the profile of youth issues in the Organization, if the United Nations is to live up to its [commitments](#) this work must be put on a more sustainable footing. I propose the establishment of a **dedicated United Nations Youth Office** in the Secretariat, which will integrate the current activities of the Office of the Envoy on Youth, continue to lead high-level advocacy and serve as the anchor for United Nations system coordination and accountability on youth matters across our work on peace, sustainable development, humanitarian issues and human rights. In the meantime, my Envoy on Youth will prepare recommendations for **more meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement in United Nations deliberative and decision-making processes**, for the consideration of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council and their respective subsidiary bodies. This will be done in consultation with the world's young people and in coordination with United Nations system agencies and other stakeholders.

Learning

48. **Quality education** (including early childhood education) is a fundamental [human right](#) – one of society's great equalizers, a prerequisite for young people to be equipped to exercise their voice and contribute to the social contract, and a foundation for tolerance, peace, human rights and sustainability. Yet the provision of education today is in turmoil. Over 90 per cent of children in the world have had their education interrupted by COVID-19, [the largest](#) disruption of education

systems in history. For many students, especially girls and young women, this break may become permanent, with potential consequences for their rights, equality and development for future generations. Even prior to COVID-19, traditional education systems were still not reaching some 258 million children and young people in the world and were [failing to provide](#) many students with even basic foundational skills such as reading and mathematics. Students in developing and developed countries alike tell us that they leave the education system without the tools that they need to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world, including digital literacy, global citizenship and sustainable development. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that both early childhood education and lifelong learning, so crucial for individuals and society at large, remain an aspiration in most countries.

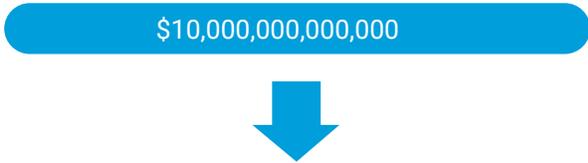
49. Our priority should be to help children and young people to catch up on learning lost during the pandemic while transforming education systems so that students reach their full potential. I will champion lifelong learning for all and convene a **Summit on Transforming Education in 2022** to accelerate progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4. The Summit will forge a common vision for education, building on the forthcoming work of the [International Commission on the Futures of Education](#) and other recent progress including the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education fund and the establishment of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism. We need a road map for teaching all children to read, write and perform basic mathematics and for giving them other core skills. Education systems need to be modernized and connected, making learning more student-centred, dynamic, inclusive and collaborative. We can succeed only if we value the world's teachers and work with them as partners in transforming schools, colleges and universities. The Summit will tackle crucial issues, including equity, the education obstacles faced by girls and young women, the transition from education to employment, and the promotion of lifelong learning and reskilling. It will

THE LEARNING CRISIS



COVID-19

School closures from COVID-19 have left over a billion students out of school and could cause students to **lose \$10 trillion in earnings** over their working lives.

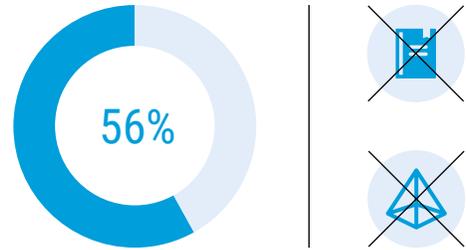


Source: World Bank, 2020.



FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

More than half - 56% - of all **children will not be able to read or be proficient in mathematics** by the time they complete primary education.



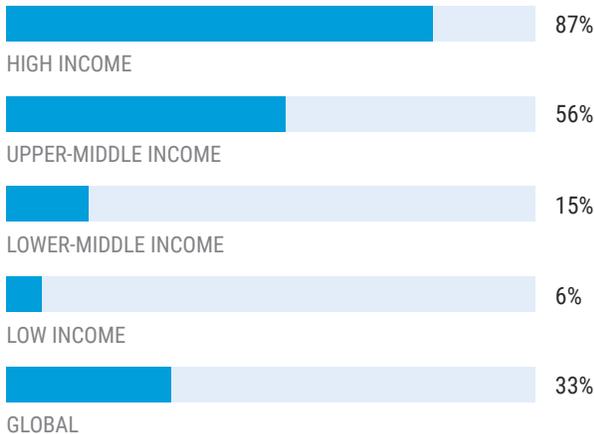
Source: UNESCO, 2017.



DIGITAL INCLUSION

Reimagining education means investing in digital literacy and digital infrastructure to **close the digital divide**.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH ONLINE, 2020



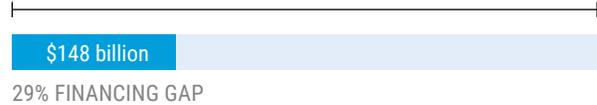
Source: ITU, 2020.



FUNDING GAP

Low- and middle-income countries face a **\$148 billion annual education funding gap** when compared with what is needed to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, quality education.

TOTAL ANNUAL EDUCATION FINANCING NEEDS: \$504 BILLION



Source: UNESCO, 2020.

also address the lack of adequate financing for national education transformation efforts, including the operationalization of the International Finance Facility for Education and other domestic and international resources. Digital inclusivity will be a vital part of the Summit, building on existing efforts such as the [Giga initiative](#), which aims to ensure that all schools are connected to the Internet by 2030. Broader investments in the education sector could also be explored, including the next generation of teachers and open-source digital education tools. Summit preparations will involve governments, students, teachers and leading United Nations entities, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). They will also draw on the private sector and major technology companies, which can contribute to the digital transformation of education systems.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON EDUCATION

- [Half of the world's students were still affected by school closures](#) a year after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed in part to an increase in child marriage and child labour.

Prospering

50. Another priority identified by youth is the availability and sustainability of decent **jobs and economic opportunities**. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on young workers and those transitioning to employment, particularly young women. Too many are settling for work in the informal sector or jobs for which they are



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overqualified and underpaid, neither meeting their aspirations nor allowing them to unleash their full potential, and perpetuating underdevelopment and lack of tax revenue in low- and lower-middle-income countries. A focus is needed on (re)skilling and upskilling youth and connecting them from learning to employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The availability of decent jobs for youth is also tied to the sustainability of their futures, including efforts to transition to low-emission and climate-resilient labour markets.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

- Globally, [youth employment fell by 8.7 per cent in 2020](#) compared with 3.7 per cent for older adults.

51. As they emerge from the pandemic, Member States are urged to consider **youth labour guarantees**, alongside macroeconomic and industrial policies to boost labour demand, drawing on the “not in education, employment or training” (NEET) indicator. Other measures could include extending social protection systems to young workers; reducing barriers to advanced education and labour market participation, including due to gender or other forms of discrimination; expanding apprenticeship schemes and technical and vocational training; and integrating young voices in social dialogue and decision-making. Youth have, in particular, asked that entrepreneurship be promoted, including through start-up capital and training in business, digital and essential soft entrepreneurship skills. In support of State efforts and the existing Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, the United Nations, together with international financial institutions, will launch a **recovery barometer** that will track career paths and labour market outcomes for youth between now and 2025 and beyond as part of the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, concerted efforts to adopt new technologies and invest in green economies could

result in [24 million new “jobs of the future” by 2030](#). One way to proceed could be the formation of a **high-ambition coalition** to promote green and digital economy job creation, involving relevant ministers (finance, planning, labour and education), youth and other key stakeholders from the 20 countries whose labour markets and workforce will expand most rapidly over the next decade, emphasizing equal access for women and girls to these jobs and the transition from the informal to the formal sectors.

B. Solidarity with future generations

52. Investing in younger generations will deliver crucial returns for those alive today, but the complex problems that we face will unfold over multiple lifespans. Today’s decisions on issues such as climate, technology and development will profoundly alter the livelihoods of the [10.9 billion](#) people who are expected to be born later this century, predominantly in Africa and Asia.

53. The principle of **intergenerational equity** – recognizing responsibilities towards future generations – has deep roots in diverse cultural and religious traditions and is reflected in the Charter of



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the United Nations. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development [found](#) that the “profligacy” of living generations was “rapidly closing the options for future generations”, calling for drastic action to protect them. The well-being of future generations has since been acknowledged in international documents on sustainable development and the environment, as well as the UNESCO [Declaration on the Responsibility of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations](#). However, this recognition has not necessarily resulted in meaningful steps to account for the interests of future generations, either nationally or within the multilateral system. Short-term calculations continue to dominate policymaking.

54. The proposals in this report would lead to approaches being put in place that will benefit future generations over the long term. Beyond this, I invite States and other stakeholders to **consider specific steps to account for the interests of future generations** in national and global decision-making. While the modalities at the national level are matters for States to decide, some options are set out below. Accounting for the interests of future generations would require two adaptations: strengthening our capacities to understand and assess the future, building long-term thinking into important policies and decision-making; and creating specific forums and instruments to protect the interests of future generations at all levels of governance.

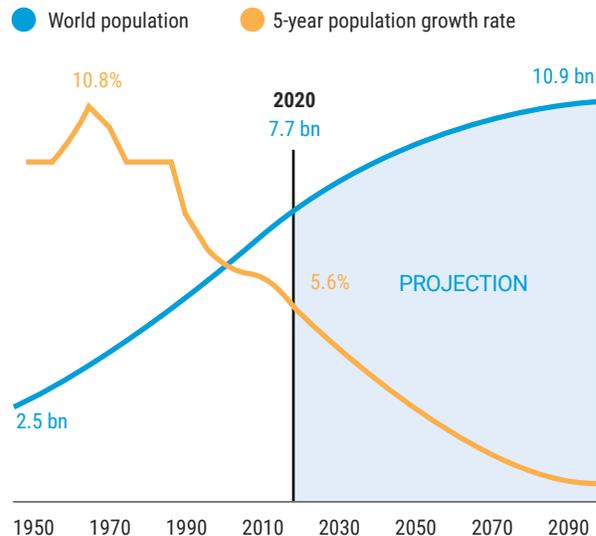
Long-term intergenerational thinking

55. The gravitational pull of short-term thinking is strong and growing. Ours is an age of acceleration and volatility, where boom-bust markets, shifting political dynamics and technologically driven innovations demand rapid responses and quick results. At the same time, we have the capacity to think for the longer term more than ever before. Technological, climate and demographic modelling offer us empirically backed scenarios reaching until the end of the twenty-first century and beyond. We know, for example, that our current rates of carbon emissions are leading to global temperature changes

POPULATION GROWTH

POPULATION GROWTH PEAKED IN THE LATE 1960s

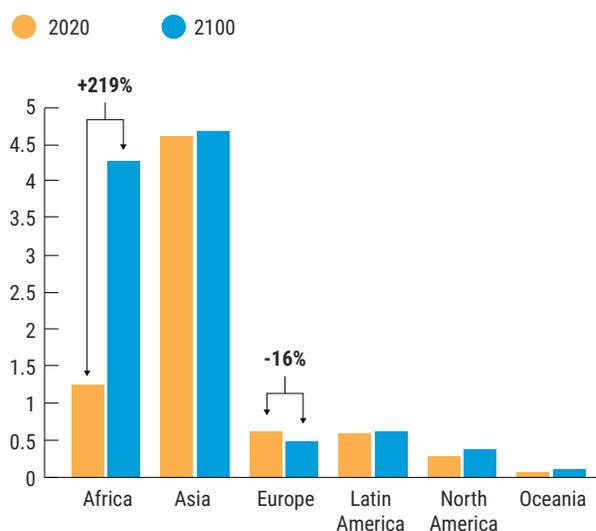
World population growth, 1950–2100



Source: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019.

POPULATION GROWTH PROJECTIONS TO 2100: LARGEST INCREASE IN AFRICA; DECLINE IN EUROPE

The world population in 2020 and 2100 (in billions)



Source: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019.

that will irreversibly affect every person on the planet. This knowledge needs to become a source of action. It is time to place long-term analysis, planning and thinking at the heart of national governance and the multilateral system. We must expand our thinking and institutions across time.

56. The United Nations will review its work to strengthen this capacity. This will include conducting future impact assessments of major policies and programmes, convening foresight and planning experts across the United Nations system and its multilateral partners, regularly reporting on megatrends and catastrophic risks (chap. IV) and working with a wider community of governmental, academic, civil society, private sector, philanthropic and other actors to strengthen strategic foresight, preparedness for catastrophic risks, and anticipatory decision-making that values instead of discounts the future. Collectively, this body of work would come together in a **Futures Laboratory ("Futures Lab")** and could support States, subnational authorities and others to build capacity and exchange good practices to enhance long-termism, forward action and adaptability.

Representing future generations

57. Future generations are, by definition, unrepresented in today's decision-making and unable to articulate their needs. To translate the principle of intergenerational equity into practice, consideration could be given to forums to act on their behalf, as their trustees, as well as instruments to further protect their interests.

58. At the national level, some countries have established **committees for the future or future generations commissioners** who advise governments and public bodies on the effects of

present decisions on people in the future. Other States could establish similar mechanisms, building on these good practices. At the multilateral level, a growing number of Member States and advocates have proposed options to represent succeeding generations in the United Nations system, including through a Commissioner or Ombudsperson for Future Generations, a Commission of Global Guardians for the Future, or a repurposed Trusteeship Council. To help explore the viability of these and other options, I propose the appointment of a **Special Envoy for Future Generations**, building on a proposal by my predecessor in 2013. The Special Envoy could be tasked with representing the interests of those who are expected to be born over the coming century. The Special Envoy could also support the work of the multilateral system on long-term thinking and foresight, including through the Futures Lab mentioned above. One of the first tasks of the Special Envoy could be to explore, together with Member States, the use of the Trusteeship Council to give a voice to succeeding generations (chap. V).

59. Member States might also consider reflecting duties to future generations in their Constitutions and national legislative frameworks, a step already taken by many countries. The interests of younger and future generations are increasingly being considered by national courts, particularly in the context of climate change and the environment. Internationally, these efforts could be consolidated in a **Declaration on Future Generations**. This could build on the above-mentioned UNESCO Declaration to specify duties to succeeding generations and develop a mechanism to share good practices and monitor how governance systems address long-term challenges.