A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations

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Introductory Comment

The world is facing unprecedented challenges of governance beyond what the United Nations was designed to face. The existential threat of nuclear war, the rapid collapse of global biodiversity and the grave effects of the global climate emergency are manifest. These require, not incremental approaches but rapid, far-reaching, and transformational changes in all aspects of society to arrest catastrophic and probably irreversible consequences and build resilience. For insofar as future people exist, they will have interests, whose contents cast a moral shadow on the present. Thus, in this time of systemic threats and global challenges should not the work that was undertaken in 1948 be completed with a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations?

Though the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 has yet to “free humanity from fear” as it sought, the world has progressed in its international recognition and protection since the Declaration was adopted. And, while it was further developed in a series of agreements and treaties, the Declaration has no counterpart declaration for human responsibility. While A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations is no panacea, such a Declaration is urgently needed to reorient on a personal, local and worldwide scale the behaviour and governance of human societies.

The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “every individual and every organ of society ... shall strive ... to promote respect for these rights and freedoms”. Of particular importance in this sentence is the responsibility placed on the individual and on civil society in the promotion of human rights: the rights of responsibility; the rights that shape in all individuals their capacity for self-realization and awareness of their place in society and their ability to participate in the decisions concerning their future and that of their community. Bearing in mind that words such as freedom, democracy or fraternity are meaningful only when our economic and social system no longer produces victims; when no one is left behind; it is the exercise of freedom that is the precursor of ethics and the fundamental principle of intergenerational social justice.

Social justice is that to which political, economic, social, cultural and international regimes should be subordinated, in a context of competence and fair and free cooperation, in order to achieve sustainable development.

Insofar as rights and responsibilities are indivisible; the idea of a human right achieves coherence when we simultaneously acknowledge the duty of all people to respect it. Accordingly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights invites us to embrace its complement; for, among others:

- If we the peoples have a right to life, do we not also have the responsibility to respect life?
- If we have a right to freedom, do we not also have the responsibility to respect the freedom of others?
- If we have a right to security, do we not also have the responsibility to ensure the conditions...
for every human being to enjoy human security?

- If we have a right to development, do we not also have the responsibility to act without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs? and;

- If we all have a responsibility to strive for peace, do not we and future generations also have the right to benefit from peace?

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right states that “all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights and, as a result of common birth into the human family, should treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. This spirit of fraternity, equity or solidarity, is precisely what the world needs more of today. Solidarity with our fellow humans, solidarity between nations, and solidarity towards our planet Earth.

A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations would enhance the intrinsic bond between human rights and responsibilities, based on the respect of the political, social, economic, cultural and international rights, at personal and collective, national and global levels.

Recognition of the equal and inalienable rights of all the peoples requires a foundation of freedom, justice and peace and no less demands that rights and responsibilities be given equal importance to establish an ethical base so that all peoples can peacefully coexist and fulfil their potential. This cannot be achieved by laws, prescriptions and conventions alone, but needs a global ethic. For without an ethical foundation, there can be no democracy. Without viable democracy, there can be no sustainable development. Without sustainable development there can be no lasting peace.

Let us understand that peace is not merely absence of war, but also an obligation to recognize, protect and restore human dignity and assure the dignity and well-being of future generations. This positive concept of peace is at once based on human freedom and, therefore, on intergenerational human rights, but also human responsibilities.

The United Nations Charter begins with the words “We the peoples ... have decided to save succeeding generations”. The “Peoples of the United Nations,” affirmed their “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”. To further realise its conviction, “We the peoples” must build a universal culture of human rights and responsibilities of the present generations towards future generations. In this, a duty of care that obliges us to be vigilant and actively engage global civil society.

The proposed Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations emphasises that a narrow insistence on rights can perpetuate a culture of domination, violence and conflict; that assemblies of persons in pressing for their own freedom have a duty of care to respect the freedom of others. The basic premise should be to aim at the greatest amount of freedom possible, but also to develop the fullest sense of responsibility that will allow freedom to grow. To enable a great transformation from a culture of domination, violence and war to a culture of engagement, conversation, reconciliation, and peace we urgently need an
intergenerational social contract; one that is anchored in a comprehensive approach to human rights and responsibilities. Then freed from fear, humankind may invent its future.

At a time when the well-being of our ‘future selves’ and that of future generations should be the focal point and prime beneficiary of anticipatory governance, it is time now to initiate an equally important quest for the acceptance of human responsibilities or duties. Indeed, for the United Nations to maintain its legitimacy it must reach beyond traditional paradigms and attitudes, framed by Development, Security and Human Rights to include Human Responsibilities including responsibilities to future generations. With an inclusive approach to multilateralism actively engaging global civil society; placing intergenerational human rights and human responsibilities at the centre of its decision-making and programming, a complementary Declaration of Human Responsibilities could enable the United Nation to move from being a platform to debate competing national interests, to become one promoting the common global interests on a range of systemic threats and urgent global challenges.

The concept of human responsibilities serves to balance the concepts of freedom and obligation: while rights relate more to freedom, obligations are associated with responsibility. Nonetheless, freedom and responsibility are the fabric of all social relations. Responsibility, as a moral quality, serves as a much-needed restraint on rapacious freedom. For, in any society, freedom can never be exercised without limits. Thus, the more we cleave to freedom, the greater the responsibility we bear toward ourselves and others including future generations.

A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations is not only a way of balancing freedom with responsibility, but also a means of reconciling ideologies and political views, a vital component of the culture of peace and disarmament which is needed to replace the culture of war, constraint and violence.

The proposed declaration of human responsibilities which follows seeks to bring intergenerational freedom and responsibility into balance and to promote a move from the freedom of indifference to a freedom of active engagement and social justice.

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Mindful of the will of the peoples, set out in the Charter of the United Nations, to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” and to safeguard the values and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and all other relevant instruments of international law,

Considering that, in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, and; Bearing in mind that the peoples of the United Nations have, in the Charter, reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person, and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Considering that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought
up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the
spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity,

**Considering** the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both adopted on 16 December 1966,
the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted on 20 November 1989, Convention on the
Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted on 18 December 1979 by the
United Nations General Assembly and Resolution A/RES/53/243 on the Declaration and
Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace adopted on 13 September 1999 by the UN General
Assembly,

**Concerned** by the fate of future generations in the face of existential and systemic threats as well as
global challenges,

**Conscious** that, at this critical point in history, the very existence of humankind and the Earth's
biosphere are threatened,

**Stressing** that full respect for human rights and ideals of democracy constitute an essential basis for
the protection of the needs and interests of future generations. A fundamental right for all human
beings, democracy should be exercised under conditions of freedom, equality and intergenerational
responsibility, ensuring diversity of opinions and beliefs, and common interest,

**Asserting** the necessity of establishing new, equitable and global links of partnership and for
promoting inter-generational solidarity for the sustainable co-evolution of humankind and the
biosphere,

**Recalling** that the responsibilities of the present generations towards future generations have
already been embrace in various instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All
Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted on 18 December 1979 by the United Nations
General Assembly; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the
Convention on Biological Diversity, adopted in Rio de Janeiro on 5 June 1992; the Rio Declaration
on Environment and Development, adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and
Development on 14 June 1992; the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the
and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace adopted on 13 September 1999 by the UN General
Assembly, the UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibility of the Present Generations Towards
Future Generations of 12 November 1997, the United Nations General Assembly resolutions
relating to the protection of the global climate for present and future generations adopted since
1990; the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by the
General Conference of UNESCO on 16 November 1972; and the UNESCO Declaration on the
Responsibility of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations of 12 November 1997,

**Noting** that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the principle of the inadmissibility
of discrimination and proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights
and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of
any kind, including distinction based on sex,
Recalling that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity,

Convinced that the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields,

Determined to contribute to the dissolution of current world problems through transformational co-operation, to create such conditions as will ensure that the needs and interests of future generations are not jeopardized by the burden of the past, and to pass to following generations a better world to future generations,

Resolved to strive to ensure that the present generations are fully aware of their responsibilities towards future generations,

Recognizing that the obligation of protecting the needs and interests of future generations is fundamental to the ethical mission of the United Nations, whose Charter enshrines the ideals of “justice and liberty and peace” founded on “the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind”,

Cognizant that the fate of future generations critically depends on decisions and actions taken today, and that present-day problems, including poverty, technological and material underdevelopment, unemployment, exclusion, discrimination and threats to the environment, must be solved in the interests of both present and future generations,

Convinced that there is a moral responsibility to formulate behavioural guidelines for the present generations within a broad, future-oriented perspective,

Recognizing the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world and implies a duty of care to present and future generations,

Whereas we the peoples, to the best of our knowledge and ability, have a responsibility to foster intergenerational social justice, it is a goal which may not be achieved by laws, prescriptions, and conventions alone,

Mindful that a narrow insistence on rights can result in conflict, division, and endless dispute, the neglect of human responsibilities to the present and future generations and perpetuate a culture of domination, violence and conflict,

The General Assembly therefore proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations as a universal standard for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society shall contribute to the equitable advancement of communities of all their members. We, the peoples of the world thus renew and reinforce commitments already proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: namely, the full acceptance of the
Article 1 - Needs and interests of future generations

Endowed with scientific reason and conscience, we the peoples accept a responsibility to each and all in a spirit of solidarity ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded.

Article 2 - Freedom of choice

With due regard to human rights and fundamental freedoms, and while ensuring no one is left behind, it is important to make every effort to ensure that future as well as present generations enjoy full freedom of choice as to their political, economic and social systems and are able to preserve their cultural diversity.

Article 3 - Maintenance and perpetuation of humankind

The present generations should actively strive to ensure the maintenance and perpetuation of humankind with due respect for the dignity of the human person. Consequently, the nature and form of human life must not be undermined in any way whatsoever.

Article 4 - Preservation of life on Earth

The present generations have the responsibility to bequeath to future generations an Earth which will not one day be irreversibly damaged by human activity. Each generation inheriting the Earth temporarily should take care to use natural resources reasonably and ensure that life is not prejudiced by harmful modifications of the ecosystems and that scientific and technological progress in all fields does not irreparably and irreversibly harm life on Earth.

Article 5 - Protection of the environment

1. In order to ensure that future generations benefit from the richness of the Earth's biosphere, the present generations should strive for sustainable development all over the world in order to assure dignity, freedom, security and justice for all people while preserving living conditions, particularly the quality and integrity of the environment.

2. The present generations should ensure that future generations are not exposed to pollution which may endanger their health or their existence itself.

3. The present generations should preserve for future generations natural resources necessary for sustaining human life and for its sustainable development.

4. The present generations should take into account possible consequences for future generations of major projects before these are carried out.

Article 6 - Human genome and biodiversity

The human genome, in full respect of the dignity of the human person and human rights, must be protected and biodiversity safeguarded. Scientific and technological progress should not in any way impair or compromise the preservation of the human and other species.
Article 7 - Cultural diversity and cultural heritage

With due respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, sovereign equality and territorial integrity of nations and non-interference in their internal affairs; the present generations should take care to preserve the cultural diversity of humankind. The present generations, imbued by the spirit of non-violence, the culture of peace and global citizenship, have the responsibility to identify, protect and safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and to transmit this common heritage to future generations.

Article 8 - Common heritage of humankind

The present generations may use the common heritage of humankind, as defined in international law, provided that this does not entail compromising it irreparably and irreversibly.

Article 9 – Peace

1. All men and women are henceforth accountable to their fellow human beings, and even to future generations, for peace in the world.

2. All human beings have the duty to respect and advance a culture of peace and disarmament in their various fields of operation: political, economic, social, cultural and international. They shall in no circumstances exercise or defend their rights in ways contrary to the aims and principles of United Nations.

3. The present generations should ensure that both they and future generations co-exist in peace, security respectful of international law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

4. The present generations should spare future generations the scourge of war. To that end, they should avoid exposing future generations to the harmful consequences of armed conflicts as well as all other forms of aggression and use of weapons, contrary to humanitarian principles.

Article 10 - Development and education

1. The present generations should ensure the conditions of equitable, sustainable and universal socio-economic development of future generations, both in its individual and collective dimensions, in particular through a fair and prudent use of available resources for the purpose of combating poverty and in accordance with the principles of equity and social justice embraced by the United Nations.

2. Education is an important instrument to in-form human responsibilities of the present generations towards future generations including the sustainable development of humankind and the biosphere. It should be used to foster peace, justice, understanding, tolerance and equality for the benefit of present and future generations.

Article 11 – Non-discrimination

The present generations should refrain from taking any action or measure which would have the effect of leading to or perpetuating any form of discrimination for future generations.
Article 12 – Implementation

1. States, the United Nations system, other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, individuals, public and private bodies should assume their full responsibilities in promoting respect for the ideals laid down in this Declaration, and encourage by all appropriate means their full recognition and effective application.

2. With foresight to represent succeeding generations, the United Nations shall institutionalise and empower an independent Ombudsperson for Future Generations. Obliging policymakers to protect the future from the present; a legitimate defender of the interests of the future; the Ombudsperson for Future Generations's moral authority shall obtain from the values and principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Furnished with institutional mechanisms, requisite legal provisions, and procedural requirements that bring the long term sharply and consistently into political focus, the Ombudsperson for Future Generations shall be supported by a systemic risk foresight facility. Serving as an instrument to bring greater deliberation, visibility, and impartiality to decision-making; with a budget guarantee mechanism; the Ombudsperson shall be empowered to initiate proactive actions in the form of ex officio investigations, raise issues in its annual report to the General Assembly, conduct reactive enquiries and judicial processes, address the media or the General Assembly, initiate public awareness campaigns, investigations, and other such actions as needed to deliver on its fiduciary responsibility to future generations. Promoting inter-generational solidarity for the sustainable co-evolution of humankind and the biosphere, the Ombudsperson for Future Generations's non-restrictive mandate and broad jurisdiction shall extend to and make concrete environmental, legal and political commitments towards future generations.

3. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any state, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the responsibilities, rights and freedom set forth in this Declaration, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the Charter of the United Nations.

4. In view of its ethical mission and to advance democratic multilateralism, the UN shall disseminate this Declaration as widely as possible and undertake all necessary steps to raise public awareness concerning the ideals enshrined herein.