



Climate change and environmental protection: Ensuring intergenerational solidarity

Arun Mahato*

Abstract

Climate change and environmental protection are key contemporary challenges that have to be addressed on multiple levels. Especially when it comes to enabling intergenerational and transnational solidarity, constructive solutions are urgently required. In order to tackle these complex challenges within a European framework, this policy brief suggests implementing an interdisciplinary approach combining economic, legal-institutional and knowledge-based measures, as well as emphasizing the pivotal roles played by civil society actors and farmers.

Introduction

A paper published by the European Commission (EC) in 2018 concludes that “solidarity is alive and active in Europe” (DG RTD, 2018). As a moral value closely bound to conceptions of identity, solidarity is nuanced, conditional and often fragile (ibid.). Since solidarity actions are largely conducted on the member-state level, the challenge is to extend that solidarity to the transnational terrain (ibid.). A cosmopolitan solidarity beyond national borders may have significant implications for the management of contemporary socio-ecological phenomena (Habermas, 1998). The climate strike movement has illustrated that climate change, conceived and framed as a common challenge for present and future generations, has the potential to facilitate solidarity across national borders. By creating a mutual focus towards the aim of protecting the

* Arun Mahato is an MA Student at the Institute for European Global Studies, University of Basel. All the opinions expressed in this briefing are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

environment for present and future generations, solidarity as a shared emotion can form productive social ties that motivate people to act towards this end (Collins, 2004). One of the key demands of this youth-led movement is intergenerational justice, a concept usually referring to the “idea that present generations have certain duties towards future generations”, and that costs and risks caused by the former are not imposed on the latter (risk-imposition) (Schuppert, 2020). This is as opposed to the concept of intragenerational justice, which refers to “global justice between different people of the present generation” (Baumgärtner & Sievers Glotzbach, 2012). Climate change is connected to agriculture, because extreme weather events, e.g. droughts or heatwaves, seriously affect harvesting while at the same time farming contributes to climate change through the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere (European Commission, 2020a). Additionally, the structural change in the agriculture sector leads to a scarcity of skilled and knowledgeable young farmers that could boost innovation and mitigate the negative effects on the environment (European Commission, 2020b).

Complex contemporary challenges such as climate change call for innovative ideas and need to be addressed at every stage of the multi-level governance within the European Union.

Ultimately, the question of how intergenerational justice can be ensured is closely linked to sustainable development,

proclaimed in the 1987 Brundtland Report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). Complex contemporary challenges such as climate change call for innovative ideas and need to be addressed at every stage of the multi-level governance within the European Union. This paper argues that by strategically supporting key actors, namely transnationally oriented civil society organizations (CSOs) and sustainably operating farmers in Europe, as well as by implementing an institutional framework for the rights of future generations, climate change can be tackled from different angles and intergenerational justice can be fostered.

Policy recommendations

1. Supporting civil society organizations to enhance transnational solidarity (spatial)

Civil society organizations mostly act in their respective national context, “because that is where funding, policies and beneficiaries are located” (DG RTD, 2020). Yet, by implementing a robust ‘civil society infrastructure’ (SOLIDUS) as a form of a cohesive system comprising civil society actors and based on solidarity, that transcends national borders, contemporary challenges such as climate change may be more readily addressed. However, CSOs themselves are increasingly facing difficulties stemming from altered societal, political and technological circumstances, which is why they too have to develop new ways of operating and retain their competitive advantages relative to other players in the field (e.g. social economy enterprises) (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017). CSOs are to be considered as key actors for any sustainable

and just society, since they represent the interests and needs of the masses. Therefore, material support for CSOs at the EU level would be a way to leverage their scope and impact on policy-decisions. However, it is crucial to ensure political independence of CSOs, as well as establishing appropriate frameworks to assess their overall performance and their legitimacy emanating from it. Policy-makers on the member-state and EU level could, in collaboration with CSOs or their representation organ “Civil Society Europe”, further enhance the visibility of the issue of intergenerational justice in relation to climate change and environmental protection. Enforcing such connections between civil society and European institutions seems to constitute a key element of the “Conference on the Future of Europe” (European Commission, 2020d).

2. Supporting future generations of farmers to ensure intergenerational justice (temporal) *Why farming matters?*

“Farmers play a key role in tackling climate change, protecting the environment and preserving landscapes and biodiversity” (European Commission, 2018). Supporting farmers by improving their material conditions is considered an important step in order to enhance the overall attractiveness of the profession and counteract the negative impacts of ageing on the sector. Thus, at the EU level, financial instruments like the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) or the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), support farmers and rural development projects to become an important pillar for modernization efforts. Improving the current working conditions of farmers is likely to have a positive effect on future generations too. However, conventional

ways of farming involving large amounts of physical work with poor economic rewards and high risks are unlikely to be attractive for a generation of digital natives, socialized with notions of flexibility and connectivity, and used to a certain standard of living. Therefore, material support should also entail innovative business models and progressive approaches, such as “providing investment funds for a small family pepper growing business in Hungary using exclusively renewable energy” (European Commission, 2020c).

Knowledge and Innovation

In order to prevent migration away from the countryside, the rural youth should in particular be familiarized with and encouraged to contribute to the development of new technologies and get inspired by the idea of generating innovative real-world solutions to pressing socio-ecological challenges. Connecting practitioners in and across rural areas through agricultural cooperatives (e.g. community supported agriculture) and knowledge-based networks, and allow them to pool their resources (see. European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) & European Commissions’ Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)) could enable solidarity among participants.

Accounting for organizational differences

The organizational structure of existing farms must be taken into account in order to adequately assess the potentials and needs of the farmers and the society at large. A small-scale family owned organic farm may have different demands, aspirations and opportunities than large-scale commodity agriculture. Under the banner of competitiveness, a just policy framework therefore has to acknowledge the potentials

and limitations deriving from the respective organizational structure of those farms.

Intragenerational solidarity

Older and more experienced generations of farmers are a reservoir of knowledge about agricultural practices and could therefore be seen as an important asset for the development of modern and sustainable agricultural schemes. By bringing together older and younger generations of farmers in a creative space where they can interact and cultivate shared learning, intragenerational solidarity could be activated.

3. Creating institutions for intergenerational justice

Future generations do not have the agency to claim their rights, since they are not yet born. They lack a legal representative body that ensures their legitimate interest in inheriting an intact environment with sufficient natural resources. Several countries have acknowledged this shortcoming and established institutions dedicated to protecting these rights (Göpel & Arhelger, 2010), mostly with a strong focus on environment and sustainable development. However, even though a number of EU publications refer to intergenerational justice, there apparently does not yet exist an institution to defend the rights associated with this issue (Göpel & Arhelger, 2010). To address this gap, “establishing an institutional ‘Guardian for Future Generations’” at the EU level, similar to existing national level institutions, could be a viable solution (Institute for European Environmental Policy, 2015). The “Parlamentarischer Beirat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung” in Germany (2004) or the “Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations” in Hungary (2006) could serve

as models for a legal representative body for future generations.

Conclusion

This policy brief suggests looking at the complex issues of intergenerational justice and climate change from different angles and implementing economic, legal, as well as more knowledge-based policy-solutions. Supporting key players in the socio-ecological realm, while at the same time creating institutions that secure the rights of future generations, constitutes an effective policy strategy to address climate and intergenerational justice.

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Trans European Policy Studies Association

Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000

Brussels, Belgium

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