Processes for Just Future-Making:
Recommendations for Responding
to the Demands of the Fridays
for Future Movement

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Summary

Throughout 2019 millions of young people took to the streets demanding action on climate change. For decades we have talked about climate change threatening the well-being of future generations, but it is only in the last year that the world has woken up to a clear depiction of those future generations, young people, vocalising their concerns in an organised and effective way, demanding more than empty rhetoric about their livelihoods, their future, and future generations.

Responding to the Fridays for Future movement presents us with a **double challenge** because it is not only about enhancing climate action, but also about appropriately engaging with young people, reconsidering their role in just future-making and how we engage with the future in our political processes. This fresh momentum offers a new opportunity for transformative action. However, thus far responses to Fridays for Future have been largely tokenistic and insufficient. While Fridays for Future is about climate action, a fair future for young people, and future generations, it is also fundamentally a movement about justice: the injustice of young people and future generations inheriting an existential threat that they didn't cause.

This policy brief offers recommendations for how to meaningfully respond to these concerns and the Fridays for the Future movement in a way that addresses three key pillars: urgent climate action; participatory future-making; and climate justice for young people and future generations. It is being published alongside a Futuring Tool that has been designed to help identify a practical and context-appropriate response[1].

■ Recommendation 1
Integration: Policymakers should consider context-appropriate methods to integrate the future into decision-making.
This could take place through the introduction of new elements into existing processes, such as additional budget scrutiny, as well as reforming the remits of already existing bodies or processes.

■ Recommendation 2
Participation: Policymakers should utilise participatory processes to inform and guide their decisions.
This could be in the form of youth-specialised participatory processes, or broader, society-wide processes such as citizens' assemblies.

■ Recommendation 3
Imagination: Policymakers should use creative and imaginative exercises to engage with the future in order to build a new collective cultural imagination.
A new collective cultural imagination is necessary to bring us out of the fossil-fuel age. Exercises like visioning and back-casting, as well as other experimental and creative practices, have an important role to play here.

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[1] https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/output/publications/2019/futuring-tool-toolkit-responding-demands-fridays-future-movement

An intergenerational crisis and the need for just future-making

The threat of climate change has never been more apparent and never been higher on the public agenda. This is partly because of the Fridays for Future movement and partly because of a number of catastrophic events and high-profile moments that have punctuated 2018 and 2019, from devastating cyclones in East Africa to record heat in Europe, from the IPCC 1.5 report clarifying the devastating reality of what a temperature rise of 2 degrees means, to the IPBES report on the biodiversity and ecological crisis that many ecosystems around the world face. There has never been more cause and momentum for action. However, even in the face of this, action is inadequate and lacks challenge- and scale-appropriate urgency.

For a long time we have maintained a cognitive distance between ourselves and the reality of climate change, calling it a future problem. However, the recent focus on young people offers a new protagonist in the climate crisis narrative that many find easier to connect with[2]. Young people around the world have come to understand the immediacy of the threat posed by climate change to their lives and they are bringing it into the present and posing a new challenge that cuts to the very core of how our social, economic and political systems work. To respond to their demands, we need to meaningfully consider the future, their future, in a way that we're not used to doing.

Justice across generations

While Fridays for the Future is about climate action and the future of young people, it is also fundamentally a movement about justice. Climate justice concerns are not just confined to the deeply entrenched tensions and injustices between the Global North

Future impact integration & assessment tools

Participatory future-making processes

Specialised council within government with diverse representation

Deliberative citizen participation

Integration of concern for future generations into existing institutional remits and processes

Reform of metrics & indicators for progress

Figure 1:
An overview of the six processes for just future-making described in the Futuring Tool

Source:
Elizabeth Dirth

[2] For a longer discussion about this narrative change, please see a recent blog by the author:
https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/blog/2019/09/responding-fridays-future-and-youth-movement-climate-justice

[3] For further discussion about other climate change injustices, please see Dirth. E (2020): What about the people that already live there? Intersections of climate change and social justice. Amnesty International Strategic Studies Series.

and South, 'developed' and 'developing', poor and wealthy; there is also an intergenerational dimension to climate justice[3]. This is what's bringing young people onto the streets: a deep sense of injustice.

While there is an immense opportunity to use the growing momentum to catalyse the systemic change necessary to address the climate crisis, there is a real risk that responses will remain insufficient and tokenistic. Responses need to address the double challenge that this movement highlights. They need to be not only about enhanced climate action, but also about appropriately engaging with young people and reconsidering their role in future-making as well as our relationship to the future more generally. This is particularly difficult because there are very few examples of meaningful youth engagement and participation, and far too many that are tokenistic or patronising. In addition, we often don't sufficiently engage with the future in political processes. It's often treated as outside of normal operations, without fully understanding that a core responsibility of governments is to look out for the long-term well-being of their citizens and country. Thus far we have struggled with this double challenge. We have been failing to connect the dots between the imperatives of climate science and the practices and processes of inclusive and just future-making.

Instead of press releases and podiums, we need to be talking about participation and engagement and openly addressing injustices. We need to be asking questions like: What does it mean to take into account the well-being of future generations? How do we take steps towards the required systemic change in our values, processes, and the goals of our political, economic and social systems? What kinds of processes can do this and would work for us?

A toolkit for futuring

The three recommendations presented here consolidate the spectrum of ideas and possibilities explored in the Futuring Tool for policymakers into three main themes. These recommendations are focused on governance processes rather than specific policy changes because they try to get at the root cause of political short-termism rather than be prescriptive about a specific goal, target or regulation.

This Futuring Tool contains a list of possibilities, including future impact and assessment tools; participatory future-making processes; specialised councils within government with diverse representation; deliberative citizen participation processes; techniques to integrate concern for future generations into existing institutional remits and processes; and reforms of metrics and indicators for progress. Three core ideas on integration, participation and imagination emerged from this process and are the main discussion points of this policy brief.

A youth volunteer facilitating a co-design session on imagining a low-carbon future with over 100 young people in Scotland. | Source: 2050 Climate Group 2017

Integration

There is a large body of work on the topic of **integration** in policymaking and decision-making, in particular in the field of sustainable development. Sometimes also referred to as policy coherence for sustainable development, it has recently been particularly championed by the OECD. Discussions about policy coherence point to a central tension inherent in the whole idea of sustainable development: the principle is all-encompassing, but yet it is often delivered as a separate policy area or by a separate department or institution. Despite the fact that nothing in society exists outside of what should be covered by the idea of sustainable development. The assumed need to develop specialised tactics, practices or whole institutions to highlight and raise the profile of the idea of sustainable development in order to gather buy-in and raise awareness remains at odds with the reality that the goals of sustainable development will only be achieved with a whole-society approach.

The same tension exists in the case of climate change. Often we isolate action on climate change in its own sphere, which doesn't accurately reflect the reality that climate change has a diverse range of causes. The idea that concerns for the future and climate change must be integrated into processes throughout government, to reflect the diverse drivers across society, is one focus of the Futuring Tool. In order to address climate change and build a sustainable and just future, we need to look beyond individual policies, and instead adopt processes and practices that enable us to pursue an integrated approach. To achieve this, process innovation is necessary, and each of the options in the Futuring Tool support that.

Participation

For a long time many governments have approached governance as something that is done to people and not *with* people. This mentality can contribute to apathy and declining trust amongst citizens, threatening the social contract within society between citizens and their governments in representative or democratic governance. New forms of **participation** are beginning to be discussed more and more as we discover that participation and deliberation are not only a means to engage citizens with political processes, but also a means to find meaningful and consensual solutions to difficult and contested topics. Participatory practices can also increase inclusion and a sense of justice and fairness. However, it is important that they are not tokenistic. Participation that doesn't go beyond superficial consultation or exchanging information won't offer the same benefits for civic life or guidance for policymaking[4].

Imagination

In order to think about the future differently, we need to develop new socio-cultural **imaginations** about the future. Culture, art and the media are dominated by images of the future that are all too often technocratic and dystopian. So frequently, one sees images of the future city and wonders where all the people have gone. With these fantasy dystopias or technocracies we implant, subconsciously or consciously, an idea or vision of the future into our imaginations that is dystopian or technocratic. Fear and negative imagery dominate imaginations of a post-fossil future. Moving beyond a fossil fuel-dependent world and

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[4] More discussion on different types of participation can be found in: in Arnstein (1969) and Newig & Fritsch (2009).

being resilient to the impacts of a changing climate are going to require significant changes to every aspect of life and will have an impact on how we interact with the world around us and see and understand ourselves, our communities, and even our cultural identities. In spite of this, we spend very little time actually creating visions based on what we would like or hope to see. It's even more rare that this kind of visioning process is part of a governance process. A number of techniques such as forecasting or scenar-io-building are indeed used to enhance government planning and foresight, but these are often not citizen-based or collaboratively built visions. They are too often technology- or science-driven, and extrapolate to such an extent that they don't usually consider how daily life might be or might change. Harnessing imaginative practices in futuring can help us not only to collaboratively build a future, but can also prepare us psychologically for the changes ahead of us.
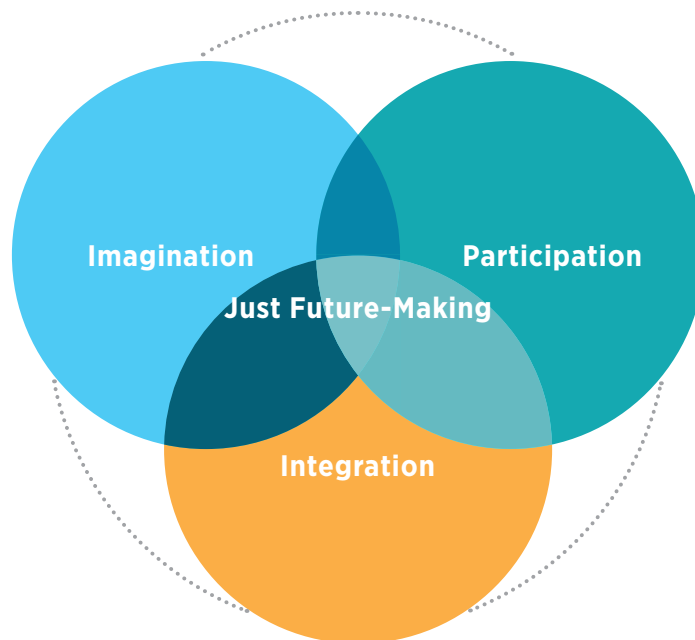

Figure 2:
A visualisation of the intersection of imagination, participation and integration in just future-making.

Source:
Elizabeth Dirth

Integration: Policymakers should consider context-appropriate methods to integrate the future into decision-making.

Rather than creating new institutions or governance processes, the reform of existing mechanisms by enhancing integrative processes can be an effective way to refocus governance on the future and what is fair for future generations. This could be done by adding additional elements of integration to, for example, the budget scrutiny process, as well as reforming the remits or powers of other existing processes or bodies. At the core of this recommendation are two principles: first, that context-appropriate approaches are often most impactful; and second, that additional governance, bureaucracy or administration is not always the most effective way to solve a problem. Three ways that the idea of integration could manifest palpably in processes are: introducing additional assessment tools for policymaking, legislative or decision-making processes; integrating future concerns into the remits of each ministry; and revising metrics and indicators[5].

To integrate the idea of the future into decision-making, existing legislative, policymaking or budgeting processes **can be supplemented by additional assessment tools or scrutiny processes** to assess their longer-term impacts. Such assessment tools and scrutiny processes could be designed to carry significant weight or have even veto-like authority in some cases. They could also involve a participatory aspect in the form of some kind of citizen review, youth engagement, or deliberative process.

An example of one such tool that has been developed recently is the Scottish Parliament's Sustainable Development Impact Assessment Tool. The tool was developed to be used in the legislation development and scrutiny process as one extra step to take in an already existing process to ensure that new bills were designed to enable, rather than hinder, sustainable development.

[5] There are other processes that would be conducive to this goal; however, these three were identified as particularly important in the research process and presented in the Futuring Tool.

Long-term concerns could also be integrated into the remits of each ministry. Rather than allocating responsibility for long-term considerations to an isolated unit, each ministry would then be obliged to assess future impacts for their policy area and even beyond it. For example, the long-term impacts of an economic ministry might include environmental degradation or climate change. In addition, steps should be taken to ensure coordination and coherence across ministries. This would allow for more holistic consideration, discussion and coordination of how to address the root causes of complex multi-dimensional, long-term issues. Such an approach could be enhanced by designating a focal point and coordination body. To enhance the accountability and legitimacy of the process, external assessments by experts and young people could also be integrated into process and the results shared with the public.

A third option for putting the idea of integration into practice is **revising our indicators and metrics** for measuring progress. Indicators and metrics dictate in both conscious and unconscious ways how we understand success and shape what we work with. Indicators can be changed to include long-term progress indicators or long-term aspects of societal development and/or short-term metrics could be removed. Long-term vision milestones could also be developed as part of a future visioning process and integrated into government-wide progress assessments. This, however, requires commitment to new metrics as an alternative to the hegemony of GDP.

Successful integration of concerns for future generations into decison-making may in fact involve all of these steps in order to counteract the long-standing habit of short-termism.

As part of their responsiblities under the Well-Being for Future Generations Act, the Welsh Government developed seven goals and 46 indicators for the government to adhere to. These new goals and indicators reconceptualise progress and indicate a direction of travel and new ways of working for the country in the context of this new legal obligation to future generations. Additionally, ways of working and objectives have been developed and the realisation of these goals is not the statutory responsibility of all the public bodies.

Participation: Policymakers should utilise participatory processes about the future to inform and guide their decisions.

Participatory and deliberative processes can enhance both decision-making and citizen engagement with governance and political processes. Deliberation is an established means of building consensus around difficult subjects or expanding perspectives on a particular challenge. Many examples of such practices show that the deliberation process itself extends the perspective of participants beyond their own isolated and immediate concerns to a longer time horizon and a broader understanding of societal benefits and the perspectives and needs of others.

Participatory practices can help build ownership of and engagement with a particular policy area or problem. They can take the form of youth-focused processes for deliberation or participation, or other population-wide practices such as citizens' assemblies, etc. However, to ensure their success, it is essential to manage expectations from the beginning and design such processes in a way that is conducive to achieving the desired outcomes.

Youth vs broad deliberation

There is a trade-off to be balanced between utilising the energy and perspective of young people to inform choices, and deriving benefits from broader, population-wide deliberative processes and consensus building. It's important to recognise the specific role and value of participants and the specific design of the process being undertaken. While young people can perhaps better represent imaginative visions of a future in which they will live, participatory processes with young people are unlikely to represent the full diversity of concerns, challenges and perspectives of society at large. Conversely, while deliberative processes may, in certain cultural settings, support consensus building on difficult issues and encourage a longer time horizon in thinking, this process can also risk stifling the voices of young people, as well as marginalised groups, and may not offer the same creativity or 'blue-sky thinking'.

The Futuring Tool proposes two specific options for participatory processes. However, each of the six processes for just future-making includes an element of participation as an essential feature of governance for the future.

A **future-oriented multi-stakeholder council** which advises government, provides recommendations, and offers additional scrutiny for policies and legislation can help to better integrate the concerns of future generations into decision-making. The council includes representatives of key stakeholders, including young people, future generations (perhaps through an empty chair), diverse demographic groups, and, crucially, cross-party elected representatives. There is a designated place and structure for consideration of the council's output by government, parliament, and committees. This type of mechanism

would, in many places, be a new institutional setting, and it therefore needs to be embedded appropriately into the context to be meaningful. It's important that such a council is endowed with adequate powers within the governance system and designed to ensure its longevity through political and governmental changes. Careful consideration should also be given to the questions of power and legitimacy within the council. The experts who lend the council scientific legitimacy may come with more assumed embedded authority than the other stakeholders. Any multistakeholder council should be representative of demographic diversity and not simply replicate the inequalities and power dynamics that exist in society.

Deliberative citizen participation processes, ranging in scale from topic-focused mini-publics to national citizens' assemblies can also facilitate consensus building and longer-term thinking. Outcomes, decisions or ideas that emerge from such processes could contribute to decision-making with concrete recommendations, binding proposals for government, or other contextually relevant outputs. They could address specific questions or topics, or a broader vision of the future. Furthermore, accurately representing demographics, including young people and future generations, is crucial to the success and legitimacy of such processes.

A workshop of the 2050 Climate Group to empower young people to engage with political processes around climate change | Source: 2050 Climate Group 2019

Imagination: Policymakers should use creative and imaginative exercises to engage with the future in order to build a new collective cultural imagination.

How can we begin to figure out what a post-fossil future can look like? We have to start by imagining it. It's striking how often we interact with long-term scenarios and the future with a changing climate through graphs, models and numbers, while for most people, this doesn't create a vision or real understanding of what this world could be like.

Positive visions of the future

What's more, we interact with models or scenarios as if they are predicting the future, not just showing alternatives. Imaginations of the future are often some kind of science fiction and tend to be extremely technology-centred and/or dystopian. What we lack now is a collective cultural imagination of a positive and people-centred future to work towards. Part of the problem is that citizens are not given opportunities to talk about this, and politicians or governments are not expected to think about this or share their vision with their constituents. Instead, short-term policies and decisions are made with no awareness of what longer-term path we may be on, or perhaps even what that longer-term future might look like.

As part of each new programme for government, the government could lead a **participatory national future-visioning design process**, which would bring citizens together in a way that is representative of the demographic distribution and diversity of society. Subsequently, clear links between the programme for

government and the citizens' vision would need to be communicated to citizens. In this way, elected representatives would be seen to be responsible not just for responding to citizens' demands in the present, but also for working towards the future they want.

This process could give rise to a new expectation that political parties and/or candidates have **future manifestos** that they have to make public. In this way, a long-term perspective becomes explicit and integrated into governance, and public accountability for the future can be enhanced. Once embedded in governance processes, these new practices could help to ensure that elected representatives engage with citizen-driven futures, perhaps even to the point that they anticipate the future visions of citizens in the same way that they might anticipate new budgets from the treasury. Such visions offer further insights into the values, perceptions and imaginations of the electorate.

Extending time horizons

It is sometimes criticised that part of the reason why our governance systems focus so much on the short term is because citizens also do this. However, the process described above can bring both governance processes and citizens imaginations into the future. A constructive, diverse, participatory, future-imagining process integrated into political processes can help extend the time horizon of everyone involved.

Conclusion and outlook

In this policy brief I've proposed three core tenets of governance processes that can help our political systems to be fairer to future generations. I have examined the core of the dilemma and demands of the Fridays for Future movement, a sense of unfairness that young people and future generations will inherit a long-term problem – climate change – that they didn't cause. Responding to this movement means recognising the full scale of the problem that young people are facing, and doing so requires us to re-examine our governance processes and look at the root causes of what has created this situation in order to find a solution.

Giving a young person a microphone will not solve the climate crisis. We can amplify the voices of young people over and over again, but at some point we must actually start doing things differently. Here, I've proposed three core principles for doing things differently, integration, participation and imagination. To begin to make the kinds of changes we need, we need to take their demands seriously and respond meaningfully and at the scale and pace required.

There are already signs that the first two of these three principles is beginning to change the way we govern society. The Sustainable Development Goals are perhaps the first international political instrument that seeks to prioritise and institutionalise the idea of integration and policy coherence. They also highlight the value of participation through the idea of 'no one left behind', even though it is not fully operationalised in the goals themselves. These two core pillars of the SDGs are also pillars of just future-making. However, imagination does not yet play a role.

While the SDGs offer a framework to work towards, they don't imagine a vision of society. No part of the SDG process built a renewed collective cultural imagination around the future that these goals and targets are trying to achieve. With the SDGs, we see goals, but no broader landscape. If each goal is but one aspect of our future society, what does that landscape look like as a whole? And who makes it and how? These questions matter.

In a final step in this process we may need to re-evaluate the institutions and processes that we have already designed. To take one example, in Germany, a number of institutions exist[6], which are often described as 'ideal' to deal with long-term decision-making by researchers or analysts outside of the German context. However, this is not always the conclusion drawn by people with first-hand knowledge of how these institutions operate. If they were working effectively, the sustainability policy landscape and the reality on the ground in Germany would look very different. What's not working here? Only a detailed examination of these institutions, their goals, their design and their setting can say. But we must acknowledge that reflexivity and adaptability should be built into processes of integration, participation and imagination in order to have good governance for the long term, which also extends into the long term. We must be willing to make a change when it becomes clear that a mechanism isn't achieving its goals. Only context-appropriate, integrated, participatory processes, which build on and enhance a collective cultural imagination, are up to the task of solving the crisis we currently face. ▊

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[6] One example often specifically referred to in this context is the German Government's Parliamentary Advisory Committee for Sustainable Development.

About the authors

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Elizabeth Dirth is currently a fellow at IASS, where she developed this tool, drawing on three years of research on intergenerational justice, climate justice and governance. She previously worked for the Copernicus Institute for Sustainable Development at Utrecht University and was the founding Managing Editor of a new open access journal, Earth System Governance, and Coordinator of the Planetary Justice Taskforce of the Earth System Governance Project. Before moving into research, Elizabeth spent five years working on capacity building for sustainable development and climate change with local government, the public sector more generally, and community organisations in Scotland. She also works as an independent consultant on a range of topics, from governance for the SDGs to facilitation and participation with her business, Just Future-Making. Elizabeth is also a co-founder and former Chair of the 2050 Climate Group. During this time she led the organisation's rapid development into an internationally recognised and award-winning NGO in under three years of operation.

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