

An Agenda for Intergenerational Rights and Responsibilities

by Richard Ponzio

Richard Ponzio served as director of GEA's Project Global 2000 Youth Program Council from 1993-95. A graduate of Columbia College, he completed his Master's at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is currently Visiting Fulbright Fellow at the Mahbub ul-Haq Centre for Human Development.

Today, forces of global change are accelerating the shift from governance driven by centralized states or unrestricted markets to people-driven governance. The emerging system of humane governance compels a sharing of responsibilities among the state, civil-society and private sectors for improving people's well-being and enlarging life choices. At the core of this transformation is a growing awareness of, and protection of, fundamental human rights. This includes the individual's inherent civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights enshrined in the constitutions of most countries, the international human rights covenants, and the UN Charter. Seeking to defend freedom from fear and want, human rights are based on universal respect for the dignity and worth of all human beings.

Recent efforts to bring war criminals to justice through an International Criminal Court; advances in the status of women; new precedents for humanitarian intervention; and the high visibility of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- all illustrate the long distance humanity has traveled since the inception of the modern human rights framework. States no longer maintain an unchallenged monopoly on the use of force, including the right to quell dissent within their borders. Democratic participation, in multiple dimensions, has also become an international norm. Despite these improvements, poverty and unemployment still afflict a large portion of humanity; social exclusion, AIDS, drug abuse, and illiteracy continue to breed intolerance and violence, and the rapid exhaustion of natural resources has led to unimaginable harm to the ecosystem. It is no matter of pride that, on average, governments spend US\$20,000 to prepare a soldier while spending only US\$190 to educate a student.

With nearly one-half the world's population under the age of 25 (85 percent are located in developing countries), the rights of young people and future generations must become the next frontier of the human rights journey, giving special emphasis to their right to development. Failing to establish the proper conditions for the full human development of coming generations risks the possibility of widespread deprivation and rebellion; 80 percent of all revolutionaries in the past 200 years have been under the age of thirty. Every effort must be made to prepare these "stakeholders in the future" for a complex, integrated, and densely populated world requiring extraordinary vision, an acute sense of responsibility, and planetary leadership. To facilitate this journey, one significant step would be to frame an agenda outlining key principles underpinning relations and commitments across generations.

Designing a Global Agenda

From January 13 to 15, 1999, a remarkable intergenerational dialogue was convened in Washington, DC: the first Global Meeting of Generations. Bringing together some 2,000 development pioneers of all ages, from all corners of the globe, the forum sought to establish new understanding and cooperation between

generations in working for human progress in the years ahead. A collaborative effort led by fifteen leading international organizations, the GMG was the first global meeting in a four-year program that includes national and regional intergenerational dialogues.

As the GMG enters its second phase of national dialogues leading to another global get-together in 2001, reflection on past gatherings should result in recommendations for strengthening understanding and collaboration across generations. Were young, middle-aged, and older participants heard by one another or did they lecture each other? What are the most promising areas of agreement? The most difficult challenges? Has any follow-through cooperation ensued from the discussions? The results of this exercise can indicate obstacles and strategies necessary to forge a consensus and a coalition around a platform of intergenerational rights and responsibilities.

The GMG process could benefit by drawing on the already impressive body of ideas and action plans concerning equity, justice, and shared responsibilities among generations, including the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All, the 1992 Earth Summit's Agenda 21, the 1995 World Youth Program of Action Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond (WYPA), and the outcomes from world conferences on social and urban development, women, human rights, and population issues. According to Agenda 21's Chapter 25 on "Children and Youth in Sustainable Development":

It is imperative that youth from all parts of the world actively participate in all relevant levels of decision-making, because it affects their lives today and

has implications for their futures. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account.

Working towards the realization of the Agenda 21 vision and the goals set forth in the WYPA, the World Youth Forum of the United Nations System called in 1996 for a UN Youth Rights Charter to be adopted by the General Assembly. At present, a compendium on youth rights is under preparation that identifies relevant UN human rights instruments, as well as other international declarations and action programs. While an International Seminar on Youth Rights will further explore the charter idea this year, neither the General Assembly nor the Commission on Human Rights plans to consider the initiative anytime soon. Covering the sectoral and cross-sectoral rights of young people ages 18-24 (the CRC deals with children below age 18), a UN Youth Charter could help promote awareness of the unique concerns and needs within this highly transitory social group. Along with the CRC and 1982 Convention on the Rights of Older People, a Youth Rights Charter could serve as a rallying point among civic organizations advocating a new agenda for intergenerational rights and responsibilities.

Human rights will not be respected and preserved unless people readily assume a flexible range of responsibilities emanating from a civic ethos for contributing to the good of the community -- whether local, national, regional, or global. Communities in which members assume responsibilities and show compassion toward one another derive tremendous benefits when people and civic groups creatively employ social and cultural resources, also known as social capital. The moral commitments that constitute the core of social capital evolve only in the context of meaningful human interaction. Before arriving at a concrete agenda defining rights and responsibilities between generations, person-to-person dialogue and

cooperation among generational groupings is essential in order to build high levels of trust and commitment -- crucial ingredients in the implementation of all social change programs.

Besides mobilizing constituencies and anticipating favorable conditions, another key step is to address, from the outset, possible conflict and opposition. Granted, tremendous international political support has been afforded to the objectives of the CRC and, to a lesser extent, the Convention on the Rights of Older People. However, not all governments have ratified the conventions and many fall short of adequate implementation. Further, securing youth rights may cause even greater friction with conservative or ineffective governments; once special rights are distinguished for youth, young people may present a political challenge to the status quo. Achieving agreement on the rights of generations yet to come is more difficult still because of the limited timeframe in which most political leaders operate. Preserving the Earth's resources, reducing the chances of global nuclear holocaust, and alleviating the burden of mass deprivation for the sake of future generations is a difficult case to make even within the most progressive and forward-looking polities. Before drafting a comprehensive intergenerational action agenda, then, the concerns of forces resistant to change should be accounted for and, if necessary, countered through the strategic utilization of political, financial, and social resources.

Elements of an Intergenerational Compact

Once the groundwork has been laid, the primary areas of concern for an intergenerational rights and responsibilities agenda can be crafted, debated, and refined. The agenda should consist of a coherent body of flexible, mutually reinforcing proposals. At its heart should be a clear emphasis on equity and justice across the generations. In terms of intergenerational rights, equity and justice involve the right for all generations to participate in governance processes at all levels; impartial and fair treatment for everyone in society and before the law; adequate investment in the intellectual, physical, and cultural development of the younger generation; shared opportunities to earn a decent wage and sustain one's livelihood; access to the resources of the global commons, including the environmental rights of future generations; and access to information critical for survival and personal growth in an interdependent world.

On the other hand, equity and justice in relation to intergenerational responsibilities refer to people's shared duty to contribute to the common good of, and promote fair treatment of, all generations; the pursuit of environmental regeneration to safeguard the biosphere for future generations; a commitment to participate actively in governance processes and voluntary community projects; and careful consideration of other generations' security and welfare when deciding and executing actions. Besides evolving in an inclusive manner that ensures each generation's views are registered, the agenda's core features must also recognize the need to balance people's intergenerational rights and responsibilities with those of states and other transnational actors.

Rights, Responsibilities and Governance for All Generations

Since local, national, regional, and global governance systems condition human rights and responsibilities both positively and negatively, the formation of an intergenerational rights and responsibilities agenda

should be seen as an integral part of the search among ordinary people for more compassionate or humane governance approaches in their daily lives. Governance, if it is to promote a new social contract between generations, must not be merely pro-people or people-centered: it must actually be owned by people of all ages, representing the planet's rich social diversity. This is the call to action not only for the 2001 Global Meeting of Generations, but also for the impressive array of civil society programs in the coming months, including 1999's State of the World Forum, Seoul NGO Forum, and World Civil Society Conference, and the Millennium NGO Forum in June 2000. Through constructive engagement, civil society initiatives can also make their mark on the Millennium Summit of heads of state scheduled for September 2000.

As the Commission of Global Governance concludes in its landmark 1995 report, *Our Global Neighborhood*:

The new generation knows how close they stand to cataclysms unless they respect the limits of the natural order and care for the earth by sustaining its life-giving qualities. They have a deeper sense of solidarity as people of the planet than any generation before them. They are neighbors to a degree no other generation on earth has been.

Young people, indeed, are key change agents for promoting intergenerational equity and justice in the widest sense today. They must not be intimidated, divided, or discouraged by the nature or scale of their challenge. Go forth and be heard!