

**Fact Sheet for the Women's Congress for Future Generations**  
**Guardian of Future Generations**  
**By Carolyn Raffensperger, Science and Environmental Health Network**  
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Climate change and other environmental ills threaten our future in unprecedented ways. These threats challenge us to innovate practical new approaches and policies. Government has a particularly important role in planning for a difficult future since it can leverage collaborative efforts that prevent harms and mitigate difficulties. Government institutions change slower than business but they can have an outsized affect on the future.

### **New Ethic**

A new ethic is emerging that will provide a rationale and structure for meeting the challenges ahead: *present generations have a responsibility to protect the rights of future generations to inherit a livable planet.* Future generations include nature and all of her creatures. This new ethic invites rethinking governmental institutions and creating new ones that can full our responsibility to future generations.

### **New Institution**

A key new institution to take responsibility for future generations is a guardian of future generations. While the exact title doesn't matter, what is important is to charge someone with the duty to care for future generations and provide the tools to carry out that duty. The guardian can be elected, appointed or designated in other ways. The guardian would have three primary responsibilities.

1. Prepare an audit of the commonwealth and common health under that government's jurisdiction. This audit would provide an inventory of parks, water and air quality, and infrastructure necessary for community wellbeing—all of the commons that are essential for the health and well being of present and future generations. The audit could be reported as a qualitative, non-monetized set of assets.
2. Draft a legacy plan for the commons. What is needed to improve, restore, and expand the commons to leave them in good shape for future generations? Some threats are particularly important to consider in plans. It is difficult to flourish in the face of floods, drought and fire. The legacy plan could become the basis of governmental sustainability goals.
3. Review all regulations and land use plans for their impact on future generations. The guardian would be empowered to make recommendations for modifications to regulations and land uses that would protect future generations.

## **Key Role of Government**

The proposal for a guardian of future generations is premised on the idea that government has two key roles. The first is to serve as the trustee or steward of the commons for present and future generations. Second, government has responsibility for protecting rights. Few rights are as important as that of a clean and healthy environment. By making these roles explicit, government bodies have a rationale for structuring budgets. The budget should be tied to the commons under its jurisdiction. The argument isn't whether government should be big or small but whether it can fulfill its responsibilities to care for the commonwealth and common health.

## **Starting Place**

If you want to establish a guardian for future generations in your local or state government you can look at who you know in government, at the local newspaper or other organizations that might be interested in helping to promote the idea. Every government is a little different. You might have a city manager or an attorney general or a mayor who is willing to champion this idea with you. A mayor or governor could appoint someone to fill this role. A county board could appoint someone. A sustainability officer in your city could adopt the role and serve as the de facto guardian.

You might begin this effort because something you treasure is being threatened by a proposal that will bring harm. Fracking, mining, a big development. You can ask if this proposed project will leave long lasting damage. Does this threaten future generations?

The idea of a guardian for future generations signals to the community that you care about more than immediate dollars. You care about the health and well-being of all the things necessary for life.

Many people in government assume that their role is to promote the economy and that a strong economy will guarantee prosperity. Making clear that the role of government is far broader than that will help to shift the conversation so that government officials and others can see that there is a bigger, more responsible role for government and that is to protect the basic infrastructure of life—air, water, land, wildlife.