



Food systems' transition and intergenerational equity: what about future generations' access to food?

Transição dos sistemas alimentares e equidade intergeracional: e o acesso das gerações futuras aos alimentos?

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection between food systems transformation and intergenerational equity, focusing on the challenges and opportunities for ensuring the right to food for future generations. It begins by critically assessing the persistent failure to achieve SDG 2 on zero hunger and the limits of current food security policies grounded in a productivist paradigm. The analysis highlights the role of international human rights law – particularly the right to food – as both a legal and policy tool to address food insecurity, while also acknowledging its limitations in adequately integrating long-term ecological sustainability. Against the backdrop of planetary boundaries and growing environmental degradation, the paper explores how principles of intergenerational justice – especially as articulated in the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations and the UN Pact for the Future – can enrich and reshape the legal understanding of the right to food. It argues for embedding intergenerational thinking into food policies through two key priorities: moving beyond food productivism to ensure access within planetary limits and reducing the food system's dependence on fossil fuels and non-renewable inputs. The paper concludes by proposing that a rights-based framework, reoriented through intergenerational equity, can help guide the necessary transition toward sustainable and just food systems that safeguard the entitlements of both present and future populations.

Keywords: food security; right to food; future generations; intergenerational equity; planetary boundaries.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a interseção entre a transformação dos sistemas alimentares e a equidade intergeracional, com foco nos desafios e oportunidades para assegurar o direito à alimentação às gerações futuras. Inicia com uma avaliação crítica do fracasso persistente em alcançar o ODS 2, relativo à erradicação da fome, e dos limites das políticas atuais de segurança alimentar baseadas em um paradigma produtivista. A análise destaca o papel do direito internacional dos direitos humanos – em particular o direito à alimentação – tanto como ferramenta jurídica quanto política para enfrentar a insegurança alimentar, ao mesmo tempo em que reconhece suas limitações para integrar de forma adequada a sustentabilidade ecológica de longo prazo. No contexto das fronteiras planetárias e da crescente degradação ambiental, o artigo explora como os princípios de justiça intergeracional – especialmente conforme articulados nos Princípios de Maastricht sobre os Direitos Humanos das Gerações Futuras e no Pacto da ONU para o Futuro – podem enriquecer e reformular a compreensão jurídica do direito à alimentação. Argumenta-se pela incorporação do pensamento intergeracional nas políticas alimentares por meio de duas prioridades centrais: superar o produtivismo alimentar para garantir acesso dentro dos limites planetários e reduzir a dependência do sistema alimentar de combustíveis fósseis e insumos não renováveis. O artigo conclui propondo que um enquadramento baseado em direitos, reorientado pela equidade intergeracional, pode orientar a necessária transição para sistemas alimentares sustentáveis e justos, capazes de proteger as garantias tanto das populações atuais quanto das futuras.

Palavras-chave: segurança alimentar; direito à alimentação; gerações futuras; equidade intergeracional; fronteiras planetárias.

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1. Introduction

As we are already beyond the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda's implementation period, the outlook for achieving the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2), which seeks to eliminate hunger, appears increasingly bleak. We are in fact moving away from it, as according to the 2024 report *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, coordinated annually by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations: in the period 2019-2022, the situation of global food security has deeply deteriorated, as in 2023 between 713 to 757 million people experienced undernourishment – around 152 million more than in 2019 (FAO et al., 2024). Thus, according to the report, progress has been pushed back by 15 years, with undernourishment levels now similar to those seen in 2008-2009. Furthermore, this situation is likely going to get worse in the following months and years, as at present, another major threat to the right to food stems from severe funding cuts to USAID and other aid programs, which are undermining the delivery of essential food assistance (Osendarp *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, with only five years remaining to achieve SDG 2, it is evident that the world is still far from meeting this goal and even going in the opposite direction.

Apart from being a moral tragedy, the persistence of hunger represents a blatant violation of the fundamental right to freedom from hunger, as guaranteed under international law. In fact, the right to food was formulated as part of the right to an adequate standard of living – enshrined International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art.11) – which has two components: (1) the right to adequate food and (2) the right to be protected from hunger. This right obligates states to take measures to ensure equitable food distribution and implement policies to address malnutrition and food insecurity. More concretely, General Comment No. 12 by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights emphasizes states' obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil it, including by ensuring access to resources and food for vulnerable populations. These provisions underscore that hunger is not merely a humanitarian issue but a legal and moral one requiring concrete actions by states and the international community. Consequently, this right has been used to develop a methodology for the creation and implementation of public policies aimed at increasing access to food by all, as reflected mainly in the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, developed by the FAO. Since their adoption in 2004, several countries have introduced the right to food in their constitutions and developed framework laws to combat hunger based on these guidelines (FAO, 2019).

Nevertheless, at present, in a global context characterized by ecological overshoot and the surpassing of various planetary boundaries, it is unclear to what extent this methodology could contribute to building policies that achieve the SDG2, which implies a fast and radical transition towards sustainable food systems. At present, the surpassing of six planetary boundaries, as well as the approaching of risk thresholds in the remaining three, is already having observable impacts on food systems (Richardson *et al.*, 2023). Thus, at this point, it is crucial to planet proof the global food system, which implies a great food system transformation (Rockström *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, there are multiple obstacles that impinge this necessary transformation, such as concentration of power in agri-food corporations, short-termism in political and economic systems and social inequalities and power imbalances (De Schutter, 2017). Moreover, another obstacle is the so-called productivity trap, a prevalent paradigm in international

institutions which posits that the solution to hunger lies primarily in boosting food production, prioritising availability over other factors like access (Lambek, 2018). This is a trap because, on the one hand, we produce globally much more than what we need (Smil, 2024); and, on the other, increasing food production globally contributes to push planetary boundaries, considering that the food system is a major driver of the surpassing of at least four of them, namely, climate change, changes in land use, depletion of freshwater resources, and pollution of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems through excessive nitrogen and phosphorus inputs (Smith *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, a recent study shows that, because of expected changes in population and income levels, the environmental effects of the food system could increase between 2010 and 2050 by 50-90%, reaching levels that are much beyond the planetary boundaries that define a safe operating space for humanity (Springmann *et al.*, 2018).

Against this gloomy background, no guidelines or specific policies would be sufficient to end hunger if we do not pay attention to those obstacles, as well as the biophysical constraints that bind the development of food systems. In this sense, authors such as Marc J. Cohen and James V. Riker argued more than 15 years ago that even the implementation of appropriate plans, policies and programmes based on the right to food may not be sufficient to achieve sustainable progress on this right (Cohen; Riker, 2008, p.146). Thus, the human rights-based framework provides tools to help the poorest to access food, by it also presents relevant conceptual limits that make it difficult to incorporate sustainability in an adequate manner, for instance because human rights are traditionally concerned only with the fate of people currently alive and not future generations (García-Juanatey; Steible, 2023). However, a greater integration between the right to food and principles of international environmental law, such as the principle of intergenerational equity, may open new avenues for research and advocacy (García-Juanatey, 2018).

In light of this, the paper aims to highlight recent and noteworthy advances focused on developing this principle, including concrete tools that may support the integration of future generations' needs and rights into food policymaking. The principle of intergenerational equity was already defined in the Rio Declaration of 1992, and it implies that states should preserve the environmental resources entrusted to them for future generations in their development decisions. Since then, there have been remarkable developments of that principle. On the one hand, in 2023 a group of experts in human rights and environmental law adopted the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations, which outline the legal and ethical obligations of states, individuals, and corporations to safeguard the rights of future generations under international law. On the other hand, the UN recently celebrated the Summit of the Future, which took place in September 2024 (United Nations, 2024). In line with the outcome document, the Pact for the Future, its aim is to take action to safeguard the future for present and coming generations. Thus, one of the conceptual proposals of this summit is the so-called intergenerational multiplier effect, which “emphasizes the potential of our current decisions to create ripple effects that extend across multiple generations” (United Nations, 2024). Considering these latest developments, in this paper, we examine the question of what would mean incorporating intergenerational thinking in the area of food policies and explore the role that international law theory and practice may have in building a more sustainable right to food.

To this end, this article is structured in three main sections. First, it critically examines dominant food security paradigms rooted in productivism and explores the concept of access to food, framing the right to food as a legal and political tool to combat hunger. Second, it turns to international law, tracing the evolution of principles such as sustainable development and intergenerational equity, and considering how emerging initiatives – particularly the proposed UN Pact for the Future and the UN Declaration on Future Generations – could support a transformative interpretation of the right to food that includes future generations. Third, it provides a normative discussion on how to embed intergenerational thinking into food policy, focusing on reducing dependence on non-renewable resources, aligning food systems with planetary boundaries, and developing intergenerational thinking in the area of food policies. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and calls for a shift toward sustainable and equitable food systems that respect the rights of both current and future generations.

2. Background: the right to food as a tool in the fight against hunger

2.1 Food security, increased food availability and the importance of access to food

Since the post-war era, global food policies have largely focused on increasing food availability, promoting a productivist narrative that suggests more food production is the key to combating hunger. In the post-colonial years, low food production and insufficient agricultural mechanisation were seen as primary barriers to reducing hunger in developing countries. The various green revolutions of that time seemed to offer a solution by promising higher yields through the use of high-performing cereal varieties, abundant fossil resources, and large quantities of water, fertilizers, and pesticides. They, in fact, delivered on their promise: they led to significant increases in land productivity, and were rapidly adopted from Western countries to Asia and Latin America (Caparrós, 2015, p. 175). This intensification was greatly aided by the Haber-Bosch process, which was widely adopted during those years for the large-scale synthesis of ammonia for fertilizer production, a factor that has been credited with supporting a massive increase in global population during the 20th century (Smil, 2001).

However, the green revolution failed to resolve the issue of global hunger and, in addition, caused significant environmental damage. On the one hand, as Jenkins and Scanlan argued, despite the increase of food production during the period 1970 to 1990, food insecurity situations continued to take place, particularly in less developed countries. By analysing data from that period, they highlighted how domestic policies, international trade dynamics, and development strategies influenced food security outcomes, emphasizing the need for systemic change to address the underlying causes of hunger in less developed regions (Jenkins; Scanlan, 2001). On the other hand, the green revolution created serious ecological problems, including soil degradation, pesticide pollution, and biodiversity loss (Lappé *et al.*, 1998). Additionally, it entrenched the global industrial food system's reliance on large and growing amounts of fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources, particularly inorganic fertilizers, further contributing to the transgression of planetary boundaries.

Thus, these critiques of the green revolution highlighted the critical importance of ensuring adequate resources to obtain suitable quantities of food, a consideration that is reflected in the definition of food security. Redefined by the FAO in the early 1980s (FAO, 1983), this concept was significantly influenced by Amartya Sen's essay, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Rights and Deprivation* (Sen 1983). As mentioned above, Sen argued that hunger is not primarily caused by a lack of food availability but by the challenges certain segments of the population, particularly the poorest, face in accessing the currently available food. This analysis shifted the focus to the political and redistributive aspects of combating hunger, emphasizing that the mere availability of food is insufficient – it must also be accessible to everyone. He demonstrated that famines may occur in countries where there is in fact enough food to feed the entire population, but simply certain groups cannot access it. Therefore, according to Sen, vulnerability to hunger is largely determined by the entitlements or rights individuals possess, placing the individual at the centre of hunger analysis.

More concretely, Sen argues that hunger is not solely the result of insufficient food production but is deeply tied to individuals' vulnerability within socio-economic systems, which determines their access to food. This vulnerability arises from inequalities in wealth, power, and access to resources, leaving certain groups disproportionately exposed to food insecurity during crises like famines. In this context, Sen's entitlement approach is crucial: it shifts the focus from aggregate food availability to individuals' ability to acquire food through various means, such as owning land, earning wages, or receiving public support. Vulnerable populations – those lacking secure entitlements – are most at risk, especially during economic, social, or political disruptions. As we will see, Sen's analysis aligns closely with human rights principles, particularly the right to food. He highlights that addressing hunger is not merely a matter of providing aid but requires safeguarding rights that reduce vulnerability, such as equitable access to resources, political freedoms, and social protections. By framing hunger as a violation of these rights, Sen's work underscores the moral and legal obligations of states and societies to eliminate the conditions that create vulnerability, ensuring that all individuals have the means to secure adequate food and nutrition.

These considerations influenced the definition of food security, evolving from a focus solely on availability in the 1970s, to a broader conception incorporating other dimensions such as food access in the 1990s. Driven by such evolution of the term and by the advances in studying the causes of hunger, countries participating in the 1996 UN World Food Summit finally agreed on a multidimensional definition of food security, based on four essential pillars: first, food availability, which entails having enough food of suitable quality to feed the entire global population. Second, access to food, which means making sure that not only is there enough food for everyone, but also that the most disadvantaged people can get the resources required to produce or to buy food. Third, food utilisation, which encompasses factors related to adequate food consumption, such as access to safe water, sanitation, and healthcare. Lastly, food stability, which ensures that individuals, households, or populations always have access to enough food without the possibility of running out because of sudden or cyclical occurrences. In this sense, the pillars of food security are hierarchical, with availability being essential but not alone sufficient to guarantee access, which is, in turn, necessary but not adequate for effective utilisation (Webb *et al.*, 2006).

However, this fundamental truth has often been misconstrued to mean that increasing food production at all costs is imperative, without considering biophysical constraints. This misconception was termed by some authors as the productivity trap, a prevalent paradigm in international institutions which posits that the solution to hunger lies primarily in boosting food production, prioritising availability over other factors like access (Lambek, 2018). Thus, it is significant that, in a context of ecological overshoot and more than 40 years after Amartya Sen's influential essay – arguing that hunger is not primarily caused by lack of food availability – increasing production remains at the heart of global hunger policies.

2.2 The right to food as a tool to improve access to food

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the mechanisms that international law has most effectively used for tackling the challenge of achieving food security is the right to food. This right was formulated in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted in 1966, entered into force in 1977) which recognises the right to food in its dual component: the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be protected from hunger. These two norms imply two different standards, one absolute and one relational. The right to be free from hunger represents an absolute standard, and the right to adequate food, like the right to an adequate standard of living of which it is a part, implies a relative standard. Firstly, the fundamental right to be free from hunger is closely linked to the right to life and is considered an absolute standard: the minimum standard to be guaranteed to all people, regardless of the level of development achieved by the state. This is how it is conceived by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereafter CESCR), which states in General Comment No. 12 that a state violates the right to food when it “fails to ensure the satisfaction of at least the minimum essential level required to be free from hunger” (CESCR, 1999). This is indeed the only right qualified as fundamental under the ICESCR. Secondly, in order to understand the right to an adequate standard of living, of which the right to adequate food is a part, and its derived obligations, it is crucial that the individual be considered as an active subject in economic and social development (García Morales, 2013, p. 36). Thus, the right to adequate food entails the need to build an economic, political and social environment that enables people to achieve food security by their own means; this implies that the individual must find ways to meet his or her own needs through his or her own efforts and the use of his or her own resources, although the use of these ultimately depends on access to assets such as land, capital or labour.

Since its formulation in the ICESCR, this right has evolved and, in fact, today it is the basis for developing a methodology for the creation and implementation of public policies, which present several benefits over previous anti-hunger policy-making approaches. This model is based on the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, elaborated by the FAO (FAO, 2004). These Guidelines are the most important document specifically oriented towards the implementation of the right to food at the national level. They have thus been described as “the first successful attempt by States to interpret an economic, social and cultural right and to recommend measures to be taken for its realisation” (Pons Ràfols, 2013). This

food methodology has several advantages over previous anti-hunger policy-making approaches, which were mainly based on the application of the four-pillar model of food security. The right to food complements this model with the human rights-based approach, which provides “a legal framework, the concepts of rights and obligations, as well as mechanisms to enhance accountability and the rule of law” (Mechlem, 2004). In addition, States bear legal obligations stemming from the recognition of the right to food in international law. It obliges them to: respect this right, by refraining from activities that negatively affect its realization; to protect it, by preventing other individuals and groups from violating it; to facilitate it, by implementing policies, laws and programmes that promote its realization; and to provide it, by supporting individuals or groups who are unable to feed themselves, in line with the absolute standard set by the fundamental right to be free from hunger.

The design of policies based on this right has been successful but still encounters significant challenges. Since the adoption of the Guidelines, several countries have introduced the right to food in their constitutions and developed framework laws and strategies against hunger based on the Guidelines, particularly in regions of the world such as Latin America (FAO, 2021). However, the implementation of this right faces many obstacles. The study entitled *Realizing the right to food in a changing world – The Right to Food Guidelines: 20 years on and beyond*, published in 2024, identified some of these, highlighting the failure of states to operationally recognize and enforce this right; other key challenges identified are rising inequalities, humanitarian crises and economic shocks, conflicts, natural disasters and pandemics (FAO, 2024). At present, another more recent challenge to the right to food is the dramatic cuts to USAID and other aid programs, which are disrupting the supply of critical food aid (Osendarp *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, climate change, biodiversity loss, nature and soil degradation, pollution and unsustainable management of natural resources are also impeding not only the enjoyment of the right to food but also of a wide range of human rights (FAO, 2024, p.18).

Considering those obstacles, several authors have questioned, from different perspectives, whether this methodology can bring about meaningful improvements in food security. On the one hand, the assessment of these Guidelines reveals that, although the primary obstacles to their implementation likely stem from a lack of political will on the part of states, there are also broader structural challenges – such as climate change, environmental degradation, and difficulties in accessing scarce natural resources, often linked to issues like land ownership distribution – that hinder the realization of the right to food. Consequently, there are voices that argue that the human rights discourse alone is insufficient to drive the structural changes needed at the international level and have instead proposed alternative paradigms, such as food sovereignty (Mowbray, 2007). Likewise, this human rights-based discourse has also been criticised from other positions that question the capacity of international human rights law in integrating environmental considerations. On the one hand, the human rights discourse derived from this area of international law has been criticised for focusing on the consequences of environmental impacts on humans, leaving aside the fate of other species, and for being overly presentist, concerned only with the fate of people currently alive and not future generations (García-Juanatey; Steible, 2023). In relation to the latter, Brown Weiss points out that contemporary concern with environmental externalities focuses primarily on the costs that present generations must bear (Weiss, 1989). This view is shared by human rights doctrine, which has historically only considered the environment when the externalities mentioned above impinge on the rights of current generations of human beings, without considering other living beings and future generations.

3. Towards a human right to food for future generations? Transformative pathways within international law

The accelerating convergence of environmental degradation, climate change, and resource scarcity poses unprecedented challenges to the realization of the human right to food, not only for present populations, but also for those yet to come. As the impacts of these crises increasingly threaten the long-term sustainability of food systems, the question of how to protect the right to food for present and future generations gains growing urgency. This section explores emerging legal and normative developments that seek to extend the temporal scope of human rights

frameworks, focusing on innovative approaches within international law that aim to safeguard the food-related needs and entitlements of present and future generations. In so doing, the premise would be that addressing global food insecurity requires extending our understanding of the right to food beyond present needs to include the long-term interests of future generations.

3.1 The future generations concept in international law

3.1.1. The debate around future generations

In recent years, the rights of future generations have gained significant attention in both academic and political circles. Therefore, there has been an open-ended debate over how to define future generations (Knudsen *et al.*, 2023) and whether they actually hold rights (Feinberg, 1974; Gosseries, 2008; Kramer, 2024). On the one hand, defining future generations is not an easy task: the term may refer to children and youth already living today, people living within the next few decades or within the next few centuries, or any future people whose lives will be significantly affected by current decisions (Knudsen *et al.*, 2023). Interestingly, authors such as Kermisch (2016, p. 1807) – in the context of debates around nuclear waste – distinguish between close future generations and remote future generations. For the purposes of this article, we define future generations as all people yet to be born, acknowledging the relevance of taking into account those in the near future whose lives will be significantly impacted by our decisions. In this way, caring about future generations can also serve as a pathway to greater awareness and motivation to confront current systemic challenges, particularly ecological ones. As Bell puts it (1993, p. 32), the fact that a present generation cares and sacrifices for future generations “benefits not only future generations but also itself”.

On the other hand, another hot topic in the literature has been if future generations may actually hold rights. *Vis-à-vis* this debate, authors such as Feinberg (1974, p. 65-67) have argued that it is plausible to ascribe interests to future generations based on their predictable needs and the potential for present actions to harm them. However, other views such as Gosseries' (2008), are more sceptical, particularly about their legal personhood, preferring to frame protections through duties assigned to current institutions. In a similar vein, Kramer maintains that future generations cannot hold rights in a strict legal sense since they do not yet exist, though he affirms that present generations may still owe them moral and legal duties. Following such positions, this article does not attempt to defend the idea that future generations can hold legal rights. However, even if future generations cannot be considered as rights holders, we defend the idea that there may still be legal duties to protect their interests and needs thus suggesting an interpretation of human rights through the lenses of environmental law principles such as intergenerational justice.

In regards to that, we consider that the concept of human needs, and particularly predictable human needs, is key in this debate. Notably, Doyal and Gough (1991) address the issue of future generations' needs in their work. Although it is not a central theme, their perspective is highly relevant to the present discussion, as the authors emphasise the importance of environmental responsibility towards future generations, particularly those who will experience the consequences of our actions. Moreover, they contend that a conception of the good that is exclusive to the present generation is untenable. To endanger the survival of the way of life we regard as good by causing environmental harm would be to betray that very conception. Therefore, by acknowledging the objectivity and universality of basic human needs, we can provide a timeless account of what human beings require and will require, based on empirical evidence. If we accept that certain needs – such as those classified as basic and intermediate – are constant across generations, and that the means to satisfy them are context-dependent (Max-Neef *et al.*, 1990), then we can responsibly identify the essential needs that future generations will have in order to carry out their lives. Consequently, ensuring that future generations can meet fundamental physiological needs such as access to food and water necessarily involves protecting the environmental systems upon which those needs depend.

In this sense, and considering this needs-based approach, the two main legal principles in international law that have central relevance in this interpretation are the principles of sustainable development and intergenerational

equity. Following these principles, the publication of the 2023 Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations and the UN Declaration on Future Generations seek to renew the connection between intergenerational justice and human rights and needs. Before delving into those recent instruments, we set the scene by explaining a core principle: intergenerational equity.

3.1.2. The debate around future generations

The principle of intergenerational equity is rooted in the broader concept of sustainable development, which was formally codified in international law through the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992). This Declaration defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Principle 3). In this way, intergenerational equity is positioned as a foundational pillar of sustainability. Complementary principles— such as the precautionary approach (Principle 15) and common but differentiated responsibilities (Principle 7)— further elaborate a framework that seeks to balance environmental protection with socio-economic development.

The concept of intergenerational equity is further developed through the influential work of Edith Brown Weiss, who in the late 1980s articulated a theory of intergenerational responsibility (Brown Weiss, 1989). According to this theory, states have a duty to preserve the environmental resources entrusted to them, ensuring that these are passed on to future generations in a condition at least equivalent to how they were received (Brown Weiss, 2010, p. 100). Therefore, for current generations two relationships are relevant: the first is the relationship with the natural system, of which human beings are a part; and the other is the relationship with future generations. The latter relationship emphasizes the interconnectedness of all generations through a shared dependence on the planet's biophysical systems. As a result, current generations have specific rights and duties, including: the duty to conserve diverse options for future generations to meet their needs; to maintain the quality of the environment; and to provide equitable access to the legacy left by past generations to current generations.

In these terms, this principle would also apply to current food policies to fulfil the right to food throughout time. According to the principle of equity, the planetary rights and duties of each generation, such as obligations to maintain options for future generations or to maintain the quality of the environment, should be respected as far as possible. This would mean, that the measures that States implement to guarantee the right to food for their populations respect and promote agricultural diversity, to preserve options for future generations. Additionally, this principle could also be interpreted as the need to avoid the use of unsustainable agricultural practices, such as the use of polluting pesticides, to maintain the quality of the environment (Garcia-Juanatey, 2018). However, it is essential to ensure that safeguarding the rights of future generations does not come at the cost of meeting the immediate needs of those living in poverty. For example, climate change mitigation measures – such as cutting agricultural emissions in developing countries – may undermine local food security (Garcia-Juanatey, 2018). *Vis-à-vis* those kinds of trade-offs, Brown Weiss emphasizes that one key principle of intergenerational equity holds that each generation should ensure equitable access to the legacy of past generations – such as access to clean water. Therefore, it cautions against placing unreasonable burdens on the present generation to meet uncertain future demands, clearly stating that environmental protection should not hinder efforts to meet the basic needs of the poor (Brown Weiss, 2010, p. 23). Additionally, to fulfil this principle, the authors of the Goa Guidelines on Intergenerational Equity propose, among other instruments: to create political mechanisms of representation of future generations; protecting their interests through legal and institutional tools; and developing instruments for monitoring the use of natural and cultural resources.

3.2 Current development around the concept of future generations

3.2.1. The principles on Human Rights for Future Generations

The Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations represent an interesting development coming from the international law doctrine, aiming to protect the interest of those not yet born. Adopted in February

2023, these principles emerged from growing concerns about the long-term impacts of current policies on climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion. They build upon existing human rights frameworks while addressing their temporal limitations, asserting that human rights obligations must extend beyond present generations to include future ones. In that regard, their definition of future generations is “those generations that do not yet exist but will exist and who will inherit the Earth”, including “persons, groups and peoples” (art. 1). Considering that, the principles draw theoretical support from various legal and philosophical traditions. More concretely, they clearly build upon Brown Weiss's concept of intergenerational equity (1989) as articulated in her “planetary trust” doctrine, where current generations serve as trustees for future ones. The principles also reflect the “just savings principle” which proposes that each generation should preserve sufficient resources for subsequent ones.

These theoretical foundations help ground what might otherwise appear as abstract obligations in concrete ethical frameworks. In fact, these principles propose a series of human rights-based obligations for current generations, as a way to respond to pressing challenges. In fact, the foundation of these principles lies in the understanding that many contemporary challenges – particularly ecological crises – have consequences that will disproportionately affect future populations. Consequently, framing the questions as a human rights issue, the Maastricht Principles establish legal and ethical obligations for current generations to consider long-term impacts in their decision-making processes, considering also an intersectional approach. Therefore, art. 7 clearly states that to “meet their obligations to future generations, States must necessarily impose reasonable restrictions on activities that undermine the rights of future generations, including the unsustainable use of natural resources and the destruction of Nature”. However, they subsequently state that “(S)uch restrictions must not impair or nullify the enjoyment of human rights of present generations”, avoiding imposing “disproportionate burdens on disadvantaged groups”. Considering that, the principles articulate three fundamental state obligations: to respect future generations' rights by avoiding harmful policies; to protect these rights by regulating non-state actors; and to fulfil them through positive measures and institutional mechanisms. This tripartite framework mirrors existing human rights law while expanding its temporal scope. The principles particularly emphasize preventing irreversible environmental damage and ensuring equitable resource distribution across generations. Therefore, the approach would involve safeguarding fundamental rights across time, ensuring protection not just for current generations but also for those to come.

These three fundamental state obligations have implications for the right to food. First, as stated in art. 17, regarding violations of the obligation to respect, depriving future generations of access to sustainable and equitable natural resources – such as fertile land, clean water, and healthy ecosystems – constitutes a direct violation of their rights to life, health, and an adequate standard of living, of which food security is a core component. Second, art. 18 specifies that the obligation to protect further compels states to regulate both public and private actors whose conduct poses foreseeable risks to future generations. Relevant examples include the failure by States to phase out fossil fuels within the shortest possible time (art. 19, b) or to prevent the degradation or destruction of irreplaceable topsoil and freshwater (art. 19, e), natural assets that are vital for food production and agricultural livelihoods, as well as the failure. Equally concerning is the lack of protection for indigenous peoples, peasants, and traditional communities, whose food systems and knowledge play a critical role in preserving agroecological diversity and ensuring long-term food sovereignty (art. 12). Third, according to the obligation to fulfil human rights of future generations (art. 20), states must take all necessary measures, including phasing out unsustainable consumption and production patterns and waste generation that jeopardizes the Earth's ability to sustain future generations (c), an aspect that for instance should include the excessive use of fertilizers and agrochemicals. The principles also state that wealthier States must proceed more expeditiously under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.

In practice, this implies that contemporary food systems must be reoriented to prioritize sustainability, equity, and long-term resilience, rather than short-term productivity alone. Integrating these articles into policy discourse compels states and international institutions to treat the food security of future generations not as an abstract ideal, but as a concrete human rights obligation grounded in legal and ethical norms.

3.2.2. The principles on Human Rights for Future Generations

The Pact for the Future and the UN Declaration on Future Generations, both adopted by the UN General Assembly at the UN Future Summit in September 2024, represent significant steps toward embedding the principle of intergenerational equity within global governance. Rooted in the idea that present generations have a moral and legal responsibility to safeguard the rights and well-being of those yet to come, these initiatives aim to translate the principle of intergenerational equity into concrete commitments, reinforcing the international community's obligation to ensure a liveable, equitable world for future generations. Previously, in 2021, the Secretary-General published his report *Our Common Agenda*, which includes a chapter that highlights the importance of strengthening solidarity with younger and future generations. To give continuity to this call, the Pact for the Future highlights the need to reform the multilateral system and accelerate collective action to achieve the SDGs.

Additionally, the Pact for the Future was accompanied by the adoption of the UN Declaration on Future Generations. This Declaration, building on the commitments outlined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 2030 Agenda, emphasizes the multiplier impact of present actions on future generations. Thus, the guiding principles, commitments, and actions outlined in the Declaration highlight the need to achieve the objectives and targets of the 2030 Agenda through an intergenerational lens. This implies the incorporation of both a procedural and a substantial perspective of intergenerational justice (Gosseries, 2023). As a result, this Declaration focuses on meeting the needs of future generations by protecting their interests in the present and future, as well as introducing a procedural dimension that promotes the inclusion of younger segments of the population in decision-making processes. In this sense, the UN Declaration on Future Generations presents a significant challenge, as it moves beyond the traditional framework of sustainable development and its iterations, aiming to deepen the principle of intergenerational equity. Therefore, the issue is not merely about meeting the needs of future generations but also about implementing measures that guide us now toward a future that minimizes risks, while respecting planetary boundaries.

This perspective based on acting now to protect present and future generations is grounded on two social facts, (1) the existence of a global community which is interconnected and interdependent, and (2) the intergenerational multiplier effect of our policymaking. On the one hand, the first issue is based on the evidence of our interconnectedness. The UNSG's report and the subsequent work leading to the Pact for the Future stem from the recognition of pressing global challenges that underscore our interdependence such as climate change, the COVID pandemic, or the interconnection of the global economy. On the other hand, the 'multiplier' approach describes the profound and amplified effects our decisions can have over time. Thus, this concept underscores the importance of making well-informed decisions today so that policymakers can better understand the long-term impacts of their decisions and work toward creating strategies that not only address immediate needs but also consider the interests and well-being of future generations. Consequently, the Pact for the Future embeds intergenerational thinking through three main pillars: elevating youth voice and agency; institutionalizing foresight and long-range planning, including the appointment of a Special Envoy for Future Generations to mainstream long-term concerns across global agendas (not yet appointed); and aligning global systems – finance, governance, digital technology – with the dual imperatives of present needs and future sustainability.

However, despite those interesting developments, both the Pact and the Declaration present key shortcomings. Chief among them is the non-binding nature of the Pact, which lacks enforcement mechanisms and concrete implementation pathways. About its content, significant doubts remain regarding whether just proclaiming the importance of considering the needs and interests of future generations –the Declaration avoids an explicit mention of rights in this regard– will make any material difference in the course correction for the future of the planet (DESAI, 2024). Finally, despite acknowledging urgent global challenges, it is seen as lacking the transformative urgency and accountability mechanisms necessary to address existential risks like climate change in a meaningful, time-sensitive way.

4. Discussion

This final section explores the normative and practical implications of integrating intergenerational equity into food systems transformation, with a particular focus on the long-term realization of the right to food. The discussion is structured in two parts. The first subsection examines the current legal and ethical foundations for extending the right to food beyond the present generation, considering the documents previously analyzed. The second subsection identifies key policy areas and strategic directions for aligning food systems with the needs and rights of future generations. Together, these sections aim to deepen understanding of how food policy can evolve to meet long-term challenges while upholding the principles of sustainability, justice, and human dignity.

4.1 Towards the recognition of a right to food of future generations?

An emerging framework for the protection of the rights of future generations is taking shape within international discourse, grounded in the principles of intergenerational equity and human dignity. This framework reflects a growing recognition that current decision-making must account for the long-term impacts on those who are yet to be born. However, the legal language used to articulate these concerns varies. Some instruments, such as the Maastricht Principles, adopt the language of rights and obligations, while others, like the UN Declaration on Future Generations, frame these concerns in terms of interests and actions. Despite these differences in terminology, both approaches converge on a shared normative proposition: that states have a duty to consider how their policies – and the conduct of actors within their jurisdiction – will affect the well-being and rights of future generations.

To operationalize this duty, several mechanisms have been proposed. One important avenue is the institutional representation of future generations, including children and youth, through the appointment of ombudspersons, commissioners, or special rapporteurs at local, national, and international levels. These actors serve as advocates for long-term interests in policy and legal processes (Gonzalez-Ricoy; Rey, 2019; Torre-Schaub; De Armenteras Cabot, 2023). In parallel, the use of prospective or long-term impact assessments – which evaluate the future consequences of proposed laws, infrastructure projects, or economic strategies – can help integrate foresight and precaution into governance systems. A broader cultural and political shift toward intergenerational thinking is also essential, requiring educational and institutional efforts to reshape the temporal horizons of policy.

Moreover, there are also interesting developments in the jurisprudence in regards the duty of states to consider the well-being and rights of future generations, particularly within the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR). In addition to the legal recognition of the right to food and adequate nutrition under Article 12 of the Protocol of San Salvador, the IACtHR has adopted a progressive interpretation of Article 26 of the American Convention on Human Rights in its recent environmental jurisprudence. This article commits States Parties to adopt measures, both internally and through international cooperation, to progressively achieve the full realization of the rights that derive from the economic, social, educational, scientific, and cultural standards set out in the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS). Regarding the interpretation of Article 26, the IACtHR has established a link between the lack of access to land, water quality, and the absence of state support for the development of productive projects, among other factors, and the violation of the right to food, as these limit access to the means of subsistence necessary to ensure one's development¹. As for the latter, recent jurisprudence has connected environmental degradation with the fulfilment of the right to food, both for present and future generations.

¹ Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I/A Court H.R.). 2005. **Case of the Yakye Axa Indigenous Community v. Paraguay**. Merits, Reparations and Costs. Judgment of June 17, 2005. Series C No. 125. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I/A Court H.R.). 2006. **Case of the Sawhoyamaya Indigenous Community v. Paraguay**. Merits, Reparations and Costs. Judgment of March 29, 2006. Series C No. 146. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I/A Court H.R.). 2007. **Case of the Saramaka People v. Suriname**. Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of November 28, 2007. Series C No. 172. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I/A Court H.R.). 2010. **Case of the Xákmok Kásek Indigenous Community v. Paraguay**. Merits, Reparations and Costs. Judgment of August 24, 2010. Series C No. 214.

The case of *Lhaka Honhat v. Argentina* (2020)² represented a significant step forward in consolidating the right to a healthy environment as an autonomous right, without the need to establish a link to another human right protected under the American Convention on Human Rights. The IACtHR held that the rights to collective property, a healthy environment, adequate food, access to water, and participation in cultural life had been violated, with the latter rights deriving from the progressive obligations established in Article 26 of the Convention (Ferrer Mac-Gregor, 2020, 3–5). The IACtHR linked these rights to the satisfaction of the needs of both “present and future generations”, thereby establishing an intergenerational dimension of the protected rights and incorporating the traditional framework of sustainable development, which includes not only present but also future generations in practical reasoning. The IACtHR further adopted the reasoning of General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights regarding the right to adequate food, holding that “food security” is intrinsically linked to “sustainability,” insofar as it entails access to food for both present and future generations³.

This interpretation has been reiterated in the case of *La Oroya v. Peru*, in which the IACtHR, in addition to reaffirming its recent case law by recognizing the right to a healthy environment as an autonomous right, emphasizes the link between environmental degradation, the fulfilment of the right to adequate food, and the satisfaction of the conditions necessary for a dignified life⁴. However, and concerning specifically the right to food for future generations, we are still far from its international recognition at the institutional level. While significant theoretical and normative progress has been made, the formal recognition of the rights of future generations remains largely absent from binding international legal instruments. Nevertheless, as the Maastricht principles are based on current human rights law, it would be highly beneficial for the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to articulate the specific state obligations that would follow from recognizing the right to food of future generations. Clarifying these obligations would help bridge the gap between existing human rights frameworks and long-term sustainability imperatives. Such a normative elaboration could provide guidance on how current policies – particularly those related to land use, agricultural practices, biodiversity conservation, and climate action – must be designed not only to fulfil present needs but also to safeguard the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of food for generations to come. It would also support the integration of intergenerational assessments in national food strategies and contribute to a more robust accountability framework for ensuring that today’s actions do not undermine tomorrow’s rights.

4.2 Priorities for incorporating intergenerational thinking into food security

In light of the need to clarify these obligations, this final subsection draws on insights from sustainability science to outline two critical priorities that must be addressed when applying intergenerational thinking to food policy: first, shifting away from the dominant food productivism paradigm toward an approach centred on ensuring adequate food for all within planetary boundaries; and second, reducing the food system’s reliance on fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources.

On the one hand, applying intergenerational thinking to food policy necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of the dominant paradigm of food productivism – the belief that maximizing agricultural output is the primary goal of food systems. In regards to that, it is well established that today's conventional agricultural practices are pushing planetary boundaries and are playing a central role in destabilizing the Earth's system on a planetary scale (Campbell *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, as Amartya Sen has compellingly argued many decades ago, the problem of hunger stems less from a lack of food availability and more from issues of unequal distribution and access. More recently, and in a similar vein, Smil (2024) argues there is not currently a pressing need to massively ramp up global food production; conversely,

² Inter-American Court of Human Rights. *Case of the Indigenous Communities Members of the Lhaka Honhat Association (Our Land) v. Argentina*. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of February 6, 2020. Series C No. 400.

³ Inter-American Court of Human Rights. *Case of the Indigenous Communities Members of the Lhaka Honhat Association (Our Land) v. Argentina*. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of February 6, 2020. Series C No. 400, paras. 220-221.

⁴ Inter-American Court of Human Rights. *Case of the Inhabitants of La Oroya v. Perú*. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of November 27, 2023. Series C No. 511, para. 136.

he states that regions of the global North such as Europe should scale down meat-heavy and industrial cropping regimes while focusing on improvements in distribution, reducing food waste and overconsumption, as well as the environmental burden of current production patterns. Thus, more than producing more, he points at the need to reduce food waste, shift diets away from meat, especially red meat, to plant-based foods, poultry, fish, legumes, and increase crop and input efficiency, especially in low yield regions like Sub Saharan Africa (Smil, 2024).

On the other hand, integrating intergenerational thinking into food policy requires confronting the deep dependence of contemporary food systems on fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources, as well as promoting food system decarbonization. From synthetic fertilizers and mechanized agriculture to global supply chains and cold storage infrastructure, much of modern food production and distribution is sustained by energy-intensive inputs that contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. In fact, current agri-food systems contribute to roughly 30% of the GHGs emissions produced by agri-food systems (IRENA; FAO, 2021). Therefore, reducing greenhouse gas emissions throughout the supply chain, including methane and nitrous oxide, and aligning national food strategies with climate targets and planetary boundaries are key priority areas.

Therefore, an intergenerational approach, apart from reducing fertilizers and other agricultural inputs, also demands a progressive transition toward agroecological practices and localized food systems that can ensure long-term sustainability. According to the last assessment of the Right to Food Guidelines made by the FAO, agroecology –as a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems – “can greatly contribute to realization of the right to food, enhancing food security and nutrition for current and future generations” (FAO,2024, p. 24).

As a final point, it is important to recall, as Brown Weiss (2010, p. 23) cautions, that environmental protection should not come at the expense of meeting the basic needs of the poor. In this context, it is essential to distinguish between a legitimate ecological critique of global industrial productivism and the pressing need for context-sensitive agricultural development in historically marginalized and underserved regions, particularly in the Global South. Indeed, in certain areas – such as remote rural communities – enhancing agricultural resilience in the face of climate change may require increased mechanization and a judicious use of inputs to ensure food security and support basic livelihood needs. Thus, these context-specific considerations are key for achieving global food security (Smil, 2008, 2024), also from an intergenerational perspective.

5. Conclusions

The worsening global hunger crisis and the mounting evidence of ecological overshoot reveal an urgent need to rethink how food systems are governed and for whom they are designed. Despite notable advancements in the recognition and operationalization of the right to food, the persistence of hunger– coupled with the surpassing of multiple planetary boundaries– demonstrates that current policy frameworks remain insufficient to meet the needs of present populations, let alone those of future generations. In fact, despite decades of international commitments and the establishment of a legal framework based on principles of human dignity and non-discrimination, hundreds of millions still lack secure access to adequate food. This long-lasting crisis is clearly not the result of insufficient production or distribution inefficiencies, but a symptom of systemic vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect the most marginalized communities and that will likely intensify in the future.

This paper has argued that ensuring food security in the long term requires embedding intergenerational equity into both the normative and practical dimensions of food policy. The existing human rights-based approach offers important legal and institutional tools for promoting access to food, especially for vulnerable populations. However, it must evolve to address the temporal limitations that constrain its ability to incorporate sustainability and long-term responsibilities. Recent legal developments, including the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations and the UN Pact for the Future, offer promising entry points for expanding the scope of human rights to encompass the needs of those yet to be born. Two critical policy priorities have been identified for guiding this

transformation: first, moving beyond food productivism by shifting the focus from yield maximization to equitable food access within ecological boundaries; and second, reducing the food system's reliance on fossil fuels and non-renewable resources, thereby enhancing its resilience and sustainability over time. These shifts demand not only technological and economic changes but also a reorientation of governance, political will, and global cooperation.

Based on these findings, several concrete recommendations emerge: (1) States and international institutions should integrate intergenerational impact assessments into food policy design and planning; (2) the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food should clarify the obligations that arise from recognizing the right to food of future generations; (3) governments should support agroecological transitions that enhance local food security while remaining within planetary boundaries; and (4) new mechanisms for the representation of future generations in food governance – such as ombudspersons or parliamentary committees – should be established at national and international levels. Advancing these recommendations would help ensure that food systems contribute to both present well-being and the long-term sustainability of life on Earth.

This reconfiguration has both ethical and practical implications. Ethically, it affirms that the dignity of future persons matters in today's decisions and policies, meaning that current generations have the duty to alleviate present suffering while preventing avoidable future harm. Practically, it means transforming food systems away from extractive, fossil-fuel-dependent models towards regenerative, diverse, and territorially rooted systems that foster resilience and respect ecological limits. In conclusion, fulfilling the right to food in the 21st century requires more than policy reform: it demands a paradigmatic and systematic shift. Recognizing the needs and rights of future generations does not diminish our obligations to the present; rather, it expands and deepens them. In doing so, it opens the possibility for a more just, sustainable, and rights-based future, where food does not only represent a commodity, it becomes common good across different generations.

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