

Repurpose the Trusteeship Council to Better Govern the Global Commons

Excerpt from [Road to 2023: Our Common Agenda and the Pact for the Future](#)

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Recommendation

The Global Commons—comprising the high seas, the atmosphere, Antarctica, outer space and, increasingly, cyberspace—surrounds, supports, and sustains our world’s ecosystem and is vital to our economic prosperity. The international community should repurpose the United Nations’ all-but-defunct Trusteeship Council to exercise a new, carefully shaped role as a steward of the Global Commons, with a view to enhancing intergenerational equity and the well-being of future generations.

Gaps in Global Governance

The Global Commons forms the basis of our ecosystem and, beyond any national jurisdiction, belongs to and benefits the whole of humanity. Some of the conventionally understood commons include the high seas, the atmosphere, Antarctica, and outer space.

All of these elements of the Global Commons are now under threat. Pollution and ocean acidification have degraded maritime biodiversity, and 34 percent of global fish stocks are now being overfished. The connection between atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions and climate warming is now well-known and studied closely. Orbital debris is at a historic high, posing threats to space operations. Even Antarctica’s iconic glaciers and ecosystem are in peril due to global warming and overfishing.

More worryingly, renewed geopolitical competition has made the commons a contested domain, as manifested in maritime disputes and the militarization of outer space.

The crisis facing the Global Commons reflects an acute governance gap. Governing the commons is inherently complex, due to competing stakeholders’ reluctance to pay the costs of maintaining it while foregoing the gains of exploiting it. International legal frameworks governing the commons are limited or non-existent in terms of regulating overfishing, deep sea mining, space debris, and air pollution. And there is no dedicated supervisory—let alone regulatory—body overseeing access to and use of the commons, or coordinating dialogue between stakeholders.

Lastly, the Global Commons governance gap represents a form of intergenerational inequality. Unrepresented in today’s decision-making and unable to articulate their needs, future generations are subject to the consequences of today’s policy mistakes.

Better managing and protecting the commons would take into account their interests, in accordance with the principle of intergenerational equity.

Repurpose the Trusteeship Council as a Steward of the Global Commons

The international community should consider repurposing the all-but-defunct Trusteeship Council to manage and protect the Global Commons. The Trusteeship Council, a principal UN organ, was originally

created to oversee the transition of colonies to independence. But its activities have been suspended since 1994, when Palau gained independence.

The idea of repurposing it to focus on the commons was first raised by the Commission on Global Governance in its 1995 report, [Our Global Neighborhood](#). It was also endorsed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his report [Renewing the United Nations: Programme for Reform](#) in 1997. The proposal gained momentum recently after it was suggested again in Our Common Agenda.

To protect the Global Commons and ensure its sustainable use, the repurposed Council should be given the mandate to exercise collective trusteeship over major elements of the commons. Acting as a deliberative forum, the revitalized Trusteeship Council would consider reports or petitions on steps to protect the Global Commons submitted by Member States, UN specialized agencies and programs, and accredited civil society groups. The revamped Council would also monitor the use and protection of the commons, oversee compliance with relevant international laws, and report any infringement thereof to the General Assembly.

The repurposed Trusteeship Council should remain a UN principal organ, giving its role significant status and enhancing its convening power. The new Council would also help to foster system-wide coherence among a wide array of UN agencies and programs currently working on the Global Commons (including the UN Environment Programme, ECOSOC, the UNFCCC Secretariat, and other bodies).

The repurposed Council should embody a new multilateral governance model that goes beyond the traditional state-centric framework—something needed if the world wishes to protect the resource and operational domains that lie beyond the sovereignty of any state but within the reach of many.

Protect Youth and Future Generations' Interests through the Trusteeship Council

The Our Common Agenda report highlighted the lack of representation for young people and future generations in today's global decision-making and their consequent inability to have their case made effectively in international forums.

Among other proposals to address the interests of youth and future generations, Our Common Agenda recommends that the Trusteeship Council act on behalf of those future generations and account for their interests. Protecting and ensuring the sustainable use of the Global Commons is crucial to advancing intergenerational equity.

In approaching the long-term governance of the Global Commons, the repurposed Trusteeship Council should make protecting the interests of future generations a guiding principle. It could further work closely with the proposed UN Youth Council and Special Envoy on Future Generations to give voice to present younger and future generations.