

Over the years numerous proposals have been advanced across the democratic world to overcome, or at least mitigate, political short-termism and policy short-sightedness. But what intervention logics – or explanatory justifications – underpin such proposals, on what behavioural and other assumptions do these various logics depend, and how robust are they? This short article briefly explores these questions. But first, let us consider the context.

#### The context

The evidence suggests that governments often give inadequate attention to long-term issues, thereby putting at risk the interests of future generations. They tend, in other words, to govern for the short term. Instead of displaying policy far-sightedness, they frequently exhibit significant 'short-termism' or 'political myopia'. Moreover, such propensities appear to be deep-seated, widespread and enduring. According to Thompson (2005: 246), for instance, policy makers in democracies are 'systematically biased in favour of the present'. This bias, it can be argued, reflects a multiplicity of factors. Above all, there are the pressures on elected politicians to be responsive to voter preferences and interest group pressures, the tendency for voters to be self-interested and impatient, the complexity and uncertainty surrounding many long-term policy issues, and the fact that future generations possess neither a vote nor a voice. To compound matters, efforts to protect the global commons – especially the Earth's atmosphere and oceans – are complicated and constrained by weak international institutions and collective action problems (see Kaul et al., 1999).

The negative impacts of such pressures, considerations and constraints, it is argued, are evident across many policy domains (see Congleton, 1992; Gardiner 2009; Jacobs, 2011). Examples include:

1. under-investment in development and maintenance of major, long-term physical assets, such as energy, telecommunications and transport infrastructure, and water services;
2. under-investment in early intervention, preventative healthcare initiatives and other social policies which entail short-term fiscal costs in the interests of long-term benefits;
3. a reluctance to confront the long-term fiscal risks of current policy settings (e.g. with respect to state pensions and elder care);
4. unsustainable management of natural capital, including critical, non-substitutable natural resources; and
5. inadequate measures to mitigate human-induced climate change.

The long-term economic, social and environmental consequences of such short-sighted policy settings are:



Proposal	Intervention logic	Core assumptions	Risks and problems	Empirical evidence
<p>Insert specific wording in constitutions to protect the interests, needs and/or rights of future generations (or to protect a healthy environment)</p>	<p>Decision-makers in democracies can be constrained by the rule of law (legal authority) to give greater protection to future generations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› The constitution is able to be changed</li> <li>› The new provisions are appropriate and justiciable</li> <li>› Relevant cases come before the courts</li> <li>› The courts give weight to the relevant provisions and are willing to override the legislature</li> <li>› The courts are authoritative and their rulings are adhered to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Some democracies lack an entrenched written constitution</li> <li>› One or more of the assumptions is not valid</li> <li>› The revised constitution results in less protection for future generations than expected and is difficult to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Few relevant cases have been brought before the courts in countries with specific constitutional protection for future generations (or the environment)</li> <li>› Little impact on policy or overall outcomes</li> </ul>
<p>Establish institutions (legislative, executive, etc.) with specific long-term analytical and advisory responsibilities (e.g. a Parliamentary Committee for the Future, a Sustainable Development Commission)</p>	<p>Institutions of this kind can encourage policy farsightedness by changing the structure of political incentives – via better information, risk identification, analysis of long-term issues and options, contributing to enhanced political debate, public understanding and accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› The institution is adequately resourced</li> <li>› Analyses are rigorous, with clear policy implications</li> <li>› Reports attract political and public attention, and prove persuasive</li> <li>› Governments change policy settings in response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› One or more of the assumptions is not valid</li> <li>› The institution is not durable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Many institutions of this kind have been created</li> <li>› Many have not survived</li> <li>› Few appear to have had a significant or on-going influence on policy</li> </ul>
<p>Require regular fiscal (or environmental) sustainability reports by an independent agency (e.g. the Office for Budget Responsibility) – and require a timely government response</p>	<p>Regular reports of this kind can encourage policy farsightedness by changing the structure of political incentives – via better information, risk identification, analysis of long-term issues and options, and mandatory government responses contributing to enhanced political debate, public understanding and accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› The institution is adequately resourced</li> <li>› Analyses are rigorous, with clear policy implications</li> <li>› Reports attract political and public attention, and prove persuasive</li> <li>› Governments change policy settings in response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› One or more of the assumptions is not valid</li> <li>› The credibility of the institution is undermined</li> <li>› Regular reporting is discontinued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Many countries have instituted regular reporting of this kind, especially on fiscal sustainability matters</li> <li>› There is as yet little evidence of such reports having had a major impact on policy</li> </ul>
<p>Institute substantive policy rules for maintaining aggregate stocks of natural capital (e.g. at the national level)</p>	<p>Such rules serve as commitment devices, and can constrain decision makers and change the political incentives they face – via new and better information, specific goals/targets, etc. contributing to changes in public attitudes/values, and enhanced accountability for performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› The policy rules are clear and enforceable</li> <li>› There are adequate mechanisms for enforcement</li> <li>› There are few, if any, override provisions</li> <li>› The relevant information is available (or can be generated) to ensure effective implementation and compliance</li> <li>› Sub-national decisions do not</li> </ul>		