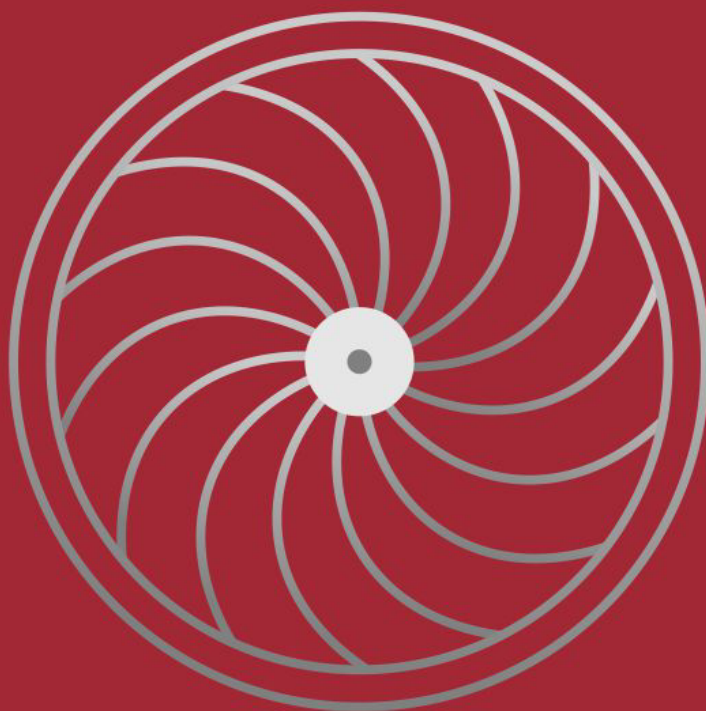




Unidade de Monitorização
de Políticas Públicas

POLICY PAPERS

**INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND THE FUTURE
OF EUROPE: A NEW PRINCIPLE FOR EU PUBLIC
POLICY**

Paulo Neto

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APRESENTAÇÃO DA UMPP / UMPP PRESENTATION

A Unidade de Monitorização de Políticas Públicas (UMPP) da Universidade de Évora é uma estrutura técnica e científica dedicada à produção de conhecimento e informação sobre conceção, monitorização e avaliação de políticas públicas.

A UMPP foi criada com o apoio do Programa Operacional Regional do Alentejo 2007-2013 (INALENTEJO) e tem como objetivo principal promover a avaliação e monitorização das políticas públicas implementadas ou em processo de implementação na unidade territorial NUTS II do Alentejo, em Portugal e na União Europeia, bem como assegurar a ampla disseminação desse conhecimento neste âmbito territorial.

A competitividade dos países, das regiões e das empresas está cada vez mais dependente das condições em que uns e outras tomam decisões e as concretizam de forma eficiente e eficaz. Neste sentido, a capacidade e competência na definição e implementação de políticas públicas por parte do Estado e a assertividade na concretização de estratégias e iniciativas bem sucedidas por parte das demais organizações são hoje fatores decisivos para o desempenho das sociedades em que se inserem.

A relevância, pertinência, coerência e valor acrescentado das políticas públicas são hoje aspetos absolutamente cruciais para as condições de desenvolvimento dos países, dos territórios, das organizações e dos indivíduos. Desde logo, em função dos contextos regulamentares e de enquadramento que estabelecem, dos mecanismos de incentivo e estímulo em que assentam, dos paradigmas e visão de futuro para que apontam, do nível de sofisticação e inovação que lhe está associado e da intencionalidade estratégica que imprimem e transmitem, numa perspetiva de médio e longo prazo, aos setores e atividades a que se destinam.

Num momento em que é cada vez maior o nível de exigência técnica e científica associado ao processo de planeamento da economia, da sociedade e dos territórios, e à construção e salvaguarda das suas condições de competitividade e de desenvolvimento, a Universidade de Évora entendeu criar uma Unidade de Monitorização de Políticas Públicas dedicada à produção de conhecimento e à avaliação e monitorização de políticas públicas aplicadas, ou em processo de aplicação nesta região.

A UMPP pauta a sua atividade por princípios de rigor, isenção, transparência e responsabilidade, e uma preocupação constante de auscultação e colaboração com as entidades e agentes da região Alentejo, mas também relativamente às de âmbito nacional e internacional.

Convidamo-lo(a) a conhecer o trabalho que fazemos.

The Public Policy Monitoring Unit (UMPP) of the University of Évora is a technical and scientific unit dedicated to producing knowledge and information on the design, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies.

UMPP was established with the support of the Alentejo Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013 (INALENTEJO). Its main mission is to promote the monitoring and evaluation of public policies that have been implemented, or are currently being implemented, in the NUTS II region of Alentejo, in Portugal and the European Union while also ensuring the broad dissemination of knowledge in this field across the territory.

The competitiveness of countries, regions, and organisations increasingly depends on the conditions under which decisions are made and translated into effective and efficient action. In this context, the State's capacity to design and implement public policies, together with the ability of other organisations to deliver successful strategies and initiatives, has become a decisive factor in the performance of the societies in which they operate.

The relevance, consistency, coherence, and added value of public policies are now crucial to the development prospects of countries, territories, organisations, and individuals. This is reflected in the regulatory and institutional frameworks they establish, the incentive mechanisms on which they are built, the paradigms and future visions they promote, the degree of sophistication and innovation they embody, and the strategic direction they provide to the sectors and activities they are intended to support over the medium and long term.

At a time when the technical and scientific demands associated with planning the economy, society, and territories – and with strengthening and safeguarding their competitiveness and development – are becoming ever more complex, the University of Évora created UMPP as a dedicated unit for the production of knowledge and for the monitoring and evaluation of public policies applied, or in the process of being applied, in the region.

UMPP carries out its work in accordance with the principles of rigour, impartiality, transparency, and responsibility, while maintaining an ongoing commitment to dialogue and collaboration with institutions and stakeholders in the Alentejo region, as well as with partners at national and international level.

We invite you to explore our work.

UMPP POLICY PAPERS

Os UMPP Policy Papers são documentos síntese elaborados sobre questões de natureza metodológica, ou de debate técnico e científico, em torno de questões avaliativas ou de monitorização de políticas públicas. Os UMPP Policy Papers abordarão, entre outros aspetos, exercícios de avaliação e análise em torno de políticas ou de instrumentos de política pública concretas, e serão concebidos com a preocupação de apresentar recomendações ou propostas de orientação futura.

Esta publicação destina-se a cumprir um dos objetivos da UMPP, nomeadamente a produção de conhecimento e de informação sobre a conceção, monitorização e avaliação das políticas públicas implementadas ou em processo de implementação na Região Alentejo, em Portugal e na União Europeia, bem como promover a disseminação dessa informação no contexto regional, nacional e europeu.

O *UMPP Policy Paper No. 12 | 2026* tem como principal objetivo sustentar que a justiça intergeracional deve ser reconhecida como um princípio estruturante da futura agenda da União Europeia e da arquitetura das suas políticas públicas. O texto procura demonstrar que a União não pode continuar a tratar esta questão como uma preocupação ética secundária ou como um tema fragmentado entre diferentes domínios de policy, como a juventude, o clima, a habitação, as pensões, a educação ou a demografia. Pelo contrário, o paper defende que a legitimidade, a coerência e a sustentabilidade do projeto europeu dependerão cada vez mais da capacidade de distribuir, de forma mais justa entre gerações, oportunidades, proteções, custos, riscos e capacidades.

Ao mesmo tempo, este Policy Paper pretende propor uma leitura institucional, territorial e estratégica da justiça intergeracional, articulando-a com a coesão económica, social e territorial, com os direitos sociais, com a capacidade pública, com a governação de longo prazo e com a resiliência democrática. Nesse sentido, o texto procura mostrar que a justiça intergeracional deve funcionar como critério de conceção, coordenação e avaliação das políticas públicas europeias, com especial atenção às condições concretas que moldam as oportunidades ao longo do ciclo de vida e entre gerações, nomeadamente a educação, as competências, a habitação, o acesso a serviços, a sustentabilidade ecológica, a qualidade da democracia e as desigualdades territoriais. O objetivo último é contribuir para uma visão mais forte, mais coerente e mais futura da ação pública europeia.

The main objective of the *UMPP Policy Paper No. 12 | 2026* is to argue that intergenerational justice should be recognised as a structuring principle for the future agenda of the European Union and for the architecture of EU public policy. The paper seeks to demonstrate that the Union can no longer treat this issue as a secondary ethical concern or as a fragmented theme dispersed across separate policy domains such as youth, climate, housing, pensions, education or demography. Instead, it contends that the legitimacy, coherence and sustainability of the European project will increasingly depend on Europe's capacity to distribute opportunities, protections, costs, risks and capabilities more fairly across generations.

At the same time, this Policy Paper aims to advance an institutional, territorial and strategic interpretation of intergenerational justice by linking it to economic, social and territorial cohesion, social rights, public capability, long-term governance and democratic resilience. In this

sense, the manuscript argues that intergenerational justice should function as a criterion for the design, coordination and evaluation of European public policies, with particular attention to the concrete conditions that shape opportunities across the life course and between generations, namely education, skills, housing, access to services, ecological sustainability, democratic quality and territorial inequality. Its broader objective is therefore to contribute to a stronger, more coherent and more future-oriented understanding of European public action.

INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: A NEW PRINCIPLE FOR EU PUBLIC POLICY

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This Policy Paper is published by UMPP – Public Policy Monitoring Unit, University of Évora. It is intended as a contribution to the European debate on the future of EU public policy, arguing that intergenerational justice should be placed at the heart of the European Union’s future agenda and policy architecture. The views expressed are those of the author.

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Abstract

This Policy Paper argues that intergenerational justice should no longer be treated by the European Union as a secondary ethical concern or as a fragmented issue distributed across separate policy domains such as youth, climate, pensions, housing, education or demography. It should instead be recognised as a structuring principle for the future agenda of the European Union and for the design, coordination and evaluation of European public policies. The paper starts from the proposition that the long-term legitimacy, coherence and sustainability of the European project will increasingly depend on the Union’s ability to distribute opportunities, protections, costs, risks and capabilities fairly across generations. This interpretation is strongly supported by the emerging European agenda on intergenerational fairness, which already presents the issue as a guiding principle for policymaking rather than as a standalone policy strand (European Commission, 2026).

The manuscript develops this argument in four main steps. First, it clarifies the meaning of intergenerational justice in public policy terms, arguing that it should be understood not only as fairness between age groups, but as fairness in the distribution of opportunities and burdens across time. Second, it shows that the European Union is now confronting a set of overlapping transitions – climatic, demographic, economic, territorial, technological and geopolitical – whose effects are deeply uneven across generations. Third, it argues that intergenerational justice should be mainstreamed into the architecture of EU public policy as a criterion for policy design, policy coordination and policy evaluation. Fourth, it demonstrates that cohesion policy, territorial development, housing, education, social rights, public investment, digital governance and democratic participation should all be reinterpreted through an intergenerational lens (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2026; European Commission, 2021, 2026; Neto, 2026).

The paper concludes that the European Union now requires an explicit intergenerational turn. Such a turn would not merely add a new social concern to the European agenda. It would provide a stronger normative and strategic principle through which the Union could reconnect long-term sustainability, social rights, territorial cohesion, public capability and democratic legitimacy. Intergenerational justice should therefore become one of the guiding principles of Europe's future public policy architecture.

Executive Summary

This Policy Paper argues that intergenerational justice should be recognised as a structuring principle for the future agenda of the European Union and for the design, coordination and evaluation of EU public policies. The central claim is that Europe's long-term legitimacy, coherence and sustainability will increasingly depend on its capacity to distribute opportunities, protections, costs, risks and capabilities more fairly across generations. In this perspective, intergenerational justice should not be treated as a secondary ethical concern or as a fragmented issue dispersed across youth, climate, pensions, housing, education or demography. It should instead become a guiding principle for public action. This argument aligns closely with the emerging European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, which explicitly states that intergenerational fairness should not be treated as a separate policy strand, but as a principle underpinning policies and spending (European Commission, 2026).

The paper develops this argument in four stages. First, it clarifies the conceptual foundations of intergenerational justice in public policy terms, defining it as fairness in the distribution across time of opportunities, burdens, risks, protections and capabilities. Second, it shows that the European Union is currently facing a set of overlapping transformations – demographic, climatic, technological, economic, social, geopolitical and territorial – whose consequences are deeply uneven across generations. Third, it argues that intergenerational justice should be

mainstreamed into the architecture of EU public policy as a criterion for policy design, policy coordination and policy evaluation. Fourth, it demonstrates that cohesion policy, territorial development, housing, skills, social rights, public investment, digital governance and democratic resilience should all be reinterpreted through an intergenerational lens (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2026; European Commission, 2021, 2026; Neto, 2026).

A distinctive contribution of the manuscript is that it links intergenerational justice to three mutually reinforcing pillars: fair policymaking, fair opportunities and fair places. Fair policymaking refers to the institutionalisation of long-term thinking, foresight, scrutiny and participatory governance. Fair opportunities refer to the life-course conditions that shape real capability, including education, skills, housing, care, employment transitions and access to essential services.

Fair places refer to the territorial conditions under which opportunity is made viable across generations. In this respect, the paper explicitly connects the emerging European intergenerational agenda with the argument advanced in UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026, according to which territorial disparities are not merely spatial asymmetries but also mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced across the life cycle and between generations (Neto, 2026).

The policy conclusion is straightforward but demanding. Europe needs an explicit intergenerational turn. That turn should be institutionalised through stronger use of strategic foresight, future-oriented policy assessment, social and territorial investment, support for citizen co-creation, and more systematic alignment between the intergenerational fairness agenda and the European social model. In this respect, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is particularly important because it already articulates a social rulebook based on solidarity between generations, jobs, skills, social protection, housing and essential services (European Commission, 2021).

The broader lesson of this Policy Paper is therefore that intergenerational justice offers Europe not merely a new social concern, but a stronger organising principle through which it can reconnect sustainability, social rights, public capability, territorial cohesion and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords

Intergenerational justice; European Union; EU public policy; future of Europe; long-term governance; social rights; territorial cohesion; fair places; strategic foresight; democratic legitimacy

1. Introduction

The future of Europe cannot be discussed seriously without asking a difficult but unavoidable question: fair for whom, and fair across what time horizon? For a long time, European public policy has tended to treat fairness primarily within present-tense distributive frameworks – between income groups, sectors, territories or Member States. These questions remain fundamental. Yet they are no longer sufficient. In a Union confronting demographic change, climate transition, digital disruption, housing pressures, geopolitical instability and widening territorial asymmetries, the distribution of opportunities, burdens and risks across generations is becoming one of the defining questions of political legitimacy and policy coherence. Intergenerational justice should therefore be moved from the margins of ethical reflection to the centre of Europe’s future agenda (European Commission, 2026).

This shift is not merely rhetorical. The emerging Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness expresses the European Commission’s ambition to ensure that today’s choices contribute positively to tomorrow’s opportunities and that both benefits and responsibilities are shared fairly across age groups. It explicitly links intergenerational fairness to economic prosperity and wellbeing, environmental responsibility, social and territorial cohesion, fiscal sustainability and democratic participation.

Crucially, it also states that intergenerational fairness should not be treated as a separate policy strand, but as a guiding principle underpinning policies and spending (European Commission, 2026). That is a major conceptual and institutional move. It means that the issue is no longer whether the Union should simply care about future generations, but whether it is willing to organise its policy architecture around a stronger and fairer temporal logic.

The process through which this agenda has emerged is itself highly significant. The EU Policy Lab and Joint Research Centre materials show that the strategy has been built through a collaborative, multidisciplinary and participatory process structured around scoping, visioning, ideation and co-creation. These phases were not merely procedural steps. They served to identify the central obstacles to fairness across time – especially short-termism, weak intergenerational collaboration, and intersecting inequalities – and to reframe the discussion around a vocabulary of Inspiration, Connection and Care (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

The significance of this is considerable. It suggests that intergenerational fairness is being developed not only as a moral proposition, but as an emerging framework for rethinking how European policymaking understands time, responsibility, institutions and long-term consequences.

This vocabulary matters because it helps avoid two common risks. One is that intergenerational justice becomes an excessively abstract moral discourse detached from real institutions and policy instruments. The other is that it becomes diluted into a set of disconnected sectoral concerns. The citizens’ booklet *Inherited Futures* and the citizen-based report *Intergenerational Fairness: The Future of Europe as Seen by EU Citizens* reinforce a more demanding interpretation.

They show that intergenerational fairness is understood by citizens through ideas of stewardship, dignity, care, memory, sustainability, reciprocity and what is worth transmitting forward (Bol et al., 2026). In this sense, intergenerational justice concerns not only what is distributed, but also what is preserved, renewed, regenerated and made institutionally possible.

The contribution of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to systematise and elevate the emerging European intergenerational agenda by arguing that intergenerational justice should be recognised as a new principle for EU public policy. Second, it situates this argument within a wider line of work on cohesion, public capability, territorial governance and the future of Europe.

In particular, it builds on the argument advanced in UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026, according to which territorial inequalities are not merely spatial imbalances but also mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced across the life cycle and between generations (Neto, 2026a).

The present manuscript extends that insight beyond cohesion policy and into the wider architecture of EU public policy.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 clarifies the conceptual and institutional foundations of intergenerational justice. Section 3 explains why the European Union now requires an explicit intergenerational turn. Section 4 argues that intergenerational justice should function as a guiding principle for EU public policy rather than as a separate policy theme. Section 5 territorialises the argument by linking intergenerational justice to cohesion and fair places. Section 6 examines strategic policy domains through an intergenerational lens. Section 7 turns to governance implications. Section 8 presents policy recommendations, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Intergenerational Justice: Conceptual and Institutional Foundations

Intergenerational justice is often invoked in political debate, but it is not always conceptually clarified. In many contexts, it is used loosely to refer to fairness between younger and older age groups, or to the obligation to avoid shifting excessive burdens onto future taxpayers. These concerns are real, but they are too narrow. In public policy terms, intergenerational justice should be understood more broadly as the fair distribution across time of opportunities, protections, risks, burdens and capabilities. It concerns not only the relationship between age cohorts currently alive, but also the relationship between present generations and those who will come after them. That is why the concept cannot be reduced to demography, pension design or youth policy alone. It belongs to the architecture of long-term public reasoning (Bol et al., 2025b; European Commission, 2026).

The preparatory work supporting the EU Strategy reinforces this interpretation. The scoping report treats intergenerational fairness as a lens through which public problems can be reinterpreted rather than as a discrete policy silo. The ideation report then extends the agenda to equitable prosperity, inclusive communities, ecological integrity, societal resilience, value-based innovation and implementation.

Taken together, these materials suggest that the issue is not simply one of resource allocation between age groups. It is a question of whether policymaking systems are capable of acknowledging long-term consequences, representing those without voice, and interrupting the cumulative transmission of disadvantage (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b).

A public policy reading of intergenerational justice must also move beyond a linear view of time. The strategy process materials call for a shift from treating the future as an external destination to understanding past, present and future as relationally connected. This matters conceptually because it suggests that intergenerational justice is not merely about abstract obligations owed by current generations to hypothetical future persons.

It is also about how institutions shape real chains of inheritance, ecology, care, social protection and opportunity. The JRC citizen report makes this even clearer by showing that citizens tend to frame intergenerational fairness holistically, linking climate responsibility, economic sustainability, care across generations, youth empowerment, cultural continuity and dignified ageing (Bol et al., 2026).

From this perspective, intergenerational justice has at least four dimensions. First, it is distributive, because it concerns who receives opportunities, protections and resources at different points in time. Second, it is protective, because it concerns whether present choices preserve the ecological, institutional and social conditions required for future flourishing. Third, it is procedural, because it concerns who is represented, heard or institutionally considered when long-term decisions are taken. Fourth, it is capability-based, because it concerns whether future people inherit the means to live well, adapt, participate and exercise agency. This fourfold interpretation aligns well with the emerging EU framing, which connects fairness to prosperity, wellbeing, participation, sustainability and long-term responsibility (European Commission, 2026).

The international and European normative context also matters. The strategy materials situate the initiative within the broader momentum created by the Pact for the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations, while also recalling that Article 3(3) TEU commits the Union to solidarity between generations. The same materials note that several Member States already refer to future generations in constitutional or institutional arrangements.

The issue is therefore no longer whether intergenerational justice has enough legal or institutional relevance to be taken seriously. The issue is whether Europe is prepared to govern more explicitly through it (European Commission, 2026).

3. Why the European Union Needs an Intergenerational Turn

The European Union now confronts a convergence of transitions whose effects are deeply uneven across generations. The emerging strategy explicitly identifies demographic, technological, economic, social, climate and environmental trends as forces reshaping how opportunities are created and shared. The issue is therefore not whether change is occurring, but whether the Union's policy choices are widening or narrowing the life chances of future generations under these conditions (European Commission, 2026). This is why intergenerational justice can no longer remain peripheral. The present model of public reasoning, heavily shaped by short-term political, economic and administrative horizons, is no longer sufficient for the complexity of the current European condition.

The scoping work clarifies why this matters. It identifies three root causes that stand in the way of intergenerational fairness: long-term thinking deficits, weak intergenerational collaboration, and intersecting vulnerabilities (Bol et al., 2025b). These are not accidental features of the present moment. They describe a more structural problem in European governance: institutions are relatively better equipped to react to immediate contingencies than to govern cumulative effects across time.

This becomes especially problematic under conditions of climate instability, demographic ageing, housing exclusion, digital disruption and territorial divergence. The need for an intergenerational turn is therefore not simply normative; it is institutional and practical.

Specific policy domains make this diagnosis more concrete. Demographic change is one obvious example. The strategy notes that young Europeans are coming of age in a period of rapid transformation, while longer lives, migration and labour-market shifts reshape the conditions under which opportunities are distributed. Yet the strategy also insists that the issue is not demographic change itself, but whether current choices improve or worsen people's chances to do well in life (European Commission, 2026).

A similar point applies to climate and ecological policy. The scoping and ideation materials repeatedly present environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and pollution as inherently intergenerational problems. A Union that continues to externalise ecological costs into the future cannot credibly claim to pursue fairness across time (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Housing and public finances provide further illustrations. The strategy materials identify housing, transport and access to essential services as intergenerational issues because they mediate autonomy, labour mobility, family formation, savings and life-course transitions. The strategy also links fairness to sustainable public finances, insisting that young people should not be left simply to service the debts of the past (European Commission, 2026).

The deeper implication is that intergenerational justice is not an abstract temporal ideal. It is embedded in very concrete systems of social reproduction. This point is reinforced by the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, which explicitly links solidarity between generations

to employment, skills, social protection, housing, long-term care and access to essential services (European Commission, 2021).

The citizen evidence strengthens this diagnosis by revealing how different generations articulate the issue. The JRC report based on #OurFutures stories shows strong common concern around sustainability, care and support for future generations, but also generation-specific emphases. Younger respondents focus more sharply on housing, jobs, educational reform and environmental sustainability as the operating baseline of the future. Older respondents place more emphasis on dignity, legacy, respect, care in ageing and the preservation of human connection in a technologically changing society (Bol et al., 2026).

The policy significance of this is considerable. A fair intergenerational contract cannot be built by privileging one temporal standpoint alone. It must hold together both forward-looking investment and age-inclusive solidarity.

Fragmented sectoral responses are therefore no longer enough. Europe cannot continue to treat climate as an environmental issue, housing as a market issue, ageing as a demographic issue, innovation as a competitiveness issue, and youth as a participation issue, while assuming that fairness will somehow emerge from the aggregation of these policies. The strategy materials move in the opposite direction by presenting intergenerational fairness as a meta-concept and a guiding principle capable of strengthening coherence across policy areas (European Commission, 2026).

That is the direction this paper reinforces. Europe needs an intergenerational turn because the present can no longer be governed fairly without a stronger temporal lens.

4. From Policy Theme to Guiding Principle for EU Public Policy

One of the most consequential developments in the current European debate is the explicit recognition that intergenerational fairness should not be treated as a separate policy strand, but as a guiding principle underpinning policies and public spending (European Commission, 2026). This is a decisive move because it changes the institutional status of the concept. Intergenerational justice ceases to be merely an ethical orientation or a thematic concern and becomes instead a criterion through which policy choices can be judged. The question is no longer whether the Union should also care about future generations. The question becomes whether existing policy design adequately accounts for the long-term distribution of opportunities, burdens, risks and capabilities.

This shift matters because EU policymaking has historically addressed future-oriented concerns through sector-specific frameworks. Climate has been handled mainly through environmental policy; youth through education or labour-market policy; ageing through pensions and demography; resilience through security or preparedness; and digital harms through

technology regulation. Each of these domains matters. Yet, treated separately, they do not generate a coherent understanding of how current decisions shape future life chances. Intergenerational justice offers a way of overcoming this fragmentation by introducing a broader evaluative question: do present policies leave future generations with more room to flourish, or with narrower possibility sets and heavier burdens? (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b; European Commission, 2026).

The implication is that policy design itself requires a longer temporal logic. It should no longer be sufficient for a measure to be efficient in the short term, politically feasible in the medium term, or fiscally contained in a given annual cycle.

A more intergenerationally serious approach would also ask whether the measure protects the capability of future societies to govern themselves well, to live within ecological limits, to sustain territorial cohesion, and to transmit opportunities more fairly across the life course. This is why the strategy is right to insist on mainstreaming intergenerational fairness into the design, implementation and evaluation of policies. If it remains external to those processes, it cannot become effective as a policy principle (European Commission, 2026).

Policy coordination is equally important. In the European Union, the most consequential outcomes often depend not on one policy instrument, but on the interaction between many: the Multiannual Financial Framework, the European Semester, cohesion policy, social investment instruments, climate legislation, digital regulation, education and territorial strategies. A fragmented policy system can easily reproduce intergenerational unfairness even if each of its parts appears reasonable in isolation.

The current strategy materials already point toward a more integrated logic by linking intergenerational fairness to the MFF, the European Semester, the ESF+ and future-oriented reforms that are both adequate and sustainable (European Commission, 2026). This is precisely why the concept has strategic potential: it is broad enough to connect multiple agendas, but specific enough to guide policy trade-offs.

The same logic applies to policy evaluation. If intergenerational justice is to become more than a rhetorical horizon, it must also influence how policy success is measured. Conventional present-oriented metrics – growth, employment, fiscal balance, output delivery or short-term inclusion indicators – remain important, but they do not adequately capture whether policies expand or narrow future opportunity structures. A stronger intergenerational framework would ask whether current policy choices build capabilities, reduce cumulative disadvantage, strengthen institutional resilience, preserve ecological integrity and protect democratic quality over time.

The strategy materials already move in that direction through discussion of impact tools, indicators, regulatory assessments and future-oriented governance mechanisms (European Commission, 2026).

For all these reasons, intergenerational justice should not be treated as one more sectoral interest to be represented alongside others. It should be treated as a way of asking whether the whole architecture of EU public policy is aligned with long-term fairness, sustainability and

institutional responsibility. In that respect, it resembles other transversal principles that have gradually reshaped European governance – such as sustainability, cohesion or gender mainstreaming – rather than a standalone programme. Its value lies precisely in its capacity to reorganise the way existing policies are understood.

5. Intergenerational Justice, Cohesion and Territorial Europe

One of the most important ways to make intergenerational justice more concrete is to territorialise it. UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026 does this with particular clarity by arguing that economic, social and territorial cohesion should be understood, in the post-2030 EU framework, as a central condition of intergenerational fairness (Neto, 2026).

Its core proposition is that fairness between generations depends not only on long-term thinking or better age-sensitive policy design, but also on fair places: the territorial conditions that shape access to education, healthcare, housing, mobility, public services, connectivity, innovation and participation. This is a powerful move because it shows that the intergenerational question is not only temporal. It is also spatial.

This matters because territorial inequality is one of the main ways in which long-term disadvantage becomes socially organised. When where one is born or grows up strongly influences access to opportunity, fairness across generations is already being mediated by geography.

Territorial asymmetries are therefore not merely development gaps to be corrected for efficiency reasons. They are also fairness gaps. They affect the conditions under which one generation can transmit advantages, protections and expectations to the next. UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 is especially useful because it insists that territorial disparities must be read not only as spatial imbalances, but as mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced across the life cycle and between generations (Neto, 2026).

This interpretation is closely aligned with the current strategy materials. The emerging EU agenda recognises that where people live strongly influences access to jobs, housing, services, digital infrastructure, mobility and democratic participation, and that territorial disparities between urban, rural, cross-border or disadvantaged territories can amplify inequalities over time. Once this is acknowledged, cohesion policy becomes more than a redistributive or convergence instrument. It becomes one of the most important practical mechanisms through which intergenerational fairness can be territorialised (European Commission, 2026).

The notion of fair places is particularly valuable because it changes the language of territorial policy. A place-based intergenerational perspective does not ask only whether a region is less productive or less competitive than another. It also asks whether a territory gives those who live there a fair chance to build, sustain and transmit opportunity over time.

The concept of life-cycle disadvantage, advanced in UMPP Policy Paper No. 5, is especially useful here: early disadvantages in education, housing, mobility, services and connectivity tend to accumulate, and territory mediates those processes. Geography thus becomes deeply embedded in the life course. Territorial inequality, in this sense, is a mechanism through which unequal future opportunities are produced.

This is why cohesion policy can be reinterpreted as an intergenerational policy. Under the right conditions, it does not simply correct current disparities; it helps shape the future opportunity structure of territories. It can expand access to education, improve connectivity, support institutions, strengthen care systems, widen service access and increase the capacity of younger generations to remain, return or flourish in places that would otherwise become structurally disadvantaged.

The key policy question is therefore no longer simply whether poorer regions catch up in aggregate indicators, but whether territories remain capable of sustaining fair opportunities across generations. In this sense, cohesion policy should be treated as one of the Union's principal delivery instruments of intergenerational fairness (Neto, 2026).

6. Strategic Policy Domains for an Intergenerational European Union

No policy domain reveals the intergenerational question more clearly than climate and ecological responsibility. The strategy materials, the citizens' contributions and the broader scoping work all converge on the same point: current generations are expected to act decisively to preserve ecosystems, stabilise the climate and ensure environmental integrity for those who come after. In the citizens' stories, environmental sustainability appears not as a peripheral aspiration but as one of the central foundations of fairness, often expressed through climate responsibility, ecosystem regeneration and circular economic models (Bol et al., 2026).

The issue is therefore not simply how to compensate future generations for harm. It is how to design a development model in which ecological integrity becomes one of the constitutive conditions of fairness itself.

Education and skills form a second strategic pillar. The citizens' report identifies education as a long-term lever for shifting values, embedding empathy and strengthening understanding between generations (Bol et al., 2026). The strategy materials likewise place lifelong learning, upskilling, digital skills and the Union of Skills at the centre of a fairer European future, while the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan gives strong prominence to education, training and life-long learning, adult training, digital skills and inclusive labour-market transitions (European Commission, 2021).

This is especially important because intergenerational fairness cannot be reduced to the fair distribution of existing goods; it must also concern the fair construction of future capability.

Education is therefore one of the main mechanisms through which societies transmit not only technical skills, but also civic competences, critical literacy and the ability to navigate long-term change.

Housing is a third strategic domain, and one in which intergenerational fairness becomes politically tangible. The strategy materials explicitly identify housing affordability as a major intergenerational challenge, noting that young people increasingly face barriers to affordable housing, while many older people live in inadequate or isolating conditions (European Commission, 2026).

This is a crucial issue because housing mediates multiple dimensions of the life course: autonomy, labour mobility, household formation, savings, care arrangements and access to services. In this sense, housing is not merely a social policy problem; it is a key mechanism through which societies organise access to adulthood and distribute future opportunity. A stronger intergenerational Europe must therefore read housing through both a social and a territorial lens.

Welfare, care and social protection form a fourth strategic domain. The strategy materials are explicit that intergenerational fairness means balancing adequacy with sustainability and ensuring that care systems, pensions and health systems remain fair across life stages (European Commission, 2026). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan strongly reinforces this logic. It calls for a social rulebook that ensures solidarity between generations, focuses on jobs, skills, innovation and social protection, and gives explicit centrality to childcare, pensions, healthcare, long-term care, housing and access to essential services (European Commission, 2021).

This is highly significant because it shows that intergenerational fairness is not external to the European social model; it is already deeply latent within it.

Public investment and fiscal sustainability also require a more demanding reading. The strategy materials make clear that intergenerational fairness depends on Europe's ability to remain innovative, competitive and economically resilient over time, but without depleting the resources on which future wellbeing depends (European Commission, 2026).

In intergenerational terms, the key question is not simply whether Europe invests more or less, but what kinds of assets and liabilities are being transmitted forward. Productive infrastructure, education, clean energy systems, digital public infrastructure, social cohesion and territorial capability contribute to the stock of opportunity inherited by future generations. Underinvestment, ecological depletion, weak services, poverty transmission and institutional decay function instead as deferred burdens.

The Social Pillar Action Plan is especially important here because it translates this logic into 2030 targets on employment, adult learning and poverty reduction, explicitly linking them to the European Semester and the Social Scoreboard (European Commission, 2021).

Innovation and digital transformation form a final strategic domain, but one that must be handled with particular care. The citizens' report identifies a major tension between the speed

of innovation and the preservation of heritage, social bonds and human connection (Bol et al., 2026). These concerns resonate strongly with the JRC report *Fractured Reality*, which shows that the current information space, shaped by engagement-maximising business models and foreign-controlled platforms, undermines information integrity, shared reality and democratic resilience (Scharfbillig et al., 2026).

This is highly relevant to intergenerational justice because a future-oriented Union cannot be fair across time if the democratic and informational preconditions of collective judgement are weakening in the present. The question is therefore not whether innovation should be embraced or resisted, but whether Europe can develop a values-based model of innovation consistent with long-term fairness, human dignity, democratic trust and democratic control of the future.

7. Governance Implications

If intergenerational justice is to become a genuine guiding principle for EU public policy, it must alter the way policymaking itself is governed. The current strategy architecture is particularly useful here because it frames the intergenerational contract around fair policymaking, fair opportunities and fair places (European Commission, 2026). Of these, fair policymaking is foundational, because it concerns whether long-term impacts are considered systematically alongside short-term objectives and whether those most affected by long-term decisions are given a meaningful place at the table.

This means that laws, reforms, budgets and investment choices should be judged not only by immediate utility or political feasibility, but also by whether they create avoidable future burdens or protect future opportunity.

This is precisely where the recent literature on strategic foresight becomes highly relevant. De Vito and Taffoni (2026) argue that past-oriented evidence is no longer sufficient under conditions of climate change, demographic change, uncertainty and accelerated transformation, and that strategic foresight should be treated as a legitimate source of evidence for policymaking when certain conditions are met.

Their framework highlights three enabling factors - robustness, appropriateness and inclusivity – through which foresight gains evidential value within a broader pluralistic knowledge ecosystem.

This contribution is particularly useful because it helps answer a common objection: that future-oriented reasoning is too speculative to guide real decisions. The point is not that foresight replaces conventional evidence, but that it complements it precisely where policy problems concern future burdens, opportunities and pathways.

Participation is a second governance implication. The European process on intergenerational fairness is already notable for the degree to which it has incorporated citizens' panels, coalition work, co-design and intergenerational dialogue. This is not just procedurally interesting. It suggests that intergenerational justice is being treated as something that must be institutionally rehearsed through participation, and not merely declared at a high level.

The report Co-Creation Spaces for Citizen Empowerment reinforces this interpretation by showing how grassroots public spaces – including makerspaces and collaborative environments – can strengthen intergenerational collaboration, informal learning, community engagement and democratic participation (Rosa & Guimaraes Pereira, 2026).

These insights are highly relevant because they show that fair policymaking depends not only on better decisions, but also on the civic infrastructures through which mutual responsibility between generations can be practised and renewed.

Democratic resilience is a third governance implication. The strategy materials state that when policies are perceived as insufficiently responsive to generational change, confidence in institutions can decline. This observation is reinforced by the Democracy Perception Index 2026, which finds that commitment to democracy remains globally strong, but that many citizens, especially in Europe, are pessimistic about where their countries are heading and are increasingly unconvinced that democracy is working for them (Nira Data & Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2026).

This is a crucial point for the intergenerational agenda. If Europe wishes to place fairness across time at the heart of its future, it must also show that democratic systems remain capable of delivering meaningful long-term protection, opportunity and stability.

The importance of this becomes even clearer when placed alongside Fractured Reality, which argues that democracy cannot survive without some degree of shared reality and that the current information space structurally promotes overload, ideological segregation, low-quality content and distrust (Scharfbillig et al., 2026).

If democratic publics become too fractured to deliberate on common facts or long-term commitments, then an intergenerational contract becomes much harder to sustain. That is why information integrity, media literacy, digital sovereignty and support for democratic resilience are not external to the intergenerational agenda. They are part of its institutional infrastructure.

Finally, a serious intergenerational turn requires institutional embedding. The strategy process materials are explicit that institutionalisation of long-term thinking requires context-sensitive design, high-level buy-in, inclusivity, independence, adequate resourcing, capacity-building, evaluation and timely outputs (Bol et al., 2025c; European Commission, 2026).

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan provides a complementary lesson: it shows how a broad normative commitment can be translated into measurable targets, policy coordination through the European Semester, and a revised Social Scoreboard (European Commission, 2021). In intergenerational terms, this is highly significant. It suggests that the future becomes

more governable when a normative horizon is linked to implementation mechanisms, measurable targets and institutional alignment across levels of governance.

8. Policy Recommendations

The analysis developed in this paper supports a set of recommendations for the future architecture of EU public policy.

1. The European Union should explicitly recognise intergenerational justice as a guiding principle for the design, coordination and evaluation of its public policies.

This recommendation follows directly from the current strategy logic: intergenerational fairness should not remain a thematic adjunct, but should become part of the evaluative grammar of EU action (European Commission, 2026).

2. The Union should build a stronger fair policymaking architecture centred on strategic foresight, long-term impact assessment, future-oriented scrutiny and broader participatory design.

Strategic foresight should be treated as a legitimate and structured source of evidence, especially where policy choices concern long-term uncertainty, multiple pathways and the distribution of future opportunities and burdens (De Vito & Taffoni, 2026).

3. The intergenerational agenda should be aligned more explicitly with the implementation logic of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Social Pillar Action Plan is particularly important because it already calls for a social rulebook based on solidarity between generations and identifies 20 core areas – from education and employment to housing, long-term care and access to essential services – that are central to fairness across time (European Commission, 2021).

4. Europe should translate intergenerational justice into a stronger fair opportunities agenda centred on the life-course conditions that shape real capability: early childhood, education, skills, digital inclusion, housing, mental and physical health, care, employment transitions and access to essential services.

This recommendation is consistent both with the current strategy architecture and with the citizen evidence gathered by the JRC (Bol et al., 2026; European Commission, 2026).

5. The Union should embed the fair places lens more systematically in cohesion policy and territorial development, treating territorial inequality as a mechanism through which future opportunities are unevenly distributed.

In this respect, cohesion policy should be recognised as one of the Union's principal delivery instruments of intergenerational fairness (Neto, 2026).

6. A stronger metric and indicator framework for intergenerational fairness should be developed.

This framework should be able to capture not only age-group outcomes in the aggregate, but also territorial capability, housing access, service availability, digital inclusion, future opportunity, intergenerational poverty transmission and the resilience of institutions. The Social Pillar's target-setting and scoreboard logic offers a useful reference point for this move (European Commission, 2021).

7. Intergenerational participation, co-creation and citizen empowerment should be institutionalised more firmly.

The strategy process itself shows the value of citizen involvement, and the JRC work on grassroots co-creation spaces demonstrates that democratic capability depends on civic infrastructures of collaboration, learning and community engagement (Rosa & Guimaraes Pereira, 2026).

8. Democratic resilience, shared reality and information integrity should be treated as preconditions of intergenerational justice.

No fair long-term contract can be sustained where democratic publics lose the capacity to deliberate on common facts and shared futures (Nira Data & Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2026; Scharfbillig et al., 2026).

9. Europe should link long-term competitiveness to intergenerational fairness rather than to short-term extraction.

Competitiveness should be judged by whether it strengthens future capability, social cohesion, ecological sustainability and public resilience, rather than merely deferring costs to those who come after. The strategy materials and long-range scenario work both reinforce this point (European Commission, 2026; Lang et al., 2026).

10. The Union should build a stronger institutional chain linking principle, participation, foresight, policy coordination and implementation.

The objective is not to create a separate bureaucracy devoted solely to the future, but to ensure that the future is no longer institutionally invisible in present policymaking. The implementation blueprint associated with the strategy is especially clear that meaningful institutionalisation requires moral clarity, delivery mechanisms, multiple time horizons and both policy and public lanes of action (Bol et al., 2025c; European Commission, 2026).

9. Conclusion

This Policy Paper has argued that intergenerational justice should no longer be treated by the European Union as a secondary ethical concern or as a fragmented issue dispersed across youth, climate, pensions, housing, demography, education or care. It should instead be recognised as a structuring principle for the future agenda of the Union and for the design, coordination and evaluation of European public policies.

The central claim of the paper is that the future legitimacy, coherence and sustainability of the European project will increasingly depend on whether Europe is able to distribute opportunities, protections, costs, risks and capabilities more fairly across generations. The emerging Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness strongly supports this interpretation by framing the issue around long-term responsibility, social and territorial cohesion, democratic participation and solidarity between generations (European Commission, 2026).

The analysis has shown that the European Union now has strong reasons to undertake an explicit intergenerational turn. Overlapping transitions – demographic, technological, economic, social, climate-related and geopolitical – are reshaping how opportunities are created and shared. The key issue, however, is not change itself, but whether current choices widen or narrow the life chances of future generations. This is why fragmented sectoral responses are no longer enough.

A Union that continues to treat climate, housing, ageing, innovation, skills, social protection and territorial cohesion as separate policy problems will struggle to grasp how disadvantages accumulate across time and how institutional choices today structure the opportunity space of tomorrow. Intergenerational justice offers a way of reconnecting these domains within a more coherent policy language (Bol et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2026; European Commission, 2026).

A major contribution of this manuscript has been to show that this intergenerational turn must also be territorial. Building on the logic of fair places and the argument developed in UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026, the paper has argued that territorial inequalities are not only spatial asymmetries. They are also mechanisms through which future opportunities are unevenly distributed and disadvantage is reproduced across the life cycle.

This implies that cohesion policy, housing, services, care systems, transport, digital connectivity and territorial capability are all central to the intergenerational agenda. Fairness across time is therefore inseparable from fairness in space. A truly fair Europe must not only create better futures in the abstract; it must create them across the territories in which people actually live their lives (Neto, 2026).

The paper has also shown that intergenerational justice is inseparable from democratic quality. The Commission's own materials present the strategy as a project of trust and cooperation, co-designed with citizens and communities.

That participatory impulse is important because it points to a deeper truth: intergenerational fairness cannot be built only through expert design or institutional declaration.

It requires participation, co-creation, shared reality and confidence that public institutions remain capable of acting responsibly under conditions of uncertainty. The evidence on democratic pessimism, informational fragmentation and citizen expectations makes this challenge sharper.

If Europe wishes to place intergenerational justice at the heart of its future agenda, it must also strengthen the democratic, informational and civic infrastructures through which long-term responsibility becomes politically sustainable (Nira Data & Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2026; Rosa & Guimaraes Pereira, 2026; Scharfbillig et al., 2026).

The broader lesson is therefore straightforward but demanding. Intergenerational justice should become one of the guiding principles of EU public policy not because it is morally appealing in the abstract, but because it offers Europe a way of reconnecting social rights, ecological responsibility, territorial cohesion, public capability, competitiveness and democratic legitimacy within a single future-oriented framework.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is especially instructive in this respect, since it already calls for a rulebook that ensures solidarity between generations and places jobs, skills, innovation and social protection on an equal footing. The task now is to extend that logic more explicitly across the Union's wider policy architecture. If Europe is serious about its future, it must also become more serious about fairness across time (European Commission, 2021, 2026).

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The first of these is the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), which has been a leading voice in the medical profession since its founding in 1847. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The second is the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM), which is a leading journal in the field of internal medicine. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The third is the *Lancet*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The fourth is the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The fifth is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The sixth is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The seventh is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The eighth is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The ninth is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health. The tenth is the *Medical Record*, which is a leading journal in the field of general practice. It is a weekly publication that covers a wide range of medical topics, from clinical research to public health.