Governing
as if
Future Generations
Really Mattered

Towards Creating a “Future Generations Committee”
National Assembly of Korea
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For most of our history, humans lived in small Tribal and Stable Agricultural Societies.

The Future was like the Present which was like the Past.

Change was rare and undesirable.
In Tribal and Stable Agricultural Societies doing good for present generations was also doing good for future generations.
Then with Modernity a few hundred years ago, change was for the first time good and possible.

The future became systematically different from the present.

The future was to be BETTER than the present and the past.
With Modernity came perpetual progress, development, and discontinuity between past, present and future.
The official future of all modern governments became and remains

Continued Growth

Continued *Economic* Development
South Korea has been a spectacular success in the continued growth mode.
From absolute and utter devastation following decades of colonial domination, world war, and then civil war, South Korea rose from complete destitution in 1953.
to become a rich, prosperous, and innovative Information Society and then Dream Society by 2012.
But many Korean leaders are acutely aware of its vulnerability.
The nation followed the prescribed steps towards development very precisely,

Growth
and reached its goal by hard-work and great sacrifice.
But what is next?
But many people now wonder:

Are important values being lost?

Are we destroying our environment?
By focusing only on our own present needs or pleasures without thinking how we are impacting the lives of future generations, are we foisting a Faustian Bargain on future generations?
Burning their oil.

Using/polluting the water they will need.

Warming their rising seas.

Requiring them to manage our nuclear wastes for thousands of years.
Is this fair?
Are we being fair to future generations?
This is a new question that humans never had to answer until recently.
For tens of thousands of years, humans assumed that if we did what our ancestors did, and taught our children to do the same, that we would be doing the best we could for future generations.
So concern for future generations is a new ethical challenge:

The first new ethical challenge that humans have had to consider in thousands of years.
If you look at the great religious or moral traditions of the past

Hinduism, Buddhism,
Confucianism,
the Jewish Old Testament
or the Christian New Testament,
Islam,
or even the new religions of the 19th and 20th centuries
you will find lots of statements about
the obligation of children
to their parents,
and the obligation of parents to their ancestors,
and a little about the obligations of parents to their children.
But you will not find a single word about the obligations of the living to the not-yet-born.
the unborn who the living will never know,
but whose lives they will effect in the future
by the way they they live in the present.
Neither the Buddha, nor Confucius, nor Moses, nor Jesus, nor Mohammed, nor any other great religious or ethical persons of the past worried about future generations
because present generations when they lived were not able greatly to impact the lives of future generations.
Their technological powers were too puny.
But now while humanity's powers are great and long-lasting, our sense of ethical responsibility for our power remains very puny indeed.
So we are faced with a new ethical and political challenge:
Developing an sense of ethical obligations towards future generations,
and inventing social institutions that see that living generations carry out their ethical obligations to future generations.
This will be very difficult to do.
It may be impossible to do.
The reason is because all ethics so far has been based on "reciprocity", 

On being able to "get back" at some one.
I don't hit you so you won't hit me.
Or I do good things to you so you will do good things to me.
This is often called "The Golden Rule"
All cultures have something like The Golden Rule as the basis of their ethics:
"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". (Or "don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you".)
But the Golden Rule makes two assumptions that once were completely reasonable:
1. I must obey the rule, because if I don't, others "can do unto me" what I don't want done; others are able to "get back at me" if I don't follow the rule.
2. I know what others want and don't want, and they know what I want and don't want, because we are members of the same community and share the same values and resources.
For tens of thousands of years, that is the way all humans lived.
But now we live in a world where the Golden Rule does not work in many instances.
Some people have the technological, financial, and political means to "do unto" others while those others are helpless to stop them or to "get back" at them.
This has been true of the United States for the last half century or more. We have had the ability to do to the rest of the world --especially the so-called "Third World"-- whatever we wanted, and they could do nothing about it.
And so we did whatever we wanted without the slightest concern for what they wanted us to do or not do.
Then, one clear September day in 2001, three airplanes rammed into three American buildings and finally got our attention.
They finally were able to "do unto us"
and we went crazy with fear and fury.
We still haven't adjusted to the realities of this new world where we must learn

we are members of a global community and must treat others fairly

so they will treat us fairly as well.
But what about future generations?
We can "do unto them" at will 
but they are helpless to "get back at us".
So why should we care what they want or think?
"What has posterity ever done for me? or to me?"
Nothing! So forget it!"

That is our response.
But more and more people are becoming concerned.
They say we need to balance the needs of present generations with the needs of future generations.

A High Commissioner for Future Generations at Rio+20
We overwhelmingly focus on

Me

and

Now.
It isn't fair.
Some people are trying to develop an ethical sense of our obligations toward future generations.
and then
to invent institutions
that make it easy and necessary
to fulfill our obligations to future generations.
We need both:

A strong ethical sense of our obligations to future generations and institutions that make it easy to fulfill those obligations.
Without both ethics and institutions, nothing will happen.
And so far,
nothing is happening
in spite a lot of good words.
You are about to change that.
You intend to create a process by which you can identify the needs of future generations and respond to them while not ignoring the needs of present generations.
You are trying to find ways to have representatives of future generations present when decisions are made impacting them.
You are not alone in this effort but you are very, very rare,
and I want to congratulate and support you to the best of my abilities.
Today, I want to consider briefly some of the ways in which the lives of future generations might be different from your lives.
First of all, for most of Korea's history during the modern period, population growth has been high.
With more people to feed every year, economic growth was necessary
Korea was also one of the poorest nations in the world.

Following the developmental road towards economic growth made sense.
But the population growth rate has been rapidly declining for decades.

Absolute population decline is inevitable unless substantial immigration occurs.
The policy challenges and responses for a declining population are very different from those for a rapidly growing population.
Instead of trying to get the population to grow again

--both impossible and very bad idea, in my view—

we need to grasp
the opportunities
that population decline
provide us
and move towards a very different future
in terms of our economy and everything else.
Korea—and a world—with a smaller population can provide opportunities for much better lives for everyone.
It will be a challenge for our traditional economists, however, because their theories assume population growth.
But there are many economists who think they know what a no-growth economy should be like, and we should learn from them.
Of course, declining population is only one thing that will be different about the future.
Even if population were to continue growing, we would still need to reconsider the desirability and possibility of continued economic growth.
There is great uncertainty about the availability of cheap and abundant oil, or an imminent replacement for oil.
In the 1970s we knew we were going to run out of cheap and abundant oil, and thus that we should begin developing replacements for it.
Instead, when the price of oil dropped in the 1980s, we abandoned serious efforts of energy efficiency and of developing replacements for oil.
In spite of what you may hear, there is no replacement for cheap and abundant oil at the present time that does not use more energy than it produces.
Any source that does not produce more energy than it consumes is a problem and not a solution.
It will take some time before there are sources that can replace cheap and abundant oil

—if ever.
Almost all the transformative miracles of Korea and the world have been due to cheap and abundant oil:

bountiful food, clean water and waste disposal, excellent health facilities, luxurious imported/exported goods, fancy automobiles, cheap airplane travel, tourism—

all because of the recent discovery and use of oil.
And the era of cheap and abundant oil is already over with no equivalent replacement in sight.
The kind of economic growth we have known over past decades is not possible in future decades.
Even if population were not a challenge,

and even if oil or its equivalent were cheap and abundant in the future,

economic growth of the kind we had in the past is not sustainable in the futures.
The environment won’t permit it.

We have exceeded the Earth’s natural carrying capacity.
We must either slow down considerably,
or assume responsibility for what we have done to nature,
or be content to die back as a species.
Even though humans only evolved a very short while ago in what geologists call the “Holocene Epoch” (between the last ice age and the next), geologists are now saying we have entered a new Epoch they call the “Anthropocene”.
This presents you with the biggest challenge of all:

“to govern evolution”.
But what about technology?
What about the robots, and artificial intelligence, and autonomous agents, and genetically-modified lifeforms, and transhumans, and the rest?
Won’t they save us?
In fact, I am hoping they will.
We are going to need all the help we can get if we are to design and govern evolution.
Robots and AI and Transhumans, working with old-fashioned humans, might enable us to find ways to move from a collapsing world into a transforming one.
But that
—and just not more production of consumer goods—
should be the main task of
every being from now on.
To govern evolution
for the sake of future generations.
This is what future generations are expecting from you.

Please don’t let them down.
As the Future Generations Alliance says:
Future generations:

they are our conscience.
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