



Research Networking Programme

Rights to a Green Future. Uncertainty, Intergenerational Human Rights and Pathways to Realization (ENRI-Future)

Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS)

Climate change, energy provision and security, natural resource limitations and demographic factors interact to present a politically and morally challenging set of pressing problems for national governments and for the international community. Although sustainable development is a generally accepted political aim, there are various conceptual, normative and practical obstacles to a morally acceptable and politically realistic pathway towards a sustainable policy approach. These concern questions such as: How to acquire the relevant knowledge about future developments? How to determine the criteria for right action in relation to future generations? Is the plea for sustainability compatible with other normative convictions, especially with the human rights framework? What are the normative implications of the fact that we cannot predict completely the consequences of technological and economic decisions? And what are the main psychological and institutional obstacles to a sustainable policy approach?

The Research Networking Programme ENRI-Future aims to interrelate the existing discourses about these topics in philosophy, law, economics and technology assessment. The multilayered nature of the challenges requires an interdisciplinary approach. Currently such an approach is lacking, which hampers the discussion on how to meet the current challenges. Adequately linking the relevant moral and political questions is a necessary prerequisite for understanding what a sustainable policy approach could mean and for making it operational. Herein lies the relevance of ENRI-Future.

The running period of the ESF ENRI-Future Research Networking Programme is four years, from May 2011 to May 2015.

State of the art



There are various ongoing debates about risk/precaution, human rights and sustainability. However, the debates are hardly interconnected and current networking is on a small scale and has no common research agenda.

A first problem is that some central questions of *intergenerational justice* are not addressed. Debates about intergenerational justice began in the 1970s and have, among other things, asked whether future generations can have *rights*. But a systematic rethinking of the framework of *human rights* from an intergenerational perspective is still missing. This is especially important since the human rights framework is the only existing framework for the international political order. Therefore, even if the discussion were framed with other concepts, such as justice or sustainability, all moral and legal considerations regarding intergenerational justice must clarify their relationship to the human rights framework. That a systematic reconsideration of human rights in an intergenerational perspective is still absent is surprising as a sustainable policy approach has enormous potential to conflict with a variety of human rights.

Furthermore, most debates about intergenerational justice are very general and lack clear strategies for application in concrete contexts, whereas the development of the human rights framework in an intergenerational perspective raises very concrete problems. For example, the goal of providing adequate living conditions for future generations easily conflicts with the human rights to (for example) freedom of movement and family life of present generations. Likewise, there have in recent years been several debates about the tension between the aim of sustainable development and the aim of supporting development in poor countries. The



challenge is to provide a comprehensive understanding of such tensions in a reformulated human rights framework.

Secondly, there are debates about *risk* and *uncertainty*, partly related to technology assessment, but also to fundamental debates in mathematics and in social science. In philosophy, the acceptability of certain levels of risks is a well-established topic. However, these debates are only rarely related to climate change and other ecological challenges.

A further complication concerns precautionary reasoning, more specifically the application of the precautionary principle. This principle is widely used in regulatory contexts, but most researchers have doubts about it. Many think that wide application of the precautionary principle leads to arbitrariness and has other unacceptable implications, such as rendering risk strategies completely risk averse. Therefore it seems that if precautionary reasoning is to be used in discussions about climate change, a much more developed normative theory of precaution is required. However, a reconstruction of the use of such reasoning in regulatory contexts and of the

metaethical presuppositions that underlie the references to precaution is missing.

Furthermore, the link is missing between the debates about risk, uncertainty, ignorance, and precaution on the one hand and the contexts of sustainability, intergenerational justice and human rights on the other. Questions that need to be addressed include the following: When is it morally obligatory to act based on precaution, and more generally what normative claims can be grounded in precaution? How are those claims related to the human rights framework? When can (the use of) individual rights legitimately be limited on the sole basis of precaution with regard to unknown future consequences of our actions? The network will not answer all questions but aims to develop a common research agenda by linking the relevant debates.

Thirdly, even if we could know how we should act in relation to future generations, we are still faced with a set of problems concerning the *psychological* and *institutional* obstacles for realising a sustainable policy. This results in many questions, such as: What kind of motivation would a plea for sustainability presuppose? Doesn't it presuppose a purely altruistic attitude to expect a person to sacrifice his liberties and opportunities for the sake of future people he will never meet? If so, what kind of institutions will be needed to coordinate a sustainable policy on a global scale? Will these be compatible with democratic, liberal institutions? Do we need persuasive technologies and institutions to make people behave in a sustainable way? If so, are these compatible with the autonomy, dignity and self-determination of human beings? Presently, discussions of psychological and institutional aspects of sustainability such as the aforementioned are not systematically linked and the conceptual, normative



and generally philosophical aspects are underrepresented.

In short: for a sustainable policy, economy and technology, which ensure acceptable life conditions for future generations, we need to know what we owe to future generations; how our obligations should be related to human rights in general and the rights of people in the developing countries in particular; how we can meet our responsibilities while our ability to predict future developments is limited; and how to make sure these obligations are fulfilled in the face of various psychological and institutional obstacles.

There are discussions about all these topics but again they are hardly intertwined. A conceptually intelligible and empirically informed comprehensive understanding of intergenerational justice is lacking, but urgently needed. Without it, it is hardly possible to adequately understand and discuss sustainability, precaution and the rights of future generations.

Objectives

The main objective of ENRI-Future is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationship between existing discourses. In doing so, a research agenda will be developed for a future-centred ethics of the environment that contributes to moral and political debates about pathways towards a sustainable policy.

Related to its primary objective, the network will identify new fields of research arising from the interface between the separated discourses and will enable early-stage researchers to start research in this interdisciplinary field. It is important for the aim of the network to bring researchers with conceptual and philosophical competence together with researchers from social science, law, economics and the sciences. This results in the following objectives:

Objective 1:

Assessing the important normative aspects of different kinds of climate development scenarios, and of scenarios of other environmental developments. Likewise, assessing the important normative aspects of discourses in the social sciences and in economics about future environmental issues.

The network will ask what kind of empirical knowledge is necessary to adequately survey normative issues such as our moral and political responsibilities in the face of uncertainty, and to evaluate the discourse of human rights in the light of responsibilities towards future generations. In addition, the network will ask to what extent it is possible to have this empirical knowledge. Comparing the needed empirical knowledge with the knowledge that we currently have will provide insight in the normative presuppositions and implications of the current knowledge, and it will also help us to understand the relevant risks and uncertainties.

The network will also ask to what extent the relevant normative discourses take the existing empirical knowledge into account appropriately, and what if anything should and could be changed here.

Objective 2:

Identifying a research agenda for the moral and legal framework of human rights given the intergenerational perspective of the network's theme.

The network will identify key questions and tensions that the human rights framework faces on account of ecological challenges. Furthermore, it aims to interpret the relevance of these challenges for moral and legal theorising. The network aims to identify the challenges for the human rights framework based on scenarios of future economic, social and moral conflicts, and relating to risk and uncertainty. It aims to identify and explore the important questions and problems for future ethical and legal research about this topic.

Two fundamental discussions should be mentioned. First, given the aforementioned situation of uncertainty, the fundamental question arises whether the human rights framework is applicable in ecological contexts at all. Second, the intergenerational challenge for the human rights framework has to be discussed against the background of critiques of the framework as Eurocentric.

Objective 3:

Assessing diverse models for the conceptualisation of risk, uncertainty and precaution in terms of their coherence, applicability and validity in the context of environmental challenges.

A fundamental question that guides our evaluation of these models is how it is possible to ascribe (moral and/or legal) responsibility for actions whose consequences we are not able to foresee.

Activities

The aim is to deepen our understanding of the usefulness, importance, synergies and potential contradictions of diverse concepts which are used in the face of environmental challenges, as well as to explore the ways in which the diverse concepts can be integrated in future research in ethics, law and social science. This assessment will be linked to the assessment of existing scenarios of future environmental situations.

Objective 4:

Identifying and analysing the main psychological and institutional obstacles for a sustainable policy.

The network will evaluate the relevance of research on moral motivation for acting in an intergenerational perspective. Furthermore, research from political science will be discussed and used in order to identify and analyse the institutional obstacles to a sustainable policy as well as the available governance strategies.

These objectives directly contribute to the *main objective*: developing a *comprehensive understanding* of the interrelationship between the normatively relevant discourses. Any adequate formulation of concrete moral and political obligations towards future generations will have to rely on all the levels described above. For instance, the limits of our knowledge will determine the difficulties in assessing risks and ascribing responsibilities. Likewise, if we are to understand the challenges for the human rights framework, we need to understand what psychological and institutional obstacles to a sustainable policy approach there are. Thus, only by making an analysis of all relevant discourses will we be able to formulate an agenda for future research which lives up to the complexity of the problems at hand.

Workshops and conference

ENRI-Future will enhance interdisciplinary research by organising annual workshops that bring together researchers from different disciplines to discuss the four focus areas of this network:

- Reflecting on scenarios of future environmental developments;
- Critically assessing the human rights framework in an intergenerational perspective;
- Developing a concept of moral and political responsibility adequately tuned to the unpredictable openness of the future;
- Surveying the psychological and institutional obstacles for a sustainable policy.

In ENRI-Future's last year, a large conference will be organised to share and discuss the results of the network with the academic and political community.

Summer schools and exchange visits

Two summer schools on aspects of ENRI-Future's theme will be organised for early-stage researchers (especially PhD students).



Funding



Short as well as longer-term exchange visits of researchers will be facilitated, in order to enable interdisciplinary and interregional interaction.

Publications and research agenda

The Research Networking Programme will result in several publications in high-ranking international peer-reviewed journals, and in a book, to be published by a British university press, which reflects the network's interdisciplinary character and aims to outline the agenda for future research in the network's area. This book will not be a loose series of articles, but a manuscript that deals with the full complexity of the project's topic and that formulates the requirements for an ethics of the environment that can meet the current challenges, as well as addressing the implications for a sustainable policy. This book will be a joint deliverable of all partners in the network.

The network will also deliver a research agenda for a broader public, outlining a future-oriented ethics of the environment and its policy implications. This agenda will identify the relevant interdisciplinary topics of study and will be used for preparing (national and European) research proposals, for strengthening and if necessary enlarging the network, and for developing educational activities.

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For the latest information on
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www.greenrights.nl

www.esf.org/enri-future

A newsletter will appear once or twice
a year. If you want to subscribe, please
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