

Current and future generations must flourish: Time for a long-term and global perspective on pandemic and other catastrophic risks

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In this blog post we cover the following:

- **The recent United Nations report ‘Our Common Agenda’ which calls for solidarity, concern for future generations, and collaborative action on global risks including pandemics.**
- **The newly mandated Long-term Insights Briefings (LTIB) that Aotearoa NZ public sector organisations must prepare and some ideas for what could be included in the Ministry of Health’s LTIB.**
- **Overview of our just published research paper calling for a well-resourced NZ Parliamentary Commissioner for Catastrophic Risks to help prioritise action and ensure a safe and flourishing future.**



New United Nations (UN) Report: 'Our Common Agenda'

In September 2021 the UN Secretary General (SG) released a roadmap to a flourishing future, 'Our Common Agenda'. The report employed the language of long-termism, portrayed wide-ranging concern for future generations and had substantial focus on building immunity to catastrophic risks including pandemics and technological risks.

The SG identified the importance of global public goods, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby setting the UN's vision for the future and major priorities for the next five years.

The report acknowledges long-term challenges, including existential risks, that are evolving over the course of multiple human life spans. To ensure a thriving future, humanity needs solidarity and to work together for common goals. Institutional leverage can help humanity represent future generations and manage catastrophic and existential risks.

The report proposes mechanisms for protecting future generations and addressing risks:

- A **Futures Lab** for futures impact assessments, megatrend and risk reporting
- A **Special Envoy for Future Generations** to assist on 'long-term thinking and foresight'

- **Repurposing the UN Trusteeship Council** to represent the interests of future generations
- **A Declaration on Future Generations**
- **An Emergency Platform** to convene key actors in response to complex global crises
- **A Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report** to be released every 5 years
- A 2023 **Summit of the Future** to discuss topics including these proposals addressing major risks and future generations

GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH

With respect to global public health the SG says the world must fund the governance of global public health, overcoming its siloed nature. The SG endorses the advice of the Independent Panel for Preparedness and Response and calls for a global vaccination plan and sharing of technology and know-how.

On pandemics generally, the SG writes:

'[G]lobal health security and preparedness (particularly investment in pandemic preparedness, but also for a broader set of potential health challenges) need to be strengthened through sustained political commitment and leadership at the highest level.'

Funding must be made available for an empowered WHO, with systems to ensure early detection, an independent verification capacity, the containment of emerging pathogens, enhanced global health security, an urgent global vaccination plan, and universal health coverage addressing the determinants of health.

Furthermore, when new biological threats arise there must be:

- Faster detection and reporting of a novel pathogen
- Faster ramp-up of nonpharmaceutical interventions to contain disease
- Faster vaccine development and greater manufacturing capacity
- More equitable vaccine distribution

The report emphasises that action is needed broadly because:

'[W]e do not know which extreme risk event will come next; it might be another pandemic, a new war, a high-consequence biological attack, a cyberattack on critical infrastructure, a nuclear event, a rapidly moving environmental disaster, or something completely different such as technological or scientific developments gone awry and unconstrained by effective ethical and regulatory frameworks.'

Overall, the report links concern about future generations with the effects of our generation that most imperil them — existential risks, such as those of nuclear war or engineered pandemics, which could spell the end for humanity. **The SG highlights that some countries have established Committees for the Future or Future Generations Commissioners**, and suggests that other countries could follow suit.

A detailed summary of the report with a focus on long-term thinking can be read [here](#).

Long-term insights briefings

Given the UN's call for a long-term and coordinated approach, how is NZ placed? On the one hand it is notable that the shortfall between the UN's benchmark for overseas

development assistance (0.7% of GDP for wealthy nations) and NZ's actual contribution (less than half that), would easily cover NZ's fair share of the US\$100 billion needed to bring 67 low-income countries up to a minimum level of health security. Promising is NZ's recent increase to overseas climate assistance.

On the other hand, the NZ Public Service Act 2020 has mandated that every departmental chief executive publish a long-term insights briefing (LTIB) that is independent of ministers every three years, which should cover medium and long-term risks.

The statutory purpose of the Briefings is to make available into the public domain:

- information about medium and long-term trends, risks and opportunities that affect or may affect NZ and NZ society
- information and impartial analysis, including policy options for responding to these matters.

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) provides an overview of the Briefings, which must look at least ten years ahead and are to be tabled in Parliament in June 2022.

There is already some public consultation on the content and scope of the LTIBs. Notably the Ministry of Health (MoH) has not yet put forward proposals for public consultation. However, this means there will still be an opportunity for public input into the shape of the content. We list important opportunities and risks to include in the appendix below.

One possible weakness of the Briefings is that the subject matter doesn't need to cover a department's entire portfolio. The LTIBs are also not required to cover issues where there is already work underway. This possibly limits their potential impact.

However, these LTIBs are a significant opportunity for the NZ public and policymakers to articulate a long-term vision and plan for a flourishing rather than crisis-riddled future.

The Briefings appear to be very much the kind of local mechanism that the UN SG's report envisions. However, **there needs to be some kind of mechanism to independently aggregate these futures think pieces, prioritise action, and coordinate internationally on global issues.**

A Parliamentary Commissioner for Extreme Risks

In a research paper just published by *Policy Quarterly*, we argue for exactly this kind of independent central coordination of risk and futures work across the NZ public sector. We propose a well-resourced Parliamentary Commissioner for Extreme Risks working in conjunction with a Parliamentary Select Committee. The argument in our paper proceeds as follows:

- As the SG has identified, the world faces many large-scale risks. We describe these global catastrophic and existential risks and identify many challenges in governing the prevention and mitigation of such risks.
- We then identify that risk reduction activity in Aotearoa NZ has not appropriately addressed these threats. For example, the NZ Civil Defence National Disaster Resilience Strategy retains a large bias towards natural hazards rather than strategic or anthropogenic risks. Additionally, the activities of the National Intelligence and Risk Coordination team within the DPMC are not sufficiently transparent and the National

Risk Register is not open to public scrutiny.

- On the basis of the challenges identified, we then deduce the desired features and functions of an entity for effectively governing risk mitigation approaches.
- We argue the needed institutional entity must be: anticipatory, central/aggregating, coordinating, apolitical, transparent, adaptive, and accountable.
- We offer structural options for such an entity and favour a Parliamentary Commissioner for Extreme Risks.

The fact that the National Risk Register is secret is particularly troubling because looking to the UK, which does have a publicly-facing version, there are oversights and biases (see the Appendix below for examples).

The secrecy is also troubling given published comments by Treasury that call for, 'a whole-of-government and *whole-of-society* response... a *multi-stakeholder coordinated approach* to risk management and resilience-building... a *strong relationship between the public, private and civil society sectors* is pivotal' (emphasis added). Similarly, the UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (2019) advocates, 'increased access to risk information' and that, 'low risk awareness is one of the main challenges.' Given that the LTIBs are intended to put risk and opportunity information in the public domain, the argument for transparency of the National Risk Register seems compelling.

A well-resourced, independent, apolitical Commissioner could objectively assess NZ's approach to catastrophic risks, given that we now know 'consistent with international best practice' was nowhere near adequate for the risk of Covid-19. This Commissioner could also help overcome siloed orthodoxy and cognitive biases, through support for the public sector chief executives and the LTIBs process.

A Commissioner could also invest in a public facing interactive tool where users can adjust assumptions and see how various societal values and risk probability and impact assessments lead to different risk prioritisation. Such a communication tool is necessary to unpack some of the opacity of the risk assessment process and provide the language for independent peer-reviewers, stakeholders, and the public to engage with the government on risk mitigation.

To the credit of the UN SG's report, Covid-19 is framed as an impetus to prepare not just for another pandemic, but for a range of global risks. Fortunately, most of the risk is contained in human activities such as biological engineering, uses of artificial intelligence, nuclear weapons, environmental manipulations, climate emissions, and so on (as per Ord 2020). This means that humanity has the power to vastly reduce the risk and secure a flourishing future.

However, there are key challenges to overcome when implementing these futures mechanisms. For example, we know that a suite of human cognitive biases such as groupthink, inattention bias, and difficulties with probabilistic and exponential thinking work against action to mitigate catastrophic risks. Former Chief Science Advisor Sir Peter Gluckman identified some of these in his report 'Uncertain but Inevitable', published earlier in 2021.

The LTIBs and other future oriented work can be leveraged to identify and plan to overcome catastrophic risk. However, the Briefings will not cover every risk, and may be focused on local rather than global threats. It is essential that a central aggregating and prioritisation mechanism exists with a view across the risks, seeing them as a set and seeing their

interconnected and global importance.

The UN SG writes:

'[t]his requires stronger legal frameworks, better tools for managing risks, better data, the identification and anticipation of future risks, and proper financing of prevention and preparedness.'

Hence there is a UN recommendation for countries to establish the sort of thing we are advocating in our paper. This is fortuitous because in our paper we suggest that the Commissioner for Extreme Risks could engage internationally and catalyse collaborative efforts, for example with Australia and Pacific neighbours.

If each country acts according to its strengths, then we can overcome these risks. NZ for example, as a temperate and remote island nation, is well-placed to resist catastrophic pandemics and winter-inducing scenarios such as nuclear war, supervolcanic eruption and comet or asteroid impacts. Policy could focus in part on these natural strengths with programmes aimed at enhancing self-sufficiency and demonstrating effective measures to other islands.

It is notable that many risk reduction activities, such as strengthening health systems, cooperating internationally, or enhancing food security will have tangible impacts here and now, regardless of future risks.

If every country plays their part as the inspiring call from the UN SG requires, then humanity can move more confidently toward a flourishing future, protected from pandemic disease, other biological threats to health and wellbeing and the suite of other catastrophic and existential threats.

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Further Reading

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Appendix

Long-term Insights Briefings: NZ Ministry of Health

Using the MoH as an example, the following might all be considered as part of a ten-plus year vision of opportunities and risks:

- Pandemic preparedness
- Bioweapons, bioengineering, synthetic biology and catastrophic risks
- Climate disruption and health
- Demographic transitions (age-groups, ethnic groups, migrants) and trends in health inequalities
- Antimicrobial resistance
- Health system infrastructure
- Health workforce needs
- Precision medicine
- Artificial intelligence and health
- Democratisation of healthcare
- Remote service delivery
- Malicious actors and cyber threats at health services

National Risk Register Shortcomings

Examining the UK's public facing National Risk Register, there are some serious shortcomings including, but certainly not limited to:

- The values and assumptions underpinning the summary risk matrix are opaque to a casual observer.
- The magnitude of the threat from 'emerging infectious diseases' for the UK (ie, Covid-19-like organisms) was 'up to 100 fatalities' in the 2017 version, indicating an error of three orders of magnitude in the risk assessment.
- Volcanism was only added to the register after the 2010 eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull, showing that key risks were not assessed.
- The register has been criticised as over securitised and biased by vested interests.
- The time horizon of 2–5 years is manifestly inadequate to plan for future risks.
- Potentially rare events, such as supervolcanic eruption or nuclear winter, are excluded but may harbour substantial risk (as per work by Ord 2020).

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