

THE PHILOSOPHY OF INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

Concept Note & UPSC CSE Mains Practice | GS-I • GS-II • GS-III • GS-IV • Essay

“The present generation is not the absolute owner of the future; it is a custodian of the opportunities future generations deserve.”

1. Meaning and central idea

Intergenerational justice means fairness between people living today and people who will live in the future. It asks whether decisions about natural resources, public finances, technology, institutions and development leave future generations with fair opportunities and a liveable world. Its central principle is that one generation should not secure its benefits by imposing unreasonable, avoidable or irreversible costs on another.

Distinction: Sustainable development is a practical approach that seeks to meet present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. Intergenerational justice is the broader ethical question of what present generations owe future ones and how responsibilities and costs should be shared.

2. Major philosophical foundations

Edmund Burke: Presented society as a partnership linking the living, the dead and those yet to be born, emphasising continuity and inherited responsibilities.

John Rawls: The *Just Savings Principle* asks generations to preserve sufficient resources and just institutions so that a fair society can endure over time.

Hans Jonas: His ethics of responsibility stresses that the expanding power of modern technology creates duties to consider long-term consequences for humanity.

Mahatma Gandhi: Trusteeship, restraint and simple living offer an ethical basis for using resources responsibly rather than treating them as unlimited possessions.

3. Core principles

Fairness across time: Future people deserve meaningful opportunities, not merely the consequences of present choices.

Sustainability: Development should preserve the ecological and social foundations of human well-being.

Precaution: Where there is a credible risk of serious or irreversible harm, uncertainty should encourage careful assessment, not automatic inaction or automatic rejection.

Stewardship: Natural resources, public institutions and cultural heritage should be managed as responsibilities, not simply possessions.

Intra- and intergenerational equity: Fairness is needed both among people living today and between present and future generations.

Accountability: Decisions with long-term consequences should be transparent, evidence-based and open to public scrutiny.

4. Constitutional and policy connections in India

Article 21: The Supreme Court has interpreted the right to life to include aspects of a healthy environment.

Article 48A: Directs the State to protect and improve the environment and safeguard forests and wildlife.

Article 51A(g): Places a fundamental duty on citizens to protect and improve the natural environment.

Article 39(b): Directs the State to ensure that ownership and control of material resources are distributed to serve the common good.

Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties: Together, they reflect the constitutional importance of public welfare and environmental responsibility.

Important nuance: The Constitution does not use “intergenerational justice” as one standalone phrase; these provisions support related principles.

5. Key debates and criticisms

Uncertain future preferences: Future generations cannot directly tell us what they will value, and their circumstances may differ from ours.

Present deprivation: Protecting the future must not become an excuse to deny poor communities urgent needs such as food, healthcare, housing or employment.

Who pays?: Costs of transition and conservation should be distributed fairly, considering capacity and responsibility.

Short political horizons: Electoral cycles may reward immediate benefits over long-term public welfare.

Balancing principle: The aim is not to stop development, but to choose evidence-based pathways that reduce avoidable harm, share benefits fairly and protect future options.

6. Conclusion

Intergenerational justice broadens the meaning of progress. A society should be judged not only by the prosperity it creates today, but also by the rights, resources, institutions and opportunities it preserves for tomorrow. We inherit achievements from earlier generations, make choices in the present, and pass their consequences to those who follow.

“True progress is not measured only by what we achieve today, but also by the opportunities we preserve for tomorrow.”

Useful keywords: Intergenerational Equity • Sustainable Development • Just Savings • Trusteeship • Precautionary Principle • Long-term Governance • Environmental Ethics • Social Justice • Future Generations

UPSC CSE MAINS — PRACTICE QUESTIONS

The following are original practice questions framed in UPSC Mains style for preparation. They are not actual or predicted UPSC questions.

GS-I | Indian Society, Population and Culture

1. “Intergenerational inequality is often the cumulative outcome of unequal access to education, health and economic opportunities.” Discuss. (150 words, 10 marks)
2. How can the preservation of cultural heritage strengthen the sense of responsibility between present and future generations? (150 words, 10 marks)

GS-II | Constitution, Governance and Social Justice

3. Explain how constitutional values and public institutions can protect the interests of future generations. Illustrate with relevant constitutional provisions. (150 words, 10 marks)
4. Short electoral cycles often conflict with long-term public welfare. Discuss the institutional reforms that can improve intergenerational accountability in governance. (250 words, 15 marks)

GS-III | Economy, Environment, Science and Technology

5. “Sustainable development is as much a question of intergenerational justice as it is of economic efficiency.” Examine. (150 words, 10 marks)
6. How should India balance the developmental aspirations of present generations with climate responsibility and resource security for future generations? (250 words, 15 marks)
7. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence create benefits as well as risks that may extend far into the future. Discuss the need for anticipatory governance. (150 words, 10 marks)

GS-IV | Ethics, Integrity and Aptitude

8. “Ethical governance requires responsibility not only towards citizens living today but also towards those who will inherit the consequences of present decisions.” Explain. (150 words, 10 marks)
9. You are a district officer. A project promises employment and revenue but may cause long-term damage to a local water source used by future communities. What ethical issues arise, and how would you proceed? (Case study, 250 words, 20 marks)

Essay

10. “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” Discuss in the context of development, justice and responsibility. (Essay)
11. “The true test of progress is the range of opportunities it leaves to the next generation.” (Essay)
12. “A society’s moral character is revealed by how it treats those who cannot yet speak for themselves.” Examine with reference to future generations. (Essay)

How to use this concept in a Mains answer

Suggested structure: Define the concept → establish the ethical/constitutional link → give a relevant Indian example → explain competing interests and limitations → offer balanced, practical solutions → conclude with long-term public welfare. Avoid treating future interests as automatically superior to urgent present needs; show how both can be balanced fairly.