

## INTERGENERATIONAL ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ECONOMICS

[FILOSOFIA MORAL E ECONOMIA AMBIENTAL: A RESPONSABILIDADE ÉTICA INTERGERACIONAL NA POLÍTICA DE DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL E NA ECONOMIA AMBIENTAL]

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of global climate change and the increasingly serious degradation of natural resources, the relationship between economic development and environmental protection has become a central issue of both economics and moral philosophy. In particular, the question of the responsibility of the current generation to future generations poses important challenges to the traditional approach of economics, which often prioritizes maximizing short-term benefits. This paper aims to analyze the concept of intergenerational justice through the lens of environmental economics, and to examine the role of ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Rawls's theory of justice in shaping sustainable development policies. The research method used in the paper is theoretical analysis combined with the synthesis of existing academic research. The paper argues that the use of economic tools such as discount rates in policy reviews can lead to an underestimation of long-term benefits, thereby diminishing the interests of future generations. At the same time, ethical theories provide an important basis for reshaping this approach in a more equitable direction. The results of the study suggest that economic development policies can only be considered rational if they fully integrate intergenerational moral factors. This requires a shift in both theoretical and practical thinking in policymaking, to ensure that economic growth does not occur at the expense of environmental degradation and intergenerational injustice.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental economics, intergenerational justice, sustainable development, ethics, discount rate

**RESUMO:** No contexto das mudanças climáticas globais e da degradação cada vez maior dos recursos naturais, a relação entre desenvolvimento econômico e proteção ambiental tornou-se uma questão central tanto da economia quanto da filosofia moral. Em particular, a questão da responsabilidade da geração atual para com as gerações futuras impõe desafios importantes à abordagem tradicional da economia, que frequentemente prioriza a maximização dos benefícios de curto prazo. Este artigo visa analisar o conceito de justiça intergeracional do ponto de vista da economia ambiental e examinar o papel de teorias éticas, como o utilitarismo e a teoria da justiça de Rawls, na formulação de políticas de desenvolvimento sustentável. O método de pesquisa utilizado no artigo é a análise teórica combinada com a síntese de pesquisas acadêmicas existentes. O artigo argumenta que o uso de ferramentas econômicas, como taxas de desconto em revisões de políticas, pode levar a uma subestimação dos benefícios de longo prazo, diminuindo assim os interesses das gerações futuras. Ao mesmo tempo, as teorias éticas fornecem uma base importante para remodelar essa abordagem em uma direção mais equitativa. Os resultados do estudo sugerem que as políticas de desenvolvimento econômico só podem ser consideradas racionais se integrarem plenamente os fatores morais intergeracionais. Isso exige uma mudança no pensamento teórico e prático na formulação de políticas, para assegurar que o crescimento econômico não ocorra às custas da degradação ambiental e da injustiça intergeracional.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Economia ambiental; justiça intergeracional; desenvolvimento sustentável; ética; taxa de desconto.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the rapid increase in global industrialization and consumption has created unprecedented pressures on the natural environment (Isele et al., 2025). Phenomena such as climate change, biodiversity decline and depletion of natural resources are no longer potential risks in the future but have become existing challenges, directly affecting economic and social life on a global scale. In this context, determining the rational relationship between economic development and environmental protection is not only a technical problem, but also a fundamental issue for the development orientation of mankind (Awan, 2013).

Traditional economic models, especially those of neoclassical growth, often place an emphasis on maximizing output and efficient resource allocation. Within this framework, economic decisions are evaluated primarily on the ability to generate benefits in the short term, through indicators such as GDP or profit (Stiglitz, 2013). However, this approach reveals significant limitations in the face of environmental issues. Specifically, negative externalities such as air pollution, land degradation, and climate change are often not adequately reflected in market prices, leading to inefficient and unsustainable resource allocation. As a result, current economic activities can cause serious and long-term losses to the environment, the cost of which is mainly passed on to future generations (Elsawy and Youssef, 2023).

It is at this point that the problem is no longer only within the scope of economics but extends to the field of ethics. The concept of intergenerational justice raises the core question of how rights and obligations are distributed between different generations. Does the current generation have the right to exploit natural resources and damage the environment to a degree that degrades the liveability of future generations? Or conversely, do we have a moral obligation to protect and maintain living conditions for the unborn? These are fundamental questions, which cannot be solved by traditional economic analysis tools alone, but require the involvement of ethical and philosophical theories.

Although the concept of sustainable development has been widely acknowledged as a global goal, especially since the 1987 Brundtland Report, the majority of research in this area still focuses on technical and economic solutions, such as technological innovation, design environmental policies or optimize resource allocation. Meanwhile, ethical aspects, especially intergenerational responsibility, are often only mentioned indirectly or are not fully integrated into analytical models. This leads to an important research gap, where policy decisions may be economically effective in the short term but do not ensure equity in the long term (Dahl, 2024).

In addition, a central factor in economics – the discount rate – further highlights the conflict between economic efficiency and moral justice. Discounting future value to the present can lead to long-term benefits and costs being underestimated, thereby diminishing the importance of environmental issues in decision-making. While it is a sensible tool in many economic contexts, its application in issues related to climate change and natural resources raises serious questions about moral legitimacy.

Stemming from the above issues, this article aims to analyze the moral

responsibility of the current generation to future generations in the context of environmental economy. Specifically, the paper seeks to clarify the ways in which ethical theories, such as Rawls' utilitarianism and justice theory, can be integrated into economic models to guide policy decisions in a more sustainable direction.

The central research question is: how should the moral responsibility of the present generation to future generations be understood and institutionalized in economic and environmental development policies? To answer this question, the article combines theoretical analysis with an evaluation of current economic instruments, thereby clarifying limitations and proposing new approaches.

The main thesis of the article is that sustainable development is not only an economic goal but also an imperative moral obligation, and that economic policies can only be considered reasonable if they fully and fairly reflect the interests of both current and future generations. The integration of intergenerational ethics into environmental economics therefore not only contributes to improving the quality of policy decisions, but also plays an important role in ensuring a sustainable future for all of humanity.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Environmental economics is an important branch of modern economics, focusing on the relationship between economic activity and the natural environment. One of the central concepts of this field is externalities, especially negative externalities such as air pollution, water pollution and ecosystem degradation. When environmental costs are not adequately reflected in market prices, economic decisions tend to lead to inefficient resource allocation, which in turn increases negative environmental impacts. To address this problem, economists have proposed a variety of policy tools aimed at internalizing externalities, including environmental taxes, emissions quota systems, and carbon markets. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends significantly on institutional design, levels of compliance, and assumptions about the behavior of economic actors, suggesting that purely economic solutions are not enough to thoroughly address complex environmental problems.

In this context, the concept of sustainable development emerged as an important guiding framework. Since the 1987 Brundtland Report, sustainable development has been defined as development that responds to the needs of the present without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future generations. This definition has become the basis for many development policies and programs around the globe. However, despite its widespread acceptance, the concept still faces much debate, especially with regard to how it is measured and enforced. Some scholars argue that sustainable development lacks specificity and is easily used as a political slogan, if not accompanied by clear criteria and effective binding mechanisms. This suggests that, besides economic and policy instruments, a deeper theoretical foundation is needed to ensure the consistency and feasibility of sustainable development.

It is at this point that moral theories, especially intergenerational ethics, play an important role in complementing environmental economics. Intergenerational ethics focuses on defining moral obligations between different generations, especially between current and future generations. One of the key contributions in this area is John Rawls' theory of equity, in which the principle of "equitable saving" requires each generation to maintain sufficient resources so that subsequent generations can achieve an equivalent standard of living. Besides, utilitarianism offers a different approach, in which decisions are evaluated based on the total benefit they generate. However, the application of utilitarianism in an intergenerational context is difficult, as the comparison of interests between generations is complex and can lead to justification of long-term injustices based solely on the sum of benefits.

One of the key intersections between economics and ethics in this area is the issue of discount rates. In economics, the discount rate is used to convert the value of future benefits and costs to the present, thereby supporting decision-making. However, the adoption of high discount rates can significantly reduce the value of long-term benefits, especially in environmental issues such as climate change. This leads to the risk of ignoring or underestimating the interests of future generations. As a result, many researchers have criticized this approach and suggested using a lower discount rate, or even zero, in environment-related analyses. This debate is not only technical, but also reflects the profound conflict between economic efficiency and moral justice, thereby emphasizing the need to integrate ethical elements into traditional economic models.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study builds on a combination of approaches in economics and ethical philosophy, in order to explain and evaluate the issue of intergenerational justice in the context of environmental economics. The focus of the theoretical framework is on clarifying the relationship between economic efficiency and moral justice, through theories such as Rawls' fairness, utilitarianism, and arguments surrounding discount rates.

First of all, intergenerational justice is considered a core theoretical foundation. This concept refers to how resources, opportunities, and obligations are distributed between different generations, especially between current and future generations. Among the philosophical approaches, John Rawls's theory of justice plays a particularly important role. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls proposes the "just savings" principle, according to which each generation is obliged to maintain a minimum level of resources and social conditions to ensure that future generations can achieve the same standard of living. This principle implies that economic decisions cannot be based solely on the short-term interests of the current generation, but must take into account the long-term consequences for society as a whole. When applied to environmental economics, this approach requires policies to limit over-exploitation of resources and protect ecosystems from irreversible

degradation, thereby establishing an ethical standard that goes beyond mere efficiency criteria (Idoko and Okeke, 2025).

In addition, utilitarianism provides an important analytical framework in economics, especially in the evaluation of policies based on the principle of maximizing the total benefit. In economic models, this approach is often expressed through the synthesis of the interests of individuals in order to make optimal decisions. However, when expanding into an intergenerational context, utilitarianism reveals significant limitations. First, comparing benefits between generations is a complex problem, due to the lack of a common unit of measurement for non-material values such as the environment or quality of life. Second, this approach could lead to justifying the sacrifice of the interests of some generations if it increases the total common good, thereby posing the risk of serious injustice in the long run. Thus, although utilitarianism is valuable in the analysis of effectiveness, it needs to be complemented by other ethical principles to ensure fairness between generations.

An important intersection between economics and ethics in this theoretical framework is the problem of discount rates. In economics, the discount rate is used to convert the value of future benefits and costs to the present, thereby supporting decision-making in long-term projects. However, the application of a positive discount rate in environmental issues has caused much debate. When the analysis period lasts for decades or hundreds of years, the value of future benefits and costs will be significantly reduced, resulting in long-term environmental damages, such as sea level rise or biodiversity loss, that may be underestimated. From an ethical perspective, this poses a serious problem, as the interests of future generations are ignored in the decision-making process. Some economists, notably Nicholas Stern, have proposed using a lower discount rate to better reflect the value of long-term benefits, while other views defend the use of discount rates as a rational reflection of human behavior and scarcity of resources. Therefore, the discount rate debate is not only technical, but also reflects a profound conflict between economic efficiency and moral justice (Guerra et al., 2022).

On the basis of the above theories, the concept of sustainable development is seen as an ethical standard that guides economic decisions. More than just a policy objective, sustainable development also implies that economic activities need to be evaluated based on their ability to maintain living conditions for both the present and the future. This concept can be linked to both Rawls's theory of justice and utilitarianism, but at the same time it also goes beyond these two frameworks by emphasizing the balance between economic, social, and environmental factors. In this context, sustainable development serves as a coordinating principle, helping to reconcile the conflicts between economic growth and environmental protection, as well as between the interests of different generations.

## 4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

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### *4.1. Resource exploitation and intergenerational equity issues*

One of the most obvious manifestations of the conflict between economic development and intergenerational justice is the exploitation of natural resources. In practice, many countries and businesses tend to maximize resource extraction to serve short-term economic growth, especially in sectors such as mining, energy and large-scale agriculture. This approach reflects the core logic of traditional economics, in which economic actors act to maximize current benefits under the condition of scarce resources.

From an economic perspective, overexploitation behavior can be explained through a combination of profit motivation and time discounting mechanisms. Current benefits are often overvalued over future benefits, while long-term environmental costs are not fully reflected in market prices. This leads to natural resources being exploited at a level that exceeds renewable capacity, causing environmental degradation and reducing the ability to serve the needs of future generations (Ruggeri et al., 2022).

However, from an ethical perspective, this approach poses a serious problem regarding intergenerational justice. If the current generation exploits resources in an unsustainable way, future generations will face resource shortages, deterioration of environmental quality, and limited development opportunities. This can be seen as a form of injustice, where the benefits of one generation are maximized by shifting costs to other generations.

Applying Rawls' principle of "fair savings", it can be argued that each generation is obliged to maintain a minimum level of resources to ensure that subsequent generations are not disadvantaged. This involves not only the conservation of physical resources, but also the maintenance of ecosystems and environmental conditions necessary for life. In this context, resource exploitation needs to be placed within the confines of sustainability criteria, rather than just based on short-term economic performance.

In addition, this problem is also related to the concept of "tragedy of the commons", in which common resources tend to be overexploited due to the lack of effective management mechanisms. This further highlights the need for regulatory policies that protect resources and ensure equitable distribution between generations.

In short, resource extraction is not only an economic issue, but also a profound ethical one. Balancing current development needs and responsibilities for the future requires an integrated approach, in which the principles of intergenerational justice play a central role in policy guidance.

### *4.2. Climate change as a global ethical issue*

Climate change is considered one of the biggest challenges of the

21st century, and is also a good example of intergenerational justice in environmental economics. Unlike many other economic problems that have short-term impacts, climate change is cumulative and lasts for generations, making actions of the present possible to have far-reaching and long-term consequences for the future (Hourdequin, 2025). From an economic perspective, climate change is often analyzed as a form of negative externality on a global scale. Production and consumption activities emit greenhouse gases but do not fully reflect environmental costs in market prices. This leads to emissions that exceed social optimum, causing an increase in global temperatures and consequences such as sea level rise, extreme weather, and biodiversity decline. However, a purely economic approach often does not fully reflect the intergenerational nature of the problem. From an ethical perspective, climate change raises a fundamental question: does the current generation have the right to continue emitting and benefit from economic growth while future generations suffer the consequences? This is a matter of accountability, because the people who are most affected are often not the ones causing the problem. This highlights the asymmetry of power and interests between generations.

Moreover, climate change has inequality not only between generations but also between countries. Developed countries, which have emitted a lot in the past, are often more adaptable, while developing countries are more affected. This makes the problem even more complicated, as intergenerational justice is tied to international justice. Therefore, climate change cannot be solved by economic tools alone such as carbon taxes or emissions markets. It requires a more holistic approach, in which ethical principles play a central role. Reducing emissions and protecting the environment is not only an economically sound option, but also a moral obligation for future generations.

### ***4.3. The role of the discount rate in environmental policy***

Discount rates are a central tool in economics, particularly in evaluating projects and policies that have long-term impact. By converting the value of future benefits and costs to the present, the discount rate allows policymakers to compare different options on the same basis. However, in the context of environmental economics and intergenerational justice, the use of discount rates has become a deeply controversial topic. Technically, the adoption of a positive discount rate reflects the fact that people tend to prioritize current benefits over future benefits. However, when the analysis period lasts for tens or hundreds of years, as in climate change-related issues, the value of future benefits and costs will be significantly reduced. This leads to long-term environmental damages that may be underestimated during decision-making (Hourdequin, 2025).

From an ethical perspective, this poses a serious problem. If future generations are “devalued” just because they lived at a later time, then that may be seen as unfair. Some economists have argued that in environment-related issues, especially those that are irreversible, the use of low or zero discount rates is necessary to ensure intergenerational equity. However,

this view has also met with criticism. Some scholars argue that eliminating or drastically reducing discount rates can lead to economically unrealistic decisions, as current resources are over-allocated to future benefits. Therefore, the problem lies not only in the selection of a specific number, but also in determining the moral values that society wants to reflect in policy decisions. Overall, the discount rate is not only a technical tool, but also an expression of a moral perspective on how society evaluates the future. Determining the appropriate discount level should therefore be considered in the relationship between economic efficiency and intergenerational equity (Al Yaqoobi and Ausloos, 2022).

#### ***4.4. Contradictions between economic growth and sustainable development***

One of the biggest challenges in environmental economics is the existence of a contradiction between economic growth goals and sustainable development requirements. In many cases, policies aimed at promoting economic growth, such as expanding industrial production or resource extraction, can lead to increased pollution and environmental degradation. From a traditional economic perspective, growth is seen as a central goal, as it is tied to improving living standards, creating jobs and reducing poverty. However, this approach often does not take into account long-term environmental costs. When these costs are not adequately internalized, economic growth can become a cause of serious environmental problems.

Meanwhile, sustainable development emphasizes a balance between economic, social, and environmental factors. This means that economic decisions need to be evaluated not only on short-term benefits, but also on the ability to maintain living conditions in the long term. However, achieving this balance is not easy, especially in the context that developing countries still prioritize growth to improve economic conditions. From a moral perspective, this contradiction reflects the conflict between the interests of the current generation and future generations. If current economic growth degrades the environment, future generations will face severe constraints on resources and quality of life. Therefore, pursuing growth without taking sustainability into account can be seen as ethically irresponsible. Therefore, resolving this contradiction requires a shift in the approach to development, from pure growth to inclusive and sustainable growth, in which environmental factors are integrated into economic decision-making.

#### ***4.5. Policy orientation based on intergenerational ethics***

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the integration of intergenerational ethics into economic policy is an essential requirement to ensure sustainable development. This requires not only an adjustment in terms of tools but also a change in theoretical approaches and policy thinking.

First of all, policies should prioritize environmentally friendly solutions, such as developing renewable energy, promoting clean technologies, and improving resource efficiency. These solutions not only help to minimize the negative impact on the environment, but also create new development opportunities in the long term.

Second, economic instruments, especially discount rates, need to be adjusted to better reflect the value of long-term benefits. Using an appropriate discount can help balance current needs and responsibilities for the future, thereby supporting more equitable policy decision-making. Third, the role of institutions and governance needs to be strengthened (Bánda, 2022). Legal regulations, environmental standards, and monitoring mechanisms need to be designed in such a way as to ensure that economic activities do not harm future generations. This is especially important in the context that environmental resources are often public in nature and are susceptible to overexploitation. Finally, raising social awareness of intergenerational justice also plays an important role. As individuals and organizations become more aware of their responsibilities for the future, they will be more inclined to advocate for and engage in more sustainable policies. In conclusion, policy formulation based on intergenerational ethics not only helps to address current environmental problems, but also lays the foundation for a long-term model of equitable and sustainable development.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS**

### ***5.1. Implications for economic policies***

The analyses in this study show that integrating intergenerational ethics into economic policy is not only a normative option but also a practical requirement in the context of growing environmental challenges. The limitations of traditional economic models, particularly in assessing long-term impacts, require a radical adjustment in the way policies are designed and implemented.

First of all, it is necessary to review the method of evaluating public investment projects, especially those with a large impact on the environment such as energy, infrastructure and resource extraction. The use of discount rates in cost-benefit analysis should be adjusted to avoid underestimating the long-term benefits of environmental protection. One possible approach is to apply different discount rates depending on the type of project, where projects related to climate change and natural resources should use lower discount rates to more fully reflect the value of future benefits (Hiromitsu, 2024).

In addition, economic tools to internalize environmental externalities need to be strengthened in both scope and effectiveness. Policies such as carbon taxes, emission quota systems, and carbon markets can play an important role in regulating the behavior of economic actors. However, the

effectiveness of these tools depends on institutional design and the level of enforcement, so a combination of market tools and strict legal regulations is required. Promoting green economic sectors, including renewable energy and clean technology, is also an important direction. Not only do these sectors contribute to reducing environmental impact, but they also create new growth drivers in the long term. In general, economic policy needs to be reoriented towards the long term, in which ethical and intergenerational justice factors are integrated as a core criterion in the decision-making process.

### ***5.2. Implications for economic theory***

The debate over intergenerational justice not only poses a challenge to policy practice, but also requires a restructuring in the theoretical foundations of economics. Traditional economic models, which are based on assumptions of maximizing benefits and discounting time, often do not adequately reflect the ethical values associated with intergenerational distribution. One of the fundamental limitations of current models is the treatment of economic actors as individuals who simultaneously exist within a fixed time frame, thereby ignoring continuity and inheritance between generations. This leads to the fact that economically optimal decisions may not be ethically optimal, especially when costs are shifted to the future (Ohlsson and Skillington, 2023).

To overcome this limitation, it is necessary to develop economic models that integrate ethical factors, in which decisions are not only based on efficiency but also on fairness. One potential approach is to build social welfare functions with different weights for generations, thereby reflecting the importance of protecting long-term interests. In addition, the development of alternative indicators to GDP, such as those that measure sustainable development, can also help to better assess the effectiveness of policies in an intergenerational context.

In addition, economic studies need to broaden their scope to include non-market values, such as environmental quality, health and social welfare. This requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration between economics and other fields such as environmental science and philosophy.

### ***5.3. Implications for ethics and philosophy***

From a philosophical perspective, modern environmental issues have expanded the scope of ethics beyond current interpersonal relationships, to include future generations. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of moral obligations, especially for individuals who do not yet exist at the time of decision-making. One of the biggest challenges is determining the moral basis for intergenerational obligations. While traditional theories such as utilitarianism and Rawls's theory of justice provide important

foundations, they still need to be further developed to deal with the complex problems of the modern world. For example, utilitarianism has difficulty comparing benefits between generations, while Rawls's theory has not yet provided specific guidelines for policy decisions in the context of the global environment (Böhm et al., 2022).

Therefore, there is a need for the development of new ethical theories or a flexible combination of existing frameworks. One potential approach is environmental ethics, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and the responsibility of humans to protect ecosystems. In addition, theories of collective responsibility and global ethics can also play an important role in addressing intergenerational issues.

Overall, ethics needs to broaden its scope and approaches to meet new challenges, with intergenerational justice becoming one of the central themes of modern philosophical research.

#### ***5.4. Implications for global governance***

Environmental issues, especially climate change, are global and cannot be effectively solved by a single country. This sets the need for a global governance system capable of coordinating the actions of countries to achieve the common goals of sustainable development and intergenerational justice (Yang et al., 2023). One of the biggest challenges in global governance is the difference in interests and capacities between countries. Developed countries, which have benefited from industrialization in the past, often have a greater responsibility for reducing emissions and supporting developing countries. In contrast, developing countries need space for economic growth to improve living standards. This creates a tension between international justice and intergenerational justice.

To address this issue, effective international cooperation mechanisms are needed, such as global climate agreements, sustainable development support funds, and technology transfer mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on the level of commitment and compliance of countries, as well as the ability to design appropriate institutions. In addition, the role of international organizations, the private sector and civil society is also becoming increasingly important in promoting environmental goals. A multi-stakeholder approach can help enhance the effectiveness of global governance, while ensuring that decisions are made reflecting the interests of diverse groups. Global governance plays a pivotal role in realizing the principles of intergenerational justice. Building a fair and effective system of international cooperation is not only a political imperative but also a moral obligation in the context of globalization and climate change.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This article analyzes the relationship between environmental

economics and intergenerational ethics, with a focus on the responsibility of the current generation to future generations. Through the combination of economic theories and philosophy, the paper has shown that economic decisions cannot be based solely on efficiency criteria, but need to take into account fair and ethical factors. One of the highlights of the article is the clarification of the role of the discount rate in shaping policy decisions. Although it is an important tool in economics, its use without considering ethical factors can lead to unfair outcomes for future generations. The article has also shown that sustainable development is not only an economic goal but also a moral obligation. This requires a shift in both theoretical and practical thinking in policymaking, to ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of environmental degradation and intergenerational injustice.

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