Future Earth Assembly and Governing Council
Terms of Reference

Process

This governance document has been developed based on the work of the Governing Council Task Force and their report, in response to the Future Earth external review. The document has been developed by Working Group III of the Future Earth Implementation Team, and has been through a consultation process with the full Future Earth community - GRPs, KANs, National Structures, Regional Structures and the early-career networks.

Overview

The proposed governance structure for Future Earth consists of an **Assembly** and a **Governing Council**. Future Earth is operating under the custodianship of ISC, UNESCO, UNEP and the Belmont Forum.

The **Assembly** is an inclusive body representing the full scope of the Future Earth community (mostly scientific). The Assembly provides a platform for broad consultation and enables the full community to participate in the development of Future Earth core agenda, strategies, activities and structures.

The **Governing Council** is the elected, operational decision-making structure working on behalf of the Assembly. The Governing Council oversees the strategic and scientific direction of Future Earth and supports timely decision processes to advance Future Earth's agenda, strategies, activities and structures.

This graphical representation aims to explain in a simple way how the Assembly and GC will interact.

Part I: The Future Earth Assembly

The Assembly Terms of Reference (ToR) is a reference document, under which the Assembly itself will organize. The Assembly itself may develop more detailed policies to support its work upon its formation. Amendments to the ToR can be made following the process under "Part III" of this document.

1. The role of the Assembly

The Assembly:

- identifies, discusses and advises on new and emerging priorities for the scientific and broader strategic development of Future Earth;
- makes regular recommendations to the Governing Council (GC) on strategic and scientific priorities for Future Earth;
- elects the GC and passes decision-making authority to it;
- reviews key initiatives/outcomes in the past year, including science highlights;
- reviews budget and gives advice: past year, next year;
- acts in accordance with the Future Earth vision, mission and objectives, as well as the core values, which are: inclusiveness, diversity, sustainability, transparency and impartiality.

2. Assembly membership

The **Future Earth community** are individuals and organizations that practice, represent, use, and support sustainability research and scholarship.

The Future Earth community includes:
- **Global Research Networks** - the former Global Research Projects (GRPs) and the Knowledge-Action-Networks (KANs), as well as new networks - and the people they convene. GRNs represent the scientific core expertise of Future Earth, organised around key themes and objectives;
- **Early-Career Researchers**[1] engaged in the Early Career Researchers Network of Networks (ECR NoN). Any other related early-career researchers network such as the Global Young Academy (GYA) is encouraged to [contact] and join ECR NoN to be represented in the Assembly[2];
- **National and Regional Networks**, such as national or regional committees or similar structures, which are independently organized groups of professionals in

---

[1] Early career is anyone whose career has started within the last 10 years and who is connected to sustainability. This includes researchers who have received their Bachelor's or Master's qualification within the last 10 years or their PhD within the last six years, as well as professionals working at the interface of society, policy, practice, and research.

[2] The process to join ECR NoN is simple and fast. All ECR networks are encouraged to join it. Through it, they will have the possibility to send representatives to the Assembly.

It is to be noted that ECR representatives should bring an ECR point of view to the discussion and act for the whole ECR community (ECR NoN), and not represent only their own network.

sustainability science, representing Future Earth communities in their countries or regions in the Future Earth global structure;

- **Custodian Organizations:** international representative bodies in the worlds of science, science funding, policy, the private sector and civil society. At inception, these are ISC, UNESCO, UNEP and the Belmont Forum. Custodian Organizations replace the now dissolved Science and Technology Alliance for Global Sustainability. These organisations are considered key to achieve Future Earth's mission by lending their name and leveraging their reputation, networks and other resources to support Future Earth's development, advance its international positioning and effective multi-stakeholder engagement. Custodian organizations are responsible for establishing and supporting Future Earth's overall mandate, ensuring the fulfilment of its vision and mission, and safeguarding Future Earth's core values. Custodian organizations engage with the Executive Director and Governing Council directly, to act, as necessary, in the interests of Future Earth. Custodians further monitor the activities of Future Earth, and initiate reviews of the programme.
- **Global Hub Boards and/or Funders:** national and international scientific organizations, funding agencies and other donors who provide financial (and in some cases additional in-kind) support to the Future Earth Secretariats and/or Future Earth activities. This group includes in particular the primary funding institutions of each Global Secretariat Hub and the Global Coordination Hub.
- **Partner Organizations[3]:** national and international organisations and initiatives that work in the global sustainability domain and with which Future Earth maintains strategic and activity-based relations. Partner organizations collaborate with Future Earth in the development and delivery of its own activities or involve Future Earth in other major international initiatives relevant to sustainability science.

2.1 Assembly members
- Members of the Future Earth community are represented in the Assembly as
    1. voting Assembly members,
    2. non-voting Assembly members, or
    3. observers.
- Voting members are entitled to vote in the election of the Governing Council, if their group is represented in the Governing Council.
- Voting may occur for other purposes (no consensus on recommendations to be made to the Governing Council, for example);
- Representatives from the community groups in Table 1 (below) are to be nominated by their respective group and should serve 3-year terms (no limit of terms);
- It is left to the appreciation of each group to nominate their representatives, following an open, democratic and transparent process taking into consideration balance in gender, discipline and geographic representation;
- Table 1 proposes suggestions on people to nominate in the Assembly from each group, but each group is free to decide who to nominate;

---

[3] The following organizations are already identified as potential partners and will be invited to the Assembly by the Future Earth Secretariat: UNU, UNDP, WMO, STS Forum, WBCSD, We Mean Business, ICLEI, C40, WWF, WRI, IUCN, Nia Tero, The Tenure Project, IAI, WCRP, SDSN, UNFCCC, CBD, IPBES

- A group can change its representative(s), if the current one(s) cannot accomplish their duty (e.g. not participating, leaving the group etc.).

Table 1: Assembly membership		
Community group	**Assembly representation**	**Number of seats** (for orientation)
Voting members		
Global Research Networks	2 from each GRN (currently 27, e.g. 1 from IPO, 1 from SSC).	54 (27 leading scientists, 27 science organizers)
ECR networks	10 nominated by ECR NoN	10 early-career researchers
National Committees or Networks	2 from each National Committee	~40 leading scientists or science stakeholders
Regional structures (Centers and Offices)	2 from each regional structure (e.g. 1 board or committee member and 1 SC member)	~14 individuals, mostly science leaders (we expect no more than 7 regional structures)
Boards and/or Funders (Global Secretariat Hubs and Global Coordination Hub)	2 from each Global Secretariat Hub (e.g. 1 board chair + 1 board member). Global Secretariat Hubs thus have representation through their funders and/or board members, on the Assembly	~9 board chairs or funders ~9 board members or funders
Partner Organizations	1 from each partner organization, (10-20, see footnote on previous page for examples)	10-20, one per partner organization
Scientists and sustainability leaders from LIC/MIC[4]	10 at-large seats for LIC/MIC leading scientists and sustainability leaders nominated by other Assembly members	10 leading scientists & sustainability leaders[5]
		Total: 160-170

---

[4] LIC/MIC: Low and middle income countries. The LIC & MIC countries classification is according to the prior year compared to the election year, as listed by the World Bank

[5] Lower and Middle Income Countries include 142 of the 195 countries in the world, but currently, only 4 of Future Earth's 19 National structures are in Lower and Middle Income Countries, and only 3 of our 27 Global Research Networks have International Program Offices in Lower and Middle Income Countries.

Non-voting members		
Secretariat Leadership	the Future Earth Executive Director and all Secretariat Hubs Directors are non-voting members	8-10 executives (one per hub + the ED)
Custodian organizations	1 from each custodian organization	4 representatives at start (ISC, UNESCO, UNEP and Blemont Forum)
GC members	All GC members are non-voting members of the assembly	17 members

2.2. Assembly Observers
- All other Future Earth stakeholders and prospective Assembly members may request permission from their representatives, or an Assembly Co-chair, to participate in Assembly meetings as observers.

2.3. Assembly co-chairs
- The Assembly has two co-chairs, who are responsible for guiding and overseeing the work of the Assembly.
- The Assembly co-chairs serve 3-year staggered terms and can be re-elected for one additional term of 3 years. New co-chairs are elected by the Assembly, on a majority of votes. The election process will be based upon (self-)nominations in written form to the Assembly.

2.4 Process for recognizing Future Earth groups
- Future Earth Secretariat maintains the complete list of all Future Earth groups who are authorized to be represented at the Assembly.
- Interested parties can apply to become a Future Earth group and to be represented at the Assembly as a voting member. Processes are in place to support applications for parties interested in joining as a National Committee, Regional Committee, Global Research Network, Global Secretariat Hub and Global Coordination Hub.
- Interested Partner Organizations are encouraged to contact the Secretariat to join the Future Earth Assembly.
- The secretariat prepares the incoming applications for the Assembly on an annual basis.
- The Assembly may provide advice to the GC, who decides on the application.
- Future Earth groups who are inactive for four years (inactive meaning not nominating representatives to the Assembly, or not participating in the Assembly), are removed from the Assembly. In case they wish to be represented again at the Assembly, they shall re-apply through the application process given above.

3. Organisation of the Assembly

3.1 Groups' organisation
- Each community group (GRNs' group, NCs' group etc.) is responsible for its own organisation.

- Groups can ask the Future Earth Secretariat for assistance in organising their internal elections (e.g. through the Future Earth member platform).
- Groups are encouraged to organise themselves prior to the Assembly meeting.

3.2 Assembly meetings
- The Assembly meets at least annually, whenever possible in conjunction with the Sustainability Research and Innovation Congress.
- All voting and non-voting members, as well as observers are invited to the annual Assembly meeting.
- The Assembly develops advice to the GC based on consensus, defined as: agreement that everyone can accept. If there is large disagreement within the Assembly, member(s) can ask the Assembly co-chairs to start a voting process on a specific decision. Each Assembly voting-member has one vote, and decisions will be made according to a simple majority of votes.
- An Organizing Committee will take care of running Assembly meetings, and summarizing advice to the GC via the Co-Chairs. The OC will initially be set up through nomination of representatives by the Future Earth community. In succeeding years, the Organizing Committee will be elected by the Assembly from among its representatives.
- The Secretariat provides year-round support to the workings of the Assembly, and can assist groups to arrange meetings, documents, processes.
- The Secretariat, with the Assembly Co-Chairs and the Organising Committee will organise the annual Assembly meeting and keep a list of representatives up-to-date.
- The annual Assembly meeting agenda is prepared by the Assembly Co-Chairs, the Organising Committee, and supported by the Secretariat. It is made publicly available to the entire community at least 2 months prior to the Assembly meeting.
- The annual Assembly meeting agenda includes at least:
    - a time slot for each community group (GRNs, RCs, Funders etc.) to gather and prepare a common declaration;
    - a plenary session with a time for each group to present their latest achievements, future plans and needs/requests/recommendations for the coming year;
    - a report on the diversity within Future Earth, especially on the Assembly and Governing Council, and potentially including the groups represented at the Assembly. The report shall include current state of affairs, the progress, and including action points to further foster diversity. The report is prepared by the Future Earth secretariat;
    - a report from the GC on its actions and plans;
- Meeting minutes are kept of the annual Assembly meeting, including: summary of discussions, and recommended advice to the GC.
- The Assembly meeting may be streamed online to the entire Future Earth community.
- A report must be prepared and made openly available after each Assembly meeting to the members and to the public, and must align with the advice given to the GC.

Part II: The Future Earth Governing Council

1. The role of the Governing Council

The Governing Council:
- oversees the strategic direction and scientific priorities of Future Earth, to progress the overall Future Earth agenda contributing to the advancement of global sustainability science, while maintaining a broad perspective on Future Earth as a whole, rather than promoting the specific interests of a single group;
- is the elected, operational decision-making structure on behalf of Future Earth. It supports timely decision processes, considering the advice by the Assembly, representing the diverse voices of the Future Earth community;
- reports to the Assembly and is fully empowered by the Assembly to make decisions;
- identifies priority research/practice areas of strength and opportunity, and conducts action planning and implementation monitoring;
- is, in collaboration with the Executive Director, responsible for resource mobilization and financial oversight;
- oversees the Secretariat's operations, including the development and oversight of Future Earth policies and practices;
- defines and acts in accordance with the Future Earth vision, mission and objectives, as well as the core values, which are: inclusiveness, diversity, sustainability, transparency and impartialness.

2. Governing Council membership

2.1 Governing Council members

The Governing Council (GC) consists of 17 voting members, serving 3-year staggered terms, renewable once.

Table 2: Governing Council Membership	
Community group	**Governing Council seats**
Voting Members	
Global Research Networks	3
National and regional structures	3
Boards and/or Funders	5
Early-career researchers	3 at-large
researcher or sustainability leader from LIC/MIC[6]	3 at-large

---

[6] LIC/MIC: Low and middle income countries. The LIC & MIC countries classification is according to the prior year compared to the election year, as listed by the World Bank. This at-large representation responds to the urgent need for greater representation of global south constituencies, as pointed out by the review. Lower and Middle Income Countries include 142 of the 195 countries in the world, but currently, only 4 of Future Earth's 19 National structures are in Lower and Middle Income Countries, and only 3 of our 27 Global Research Networks have International Program Offices in Lower and Middle Income Countries.

Non-voting Members	
Custodian Organization Representatives	4 (one from ISC, UNESCO, UNEP and Belmont Forum)
The Future Earth Executive Director and Global Secretariat Hub Directors	8-10 initially (one per global secretariat hub + the ED)

3. Election process for the Governing Council

3.1 GC election process

- The election process should aim at inclusiveness and diversity, taking into account balance in gender, discipline and geographic representation.
- Each Assembly group will elect its representatives to the GC during the annual Assembly meeting.
- If a newly elected GC member is a current Assembly member, the GC member transfers to a non-voting ex-officio Assembly member as soon as s/he becomes a GC member. The group would therefore be invited to nominate a new representative to the Assembly.

Nominations:

The nomination for GC members is based on both self-nominations and nominations by others. The nomination process is open to all members of the Future Earth community, for each community group. Nominees can be Assembly members or non-members. The application process is supported by the Secretariat, with a call for (self-)nomination within the Future Earth community, asking for a written formal application letter. The received nominations shall be made available to the entire Assembly before the Assembly meeting.

*Voting***:**

- The respective Assembly groups vote through a secret-ballot on the nominees within their group (e.g., GRNs only vote for the GRN nominees).
- The 3 at-large seats for researchers from LIC/MIC's and for ECR are voted upon by all Assembly members who are from and working within a LIC/MIC country or are ECR.

Re-election:

GC members can be re-elected for one additional term. This second term can be subsequent after their served term, or discontinuous in time.

3.2 GC co-chairs

- The two GC co-chairs are responsible for guiding and overseeing the work of the GC. One of the GC co-chairs should come from the representatives of the Global Research Networks.
- The GC co-chairs serve 3-year staggered terms and can be re-elected one additional term of 3 years.
- The co-chairs are elected by the GC, on a majority of votes. The election process will be based upon both self-nominations and nominations by other GC members in written form to the GC.

- Each GC member votes for 2 different nominees. The 2 nominees receiving the most votes are elected co-chairs.
- Among the first 2 co-chairs, one is elected for 2 years, the other one for 3 years.

3.3 First GC elections
- 2 months before the first Assembly meeting, the Secretariat will issue a call for (self-)nominations within the Future Earth Community.
- During the annual Assembly meeting, each Assembly group will elect 3 representatives to the GC (5 for the Boards and/or Funders group), chosen from the pool of nominations to the Secretariat call. Selection must be made in accordance with the principles stated in 3.1 (ensure balance in gender, geographical representation, career stage and discipline, when applicable).
- The election process is left to the discretion of each group. Nevertheless, Annex 1 provides some ideas to ensure diversity.
- The first GC starts off with positions that serve 1-, 2-, and 3-year terms within each group of 3 seats.
- The current GC shall ensure a well-organised hand-over to the new GC within 3 months after the election outcome, including all relevant documentation.

3.4 Following GC elections
- For the following years, each group needs to replace its GC representative(s) who are ending (or discontinuing) their term(s).
- A call for new GC members will be opened 2 months prior to the Assembly annual meeting. This call will have the possibility to include specific criteria for selection in order to ensure balance in gender, geographical representation, career stage and discipline of the existing GC composition.
- Nomination and election follow the process detailed in 3.1 above.

---

4. Governing Council roles and missions

4.1 GC meetings, procedures

- The Assembly brings forward proposals on directions/strategies to the GC, for them to take decisions.
- The GC makes decisions based on consensus, defined as: agreement that everyone can accept. If one GC member is in disagreement, s/he can ask the co-chairs to start a voting process on a specific decision. Each GC member has one vote, and decisions will be made according to the majority of votes.
- The GC meets at least quarterly, either virtually or hybrid (in-person + virtual).
- The GC ensures that proposed directions/strategies are aligned with ongoing activities (avoiding duplication), and are (directly) contributing to the advancement of global sustainability science in a way that no single nation can do.
- The GC ensures proposed directions are within the capacity of the Secretariat and are supported with sufficient funding to materialize.
- The GC terminates on-going activities where appropriate, and possibly advised by the Assembly.

- The GC may invite one or more representatives of the Future Earth community groups as observers to the GC meeting for strategic purposes.

4.2 GC and the Assembly

- The GC is accountable to the Assembly: meeting documents and reports shall be made available to the entire Assembly.
- All GC members are non-voting ex-officio members of the Assembly.
- The GC reports to and interacts with the Assembly. The GC reports in a coherent manner to the Assembly, in written form and exchanges with the Assembly at the annual Assembly meeting.

4.3 GC and the Secretariat

- The GC and the Future Earth secretariat shall work closely together to ensure their alignment and collaboration towards advancing sustainability science on a global scale.
- Effective and continuous communication between the GC and the Secretariat shall be fostered and ensured.
- Some GC members will participate in the selection process of the Future Earth Executive Director, with the Funders and Hosts of the Global Coordination Hub.
- The GC and the Funders group meet at least annually to ensure financial feasibility of the activities.
- The GC is supported by the Future Earth Secretariat. The secretariat will e.g. coordinate and arrange meetings, as well as summarize key points from meetings and help draft documents facilitating the work of the GC.

4.4 GC and the core fund

- The GC is responsible for assuring that the Future Earth Core Fund is administered in accordance with the 'Guiding Principles on the Use of the Core Fund".

4.5 GC communication

- The current composition of the GC shall be made publicly available on the Future Earth website, as well as the dates of GC meetings.
- The GC publishes a summary of its agenda and decisions.
- The GC publishes an annual report on major decisions and deliberations via the Future Earth website.

4.6 Disclosure of distrust

- In case of the event of strong distrust towards a GC member, a vote of no-confidence may be requested to the GC. All GC members have the right to vote, except the distrusted GC member. If the vote of no-confidence reaches an outcome surpassing 75% of the votes, the distrusted GC member has to step down.
- In case of an event of strong distrust towards the entire GC, a vote of no-confidence can be asked for by the Assembly members. All Assembly members with voting rights have the right to vote. If the vote of no-confidence reaches an outcome surpassing 75% of the votes, the entire GC has to step down.

Part III: Amendment to the Terms of Reference

Proposed changes to these Terms of Reference may be proposed by any member of the Assembly or the Governing Council, shall be discussed and voted by the Governing Council and ratified by the Assembly.

Annex 1

Proposed Mechanisms for the Voting Process of the First GC Election

The GC seeks to exemplify the core values of Future Earth and create a dynamic and creative group.

During the annual Assembly meeting, each Assembly group will elect 3 representatives to the GC, chosen from the pool of applicants to the Secretariat call.

The intent of the within-group election process is to support the transparent election of committed individuals from within each group that represent the full diversity of perspectives and backgrounds needed to maximize the legitimacy and credibility of the GC as an elected body of the global networks that exists within Future Earth. Consideration of gender, geography, career stage, discipline and sector should all be considered in this process.

Below are a number of ways that this can be undertaken.

Within each group, Assembly members will vote and generate a shortlist of nominees. Two members of the group may facilitate the voting process and can ensure that the final 3 selected would come from diverse backgrounds. They should ensure that no 2 representatives to the GC would come from the same region/area, no 2 reps would come from the same discipline and that at least one of the 3 representatives would be of a different gender.

Option A

In the event that the top 2 or 3 selected representatives will have similar backgrounds, only 1 or 2 of them will proceed to the GC and those next in line will be considered and so on.

Option B

In the event that the top 2 or 3 with the most number of votes have similar backgrounds, the group will go through another round of voting, this time specifying a criteria that will ensure diversity (e.g.,the top 3 elected are all women, they will have to vote for a male representative or they need to elect someone from Latin America or Asia in the next round.)

Option C

From the pool of nominees, the secretariat can make an initial analysis of the diversity of the nominees. An appropriate criteria may then be indicated for sectors that may be marginalized. For example, most nominees are male or all natural scientists, then from the start, a criteria for 1 female representative or social science could be allotted. The nominees are then already categorized and the top vote per specified category will be chosen.

Election Process for succeeding GC members

Since GC members would have staggered terms, the criteria for filling in vacant seats will be determined by incumbent GC members taking into consideration diversity and balance. Nominations and elections will then follow the criteria described.