



*A special issue
examines whether
researchers today
consider the world of
tomorrow — and why
they should.*

FUTURE GENERATIONS

The effects on distant tomorrows of the decisions we make today have never been greater. As we change our planet, ourselves and, potentially, our descendants, in ever more dramatic ways, this issue of *Nature* takes stock: do we have the brains and the tools to understand and account for the future and, if not, what should be done?

Technology experts foresee a world just a few decades away that is so radically different from today that it is hard to comprehend. The exponential rate of progress in a suite of enabling technologies, ranging from computer-processing power to communication, could drive drastic changes in artificial intelligence, robotics, molecular biology and more (see page 398).

Some think that the people who inhabit this world might also be irrevocably altered, for the first time, by genetic engineering. The arrival of the powerful genome-editing technology CRISPR–Cas9 might prevent children from being born with some deadly disorders or disabilities, and a feature on page 402 discusses the extent to which this is possible and desirable.

Forecasting is hard and fraught with bias. For example, as Nicholas Stern warns on page 407, current models of climate economics implicitly assume that lives in the future are

less important than those today — a value judgement that is rarely scrutinized and difficult to defend. And, as Celine Kermisch writes on page 383, near and remote future generations have very different needs. Hundreds of social-science studies highlight the tensions between our tendencies to care about the well-being of others yet to favour current benefits over future ones. Therefore, on page 413, behavioural economists Helga Fehr-Duda and Ernst Fehr call for the design of sustainable-development policies and schemes that exploit these evolved behaviours.

Finally, John Bongaarts expresses the view on page 409 that the best thing we could do now for future generations is to ensure that there are fewer of them, by doubling the aid spent on family planning.

The only certainties are that tomorrow's world is difficult to predict, is heading straight for us, and that billions more people will inhabit it. How we account for future impacts in today's decisions should preoccupy researchers and policymakers more than it does now. ■



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