

# “Long-Term Thinking” Will Change the Future

The modern world is plagued by extremely short-term thinking that considers only the “here and now.” What do we need to do in order to transition to “long-term thinking” that takes a perspective on the future with a focus on problems such as global environmental issues?

## About This Issue

### Can We Change Our Future?

- Extreme “Short-Term Thinking” Hinders Us in Confronting Long-Term Global Issues -

Shigeki Uno

Executive Vice President, NIRA/Professor, Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo

Humankind has advanced by making good use of “short-term thinking” to think about the present and “long-term thinking” to consider future generations. However, it cannot be denied that the modern world is plagued by extremely short-term thinking. It is almost impossible to imagine the impact of Japan’s continuously growing fiscal deficit on future generations, or the devastating effect on the planet of the greenhouse gases that we emit on a daily basis.

How could our societies change if we engaged in long-term thinking?

What will it take to enable the transition to long-term thinking?

In this issue of *My Vision*, we seek opinions from experts who advocate the importance of long-term thinking.

Keywords...Extreme “short-term thinking,” “here and now,” imagining the existence of future generations, the meaning of one’s existence

## Expert Opinions

### “Long-Term Thinking” Will Change the Future

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Roman Krznic

Social Philosopher

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Professor, Faculty of Economics, Keio University

Keywords...Benefits for future generations, democratic mechanism, independent fiscal institution

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Susumu Nomura

Professor, Faculty of International Studies, Takushoku University

Keywords...Sampo yoshi (“good for the seller, the buyer and society”), altruistic thinking, social responsibility

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Interviewer : Mari Kawamoto (NIRA Research Coordinator & Research Fellow), Ayumi Kitajima (NIRA Research Coordinator & Research Fellow)

## About This Issue

# Can We Change Our Future?

## – Extreme “Short-Term Thinking” Hinders Us in Confronting Long-Term Global Issues



**Shigeki Uno**

Executive Vice President, NIRA/  
Professor, Institute of Social Science,  
The University of Tokyo

Extreme “short-term thinking” is the currency of the modern world. People see and think only about what is immediately before their eyes. This is even more the case today, when results are required in the short-term. Looking to the past, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat and the author of *Democracy in America*, already points out that even in the early 19th century, people’s thoughts tended to be focused on the “here and now.” Previously, people would look at ancestral lands and see there their family history and stories. Such land was now divided and sold over generations, and family memories were lost. Tocqueville predicted that it would become difficult for a person to imagine future generations, and one would only be able to think in very short time frames.

### Changing the Patterns of Ideas and Behaviors for the Sake of Future Generations

In our era, the cultural thinker Roman Krznaric has warned of people's short-term thinking. In his impressive book *The Good Ancestor*, he called on us all to be “good ancestors.” The book encouraged us to change our patterns of ideas and behavior to ensure that future generations would, at least to some extent, be grateful to us. In the interview published here also, Dr. Krznaric takes the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales as an example. This mechanism, which examines the impact of public policy up to 30 years from now, in areas from transportation to healthcare, and makes policy proposals on this basis, seeks to stop the destruction of the interests and rights of future generations by the decisions of the current generation. Dr. Krznaric’s awareness of the issues, which even leads him to call the act of denying the interests of future generations without giving them rights or representation “colonization,” is sharp but clear.

Interestingly, the contemporary Buddhist monk Shokei Matsumoto translated Dr. Krznaric’s book into Japanese. He tells us here that in the Japanese environment, people come into contact with “ancestors” through graves and other markers, and feel things that transcend their own existences. Mr. Matsumoto explains that accepting the “now,” in which we inherit the things created and the wisdom cultivated by our predecessors, is an important factor in nurturing long-term thinking. At the same time, he is also involved in the activities of “Development monks,” who engage in dialogue with the business world. Biased short-term thinking and the pursuit of immediate profits lead to the long-term exhaustion of people and organizations. As opposed to this, the indication that industry is an area in which long-term thinking is readily incorporated as a rational strategy is very interesting. We must give attention to the fact that traditional Buddhism is able to offer important suggestions in relation to contemporary issues.

## **The Transformation of Social Mechanisms Will Also Be Necessary**

Professor Tatsuyoshi Saijo, Director of the Kochi University of Technology's Research Institute for Future Design, practices social design from the perspective of future generations. As a result of the encouragement of short-term thinking, current generations tend to devote themselves to the enjoyment of existing resources and benefits. Professor Saijo finds problems with the market, the democratic system and science as they have been up to the present in issues such as the failure to control the increase in greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming. In response to this, he proposes "future design." The aim of this program is to have participants in workshops and similar events become "virtual future people" living in 2050, 30 years from now, and to think about what should be done now from that perspective. Put into practice in Yahaba Town in Iwate Prefecture, Professor Saijo tells us that some residents proposed turning an area damaged by flooding into a nature park, and even to increase water charges.

Professor Keiichi Kobayashi, a professor of economics at Keio University, finds the cause of the problem in the length of the time horizon. In the case of issues such as nuclear waste and climate change, those who reap the benefits and those who pay the costs can be members of different generations. Thinking rationally in order to realize profit only within our own lifetimes will never solve these problems. The same is true of Japan's fiscal problems. We should see it as a good thing if future generations benefit, even if ours does not. Professor Kobayashi explains that a shift in our values in this direction will be necessary. He especially emphasizes the creation of an independent fiscal institution that will estimate the fiscal situation 50 or 60 years from now. Government budgets would need to be formulated to be consistent with these estimates, and it should also be made mandatory for the Diet to discuss sustainable fiscal policy. Now is the time to seriously consider these recommendations.

## **The Concept of "Social Responsibility" Possessed by Long-Established Japanese companies**

In Japan, there actually are organizations that embody such long-term thinking. Susumu Nomura, a professor in Takushoku University's Faculty of International Studies, emphasizes the fact that there are about 33,000 long-established companies that have been in business for over 100 years in Japan. This is an astounding number. Contrary to expectations, Japanese tradition is surprisingly rich in "long-term thinking." As one factor in the longevity of these companies, Professor Nomura points out the "tolerance" that sees these companies passing down long-established techniques, while also not focusing only on blood relations in continuing the company; they will take in talented human resources through methods such as adoption. Furthermore, he explains that the Omi merchants' precept of "Sampo Yoshi," which is frequently invoked, focuses not only on benefit to sellers and buyers, but also incorporates a public perspective, taking "Good for society" an important element. Here, there was a concept of long-term social responsibility that went beyond the idea of making a profit at all costs. This is perhaps the "DNA" of Japanese organizations.

We lose the meaning of our existence when we grasp it in a short time frame. We must not forget that the meaning of individuals and organizations can only be seen on a long time horizon.

Expert Opinions

## We Are “Colonizing” the Future



Photo: Kate Raworth

**Roman Krznaric**  
Social Philosopher

Long-term thinking has become extremely important today, given the increasing realization that humankind has never before been capable of having such potentially devastating impacts on the future. This is an issue that first came to our attention with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At that moment in history, it became evident that human beings were able to destroy the future through technology, and since then the means of destruction have multiplied, and the speed with which they are developed has increased.

We are colonizing the future, because we are not giving future generations any rights or representation. I think that the idea of colonization makes sense in countries like Britain or Japan, which have colonial histories. Long-term thinking is a concept that urges us to take actions that benefit future generations and to seek intergenerational justice. To make long-term thinking a social norm, we need to strive to realize fundamental changes in our social structures, and create a culture that promotes thinking over the long term. Long-term thinking is not about disregarding the present; it is about having a fair debate. Our ambition should be to extend the time horizons of democratic government and rescue it from myopic politicians who fail to take the long view, swept up as they are in the whirlwind of elections, opinion polls, and 24/7 media cycles, as exemplified by Twitter and Facebook.

I see two problems with the UN's SDGs. The first is the lack of recognition of the need for political change; the second is the fact that the SDGs are still focused on economic growth. In order to overcome the first problem, we need institutions like the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, which is a non-affiliated organization that looks at the impact of public policy up to 30 years into the future in fields ranging from transport to healthcare. It is essential that we give legal rights to future generations, and I believe that 30 years is a pragmatic timeframe to consider, given that it is longer than a normal political career. To respond to the second problem, we also need to update our idea of growth by having a national dialogue to ask ourselves to what extent we really need to keep growing. From an international perspective, the global north needs to recognize its responsibility and provide financial aid to enable the global south to leapfrog its way past a dirty and polluting industrialization process, and overcome the unfairness of the gap between the hemispheres.

The future seems too unpredictable for us to be able to think beyond ourselves, but there are many challenges that require us to do the work of thinking beyond our lifetimes. It is possible for human beings to imagine 100 years in the future. Such a timeframe is not out of the question, as most of us know our grandparents, and we might also know our grandchildren; this is already five generations. Consider the fact that the idea of development aid barely existed before the Second World War, but is now a familiar concept. We have expanded our moral universe across space. Now we need to expand it through time. I want us to do so, and in doing so to become good ancestors.

As a social philosopher, Dr. Krznaric's writings, including *Empathy*, have been published in more than 20 languages, and have been highly influential amongst political and ecological campaigners, education reformers, social entrepreneurs, and designers. Dr. Krznaric is also an acclaimed public speaker worldwide. He grew up in Sydney and Hong Kong, and studied at the universities of Oxford, London and Essex, taking a PhD in political sociology at the latter institution. He is the founder of the world's first Empathy Museum, as well as a Research Fellow of the Long Now Foundation and a member of the Club of Rome. The Observer has named Dr. Krznaric as one of Britain's leading popular philosophers.

His book, *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*, served as the background for this interview.

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Expert Opinions

## Viewing the Existence of the “I” on a Longer Timeline



**Shokei Matsumoto**

Contemporary Buddhist monk

Up to the present, human beings have relied on instinctive instantaneous reactions and short-term thinking that is indispensable for survival in the present, and also possessed awareness of a long time horizon that awes with a world beyond human knowledge; there has been a continuity between generations. However, living in today’s society, we are constantly pulled by overwhelmingly short-term thinking. It is necessary to overcome difficult situations with instantaneous force and the power of concentration, but if, when facing social issues such as climate change and planetary-scale problems we close ourselves in the visible world without considering our connection with an invisible existence, it puts the entire human race, and thus the entire planet, at risk. I want us to regain an awareness that views our existence and the meaning of life over a vast time horizon, rather than being completed within our lives.

In Japan, the existence of the dead that we know as “ancestors” could be one of the keys to opening this door. Tombs and small shrines that enshrine ancestors remain everywhere, from street corners to rural roads to mountain trails, and these are catalysts for evoking a sense that transcends the existence of the “I.” The view of life and death in which we receive blessings from our predecessors and live together with the dead is an important element in nurturing long-term thinking. The fact of a multiple “we” living in a now in which the past is enfolded means that the blessings we have received will be passed on to the future.

I am currently working on a new initiative in which “Development monks” (as opposed to “industrial doctors”) engage in one-on-one dialogues with people working for companies. Modern society is rife with biased short-term thinking that seeks immediate satisfaction, and the view that the burden of responsibility rests with the individual rather than with structural problems. If the concept “short term” × “individual” × “ownership” becomes extreme, it could exhaust people, leading to functional deterioration of the entire organization and society as a whole. Through dialogue with the monks, each individual is taken out of their social position and framework and is placed in a deep and long timeline, an experience that enables them to renew their perception of things. With regard to company products which are the subject of daily sales activities in search of market expansion, there are times when voices from different perspectives are born from the dialogue, saying “We probably cannot continue to expand production as is.” The world of business is an important gateway to influencing people’s awareness and the greater society itself.

If we can grasp the existence of the “I” in a more expansive manner, the meaning and purpose of life (*ikigai*) will change. Long-term thinking is indispensable in terms of survival strategies for humankind, helping us overcome risks such as climate change, but it is also important in terms of enhancing the richness of the cultural and religious spirit. We can say that traditional Buddhism, which has spanned 2,500 years and which exists on the shoulders of countless ancestors, will play a role in unplugging us from our daily lives of short-term thinking.

Shokei Matsumoto is a Contemporary Buddhist monk. He is a Visiting Associate Professor at Musashino University. Mr. Matsumoto was the translator of Roman Krznaric’s book *The Good Ancestor* into Japanese. He is a graduate of the Department of Philosophy of The University of Tokyo. In 2010, he acquired an MBA from the Indian School of Business (ISB) as a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar. In 2012, he launched the project “*Mirai no Jushoku-Juku*,” a temple management school for chief priests and monks. In its 10 years, the project has produced over 700 graduate religious practitioners, transcending sects and regions. He was nominated as one of the World Economic Forum’s (Davos Conference) Young Global Leaders. Mr. Matsumoto hosts the program “*Temple Morning Radio*” as a podcast, and publishes a daily column called “*Shokei Matsumoto’s Hojo-an*” on note.

Expert Opinions

## Social Design from the Perspective of Future Generations



### Tatsuyoshi Saijo

Director, Research Institute for  
Future Design, Kochi University  
of Technology

“The market,” “democracy,” and “science”: these represent the foundations of our society. What is lacking in these is a perspective concerning how future generations will think. When we pursue profit, the lack of a mechanism for control that takes the perspective of future generations encourages short-term thinking only, and current generations devote themselves to the enjoyment of the resources and benefits that exist now. Scientific knowledge has also contributed to population growth and economic development by virtue of its expanded application in agriculture and industry, but by being too demanding of comfort in our daily lives, we have also increased emissions of greenhouse gases and reactive nitrogen(\*), which are the causes of global warming, and it

has not been possible to mitigate their future impact.

How can we solve long-term problems that will affect future generations? I am proposing a new direction for society in which “future design” functions as a social device that changes the way of thinking and way of life of people who have become short-sighted. For example, participants in the Future Design Workshop ride in a “time machine” and each becomes a “virtual future person” living in 2050; they then imagine what kind of society 2050 will be. If it is a good society, the participants consider what we should do now to make it so. If it is a society that faces significant problems and difficulties, they consider what to do now to prevent this from eventuating.

The first place in which we implemented this initiative was Yahaba Town, Iwate Prefecture. We asked residents of the town to participate and formed two types of groups. Of these, the group that thought about policies from the perspective of the present could only envision a future that had been hobbled by the present, and could only think of problems such as a shortage of long-term care facilities and children on waiting lists for nursery schools. On the other hand, based on the fact that a mountain called Nanshozan, which is quite familiar to the residents of Yahaba Town and said to have been the setting for Kenji Miyazawa’s book *Night Train to the Stars*, had been inundated by floods, the group of virtual future people produced new ideas, such as developing the area as a nature park. Even following this, we witnessed more noteworthy developments; in the session on the theme of the water supply, for example, it was understood that it would be difficult to maintain the infrastructure in the future, and the residents themselves proposed increasing water charges on this basis.

If, in this way, the practice of future design draws to the surface a desire to think about the future, of which people were not previously aware, and changes the way people think and live, we can become a society that thinks about how to achieve happiness for both current and future generations.

(\* ) Reactive nitrogen is a general term for nitrogen compounds excluding nitrogen gas (N<sub>2</sub>). When released into the atmosphere, compounds such as nitrogen oxides are a cause of air pollution.

Professor Saijo is an advocate of “future design.” As a framework for research related to sustainability, such as decision-making that takes future generations into consideration, it is being put into practice in workshops for local governments and other organizations. Professor Saijo completed his studies at the University of Minnesota’s Graduate School of Economics. He took his present position following terms as a professor at Osaka University’s Center for Environmental Innovation Design for Sustainability, and a professor at Hitotsubashi University’s Institute of Economic Research. He is also the Program Director of the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature and a Research Director with the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research. His books include *Future Design – nana sedai saki wo misueta shakai* (“Future Design: A Society that looks Seven Generations Ahead”) (Keiso Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., 2015; in Japanese), of which he was an editor and co-author.

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Expert Opinions

## Recognizing the Value That Should Be Protected Across the Generations



**Keiichiro Kobayashi**

Professor, Faculty of  
Economics, Keio University

Long-term problems, such as nuclear waste and climate change, in which current behavior affects the survival of future generations, have become increasingly obvious to us. These problems have long time horizons, and are characterized by the fact that it is frequently people of different generations who benefit and who pay the costs. Whether climate change or the nation's fiscal problems, the problems will not be solved by "self-interested individuals" who are alive now "rationally" considering benefits only within the span of their own lifetimes. In order for the current generation to be willing to choose the burden of cost, the members of the current generation that will pay the cost must possess a sense of values that allows them to think that even if they do not receive the benefit during their

lifetimes, it is a good thing that future generations will receive the benefit.

The democratic mechanism, by means of which issues are deliberated on together and decided by majority vote following this, presupposes that all parties are present at the same time. It is poor at dealing with long-term problems that will affect future generations that do not yet exist. It will be necessary not only to discuss how to protect the freedoms and decision-making rights of we who are alive now, but also to discuss what should be changed in order to realize value that also encompasses the freedoms and decision-making rights of future generations.

Japan's public finances continue in a critical state that jeopardizes their sustainability. The Japanese public's thinking regarding this issue must also adopt a longer-term perspective, bringing future generations into view. For that purpose, we should first calculate long-term estimates, make these known to the public, and provide materials for public consideration. The "Economic and Fiscal Projections for Medium to Long Term Analysis" issued by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy twice a year adopts only a short-term financial outlook of about 10 years; it is necessary to conduct estimates of the financial situation in 50- or 60-years' time. As a mechanism to realize this goal, an independent fiscal institution should be created, which will be composed of public and private experts and will conduct estimates from an independent and neutral standpoint. The government budget should be institutionalized by law or other mechanisms to ensure that it will be consistent with the estimates made by this institution. If the Diet was to respond by making it mandatory to discuss sustainable fiscal policy, then policy would also gradually change to a long-term perspective.

It is necessary to consider not only fiscal problems but also such issues as global environmental problems, and to think about the direction for society and the economy on a long-term time horizon. To that end, we must recognize the value that should be protected across the generations. It is only when we are confident that society and the economy will survive for generations that we can feel the value in our daily lives. I want this generation to powerfully share the understanding that sustainability itself is, in fact, the source of all value.

Professor Kobayashi is a commentator who has sounded warnings regarding the sustainability of Japan's public finances for many years. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Chicago, and his fields of specialization are macroeconomics and economic thought. He is also currently conducting research that attempts to verify the significance of, and potential for, decision-making and policy-making based on the interests of future generations. After graduating from The University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Engineering, Professor Kobayashi joined the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (as it was then known). He took his present position in 2013, following terms in positions including as a Fellow of the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry and a Professor in Hitotsubashi University's Institute of Economic Research. He is also a Research Director of the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research and a Research Director at the Canon Institute of Global Studies. His latest book is *Posuto-korona no seisaku kousou* ("A Direction for Post-Covid Policy") (Nihon Keizai Shimbun Publishing, 2021; in Japanese), of which he was a co-author.

Expert Opinions

## The Values of Long-Established Japanese Companies Will Be the Global Standard in the Future



**Susumu Nomura**

Professor, Faculty of  
International Studies,  
Takushoku University

In Japan, there are approximately 33,000 companies that have been in business for over 100 years, accounting for 40% of the world's 100-year-old companies. There are a number of factors that have enabled the long-term continuation of these companies. The first of these is “adaptability.” They adapt flexibly to changing times. The techniques cultivated by long-established companies are also employed in cutting-edge products. The next factor is “tolerance”. Many Asian countries emphasize the family based on the principle of consanguinity, but Japan emphasizes the continuation of the family business; talented human resources that are not members of the consanguine family may be brought in through adoption or other means, thus introducing “new blood”. Another factor is a “focus on the main business.” This means adapting while pushing forward, but without easily letting go of the company’s main business. There is a strength of trust in what has been inherited from ancestors. Many of the long-established companies that

leapt into business areas which were profitable at a specific time, such as the real estate business during the bubble era, have collapsed, but those that remained focused on their main business remain.

Another notable characteristic of Japan's long-established companies is an emphasis on the concept of “sampo yoshi”, which is famous as the family precept of the Omi merchants. In addition to “Good for the seller” and “Good for the buyer”, this precept includes a public perspective in “Good for society”, something which is rarely seen in other countries. The ideas expressed in phrases such as “Society won’t accept this” and “I know my place” admonish us not to believe that we can do anything in the name of profit. Cerarica Noda, a company that manufactures natural wax products derived mainly from plants, and which has been in business since the Edo period, now also purchases natural wax from overseas. When the company was involved in a tree planting project in China, local people would sometimes fell the fully grown trees and use them as firewood. The company's president, Taizo Noda, has indicated that having understood that daily life was more important for the local people than a long-term tree planting project, he advanced the project while communicating the fact that growing trees not only produced income, but would also benefit society in the future. This is also “Good for society.”

The word *rita* (altruism) has recently come to be frequently used. I think that altruistic thinking is an essential aspect of a long-established company. The will of long-established companies to fulfill their social responsibilities through their businesses is something that continues through the years. There is a way of looking at things that rejects the egoism of the “profit at any cost” attitude, and instead seeks to determine how useful one can be to society. This awareness is prevalent among the younger generation. Today's students take it for granted that they will do volunteer work, and find competition in which they succeed by trampling on others unappealing. Values have changed from those of the generation that experienced the fierce competition around university entrance exams. The value system possessed by long-established companies, which emphasizes the development of society, will become the standard for the world in the future.

Professor Nomura is a non-fiction writer. Seeking to clarify the key to the longevity of long-established companies with histories of more than 100 years, he interviewed representatives of numerous such companies, which led him to write *Sen-nen, hataraitekimashita – shinise kigyo no taikoku nippon* (“A Thousand Years of Work – Japan, the Home of the Long-established Company”) and *Sen-nen kigyou no dai-gyakuten* (“The Great Reversal of a Thousand-year Company”). He has numerous other writings to his credit. Professor Nomura received the Oya Soichi Nonfiction Award and the Kodansha Yasuharu Honda Nonfiction Award for *Korian sekai no tabi* (“A Journey through the Korean World”), which depicts the world of Koreans living in Japan. He received the Asia Pacific Award for *Asia: atarashii monogatari* (“Asia: A New Story”). He withdrew from studies in the Department of English Studies, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University. In 1997 he was a standing member of The Japan Pen Club. He has been a part-time lecturer at Tokyo Metropolitan University and Sophia University, and has been a professor in Takushoku University’s Faculty of International Studies since 2005.