

# FutureGenerations

REDEFINING COMMUNITY FUTURES: A FUNCTIONING SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND EQUITY



Environmental protection and preservation go hand in hand with community development in the Future Generations approach. Here, peaks high above Tibet's Gama Valley, have become the symbol of a nature preserve where traditional Tibetan communities are reshaping their futures while protecting their land.

## The Future Generations model for community change

- what it is
- how it works
- why it works

# The Future Generations Model for Community Change

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## An overview

For more than a decade Future Generations has been studying and putting into practice a model for effective community action and environmental protection. This is far from a merely theoretical scheme. We have tested and refined this approach in large projects in Asia and Latin America and smaller projects in Africa and North America. It works well wherever communities face challenges.

There are many possible starting points: health care, education, environmental protection, or job creation. Once begun, this community-based action easily expands to other priorities, ultimately defining a new and balanced future that fits the ecology, culture, and economy unique to each community. This process can be initiated from inside communities through their own efforts, or from outside, through action by government or large agencies. The mobilized change can grow to any scale—we are even helping entire nations implement this process.

Several essential features characterize our process:

- **First:** although change must grow from within communities, for this to occur such change must be supported by officials and informed by experts. Communities don't change on their own; they need this three-way partnership of community, officials and experts.
- **Second:** all three partners must work from objective data about each local situation.
- **Third:** community action is guided by simple, easy to understand, annual work plans that assign work roles to each partner.

Change that addresses human needs and sustainable use of the environment is never produced by donations of money alone. Nor is it merely a technical solution. The change that Future Generations promotes grows year by year as energized partnerships of communities, officials and outside experts use local data to realize annual work plans where everyone performs a part of the job.

Let's start with a closer look at community-level action.

*Daniel Taylor-Ide*  
*President, Future Generations*



The Himalaya has provided us with an exciting laboratory to test our ideas, and a telling metaphor for the interdependence of conservation and community development—even in the most challenging environments.

# Local Action, the Annual Cycle of Seven Steps

## Don't get trapped by any one step— Accomplish the full annual cycle of steps

In many areas of life, we use a cycle of steps. To grow crops, there are the seasons of plowing, fertilizing, planting and weeding, before the harvest. To graduate from school, there is a routine of classes. Our studies of worldwide development experiences indicate a frequent failure: communities and governments often just keep starting over, without ever completing a full cycle of action. Much like a farmer who never goes beyond plowing and planting, or a child who keeps repeating the same class in school.

The process of community change can begin by focusing on any given need. The initial goal may be a health clinic, a conservation effort, a jobs program, a road.

The first activity matters far less than how community choices are made, and the cooperation that follows. What is crucial is that community action starts a process that builds momentum, where one success adds to the next.

It is imperative to complete an annual cycle. Time and again, we have observed that each year seven steps are required to complete a cycle of community effort. Such effort, however well intended, is essentially wasted if only some of those steps are accomplished. Our conclusion: do the whole cycle, even if poorly, then next year do the cycle better.



A community meeting in southern Tibet, to discuss implementing the annual action plan. Once this community process has begun in earnest, even a snowstorm can't stop it.

## The First Three Steps Building Community Capacity

**Step One:** Create a coordinating committee. One individual who seeks to lead will likely get caught by factions or personalized demands. But a coordinating committee brings groups together and distributes responsibilities.

**Step Two:** Identify each community's successes. Whatever a community has done best in the past will be the most likely base for future success. Outside experts can help identify these successes.

**Step Three:** Study other communities. Find options that have worked for other people in similar circumstances, options that can be adapted and used. Send community members to observe these other successes, especially those people who will actually do the work.

# Choosing a Vision – Steps Four & Five

## SEED (“Self-Evaluation for Effective Decisionmaking”)

**Step Four: Self-Evaluation.** Gather data specific to each community. Gather information on resources and problems. Look at human needs, financial factors, and environmental change. Such objective data provides a better basis for action than the more common practice of bringing together people’s opinions.

**Step Five: Effective Decisionmaking.** Working from data specific to each community, discussion will identify and clarify actions that can solve problems and build community confidence. Discussing these matters collaboratively, the community probes the sources of problems and explores alternative solutions. Once community members (in public meetings, guided by the coordinating committee) have agreed on an achievable course of action, it’s time to create an annual work plan that assigns specific jobs and functions to all.

We refer to these two steps by the acronym SEED (for **S**elf-**E**valuation for **E**ffective **D**ecisionmaking). But additionally we have developed a survey technique which facilitates this all-important part of the annual cycle of community action. SEED surveys represent an accurate but simplified data gathering process. Instead of trying to measure every possible factor affecting community and environmental life and health, certain key indicators are selected to be surveyed, indicators that measure multiple interconnected variables.

An example of key indicators used in a SEED survey comes from our Himalayan fieldwork. The question was: how can communities monitor their environmental change? Traditional monitoring would gather data on trees, flowers, animals, water, climate, etc. Each area is complex, and assembling and integrating such data challenges even the best experts. But key indicators make monitoring change simpler. In the Himalayan areas where we are working, the presence of pheasants indicates a pristine habitat, while babblers are found more in brushy areas, and sparrows are common in fields. Thus, bird counts can monitor change. The changing proportions among these three birds tell us whether the environment around them is improving or declining.

(For additional details on how to do such SEED surveys, check the expanding data base on our Future Generations web site [[www.future.org](http://www.future.org)] as well as our forthcoming book, from Johns Hopkins University Press.)



The Quomolangma (Mt. Everest) National Nature Preserve (QNNP) is one of the most spectacular spots on earth...and one of the largest demonstrations of the Future Generations process.

### *Case Study: Seeking effective action,*

#### *Tibet’s Qomolangma (Mt. Everest) National Nature Preserve:*

*When work began to create a new nature preserve across much of the northern slope of the Himalaya, the government felt that reducing poverty was the number one need: How could the poorest counties in China advance unless incomes rose? International experts felt preserving the majestic environment came first. The local people felt that their top needs were more firewood plus transport to their villages. But collaborative research turned up a more realistic and achievable starting point: community-run health services. Now, with child mortality reduced by half, a momentum for change has begun that everyone believes in, and local communities are re-directing their action toward other priorities and problems.*

# Taking Action – Steps Six & Seven

**Step Six:** Start popular projects that will build community confidence. The goal is not merely to accomplish a given project but to create a sense of community momentum as well. Building progress that will lead to further progress means involving as many people in the community as possible.

**Step Seven:** Maintain the momentum. Keep improving what works, so as not to waste the community experience. The issue here is not so much to find the perfect solution but rather to test a promising option, adapt it, and keep building on it. Tackle projects everyone believes in. Monitor the momentum of this community action, and then make necessary midcourse corrections in the way the work is actually performed.

Communities generally tend to slip toward exploitation. The wealthy will seek more wealth. Those with power will not want to share control. The selfish will exploit the environment. A community cannot continue to develop when it is dividing internally, or using up its foundation on the earth (i.e. where its natural resource base is declining). On-going, multi-level monitoring is critical, with all three partners participating, gathering data, and revising targets.

## *Case Study: Peru,*

### *Communities, Government & Experts Learning to Work Together*

*After decades of violence the Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist terrorist movement, in 1994 was driven out of the Peruvian Andes. The government was eager to re-establish social services, but some communities refused to let health centers be reopened. In a public meeting one leader said, "It was not the Peruvian army and American helicopters that defeated the Sendero. Our women drove them out by sitting armed with guns in stone pillboxes around our villages and shooting guerrilla gangs when they came to take our teenage sons." They asked for control over their health posts. Working with the three principles of the Future Generations approach, the government enacted new legislation that created an enabling framework for communities. A new community-based alternative was created, the local health-care committee or "CLAS" (Comité Local de Administración de Salud). Mid-level functionaries in health services had great difficulty adjusting to this process and tried to force a return to bureaucratic requirements. Five years of uneasy but inevitable mutual accommodation ensued while, simultaneously, community after community engaged with the process. As adjustments were made between the partners, a national wave of community health centers unfolded—1,200 new CLAS centers in five years, with more local health-care committees being formed all the time.*



Local health-care committees have transformed health-care delivery in Peru

# Why the Future Generations Process Works

## Three Essential Principles

### Principle One: Three-Way Partnerships

Community energy seldom mobilizes by itself. Communities need help from officials, who can adjust policies and regulations to facilitate cooperation among factions and channel external resources. Communities also need help from experts who can build capacity by training, introduce new ideas, and help monitor change.



The three way partnership between communities, government & experts is evident at this regional meeting to discuss the village welfare worker program in the Quomolangma (Mt. Everest) National Nature Preserve, Tibetan Autonomous Region, China.

Our long-term studies of community development worldwide show that success results when communities work from the bottom up, when officials work from the top down, and when experts work from the outside in. All three roles are needed. When governments create enabling policies, change can accelerate in a cost-efficient way across entire regions. When appropriate experts are involved, development ideas are up-to-date, and fit the local ecology, culture, and economy. When communities are true partners (rather than simply being manipulated by governments or NGOs) then these communities can act more effectively to redefine their futures.

Relationships between these three partners must be flexible, and need continuing adjustment. Many projects start out working well, but then flounder because participants do not understand that their relationships need to evolve. Initially, entrepreneurial leadership is important. In the middle stages, expert-led training, monitoring, and experimentation guide the process. Later, officials and experts must shift their roles from control to support of community action.

#### *Case Study: New York City*

#### *A "Conservation / People" Success Story*

*With its towering skyscrapers, New York City is not commonly viewed as a center of conservation innovation. But New York was one of the first places to see that the future was not in setting apart green spaces under professional staff but in involving the people. An early and important change came in the crime statistics for Central Park (which is so large that it qualifies as a separate police precinct). The change from the second highest crime rate to the second lowest occurred primarily because park management was turned over to citizens. Throughout the city community groups took over the parks—and today they are almost all safer, more used, and in better shape environmentally. With greater citizen support, the number of parks increased to 1,700 as groups identified buildings, including five miles of warehouses and docks along the Hudson river, that could be torn down and turned into parks, increasing park area from 9% to 13% of New York City.*



## Principle Two: Action Based on Locally-Specific Data

Find an objective common ground of data to bring all parties together. Lacking such data, participants will make decisions on the basis of transitory opinions. These tend to be most influenced by whoever talks most convincingly, or whoever holds more power at the moment. Or, without data from local situations, decisions are made on the basis of information from more distant situations—which may or may not be relevant.

While the principle of basing decisions on local data makes sense, accomplishing this goal is often compromised. The SEED process readily adjusts to local capacity, creating an easy-to-do technique by which every community each year can gather data relevant to its needs. Data gathering (especially using the key indicators of a SEED survey) is a process that can start simply, but develop great sophistication over time.

## Principle Three: Changes in Community Behavior

People can come together in partnerships; they can agree on objective data; but, to achieve lasting results they must also change behaviors. While changing behavior for the community may start simply by gaining new skills, those in positions of power—community leaders, officials, or experts—face a more challenging requirement, changing their behavior to share power. This means giving up exclusive control, shifting to guidance that empowers rather than acting to foster dependency.

For example, at first community members must be trained how to execute their tasks. But very soon, community members must be allowed to make mistakes as part of the developing process. After that, officials and experts must rapidly let go, and not just pretend to do so. This shift is especially difficult, but it can be brought on systematically if the seven steps of the community action cycle are repeated each year.

When officials and experts show some humility, community enthusiasm becomes contagious. A feedback loop creates new expectations and standards for everyone. As one change supports another, social pressure builds, and those who do not cooperate are generally bypassed or overrun by the community's momentum. This momentum will eventually redefine the entire community's collective future.

# Going to Scale: widening community-based action

Extending health care options, community by community, across an entire region, is a natural opportunity to take the Future Generations process to scale.



The Future Generations approach permits development success from one community to expand (or “scale up”) quickly to other communities. Our process of “going to scale” facilitates a rapid yet site-specific expansion of community progress that remains sensitive to local ecology, culture, and economics. We often use the terms, SCALE-One, SCALE-Squared and SCALE-Cubed to refer to the different dimensions of this process. SCALE-One describes the single community dimension of our model; SCALE-Squared refers to the inter-community dimension; while SCALE-Cubed describes the largest, regional or even national dimension.

Central to the notion of expanding community-based development, is the way successful communities can share their experiences with other communities in the same region. Our term, SCALE-Squared, refers to clusters of communities that have already experienced developmental successes, and which then function as formal Self-help Centers for Action Learning and Experimentation, to demonstrate to others how they too can succeed. A SCALE-Squared Center is a cluster of neighboring communities that support each other. Visitors from other communities are welcomed at such centers. As well as observing life in the SCALE-Squared Center, close up, the visitors can take part in workshops and formal training. Invariably, they come to see that meaningful change is possible, because it is being demonstrated by people like themselves.

SCALE-Cubed takes us to the next largest dimension, and refers to the large-scale implementation of community-based action, on a wider regional or national scale. The SCALE-Cubed dimension of our process involves the creation of larger-scale legal, administrative and social mechanisms to promote Systems for Collaboration, Adaptive Learning and the Extension throughout whole regions and societies. It is a government enabled process

When the right enabling conditions exist, societal change can spread through a region like wildfire, taking hold spontaneously in multiple places. The rate of change can be exponential (2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...). When only partial enabling conditions exist, change will continue to spread, but only arithmetically (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12...), as neighboring communities join in, a few at a time.

This important “scaling up” process can start at the community level, or it can be initiated at different levels (SCALE-Squared and SCALE-Cubed) by NGOs, academic groups, or governments. For more details see our web site ([www.future.org](http://www.future.org)) or our book, *When Communities Own their Futures*.

## Case Study: China,

### Expansion of maternal and child health services:

*From 1982 to 1995 maternal and child health services in China used this “going to scale approach.” A pilot project in ten counties with four million people were the initial experimental and teaching sites (SCALE-Squared.) Then, with an enabling framework of SCALE-Cubed type systems, twenty more counties were added, then 85 more counties, then 300 more counties, to finally reach a total population of 160 million people. Using this process in each of more than 400 counties a county-specific pattern resulted that fit local needs.*

# One woman's story: the human face of community-based development

*Future Generations believes that almost anyone and almost any community can organize to create a better future for themselves—and a future that protects the environment at the same time. We believe this because we have witnessed and participated in so many successful examples around the world. Communities can and do change. This booklet shares important examples, from sophisticated centers like New York City, to entire nations like Peru, to remote and isolated villages. Consider the following story of Biri Mema and the village of Palin in the jungles of northeastern India. If illiterate people in traditional village societies can initiate change, your community can do so too.*

“My name is Biri Mema, wife of Biri Tarang of Palin. I don't know when I was married, but I must have been six or seven years old, because I remember my teeth falling when I was in the house of the in-laws. I was extremely shy and introvert and couldn't utter even a single word in front of other people. I didn't know the going-on even in my next-door neighbor's house, let alone the outside world. Moreover, I was addicted to alcohol, always taking local beer with my husband. I had lost two children as babies and one was stillborn. The very thought of spending the night with my husband sent chills down my spine.

“One day, while I going somewhere, I saw some people having a meeting. What attracted me was that most of the persons were women. Out of curiosity, I went near to find out. They were talking about keeping oneself healthy, taking care of the children and keeping fit during pregnancy. The meeting had been organized by *Future Generations Arunachal*, a nongovernmental organization. They asked me to join the group and work, and soon I found myself changing slowly.

“One day there was a talk of a training program being organized in Itanagar. I was selected as one of the members to attend. It was very useful for me, but when I came back to Palin, my husband was very angry. He chopped a pig into two, shrieking that he intended to do that to me. Full of fear, I told my husband the things I have learnt in Itanagar and how the knowledge can be useful for us.

“In 1999 some women were being sent to Jamkhed for further training. I was again selected. I didn't know that Jamkhed was on the other side of India. I was illiterate so I refused to go. Even then, my friends forced me to go. The trip was an eye-opener. The women there were also illiterate, but they were doing an excellent job. When I came back to Palin, I was much more confident. In the meantime, the Site Team Coordinator of our Palin group was unable to continue her job. So, all the women selected me. Hesitantly, I started working for my community with renewed vigor. I was even successful in persuading my husband to give up drinking. Today my husband as the leader is the head Gaon Bura of our village. He is proud of me and I am proud of him.”

The Women's group in Palin village, Arunachal Pradesh, now has their own meeting place, thanks to an independent local offshoot of Future Generations.



# How governments can use this process



This Peruvian woman and her daughter now have access to health care, because the Peruvian government created the enabling conditions for local communities to run their own health care system

*The optimal entry point for governments is to concentrate their efforts at the SCALE-Cubed level, creating an enabling environment to mobilize community energy. For this, three empowering systems are required:*

## 1. A System for Sustainable Collaboration

A web of supporting structures is needed, frameworks that promote collaboration between communities, officials, and experts:

- Policies to encourage existing government services to support community action.
- Flexible financing so already budgeted funds can be reassigned as needed.
- A network tying together the inter-community SCALE-Squared Centers.
- “Seed grants” to leverage internal resources (typically not exceeding 30% of total project costs.)
- Promoting communication among communities to learn from what others are doing.
- Regional events such as fairs, competitions, concerts, workshops, to create a larger sense of an expanding regional or national movement.

## 2. A System for Adaptive Learning

Each year add more skills and knowledge. This cumulative evolution requires a system to promote:

- Visits to SCALE-Squared Centers so communities learn new ideas and receive training.
- Access to government records to provide locally relevant data.
- Support for SEED surveys so communities come together in informed action.
- Officials that learn how to empower communities, push experts, and push themselves to speed up action.
- Deliberate programs to change attitudes and values (especially among officials and experts) to be supportive of communities rather than controlling.
- Oriented experiments of innovation to bring in continually new ideas and to adapt older successes.

## 3. A System for Extension

A battle over control is often found at the heart of large-scale extension.

Government bureaucracies and decades of highly-paid professionals have often built a legacy of arrogant incompetence that seeks to remote-control the delivery of development. No central authority can orchestrate complex community-based action over a large region. For community change to go to scale, external control, which was in the past concentrated in the hands of officials, must be shared.

This is difficult. Officials never want to let go. And communities will frequently feel they are more capable than they have actually become. A system is needed which, once started, gains momentum, pressing officials to let go and allowing communities to increase not only their capacity but also their control.

Experience has shown that the annual cycle of seven steps can do this. However, for this to happen, the annual community cycle needs to take precedence over the government’s calendar. Community action must not be required to fit the government calendar.

# How NGOs, academic centers, or donors, can use this process

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) academic centers, or donors can become partners to perform central roles in the extension of development, conservation, disaster relief, or in any other areas where large, community-based responses are required. They offer uncommon flexibility, speed of action, and access to outside information and resources. These traits make them particularly good at leading the SCALE-Squared dimension of community action in the following ways:

- Opening access to world experience,
- Setting up experiments to adapt ideas to local situations,
- Teaching communities as well as officials about useful techniques,
- Assembling new resources from within communities or from outside,
- Serving as an objective agency to monitor equity and sustainability,
- Organize cooperation with businesses, religious agencies, entertainment and entrepreneurial leaders.

Governments can also undertake some of the above tasks. However they usually are neither as quick or cost-efficient as NGOs or other expert groups. We

encourage the more effective alternative of governments supporting NGOs, and academic organizations who in turn organize the SCALE-Squared process. This separation of roles also makes it easier for governments to monitor the effectiveness of the vitally important SCALE-Squared Centers.

The same freedoms that make NGOs effective also make them somewhat politically and publicly immune. However, these freedoms combined with their focused agendas also tempt them to try and replace government and take over policy, or speak for the people, or take over the core financing. A parallel danger is that NGOs may move into a pattern where

they primarily talk to and take care of each other. While basic science, art, or learning may evolve in such a closed loop, development, lasting conservation, or disaster relief does not. To achieve these goals, nongovernmental organizations need a structure that links them directly to communities and holds them accountable. This structure can be a provided by a SCALE-Squared Center.

Nongovernmental partners may fulfill many roles: refining key indicators for SEED surveys, developing training materials, bringing in new ideas, raising funds to support the center, managing off-site training programs, or overseeing management. Perhaps most important is their potential for setting up a process of independent surveillance, especially monitoring for equity and environmental change. Whatever the specific roles they undertake may be, it is important that NGOs have stated performance objectives, along with the other two partners in this process: communities and government.



A training center in the Quomolangma (Mt. Everest) National Nature Preserve, Tibet, built with the assistance of Future Generations, a classic example of SCALE-Squared participation by an NGO.

# How individuals can use this process

What starts momentum in one community may not address needs important in your community. For example, improving children's health, while a noble goal, may not fit your priorities, but instead, what will start positive change in your community might be a winning sports team. Or perhaps your community is satisfied with existing social services, but the real need is for those services to work together. While the optimal starting point will differ from community to community, the Future Generations model for community change can help you discover the most appropriate starting point, and clarify the path your community should take.

The key is simply to start the process, without being overly concerned about whether your decisions are perfect. With action, confidence will grow. Momentum will accelerate. Each new action will be more sophisticated than the one before. But to really embrace this process, a community must pace itself through the full annual cycle of seven steps. Here is how you, and your neighbors, might participate in realizing that cycle:

**Step One:** Join a community forum that encourages others to join, a forum that is focused on promoting community action. The group does not need to be highly organized or at first be more than a dozen people. The more they represent the diversity of the community, the better.

**Step Two:** Identify past successes, publicize these successes to raise awareness of what works, and has worked, in your community. Perhaps a month or two of focused effort is wisely invested on this.

**Step Three:** Visit other communities that seem to be "ahead" of your community. Look for specific projects that can be adapted and adopted—this can go on simultaneously with Step Two.

**Step Four:** Collect objective facts. Seek data that is relevant to recognized needs. Don't make the first data-collection cycle a difficult and time-consuming survey. Make the data-gathering simple, or use data already collected, but strive to obtain an objective portrait of your community.

**Step Five:** Announce a problem-solving meeting and encourage wide participation. Work from specific data to reduce factionalism and unify divergent subjective opinions. Try to reach this step in less than six months from the time you began.

**Step Six:** Start action on at least one achievable, agreed-on priority. Seek issues that have the greatest emotional appeal in the community. Give all participants tasks: officials, experts, and as many members and different sections of the community as possible.

**Step Seven:** Monitor progress regularly. Get together. Don't hesitate to make mid-course corrections to make your plan of action more successful. As progress builds, prepare to relaunch all seven steps next year, taking on a new priority.

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