Community Conversations: Introduction

Introduction

Community conversations for global solidarity aim to bring people from all backgrounds and all political positions together, to build social cohesion in societies often divided, to consult about the needs of their communities or neighbourhoods and to assist them in bringing about transformational social change.

The proposed framework is general enough that it could be applied all over the world in a vast diversity of cultures and natural environments, building solidarity from the local to the global level.

It is now too late for incremental changes, no matter how well designed. The huge problems of climate change and environmental disintegration, of abject poverty and impending economic collapse, of the threatening global hunger crisis, of inequality and injustice, of human conflicts and breakdown of social cohesion, of violence and war, leave us no other realistic choice than to rise to a higher level of human consciousness and maturity. Spiritual traditions tell us that humans have vast unexplored capacity for spiritual development. The high capacity of human ethical action has been shown throughout history by individuals helping each other, by sacrificing and working for the common good.

Communism and capitalism both failed because of their materialistic approach and have led to oppression and the amassing of power and wealth by a few at the expense of the generality of humankind and of the environment. In contrast, the community conversations proposed here are based on spiritual values – values that can be shared by people of any or no faith.

Solidarity in this context means the recognition of the essential oneness of humankind, that we are all interconnected with each other and with the natural world, and that achieving our true potential as human beings requires that we care for each other and strive toward the well-being of all people.

These community conversations aim for fundamental change by tapping into the capacity for goodness in all people, thus generating enthusiasm for a just, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable society.

This tool for community conversations can be adapted by people all over the world to their specific needs and local culture.

For accessing these materials online and to easily share them with friends with a link, go here: https://www.iefworld.org/acct_conversations_intro

For an introduction to Baha'i-inspired public discourse and social action, go here.
For information about the *background* of this initiative, go here.

The Vision

With their 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations have clearly laid out what we must achieve to enable all humans to have their basic needs met and lead a

dignified life while maintaining the integrity of the Earth's natural systems. There is also an abundance of knowledge and scientific advances we can draw on to make the world a better place. However, despite many well-intentioned efforts, actions toward these goals have been slow, incremental, and by far not adequate to the human suffering and the existential threats to humanity's future. What is missing is a strong collective will. The Baha'i Writings explain: *"The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment."*1

The purpose of these community conversations in global solidarity is to facilitate the emergence of this missing volition, of a collective will and unified action. Centering our consultations on solidarity, on the common good, resonates with human souls and can be a powerful motivation for action.

The inspiration for a deep commitment to solidarity comes from the Baha'i teachings: *"Let your vision be world embracing rather than confined to your own self."*2
"Humanity's crying need ... calls ... for a fundamental change of consciousness ... that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family." 3

Developing such a vision for the common good is the path toward addressing our dire problems and in the process fulfilling our true human potential.

With widespread global solidarity, it is realistic to envision a world in which all people's basic needs are met, where all people are equally valued and live in peace, in which human economic activities are in harmony with the natural world, in which humankind does not use more of the Earth's resources than can be replenished, and in which global warming has been limited to the lowest still possible temperature rise and the climate system brought back into balance, in which pollution is systematically cleaned up and many ecosystems restored, enabling all life to thrive.

In a world of solidarity, the principle of the oneness of humankind is anchored in the hearts of individuals and communities, and it is adopted to be the overarching guideline for governing institutions. There will be no room for the false perception of "us" and "them". It will be a society characterized by transparency, honesty, accountability, equity, unity, and responsibility.

When people are deeply interested in and engaged in contributing to the common good through their work and service, they can develop their true potential and find meaning in life which will also address the growing mental health crisis.

At the same time, each individual is the trust of the whole society. Society should support all individuals in need. When fully realized, the Global Solidarity Accounting initiative supported by community conversations could lead to a social safety net from the local to the global level.

In this way, there will be a reciprocity of giving and receiving between individuals, government and society as a whole.

Participation and Ethical Standards

Diversity of thought, background, and experiences is a vital asset for finding the most suitable pathways forward. Therefore, it is important for these conversations to have participation from all segments of society: Different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds, women, Indigenous people, youth and elders, people who have lived in the community for generations as well as newcomers and immigrants, faith communities, representatives of business, political leaders, scientists, etc.

These community conversations need to adopt a fundamentally different way of operation compared to what most people are accustomed to. In many countries, there is increasing division in society. People with different ideological views do no longer talk with each other; they only fight for their own view to win. Racial and religious divisions and hate speech are worsening. Social media with their "echo chambers", confirmation bias and potential to spread disinformation and slander have contributed to this social crisis.

Participants in these community conversations strive to free themselves from such negative traditions, from ideologies, partisanship, and preconceived ideas and opinions so that they have an open mind that will empower them to search collectively for the best actions to address their community's needs. Before speaking, participants would need to first weigh their words, whether they are promoting a preconceived idea, an ideology or self-interest, or whether they are offering their thoughts as a contribution to the common good in the spirit of solidarity. The goal is not to seek compromise of different opinions, but to search together to assess the community's needs and to find a common way forward.

To be successful, these consultations would need to be characterized by humility, respect for all, and careful listening to other people's knowledge, experiences, and points of view. They will require an attitude of learning as well as patience with oneself and others.

The methodology of community conversations

The methodology behind community conversations consists of ongoing conversations that can be held in communities, in neighborhoods and in local governmental institutions.

There are two parts to the process:

1. To assess the reality of the community's condition and to identify problems

2. To consult together about how to address existing problems and to improve conditions, to decide on actions and to carry them out.

Part 1 contains numerous questions. While these questions address specific areas of human and environmental well-being, the framework proposes a holistic approach. A social or environmental problem cannot be solved in isolation as it is usually strongly connected to other issues. Often, several problems need to be addressed together.

Participants will need to pick a few areas of greatest concern as it would not be practical to consult about all of them.

It would be necessary to have a facilitator who has no other agenda than keeping people focused on their mission which is making progress in solidarity, who prioritizes ethical values as well as considerate and constructive interaction over "efficient business", and who can practically guide the process of consultation.

At the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator should remind everyone about the ethical foundation of the process – to work for solidarity within the community, while having global solidarity in mind, as well as solidarity with future generations. Everyone must put the well-being of all people before their personal interests.

Such conversations would be ongoing, reflecting on progress made, and assessing current conditions, always open to adjusting actions and to shifting priorities as needed.

While these community conversations start with assessing current conditions, their ultimate aim is to serve as a tool that assists actions toward greater solidarity. The objective is to bring people together, to gather resolve, and to serve as an inspiration and focus for actions that consider the limits of human and other resources but strive to be adequate to the global existential threats to human well-being and the natural world.

Link to Part 1 (also below)

Link to Part 2 (also below)

References

1 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 217–218
2 Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah XLIII
3 The Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2001 Letter

Part 1: Assessment of Reality

Questions for Local Community Assessment

The Community Conversations for Global Solidarity offer initial questions which serve communities and institutions to assess their social and environmental conditions in a wide range of areas, to initiate consultations about how to improve these conditions based on the value of solidarity, and to motivate and facilitate concrete action.

While most issues addressed are relevant in most places, not all questions are applicable everywhere, and some communities may have special concerns that are not addressed in the questions below. In fact, *the questions are supposed to encourage the participants to think about the reality of their community and to come up with their own questions*. The questions provided should just assist with a systematic assessment of the community's social and environmental conditions to make sure that all areas of human and environmental health are considered.

The process should assist individuals and communities to develop their capacity to read their social reality, think critically, use science, consult, plan, develop a sense of collective will, and engage in unified action. The sincere pursuit of solidarity can build trust among all participants and different segments of the community.

The questions are divided into different sectors. However, it is important to be aware that no problem can be solved in isolation. There are strong linkages across sectors; addressing just one question may often require to simultaneously consider other areas of concern.

Some assessments would need to rely on the relevant available science, for example from Global Solidarity Accounting. Some could even initiate further scientific research if needed. However, they can also be informed by the experiences of people, including traditional and indigenous knowledge.

It is not necessary to complete an assessment before moving to Part 2 - consultation about action to address the issues. You can go to Part 2 once you have a general overview of the various social needs and environmental problems, as well as the basic information about the specific issues you would like to address first.

Human well-being

Basic Needs

Are all people's basic needs met and, if not, what are the most urgent problems?

Do all people have access to nutritious, sufficient, and affordable food?

Do all people have access to clean water?

Is the air clean?

Do all people have access to adequate shelter?

Do all people have access to sanitation?

Do all people have access to energy?

Is there affordable public transportation that serves the needs of all people?

Food

Is there hunger or malnutrition in the community?

Is there a problem with food availability or affordability?

Are there local small and medium sized farms that can assure some food security?

Is most of the food consumed produced somewhere else, or is a substantial part locally grown?

Are there efforts to improve food security and quality? How effective are they and what needs to be improved?

Do local farms use organic or other sustainable farming practices such as permaculture?

Are there farmers markets?

Are there community gardens?

What are the main sources of protein? How important is meat in the local diet?

What happens with most of the food scraps and yard "waste"? Is it composted / fed to animals, or does it end up in the trash?

Are there factory farms (chicken, pork, beef) that pose a threat to the environment and human health?

How are our food choices aligned with Global Solidarity?

Health and Health Care

What are the major health problems in the community? (Malaria, water borne diseases, high child mortality rate, pandemics, high cancer rates, high rates of diabetes, asthma, obesity, etc.?)

Are there widespread mental illnesses such as depression?

Is there drug abuse? Is good treatment for drug addiction available to all people?

Is there a high suicide rate?

Do people live under stress caused by discrimination, racism, bad working environments, or poverty?

Is there good quality health care that meets the needs of the community?

Is health care accessible and affordable for all?

Are all health care facilities not for profit, e.g. government owned?

Are medicines sold at a fair and affordable price?

Is the pharmaceutical industry regulated to adhere to high ethical standards?

Is there separation between the prescription and the sale of drugs?

Are there laws that regulate damaging substances such as tobacco and alcohol (e.g. prohibition of advertisements)?

Is there preventive care (including alternative medicine such as Chinese medicine and acupuncture, appropriate indigenous remedies, as well as up-to-date science)?

Are there programs for preventive health care and health education?

Are there good hospitals and health care facilities?

Are there fitness centers and sport programs (that observe moderation) for children, youth, and adults?

Do people lead a healthy lifestyle in terms of nutrition and exercise?

Are there frequent traffic accidents and deaths?

Is violence glorified in the entertainment industry?

Do all people have access to nature?

Economic Well-being and Justice

Are there very poor people and extremely rich people in the community?

Are there laws instituting a living wage?

Do rich people pay their fair share of taxes?

Are all people engaged in productive work or is there a problem with unemployment?

Do all individuals adequately contribute to society?

Are all types of work equally recognized including service traditionally not remunerated such as raising children, caregiving, and subsistence agriculture?

Are people of all abilities given the opportunity to be of service to the community?

Do people engage in their work with a positive attitude and a spirit of service trying to do their best, or do they only do their work for the money?

Are people suffering from an unhealthy work environment (agricultural chemicals, indoor pollution, exploitation etc.)?

Is there social security for old age and difficult circumstances?

Does the community provide assistance and services to those in need?

Social Cohesion and Harmony, Culture

Do people live in harmony or are there conflicts, even war?

Is there a problem with gun violence?

Is there racism or historical animosity; are there other prejudices?

Is human diversity valued and appreciated as important to the overall health and success of the community?

Are immigrants and refugees welcomed as active participants in the development of the community?

Is there gender discrimination?

Is there gender violence?

Is there a high crime rate?

Is there a sense of safety and trust within the community?

Is it a safe environment for women?

Is there freedom of religion? Is there religious conflict or religious persecution?

Is there partisan division and polarization?

Is there a breakdown of family unity?

Is there a decline in moral parenting?

Is there alienation or do people have a sense of identity, interconnectedness and belonging to the community?

Is there a danger of fundamentalism or nationalism?

Do people believe in conspiracy theories? Such theories are always divisive.

Is there a free and vibrant press?

Is there rampant materialism and a distorted definition of success?

Do media and entertainment refrain from promoting materialism and consumerism and instead provide valuable information, science, art, culture (especially including indigenous and minority cultures), and promote a meaningful life?

Is there a flourishing culture (arts, music, cultural traditions, theater, storytelling, Indigenous traditions, libraries, museums)?

Is the cultural or ethnic heritage of the community celebrated and preserved?

To what extent are people engaged in cultural activities or projects that improve their community?

Are there spaces available for community gatherings and activities?

Are there opportunities for the community to share information such as social events

and community service activities, to discuss important community decisions, and to share resources, skills, or transportation?

Are community members engaged in service projects?

Are there community service opportunities available for youth?

Is there a cultural shift from competition and accumulation toward cooperation and sharing?

Are technological advances applied in a socially and environmentally responsible and ethical way?

Is there a commitment to the rule of law?

Is there apathy and a feeling of disempowerment?

Governance

Does the government serve the interest of all people?

Is there corruption in governmental institutions?

Does the government uphold human rights?

Is there a lack of trust in the government?

Do minorities enjoy equal rights?

Do women enjoy equal rights?

Is there civic literacy?

Is the enforcement of laws and regulations equitable?

Do governmental institutions demonstrate the capacity to consult and to make collective decisions in unity?

Are all assessments and scientific reports about human and environmental issues truthfully reported to the public?

Is there collaboration between different sectors of the government that would assure that all aspects of human and environmental concerns are addressed when trying to solve a particular problem?

Can members of the community have an input in the decision-making process on the local level?

Do governmental decisions reflect a concern for the long-term welfare of the community, or do they merely aim for short-term successes to favor reelection?

Do governmental decisions reflect a concern for all the people in the community leaving no one behind, and consider their potential impact for all of humanity and for the environment?

Are the commons protected from special interests?

Are there systems in place or institutions that regularly assess whether all people's basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, and safety are met?

Is there a system for conflict resolution that is supportive and not punitive?

Education

Does the educational system include pre-school, elementary education to high school, vocational training, and higher education (college)?

Do people have equal access to education?

Do all people have basic literacy?

Is there a high rate of school dropout for children and youth?

Are the schools holistic – do they aim to develop the physical, intellectual, social, spiritual/ethical, and artistic capacities in children and youth?

Does the curriculum include critical thinking skills and science?

Are people engaged in self-motivated life-long learning?

Do adults have access to continuous education?

Do all educational efforts include nurturing solidarity, global citizenship, collaboration, and responsibility for the natural environment?

Is rationality and science recognized as essential for human progress?

Is there health education for children, youth, and adults?

Is there environmental education for children, youth, and adults?

Are people knowledgeable about local plants and animals?

Is there civic education?

Is there spiritual/ethical education for all ages?

Are there programs where community elders can pass on their knowledge to younger generations?

Are there wholesome programs and activities for youth outside of school?

Are children involved in some community activities or service projects?

Are there opportunities for community members to develop artistic talents?

Spiritual/Ethical Development

Are ethical/moral principles accepted as the foundation of community life? Such principles are, for example trustworthiness and integrity, justice/equity, tolerance and respect for others, unity, compassion, and solidarity.

Do people care about social and economic injustice in their community and in the world?

Do people have a sense of personal responsibility toward others?

Is there a widespread consciousness that we humans are interconnected with and depend on the natural world?

Are people generally aware of the impact of their choices on the global environment, and are they mindful consumers?

Do people have a sense of individual purpose - are they connected to a higher purpose in life?

Do people feel at peace with their life?

Are people motivated to serve the common good? Do community members offer selfless service?

Is there a lack of trust between people?

Is there a free press, or is public information manipulated?

Is there transparency and truthfulness where food and other products are coming from?

Is there a threat of vested interests or ideologies shedding doubt on facts and science?

Does religion motivate people to be inclusive or is there sectarianism, indoctrination, abuse of power by religious leaders? Is religion abused to divide people?

Do community members get together for spiritual practices that foster unity, personal spiritual growth, and interconnectedness with the Earth?

Is there a common vision or purpose that inspires and unites the community?

To what extent are people's lives and community decisions aligned with Global Solidarity?

Environmental Well-being

Environmental Concerns

What are the community's energy sources?

How far is the community with transitioning to 100% clean energy?

Do people actively conserve energy?

Are there subsidies for clean energy sources?

Do all people have access to clean energy? Are there concrete plans for such accessibility?

Are there building regulations for better insulation?

Are old buildings retrofitted to lower their energy use?

Is there a clean public transportation system?

Is the community designed to reduce car use?

Is there a problem with air pollution? Is there a system in place that continually monitors air quality?

Is there a problem with water pollution? Is there a system in place that continually monitors water quality?

Is the community aware of its water source and protects and conserves it?

Is there a problem with soil pollution?

Is there a problem with soil erosion/depletion?

Are agricultural practices environmentally sustainable?

Is scientific research conducted about specific local pollution?

Does the community have access to this scientific research?

Are the sources of pollution tracked and fined?

Is there a plan to clean up pollution, and is this plan properly implemented?

Are polluters paying for the cleanup?

Are people harmed by pollution compensated and supported?

Are there laws and regulations that prohibit or set stringent limits on pollution?

Are there existing efforts to clean up pollution?

Is there a system in place for the proper disposal of toxic waste (such as paint, batteries, oil) and do people use it?

Are there natural areas that require protection such as forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, etc?

Is there a problem with loss of biodiversity due to urbanization, deforestation, harmful agricultural practices, or over-exploitation of species such as fish?

Are there efforts to protect local biodiversity?

Are there efforts to restore local biodiversity rich ecosystems?

Do community members understand the concept of sustainability and support it?

Do community members support or even participate in environmental restoration or conservation?

Do people lead an environmentally responsible lifestyle?

Do extravagant consumption patterns of the community place an undue burden on the environment?

Is there a problem with waste management?

Are most products reused and recycled?

Is there a market for recycled materials?

Is there transparency where the recycled materials go?

Is there a problem with littering?

Is there a problem with noise or light pollution?

Do people use natural resources with respect to planetary boundaries?

Does the community depend on products made at great cost to humans (exploitation) or the environment (pollution, carbon, deforestation)?

Are scientific facts by the IPCC and other trustworthy sources regarding climate change regularly consulted and considered in all decision-making?

Is there a system in place that monitors carbon emissions?

Is there a system in place that reports on green washing?

Are there initiatives to stop or quickly reduce harmful practices such as subsidies to the fossil fuel industry?

Is there an adequate carbon tax that is effective in reducing carbon emissions?

Are there strong regulations and laws that protect forests and natural protected areas? Are they effective and strictly enforced?

Are there financial incentives to protect natural areas (for example, to prevent deforestation)?

Do prices represent the real cost of natural resources including carbon and other pollution?

Are environmental laws and policies and their implementation in need of strengthening?

Incidence of natural disasters and accidents

Does the community suffer from the impacts of climate change such as extremely strong storms, sea-level rise, droughts, wildfires, and flooding?

Does the community have adequate measures in place to adapt to the changing climate?

Are these adaptation measures based on science from all relevant disciplines?

Are these adaptation measures socially just?

Are these adaptation measures planned only for the short term, or do they take long-term changes into account, especially with sea-level rise?

Are there provisions for emergency responses that consider all people equally?

Part 2: Consulting and Deciding about Actions

It is not necessary to "complete" the assessments in all areas before moving toward action to address the most urgent problems. This will necessarily be an ongoing process of assessing conditions and consulting about how to improve them. It will continue with reflections on the benefits of actions taken, followed by further assessments, evaluations, and actions.

There are some fundamental prerequisites for this second step:

When consulting about one specific problem, it is important to keep the complexity of the situation in mind, to always remember the well-being of all people as well as that of the environment.

Depending on the topic discussed, it may be essential to draw in experts in the particular field.

When considering action, it is essential to be mindful of the human and financial resources available.

The participants also need to consider the range of their agency. Neighbourhood or community groups may not have the same authority as the government to institute change.

The success of the project lies in unity. After diverse views were heard and ideas explored, once a majority finds agreement on a certain action, everyone would need to support it, even those who hold other opinions.

The project should be approached in an attitude of learning. Mistakes will show a clearer path forward. Tolerance, patience, and perseverance will be prerequisites for success.

When consulting on the actions needed to improve the community's conditions, it is important to remember global interconnectedness and the well-being of future generations.

Practical Steps:
The process of the conversations will be determined by the participants as it is dependent on the size, nature, and the resources of a group. Generally, it is best to begin with small actions.

One possible way to start is with identifying one to three areas where action is most urgent.

Another option is to think about some low-hanging fruits, in other words, are there some possible actions that can easily be taken right now?

The following may be some useful aspects to consider:

• Are people most affected by the issue discussed represented in the group or is there a need to specifically invite them to future meetings?

• Does the group have sufficient information about the problem? What needs to be done to learn about its specifics and its interconnectedness with other issues?

• Does the issue require scientific expertise? Identify scientists who could assist.

• Invite officials from governmental institutions that may be instrumental in achieving major change.

• Identify the ethical principles that would guide the process, for example, is it an issue of justice for a certain segment of the population, or an issue of justice considering future generations, or is it an issue that requires a commitment to truthfulness and honesty?

• Be careful with publicizing your intended actions so that you don't create an "us" versus "them" mentality in the community. The whole project is about "we". That is why, at the beginning, publicity may be best focused on informing about the purpose and ethical foundation of the Global Solidarity Conversations and inviting participation. The next step may be to inform about the facts of an issue, perhaps highlighting how it is connected to other issues and linking its solution to the commitment to solidarity.

• Discuss how education considering all ages can help with getting support for meaningful action.