

International Environment Forum Contribution to the Talanoa Dialogue

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Topic: How do we get there?

Objective: Wider partnerships in public education about climate change

Motivating the transition at the grassroots

SUMMARY: It is easier for government to increase ambition if they have public support. Public education about climate change should combine scientific and ethical perspectives to motivate action, as demonstrated by a decade of experience with interfaith climate change courses available on line. In Vanuatu, a climate change course was prepared for use in rural training centres around the archipelago. Governments should partner with a wide range of stakeholders to spread values-based education about the science and ethics of climate change and to encourage practical actions everyone can take to build community resilience.

The climate crisis demands large scale fundamental change at all levels, and increasing ambition from governments. Yet political leaders are often afraid to get too far ahead of their electorates and public opinion. One answer to the question “How do we get there?” is to build public understanding of, and support for, strong action at all levels.

Present incremental progress only slightly mitigates global warming without preventing catastrophic climate change. Courageous leadership is required to accelerate the massive changes needed in economic activities and energy systems, and to sustain the momentum for fundamental transformation. Yet around the world, most people are still not properly informed about the real threat of climate change, with some even confused by deliberate misinformation. The poor have more immediate priorities, while those better off are steeped in materialism and consumerism and in the expectation of continual economic growth.

The negative messages communicated by science do not motivate change in individual behaviour. What is needed is positive messages of a better world that can result from learning to live within planetary boundaries. This calls for a new kind of education that combines the science of global warming and the social, cultural and spiritual visions of a more just, equitable and humane world with no one left behind, as envisaged in the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. The best way to leave no one behind is to involve them in the process in ways they understand.

Only education of both mind and heart has the potential to bring about profound and widespread change in public attitudes. The International Environment Forum (IEF) has worked for more than 20 years to bring science, ethics and spirituality together. In 2009, alongside the faith-based action plans on climate change launched at Windsor Castle, and in preparation for its participation in COP15, IEF developed an Interfaith Study Course “Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change” freely available online (<https://iefworld.org/ssdcc0.html>). The course has since been used by grassroots study classes around the world including the US, the UK, and Australia, and for COP21 it was translated into French and Spanish. The IEF also created more comprehensive online courses on climate change and on Sustainable Development offered annually by the Wilmette Institute. These online courses have included participants from many countries including

Afghanistan, Cameroon, Laos, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Singapore. Such initiatives would be easy to scale up with other partners.

One important objective of these courses is to impart basic knowledge about climate change and how it exacerbates many other environmental and social problems. But, as recent social science confirms, knowledge is only an essential prerequisite, not the decisive factor in motivation for action. People often despair when they are confronted with the immensity of the climate crisis and the seemingly insurmountable efforts needed to mitigate it. Despair results in a paralysis of will, if not denial. From the beginning therefore, these courses have included a spiritual dimension from an interfaith perspective and discussed the ethical imperative for climate action and sustainable development. The faith perspective connects climate action with people's hearts, with their values and world view. It touches people's core, so that the motivation for action becomes strong and enduring. It also opens up a vision of a just, sustainable, and peaceful world, a goal worthy of effort and sacrifice.

Participants in the courses have taken many actions in a wide range of areas, starting with changes in their lifestyles. For example, they reported that they would reduce or eliminate meat from their diets, use their bicycles and walk more, help with community gardens, change to public transportation, install solar power, start to compost, reduce water and energy use, switch to green energy, divest from fossil fuel companies, and generally reduce their consumption.

Some participants became actively involved in environmental organizations such as Interfaith Power&Light and Citizens Climate Lobby or began to help their town become more environmentally sustainable. One student wrote letters to members of the US congress about taking action on climate change and letters to the editor of the local paper, another one talked with the mayor. Some were able to use the inspiration from the courses in their professional lives, such as one participant in the US who was planning environmentally and socially sustainable housing developments. The Bahá'í Centre in Auckland, New Zealand, provided land for a community garden and now hosts bi-monthly sustainability meetings. A participant in Cameroon planted 40 trees and started a small business that up-cycles tires and used clothing and trains young women to sew.

Probably the most effective outcome of the courses has been the participants' initiatives to pass on their insights and encourage others to learn more and take action. Many participants reported hosting interfaith devotional gatherings with themes like climate justice and sustainable development. Many created talks, art projects, and presentations on climate change and presented them in a large variety of settings. Some facilitated the IEF interfaith study course in their local community. Especially significant are the efforts of participants to incorporate aspects of sustainability in teaching children's and youth classes. One group of participants created a special course for youth that helps them to free themselves from consumerism and lead a more meaningful life. The ripple effect of these educational efforts has the potential to reach many more people.

An IEF event at COP21 reported on Bahá'í-inspired grassroots education helping to build community resilience in Vanuatu (<https://iefworld.org/cop21>). In 2014, the non-governmental organization Vanuatu Rural Development Training Centres Association (VRDTCA) produced a climate change course for use in rural training centres around the archipelago. Topics covered by the course include causes and impacts of climate change, mitigation of and

adaptation to climate change, hazard risks in Vanuatu, the importance of traditional knowledge in building community resilience, and the promotion of community action to prepare for climate change and disaster risk reduction. The basic aim of the course is to empower the participants to become agents of change in their communities, able to conduct awareness programmes and demonstrate practical techniques of mitigation and adaptation. Students learn how to present key concepts to village communities, do research to produce hazard risk maps, discover traditional techniques of weather prediction, food preservation and fishing, analyze the adaptive and coping capacities of communities, establish their own agro-forestry plot, practice how to do coral planting to replace degraded reefs (using methods developed by an IEF member in Fiji), prepare action plans for building resilience to disasters, and take a two-day course in First Aid so as to be able to handle emergencies during hazard events (<https://iefworld.org/elcvanuatucc>).

While not directly covering spiritual topics, the course emphasizes participatory learning and promotes reflection and learning through experience. Interactions between students and communities are conducted with humility, with a focus on consultation between the parties concerned. Emphasis on fostering unity and coherence is paramount, since these attributes are key factors in strengthening community resilience to hazards and climate change.

All these courses aim to elevate the level of knowledge, capacity, and motivation to take effective climate action among increasing numbers of people and to empower them to become strong protagonists of sustainable development. Governments should reach out to the many partners in faith-based organizations, indigenous communities and civil society who can help to spread values-based education about the science and ethics of climate change. This can inspire positive action in communities to begin the transformation to a carbon-neutral sustainable society from the bottom up, while encouraging ambitious climate leadership from their governments.