



Template for non-Party stakeholders' inputs for the Talanoa Dialogue

Question 1 – Where are we?

The Texas Gulf Coast was hit by Hurricane Harvey last year. Texas has been very resistant to discussion of climate change. State lawmakers have made light of climate change as being an issue of “polar bears,” even though some of the world’s notable climate scientists live and work in Texas. The state’s fossil fuel industry is very powerful, and there are renewed attacks on renewable energy even though the renewable industry has been good for the state’s economy.

Against this backdrop, Texas Interfaith Power & Light (an affiliate of Interfaith Power & Light and a program of the Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy) is holding a series of Talanoa Dialogues in Gulf Coast communities focusing on Harvey recovery and possible lessons on resilience. We have asked Gulf Coast residents to focus on the three Talanoa questions as they pertain to Harvey recovery—and from their responses, we can derive answers to those questions with respect to next steps on climate change mitigation and adaptation for the U.S.

We have found that Gulf Coast residents are not resistant to discussing climate change, and in fact many now see climate change as a “given.” They are most concerned with the slow progress of Hurricane Harvey recovery, and with preventing similar devastation from happening in the future.

In terms of Harvey recovery, many Talanoa participants raise the following issues:

1. Inequity of resources, both in terms of what impacted households started with/bring to the table, and in terms of public assistance such as FEMA. Clearly more affluent Gulf Coast residents have been able to recover faster, and have more choices about whether to relocate permanently.
2. Lack of mental health services. Virtually every Talanoa participant, from disaster response professionals to struggling young families, has said they and people they know require mental health services beyond what are available. This is not just an issue of coverage: there is broad agreement that the breadth and depth of services needed is orders of magnitude more than what



is available. There is special concern for children's mental health. Some participants said they were experiencing PTSD, and others said they were suffering debilitating guilt from not being as badly impacted as others in the community.

3. Bureaucratic issues. There is especially widespread frustration with things like limitations on how FEMA funds can be spent, and with different eligibility and processes in different nonprofit assisters.
4. Lack of attention to long-term health impacts from exposure to water-borne pathogens and toxins, mold, and other dangers.

In terms of mitigating damage from future disasters, many Talanoa participants raise the following issues:

1. The need for land use planning, and growing distrust of developers. Many residents express the belief that developers "should have known" their communities were at risk and should have executed the developments differently or not at all.
2. The need for relational systems in communities. Many residents say their local community "came together" to respond to Harvey, and they now see that they should have been in relationship more before the disaster struck. One participant said he is the president of a homeowner's association, and it didn't occur to him until Harvey that he should have phone numbers for local officials and first responders in his cell phone.
3. The need to value all members of the community in planning, and to prevent the development of structures or systems that inherently benefit some kinds of households (i.e. 2-parent families), groups (i.e. wealthy), or communities (i.e. religious) over others.
4. The need for designated "trusted messengers" in every micro-community so information can go out quickly, efficiently, transparently, and equitably. These could be religious leaders, teachers, or even "youth soccer coaches."
5. **The need for honesty.** Participants have said they don't trust that real estate agents or elected officials have been honest with them. They do not feel a high level of trust in the current public processes like FEMA, even though they see individual FEMA employees as "good people."



Question 2 - Where do we want to go?

Most Texans, like most people, want the global climate to stay liveable for humanity. Also, they want to maintain the standards of comfort they are used to.

The U.S. is behind a lot of the world in terms of climate mitigation, and Texas drives more than its population share of U.S. energy policy, but global climate progress depends on U.S. leadership—so we need to use the tools and information we have to change the script.

We want American mainstream faith voices to lead the U.S. civic/public discussion of climate response, and we want those voices to lead from the perspective of local communities, not conceptual/theological frameworks that don't relate directly to people's lived experience. We believe Texans tell effective personal stories that impact policymakers, but they need training to connect their stories to climate change, and they need opportunities to tell their stories.

Texas Interfaith Power & Light, like our colleagues in other states, wants to rebuild public discussion of climate change in the U.S., leading to vigorous political will to adopt policies and programs that will reduce carbon emissions rapidly and ensure equity in adaptation support.

Groups like Interfaith Power & Light are important because we function as a network of local communities, enabling us not only to tap into the diverse populations of people of faith across the country, but to do so in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways. In the U.S., knowledge and consideration of each community's particular needs is necessary in effecting political change. Also, due to the nature of faith traditions in the U.S., faith communities play a vital role in defining narratives for the rest of society. Our interfaith connections allow us to tie stories of one community—like the Gulf Coast—to the experience of people in other parts of the world.



Question 3 - How do we get there?

Faith groups should be seen as full partners in the COP, including having an officially recognized constituency.

American faith groups should be resourced at the level needed to generate political will for rapid transformation, which requires intensive, granular engagement in local communities throughout the U.S.

Talanoa is just getting started at the U.S. state and local levels. Our Texas experience so far shows that Talanoa is a uniquely effective strategy for uncovering deep, personal stories that help people change their individual and collective thinking. 2019 and 2020 should be seen together as a “year” of U.S. Talanoa Dialogue, and there should be an aggressive, coordinated push at the municipal level to generate thousands of Talanoa Dialogues with a common U.S. Talanoa portal.