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STORYTELLING WITHOUT CONCEALMENT

Talanoa: Dialogue for Action

by Bee Moorhead

As the saying goes, “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.” Talanoa Dialogue just might change that.

It’s safe to say that prior to November 2017, few Americans – and relatively few people outside the Pacific Islands – had heard of “Talanoa.” Over the past 12 months, however, Talanoa has become central to the ongoing process of [United Nations global climate negotiations](#), and word is starting to get out that this particular framework for dialogue can be effective even when other models have failed. Talanoa’s unique approach of building empathy and common understanding allows participants to share areas of common concern and

common aspirations, which in turn opens pathways for identifying steps for future action.

No constituency should be happier about this development than the interfaith community. Talanoa is changing the way people talk about climate solutions, and it has the potential to reshape the nature of interfaith dialogue – which could lead to breakthroughs around other tough topics such as racism, sexuality/gender, and other issues where faith communities have disagreement both within and across faith traditions.



A New Way to Dialogue

Photo: Max Pixel

Talanoa is an indigenous Pacific Island term that means “storytelling without concealment.” It describes a kind of community conversation where participants lay a foundation by sharing personal stories, identifying common goals that are responsive to those stories, and considering strategies to achieve those goals.

Talanoa is invoked to address a conflict, concern, or need in the community. In this way, it is similar to other kinds of stakeholder processes. But Talanoa is significantly different from other kinds of community conversations in some key ways that make it a perfect fit for faith communities.

Talanoa asks open-ended questions.

Compared to traditional focus groups, Talanoa does not validate an existing conclusion or ask participants to choose between pre-arranged choices. Instead, participants are asking to work together to identify conclusions that reflect *all* of their stories. There is no point in dialogue when some participants’ positions become marginalized based on the will of the majority.

Talanoa is audaciously democratic.

Can you imagine a city council or legislative hearing where observers could ask the lawmakers questions? Unlike typical legislative processes, Talanoa is completely non-hierarchical. Participants sit in on the same level (traditionally on a woven grass mat), in an empowering configuration, like a circle. The moderator asks a few questions to guide the discussion. Other than the moderator and the note-taker, everyone present in the dialogue is a participant. No one just “sits and watches.”

**Talanoa Dialogue, held by the COP23
Presidency in Bonn, Germany on 6
May 2018 – Photo: COP23
Presidency**



Talanoa seeks solutions.

Interfaith dialogue builds understanding, but participants sometimes complain that the conversation doesn't lead to a clearly articulated outcome or obvious next steps. By contrast, Talanoa's format leads participants through a conversation ending with the identification of next steps that are responsive to the information participants put on the table earlier in the discussion. Obviously not all interfaith dialogues are intended to lead to action steps, but incorporating the Talanoa model is applicable where action is desired.

Talanoa is a multi-lateral dialogue.

Unlike typical town hall events, which feature a presentation by one focal individual with questions from the audience, Talanoa asks the same question of all participants, and each participant has an equal opportunity to share their responses with the whole group. Town hall participants often are called out for trying to "steal the floor," but in Talanoa, everyone gets time in the spotlight.

The Talanoa framework revolves around three questions:

- Where are we?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there?

These questions are deceptively simple. The first question, "Where are we?" builds empathy between participants who may come from very different circumstances by providing space for them to share their own experiences, observations, and concerns. The second question, "Where do we want to go?" reveals priorities participants may not have considered. By leading participants to articulate their hopes, or desired future conditions, the Talanoa process motivates participants to develop steps to bring about those conditions. The third question, "How do we get there?" asks participants to name concrete activities that could change the present state of affairs into something they would like better. Building on the previous discussion about the desired future, the third question offers surprising opportunities for traditional adversaries to agree on concrete next steps.

Speaking Up for the Planet

Photo: Bee Moorehead

Talanoa came onto the global stage through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the annual process known as the Conference of the Parties (COP), and the landmark [Paris Agreement](#), which COP21 adopted in 2015. The Paris Agreement included a process described as a “facilitative dialogue” to take place in 2018 as a status check to see how nations were coming along with their pledged carbon emission reductions.



Late in 2017, Fiji held the role of COP President (or “Presidency” in UN-speak). In this role, [Fijian leaders offered the model of Talanoa](#) as a welcoming and inclusive approach to the “facilitative dialogue.” Negotiators agreed, and so the Talanoa Dialogue for Climate Ambition was born. In January 2018, the UNFCCC established a [Talanoa web portal](#) and invited stakeholders from all levels of government and civil society to hold dialogues and submit their answers to the three Talanoa questions. Throughout 2018, more than 400 groups from across the globe including such diverse pedigrees as the European Union, the Dutch Youth Council, and the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Climate Reality Project, held Talanoa Dialogues centered around climate change, typically looking at a sub-component of the overall issue through their particular lens.

The global interfaith community has participated robustly. Among the faith-based organizations submitting responses to the [UN Talanoa portal](#) were: the World Council of Churches, Islamic Relief, Quaker Earthcare Witness, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy/Texas Impact, the Pan-Amazonian Church Network, and the collaboration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary of California, Lutheran University, the Lutheran World Federation, Bread for the World, Lutherans Restoring Creation, and the Lutheran Office of Public Policy-California.

According to practitioners, any leader in a community can call a Talanoa dialogue. The person who calls the dialogue has certain responsibilities, including:

- Identifying a group of participants representing the diversity of community viewpoints on the topic;
- Inviting participants and, to the extent possible, making accommodations to ensure that everyone who wants to participate, can do so. (This can include

making virtual options available – it’s not ideal, but it’s better than leaving some voices out.)

- Designating a note-taker, distributing the notes after the Talanoa, and making any edits the participants request to improve accuracy.

Depending on the specific situation, the leader might be someone in a position to propose actions to the community, for example an elected official, board member, or staff leader. In other cases, the person leading the Talanoa effort might be someone in a position to take the input from the dialogue to a policymaker, such as a neighborhood leader taking Talanoa results to a local elected official.

In the case of the UNFCCC Talanoa program, the submissions from around the world all have been collected on the UN portal and synthesized into one report, which has been presented to COP delegates to inform their decisions as they

[finalize plans to implement the Paris Agreement.](#)



Photo: Pixabay

The Talanoa associated with the COP is called “Talanoa for Ambition.” The word “ambition” refers here to the need for countries to pledge deeper carbon emission reductions in light of recent scientific reports highlighting the need for swift, unprecedented cuts to avoid global warming at catastrophic levels. This is a very broad topic, and groups have approached it from different angles based on their expertise and focus. For example, the submission of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon focuses on deforestation, while the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies focuses on disaster response.

The Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy/Texas Impact held a series of Talanoa dialogues with members of communities that were impacted by Hurricane Harvey. We were overwhelmed by how the Talanoa framework guided participants to be open and honest, in some cases sharing personal stories they had not shared with anyone before. We highlighted their stories in [our UNFCCC submission.](#)

Taking it Into the Community

While, in the context of global climate policy, faith communities are participants in Talanoa dialogues organized by the UNFCCC, could easily launch their own Talanoa programs to address concerns they define. For example, in *Other Voices Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality*, retired Anglican [Archbishop Winston Halapua](#) points to Talanoa as a promising strategy for dialogue around issues of sexuality and gender identity.

Photo: U.S. Embassy Jerusalem, C.c. 2.0

Local interfaith organizations are well-positioned to lead Talanoa dialogues around issues facing local communities. These organizations often hold interfaith dialogues already, and applying the Talanoa framework could yield actionable information for policymakers. Such an approach could be a game-changer for local communities that are experiencing violence against houses of worship, racial tensions, conflict around homelessness or poverty, or environmental injustice.



In a world suffering from high levels of polarization and fear, the interfaith community has an opportunity to help policymakers at every level of civil society identify action plans that can lead us to a better future. Talanoa can – and in my view should – be part of that process.



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