

# Community Visioning Initiatives or General Elections?

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Which citizen participation/problem solving process has the better cost/benefit ratio for problem solving on a scale most of us have never known before?

## Introduction

We live in a time of unprecedented opportunities, in many ways created by the expansion of the Internet, and by electronic devices, communication satellites, etc which make it possible for information, knowledge and wisdom to be passed quickly to a broad range of international participants. As a result of these unprecedented opportunities, it may be that a majority of people on Earth are now familiar with the basic concept of democracy: representatives who are elected by receiving a majority of votes from an election process in which all citizens are welcome to participate.

We also live in a time of unprecedented challenges (see “A List of Ten Critical Challenges”, on p. 9 of this document, for one assessment of the challenges ahead). It may be no exaggeration to say we are now living at a critical point in the evolution of life on planet Earth. We need problem solving processes which are collaborative efforts—which make best use of the knowledge and skills each one of us has, and which can create, develop, and accelerate a full array of solution-oriented activity.

The purpose of this article is to encourage creative thinking about the way we go about solving problems in our communities, and in our different cultural settings. This article will encourage such creative thinking by providing readers with a model for citizen participation and problem solving which is different from the use of time, energy, and money to elect representatives for government offices, and the use of time, energy, and money to influence the policies those representatives are responsible for creating.

In contrast to the “General Election” model, the model which will be featured here focuses on the responsibilities of citizens, responsibilities which can be briefly described by the following observations--

All of us have important responsibilities associated with resolving a significant number of very serious challenges ahead.

The investments of time, energy, and money that each of us make in our everyday circumstances are what creates the larger economy.

The citizen participation/problem solving model featured here will be referred to as Community Visioning Initiatives.

Since most readers will already have clear impressions in their minds about the citizen participation potential and problem solving potential of General Elections, most of this article will be an effort to

familiarize readers with the potential of Community Visioning Initiatives—and key processes which can support the effectiveness of Community Visioning Initiatives. To describe the potential of Community Visioning Initiatives, this writer will reference ideas and resources he has created as part of building The Interfaith Peacebuilding and Community Revitalization (IPCR) Initiative. This writer does not reference these ideas and resources to promote The IPCR Initiative; he references them because they provide the most comprehensive description of the potential of Community Visioning Initiatives that he knows of. By familiarizing readers with the potential of Community Visioning Initiatives, this writer hopes readers can make an informed response to the question posed in the subtitle of this post. The second-to-last section of this post poses that question in more detail.

### Making Best Use of Community Visioning Initiatives—the IPCR Initiative

The IPCR Initiative recognizes that there are many critical challenges ahead [“A List of Ten Critical Challenges”, on p.9, is a summary of the “IPCR Critical Challenges Assessment 2011-2012” project (webpage at <http://www.ipcri.net/Critical-Challenges-Assessment.html> ]. The IPCR Initiative advocates for a combination of preliminary surveys to 150 local leaders (as preparation for Community Visioning Initiatives), time-intensive Community Visioning Initiatives supported by many “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” (offering workshops suggested by the preliminary surveys), and “sister community” relationships as a way of creating local community specific and regional specific “constellations of initiatives” responses to the challenges of our times.

#### Preliminary Surveys (as preparation for Community Visioning Initiatives)

Preliminary surveys or questionnaires (as preparation for Community Visioning Initiatives) are meant to help people rediscover truths about their goals, how what they are doing in everyday circumstances of community life relates to achieving those goals, the challenges perceived as the highest priority challenges by the majority of residents in a community, and what residents are doing to overcome such challenges. (“Organizations and communities of people often use questionnaires and surveys to identify problems and solutions, and to build consensus for collective action.”)

Results from well thought out preliminary surveys (circulated to at least 150 key leaders from many different fields of activity in the community) can help residents appreciate the need for a Community Visioning Initiative—and appreciate the need for many “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”.

#### Community Visioning Initiatives

Community Visioning Initiatives can be described as a series of community meetings designed to facilitate the process of brainstorming challenges and solutions, prioritizing the challenges and solutions, and identifying doable steps and action plans.

Many Community Visioning Initiatives require steering committees, preliminary surveys or assessments, workshops, task forces, and collaboration between many organizations, government agencies, businesses, and educational institutions—and seek to build up consensus in the community for specific goals and action plans by encouraging a high level of participation by all residents.

One of the main goals of Community Visioning Initiatives is to maximize citizen participation in identifying challenges, and in solution-oriented activity

Many cities and towns in the United States have carried out visioning initiatives or strategic planning exercises (see “Google” results for the key words “community visioning”); however, this writer does not know of any specific examples which are meant to be responses to most of the critical challenges identified in the IPCR initiative’s “List of Ten Critical Challenges” (included on p. 9).

The IPCR Initiative advocates organizing and implementing Community Visioning Initiatives in 1000 communities (communities, or segments of rural areas, towns, or cities, with populations of 50,000 or less) around the world--which are time-intensive, lasting even as much as 1½ years (18 months), so as to give as much importance to developing a close-knit community as it does to

- a) accumulating and integrating the knowledge and skill sets necessary for the highest percentage of people to act wisely in response to challenges identified as priority challenges
- b) helping people to deliberately channel their time, energy, and money into the creation of “ways of earning a living” which are directly related to resolving high priority challenges
- c) assisting with outreach, partnership formation, and development of service capacity for a significant number of already existing (or forming) organizations, businesses, institutions, and government agencies
- d) helping to build a high level of consensus for specific action plans, which will help inspire additional support from people, businesses, organizations, institutions, and government agencies with significant resources

In 1984, the non-profit organization Chattanooga Venture [Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA)] organized a Community Visioning Initiative that attracted more than 1,700 participants, and produced 40 community goals—which resulted in the implementation of 223 projects and programs, the creation of 1,300 permanent jobs, and a total financial investment of 793 million dollars.

#### “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”

The IPCR Initiative’s specifically advocates for Community Visioning Initiatives which are supported by many “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”. The “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” concept (created by the “Teachers Without Borders” organization) has been expanded by The IPCR Initiative so that such local community points of entry function as information clearinghouses, meeting locations, education centers for ongoing workshops (on a broad range of topics related to the Community Visioning Process, and building the local knowledge base), practice sites for developing “teacher-leaders”, a location for an ongoing “informal” “Community Journal”, a location for listing employment opportunities—and as a means of responding quickly (by changing the emphasis of workshop content) to new urgencies as they arise.

The “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” would also function as the local community centers people would go to brainstorm on challenges and solutions, and “vote” on the prioritizing of challenges, solutions, and action plans. [The IPCR Initiative document [“A 15 Step Outline for a Community Visioning Initiative”](#) provides much detail which illustrates the importance of having at least 30 “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” per communities with 50,000 potential participants.]

Consider the following observations:

People not sufficiently informed about critical issues are everywhere, and investing their time, energy, and money—voting—all the time.

The challenges of our times are not something the experts will resolve while the rest of us are doing something else.

All of us have important responsibilities associated with resolving a significant number of very serious challenges ahead.

Everyone is involved when it comes to determining the markets which supply the “ways of earning a living”.

The ways we “invest” our time, energy, and money have a direct impact on the “ways of earning a living” that are available.

The investments of time, energy, and money that each of us make in our everyday circumstances becomes the larger economy.

Time-intensive Community Visioning Initiatives, supported by many “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”, are one way people at the local community level can learn how to make wise choices about how they use their time, energy, and money... so that all (or most of) the “little events” in the circumstance of everyday community life have a positive and cumulative effect on the challenges they have identified as priority challenges.

#### Sister Community Relationships

The challenges of our times are such that it is now critical for us to access the storehouses of wisdom and compassion which have accumulated over the many centuries of human experience, and which have been confirmed again and again as essential to individual well-being and social harmony by the saints, sages, spiritual leaders, and sincere practitioners of all religious, spiritual, and moral traditions.

One way the above statement can be substantiated is by considering how many of our current leaders are referring to a need for “economic growth”, as the most effective remedy for the debt crises which are occurring in many countries—and then considering the following passages from

[From “Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication” United Nations Environment Programme 2011; from the Introduction, p. 14-15 (full report accessible at <http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/GreenEconomyReport/tabid/29846/Default.aspx>) (press release dated November 16, 2011, accessible at [http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER\\_press\\_16nov11\\_en.pdf](http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER_press_16nov11_en.pdf))

“Most economic development and growth strategies encouraged rapid accumulation of physical, financial and human capital, but at the expense of excessive depletion and degradation of natural capital, which includes the endowment of natural resources and ecosystems. By depleting the world’s stock of natural wealth – often irreversibly – this pattern of development and growth has had

detrimental impacts on the wellbeing of current generations and presents tremendous risks and challenges for the future. The recent multiple crises are symptomatic of this pattern.

“Existing policies and market incentives have contributed to this problem of capital misallocation because they allow businesses to run up significant, largely unaccounted for, and unchecked social and environmental externalities.”

Unfortunately, the kind of “economic growth” which is most often being referred to by most political leaders, economists, and mass media news analysis includes a vast array of “enterprises” which require the continued exploitation of flaws and weaknesses in human nature, fragile ecosystems, and already significantly depleted natural resources—and which are much of the reason why cultures of violence, greed, and corruption have become so common that most people believe they are inevitable.

Readers who are in doubt about the existence of such “significant, largely unaccounted for, and unchecked social and environmental externalities” are also encouraged to consider Sections IV and V (“Cultures of Violence, Greed, Corruption, and Overindulgence” and “Other Challenges Which Are Part of This Writer’s Ten Point List and Which Need to be Resolved as Part of a Sustainable Solution to the Current Debt Crises”) in the “IPCR Critical Challenges Assessment 2011-2012” Summary Report titled [“Calling ‘the better angels of our nature’: A Multi-Angle View of the Debt Crises”](#) (January, 2012; 398 pages).

This writer, for one, is convinced that we are at a critical point in the evolution of life on planet Earth, and that there is now a profound and critical need for an exponential increase in compassion for our fellow human beings.

Unfortunately (that word again), much of the real treasured wisdom of religious, spiritual, and moral traditions (the cultural storehouses of the time-tested means for cultivating wisdom and compassion) now seems to be hidden—and thus in need of being re-discovered. These “hidden” resources include teachings which inspire and encourage people to

- a) place a high priority on the development of truth, virtue, love, and peace—and live disciplined lives for the purpose of adhering to truth, cultivating virtue and love, and maintaining the pathways to enduring peace
- b) sacrifice personal desires for the greater good of the whole
- c) find contentment and quality of life while consuming less material goods and ecological services
- d) prefer peacebuilding which supports and actualizes mutually beneficial understandings, forgiveness, and reconciliation—and *which abstains from violent conflict resolution*—as a way of bringing cycles of violence to an end
- e) use resources carefully, so that there is surplus available for emergency assistance
- f) support community life and cultural traditions which “... bring to the fore what is often hidden: how many good people there are, how many ways there are to do good, and how much happiness comes to those who extend help, as well as to those who receive it.

Many people seem to have the belief that human morality is a constant, and therefore is not a factor they need to consider as part of their “tool box” of resources for overcoming critical challenges. This writer, however, believes that human morality is not a constant—it is not something which is the same throughout the centuries of human existence; and thus it is something which can become degraded or raised up, depending on the leanings of human aspirations. Therefore, he believes we cannot afford to

exclude from our “tool boxes” the time-tested sources which have helped people learn compassion over many centuries. What we need to do instead is to learn how to cultivate the time-tested sources so that the sources yield the treasured wisdom.

It is in the context of the leanings of human aspirations regarding human morality—and in the context of emphasizing the need for an exponential increase in compassion for our fellow human beings—that The IPCR Initiative encourages communities (with the resources to do so) to enter into “sister community” relationships with communities in other countries where there has been well documented calls for assistance with basic human needs. Such community-to-community relationships can provide critical assistance with capacity building (especially if communities make best use of already established humanitarian aid organizations specializing in capacity building). “Sister community” relationships can also create service work capable of uniting diverse communities of people, and a variety of opportunities for person-to-person peacebuilding (as can be seen by the work of organizations such as “Sister Cities International”; webpage at <http://www.sister-cities.org/>.)

While it may be difficult for political leaders to accelerate the use of “sister community” relationships—when the concept is specifically linked to time-tested sources which have helped people learn compassion over many centuries—Community Visioning Initiatives which focus on the general themes of maximizing citizen participation in identifying challenges, and in solution-oriented activity, will almost certainly accelerate the use of this “sister community” concept.

#### Job Fairs

The job fairs which come at the end of the Community Visioning Initiative process provide opportunities for all key stakeholders in the community (businesses, organizations, institutions, government, etc) to *demonstrate their upgraded awareness (relating to the challenges, solutions, and action plans perceived as high priority by community residents)—and their interest in the welfare of the community—by offering and facilitating new employment opportunities...* and thus assisting with a just transition from patterns of investment which in only limited ways represent solution-oriented activity to patterns of investment which in many ways represent solution-oriented activity.

#### Local Newspapers

The Community Visioning Initiative “constellation of initiatives” approach to maximizing citizen participation in solution-oriented activity also provides many opportunities for local newspapers to contribute very valuable community services. (For example: making preliminary survey results accessible; highlighting inspirational role models and service-oriented initiatives associated with the Community Visioning process; describing workshop activity in the “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”; providing accountability reporting relating to the planning, implementation, evaluation, and sharing the lessons stages of the Community Visioning Initiative; etc).

When local community specific narratives are “grown organically”

One special value of the IPCR “constellations of initiatives” approach is that it encourages an “organic” approach to problem solving, peacebuilding and community revitalization: i.e. the process begins from

wherever the community is, and proceeds to whatever emerges from Community Visioning Initiatives as the solution pathways preferred by the residents of each particular community. There is no need for consensus on a blueprint for a model community to carry out a Community Visioning Initiative. The idea of the Community Visioning Initiative is to maximize citizen participation in identifying challenges, and in solution-oriented activity—and to (thus) grow the project “organically”.

A continued emphasis on the basic themes of a Community Visioning Initiative—maximizing citizen participation in identifying challenges, and in solution-oriented activity—will, even in a matter of a few years, bring communities back into alignment with the realities of the times... and it will do so at a pace which is workable for those particular local residents, it will add valuable knowledge and skill sets relating to problem solving as a team, and it will give local residents many more opportunities to encourage and support each other in the everyday circumstances of community life.

In addition, when local community specific narratives are “grown organically” by the processes described above, such narratives are much more likely to be aware of, and responsive to, local specific needs and challenges, much more likely to maximize citizen participation and create solution-oriented momentum, and much more likely to inspire commitments of time, energy, and financial support.

There can be much very useful public discourse on how to create effective local Community Visioning Initiatives, of the kind which can succeed in turning polarizing circumstances into collaborative efforts (and thus make best use of the knowledge and skills each one of us has), and which can create, develop, and accelerate a full array of solution-oriented activity.

#### Community Visioning Initiatives or General Elections?

The IPCR Initiative emphasizes a time-intensive approach to Community Visioning, which may take up to 1<sup>1/2</sup> years (18 months) to complete. The IPCR Initiative advocates for the kind of Community Visioning Initiative outlined in detail in the IPCR Initiative document [“A 15 Step Outline for a Community Visioning Initiative”](#). A very rough estimated cost, for 18 month Community Visioning Initiative which can be carried out by local communities—or segments of rural areas, towns, or cities—with populations of 50,000 or less, is \$3 million (estimate in U.S. dollars).

For the most part, this article presents the comparison between Community Visioning Initiatives and General Elections as a comparison between what is provided here about the citizen participation potential and problem solving potential of Community Visioning Initiatives, and what the readers’ impressions are (from his/her own experience) about the citizen participation potential and problem solving potential of General Elections. However, there is one important observation this writer will make here about the current state of many political campaigns at this critical time.

At a time when there are critical challenges which require problem solving on a scale most of us have never known before (see The IPCR Initiative’s “List of Critical Challenges” on p. 9), we are in great need of collaborative efforts which make best use of the knowledge and skills each one of us has. And yet many current forms of representative democracy include media campaigns which repeatedly paint negative portrayals of opposing candidates, and which encourage the demonization or dehumanization of fellow citizens and fellow human beings. No one who has ever tried to mediate a peaceful resolution to a conflict between people in their own personal life would ever consider carrying out anything even remotely resembling such negative campaigns as a way to assist people they care

about through difficult times, and as a means of re-establishing peaceful relations. And yet here we are, at a time of many critical challenges which require best use of the knowledge and skills we have—and it is clear that many of us continue to believe that participation in the current forms of representative democracy (which include these negative media campaigns) is one of the key indicators that a nation is on the road to becoming one of the most advanced societies we can conceive of. What exactly is the nature and character of the most advanced societies we can conceive of? Is arriving at that kind of society really one of our goals? If so, how much of what we are doing in everyday circumstances of community life actually relates to achieving that goal?

As mentioned earlier, preliminary surveys or questionnaires (as preparation for Community Visioning Initiatives) are meant to help people rediscover truths about their goals, how what they are doing in everyday circumstances of community life relates to achieving those goals, the challenges perceived as the highest priority challenges by the majority of residents in a community, and what residents are doing to overcome such challenges.

Here is one question such preliminary surveys could ask:

If 1000 Community Visioning Initiatives of the kind advocated in this article (i.e. time-intensive Community Visioning Initiatives supplemented by the above mentioned key processes) had already been carried out, and each visioning initiative had the general focus of maximizing citizen participation in identifying challenges, and in solution-oriented activity—and the citizen participation/problem solving results could be compared to 1000 political campaigns of equal expenditures, which resulted in the election of citizen representatives—

--which processes (1000 Community Visioning Initiatives or 1000 General Elections) do you believe would have the best cost/benefit ratio (i.e. given equal expenditures in both citizen participation/problem solving processes, which one would result in the most solution-oriented activity)?

#### Concluding Comment

There can be much very useful public discourse on how to create effective local Community Visioning Initiatives, of the kind which can succeed in turning polarizing circumstances into collaborative efforts (and thus make best use of the knowledge and skills each one of us has), and which can create, develop, and accelerate a full array of solution-oriented activity.

## A List of Ten Critical Challenges

(supported by evidence gathered in “IPCR Critical Challenges Assessment 2011-2012” project)  
(webpage for “Assessment” project at <http://www.ipcri.net/Critical-Challenges-Assessment.html> )  
(supporting evidence summarized in the IPCR Initiative document  
[“Calling ‘the better angels of our nature’: A Multi-Angle View of the Debt Crises”](#))

### **1. Global warming and reducing carbon emissions**

**2. “Cultures” of violence, greed, corruption, and overindulgence**—which have become so common that many of us accept such as inevitable; which are a significant part of the current crises of confidence in financial markets; *and which are in many ways slowing the restructuring of investment priorities needed to respond to an increasing number of other critical challenges*

### **3. The end of the era of “cheap energy” (particularly in reference to “peak oil”)**

**4. The increasing world population and its implications relating to widespread resource depletion**(with special focus on the increasing number of people who are consuming material goods and ecological resources *indiscriminately*)

**5. Current trends indicate that we are creating more and more “urban agglomerations”**(cities with a population of more than 1 million people—more than 400), which require more and more complex and energy intensive infrastructures, where it is more and more difficult to trace the consequences of our individuals investments of time, energy, and money—and which are the least appropriate models when it comes to implementing resolutions to many of the other challenges in this ten point assessment

**6. The U.S. and many other countries will enter the next 15 to 20 years burdened by substantial public debt**, possibly leading to higher interest rates, higher taxes, and tighter credit

### **7. A marginalization of the treasured wisdom associated with religious, spiritual, and moral traditions**

### **8. Global inequities and the tragic cycles of malnutrition, disease, and death**

**9. Community building associated with responding to the above eight challenges may or may not be accompanied by an exponential increase in compassion for our fellow human beings.** In such circumstances, shortages of goodwill in times of unprecedented transition could tilt already precarious systems into further disarray, and thus erode established systems in even the most stable communities and regions

**10. Sorting out what are real challenges and what are sound and practical solutions is becoming more and more difficult**, as there are now, in most communities of the world, *a multitude of ideas of all kinds coming to the fore in personal, family, community, and cultural life—all at the same time*

## A Brief Introduction to TheIPCR Initiative

The beliefs that there is a critical need for an exponential increase in compassion for our fellow human beings—and that at no other time in history has there been more potential for such an increase—have urged and inspired The Interfaith Peacebuilding and Community Revitalization (IPCR) Initiative ([www.ipcri.net](http://www.ipcri.net)) to explore how such potential might be realized. This exploration has identified a set of critical challenges which require problem solving on a scale most of us have never known before, and a “constellations of initiatives” approach to resolving the critical challenges identified. The IPCR Initiative advocates for a combination of preliminary surveys to 150 local leaders, time-intensive Community Visioning Initiatives supported by many “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” (offering workshops suggested by the preliminary surveys), and “sister community” relationships as a way of creating local community specific and regional specific “constellations of initiatives”.

### Four Glimpses into the “Inner Life” of The IPCR Initiative

- 1) One of the most persistent ironies in life is that with so many opportunities to provide real assistance to fellow human beings—and with the potential for such assistance to result in happiness “to those who extend help as well as to those who receive it”—there are still many, many people in this world who cannot find a “way to earn a living” providing such assistance.
- 2) There can be much very useful public discourse on how to create effective local Community Visioning Initiatives, of the kind which can succeed in turning polarizing circumstances into collaborative efforts (and thus make best use of the knowledge and skills each one of us has), and which can create, develop, and accelerate a full array of solution-oriented activity.
- 3) People with faith can be patient, because they believe that eventually the majority of people, through pathways specific to their strengths and capacities, will find their way to solutions which are specific to their identities, cultures, and resource limitations.... And if people are trusted and respected enough to be allowed to find their own way, the result will be much more trust in the systems (such as preliminary surveys, Community Visioning Initiatives, “Community Teaching and Learning Centers”, “sister community” relationships, etc) which helped them to collaborate on identifying challenges, maximize participation in solution-oriented activity, and create more and more opportunities to encourage and support each other towards their chosen goals.
- 4) We are in uncharted territory, for there is no culture or association of societies that ever existed on planet Earth which has had to resolve the kind of challenges the next few generations of people will have to resolve. In many ways, all of us are Stakeholders, and People Needing Assistance, and most of us are going to need to become Experienced Practitioners of some kind. There can be some consolation in the fact that if most of us become Experienced Practitioners in the art of being compassionate towards our fellow human beings, we will all have a better chance of accomplishing what no civilization has accomplished before.

### Key IPCR Documents and Webpages (Note: All IPCR documents are accessible for free)

- 1) [The webpage for the project “IPCR Critical Challenges Assessment 2011-2012”](#) (4 draft pdfs accessible)
- 2) [“Calling ‘the better angels of our nature’: A Multi-Angle View of the Debt Crises”](#) (Jan. 2012; 398 pages) (Includes summaries of the evidence for most of the critical challenges identified by the above assessment project, a wide-ranging “Solutions” section, and many detailed ideas for creating a “constellation of initiatives” approach)
- 3) [The webpage for “IPCR Outreach 2012”](#)—outreach package includes “Sample Cover Letter B” (2 pages), “The Potential of Community Visioning Initiatives (in 500 words)”, and “Much Unrealized Potential for Community Service” (2 pages) (and this webpage has pdf files of all documents in the outreach package).
- 4) [“A 15 Step Outline for a Community Visioning Initiative”](#) (28 pages) (with many details which will help readers to appreciate the potential of Community Visioning Initiatives and “Community Teachings and Learning Centers”)
- 5) [“Brief Descriptions of The Eight IPCR Concepts”](#) (26 pages) (There could be workshops on these concepts....)
- 6) [“A Four Page Summary of The IPCR Initiative”](#) (key document for “IPCR Outreach 2011”)