

Reflections on GCGI: Creating a Culture of Dialogue, Collaboration, and Cooperation for the Common Good

Kamran Mofid

The future is indeed fraught with environmental, socio-economic, political, and security risks that could derail the progress towards the building of 'The Future We Want'. However, although these serious challenges are confronting us, we can, if we are serious and sincere enough, overcome them by taking risks in the interest of the common good. One thing is clear: the main problem we face today is not the absence of technical or economic solutions, but rather the presence of moral and spiritual crises. This requires us to build broad global consensus on a vision that places values such as love, generosity, and caring for the common good into socio-political and economic practice, suggesting possibilities for healing and transforming our world.

Key words: Globalisation, global consensus, values, common good.

'He that seeks the good of the many seeks in consequence his own good.' Saint Thomas Aquinas

'What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good.' Aristotle

'A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.' Buddha

'We have to build a better man before we can build a better society.' Paul Tillich

'Try not to become a man of success, but a man of value.' Albert Einstein

'The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.' Thomas Paine

Kamran Mofid is founder of the Globalisation for the Common Good Initiative and co-editor of GCGI Journal. He is a patron of the Human Values Foundation, and a founding member of World Dignity University. His work is highly interdisciplinary, drawing on economics, business, politics, international relations, theology, culture, ecology, ethics, and spirituality. He is the co-founder and was the Associate Director (1996–1999) of the Centre for the Study of Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Coventry University.

Introduction: Why Globalisation for the Common Good Initiative matters

Complex problems require interdisciplinary teams to solve them, but the current dominant model of neo-liberalism promotes individualism, selfishness, competition, specialisation, and isolation. How can we then develop a cross-discipline culture of cooperation and dialogue for the common good?

‘No man is an island.’ ‘Two heads are better than one.’ ‘A problem shared is a problem solved.’ These are just some of the proverbs that tell of the virtues of teamwork, but it seems they cannot always be universally applied.

In the past few decades, there have been great endeavours to bring about a dialogue of civilisations, cultures, religions, and peoples. However, there is a very serious void here: there has not been a concurrent attempt to bring about a fruitful and rewarding dialogue between different academic disciplines, faculties, values, visions, and missions. For example, there was a time when economics was regarded as a branch of theology, philosophy, and ethics. Economic factors were intimately linked to what was regarded as just or right, and these, in their turn, were shaped by spiritual and moral understanding of the common good. Today economics has become an autonomous discipline, divorced and separated from its original roots. This engineered separation has brought us all a very bitter harvest. In the end economics is about human well being in society and this cannot be separated from moral, philosophical, theological, and spiritual considerations. The idea of an economics which is value-free is totally spurious. Nothing in this life is morally neutral. The same, of course, can be said about other disciplines, such as business, commerce, management, education, politics, international relations, medicine, law, theology, and many more.

This shortcoming is having a serious consequence on our ability to understand, evaluate, address, and solve the multiple crises that the world is facing.

The world is changing at an incredible rate. Pressing problems like climate change and the related social unrest are connected to an ever-growing population and dwindling resources. It has become clear that these vast problems cannot be answered by single academic disciplines, working within archaic institutional settings and throttled by systemic boundaries.

Working across disciplines is the key to answering the big questions, focusing on what is needed to solve problems, and transcending the boundaries of conventional approaches and disciplines. However, in academia we have put boundaries in place to stop this happening, and the pace of change to adopt new strategies is glacial at best. (Guardian, 30 May 2014, in Kamran 2014)

Since 2002, when Globalisation for the Common Good (GCGI) was founded (Mofid 2013), we have been at the forefront of activities to encourage a way of working and forming a place where such dialogical conversations can be encouraged, nurtured, developed, and supported by bringing together a group of noted scholars, researchers, students, and professionals from all contexts and backgrounds who share this vision and appreciate the exciting potential of having the chance to talk and engage in a dialogue of ideas, visions, and values with people from a broad array of backgrounds and disciplines.

There are major benefits to such an interdisciplinary dialogue and encounter: it nurtures critical thinking; it encourages the recognition of diverse perspectives; it increases tolerance for ambiguity; and it improves sensitivity to a wide spectrum of ethical and spiritual issues. We are committed to the view that inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work is a very positive and credible way forward in a rapidly changing world. It is our firm belief that a dialogue of values, ideas, and visions, supported by a meaningful dialogue of interrelated academic disciplines, will be very positive for a successful and rewarding path to a better and more harmonious world.

We strongly encourage others to join us in this timely mission. I do know, from my personal conversation and engagement with many at different universities in different parts of the world, that a very large number of academics as well as students are extremely unhappy about what is happening at their universities and other places of higher education. The sense of disillusionment springs from the introduction of managerialism, the growing loss of collegiality, dwindling and competitively allocated resources for research, the inappropriate but nevertheless wholesale use of business models in the education system, and the consequent transformation of Higher Education (teaching, research, and learning) into a fundamentally consumerist activity.

Many working in the education sector see their job and work as more akin to a vocation – something one does because of the love of learning, teaching, and the excitement of being with students – guiding and helping them to think for themselves. They do not see themselves as service providers and their students as customers.

In short, for us at the GCGI, our sense of passionate commitment to interdisciplinary work is a reaction to the sense of frustration many people feel when faced by the narrowness of subject disciplines and the inability of subject specialists to raise their eyes above or beyond the horizons of their own territory. Dialogue and engagement with people from varied areas of interest can throw fascinating, stimulating and poignant insights into one's own thinking and research. There

is nothing more refreshing than looking at one's own work through the eyes of another, or being able to share perspectives with people from other professions who are working in similar areas. The possibilities for creative and innovative research are enormous.

Dialogue of ideas, visions, values, struggles, and hopes for the common good

Good ideas will drive out the bad

Imagine a political system that puts the public first. Imagine the economy and markets serving people rather than the other way round. Imagine us placing values of respect, fairness, interdependence, and mutuality at the heart of our economy. Imagine an economy that gives everyone their fair share, at least an appropriate living wage, and no zero-hour contracts. Imagine where jobs are accessible and fulfilling, producing useful things rather than games of speculation and casino capitalism. Imagine where wages support lives rather than ever expanding divisions and separations between the top 1% and the rest. Imagine a society capable of supporting everyone's needs and which says 'no' to greed. Imagine unrestricted access to an excellent education, healthcare, housing, and social services. Imagine hunger being eliminated, no more food banks or soup kitchens. Imagine each person having a place he/she can call home. Imagine all senior citizens living a dignified and secure life. Imagine all the youth leading their lives with ever present hope for a better world. Imagine a planet protected from the threat of climate change now and for the generations to come. Imagine no more wars, but dialogue, conversation and non-violent resolution of conflicts.

This is the world I wish to see and I believe we have the means to build it if we take action in the interest of the common good. We must begin to seriously think, ponder and reflect together on life's big questions, questions of meaning, values, and purpose:

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose? What does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world, to forge a more just society for the common good? In what ways are we living our highest values? How are we working to embody the change we wish to see in the world? What projects, models or initiatives give us the greatest hope? How can we do well in life by doing good? How can we become agents of change for the common good? How to spark a new public conversation framed around human dignity and the common good?

Human beings have explored these many questions of value through religion, philosophy, the creation of art and literature, and more. Indeed, questions of value have inaugurated many disciplines within the humanities and continue to drive them today. Questions about values and valuing are fundamental to being human, but rarely are the subject of explicit public reflection.

What do I mean by the Common Good?

By the ‘common good’ I am referring to a broad evolution beyond values and actions that serve narrow self-interest, and towards those guided by inclusiveness, supporting well being, happiness, inner peace, contentment, dignity, economic prosperity and success, security, human rights, and stewardship of resources for the benefit of all, rather than just for some, as it currently is.

The principle of the common good reminds us that we are all responsible for each other – we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers – and must work for social conditions which ensure that every person and every group in society is able to meet their needs and realise their potential. It follows that every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups and the well being of the whole human family.

The future is full of risk and perils for our planet and all peoples. If we are to survive, we must surely build cultures of peace, justice, kindness, sympathy, empathy, and trust, and we must walk together to face the future. The journey, for sure, will be much more secure and fruitful if we begin to walk the walk together for the common good.

The Origins of the GCGI

Perhaps the best I can do is to quote a passage from a book I co-authored well before the financial, spiritual, and moral crash of September 2008:

From 1980 onwards, for the next twenty years, I taught economics in universities, enthusiastically demonstrating how economic theories provided answers to problems of all sorts. I got quite carried away by the beauty, the sophisticated elegance, of complicated mathematical models and theories. But gradually I started to have an empty feeling.

I began to ask fundamental questions of myself. Why did I never talk to my students about compassion, dignity, comradeship, solidarity, happiness, spirituality – about the meaning of life? We never debated the biggest questions. Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going to?

I told them to create wealth, but I did not tell them for what reason. I told them about scarcity and competition, but not about abundance and co-operation. I told them about free trade, but not about fair trade; about GNP – Gross National Product – but not about GNH – Gross National Happiness. I told them about profit maximisation and cost minimisation, about the highest returns to the shareholders, but not about social consciousness, accountability to the community, sustainability and respect for creation and the creator. I did not tell them that, without humanity, economics is a house of cards built on shifting sands.

These conflicts caused me much frustration and alienation, leading to heartache and despair. I needed to rediscover myself and real-life economics. After a proud twenty-year or so academic career, I became a student all over again. I would study theology, philosophy and ethics, disciplines nobody had taught me when I was a student of economics and I did not teach my own students when I became a teacher of economics.

It was at this difficult time that I came to understand that I needed to bring spirituality, compassion, ethics and morality back into economics itself, to make this dismal science once again relevant to and concerned with the common good. (Braybrooke and Mofid 2006)

Aiming to be a source of hope and inspiration, enabling us all to move from despair to hope, darkness to light, competition to cooperation, and monologue to dialogue, the GCGI, which I very much wish to introduce to you, was born at an international conference in Oxford in 2002.

To understand, appreciate, and face the challenges of the contemporary world requires us to focus on life's big picture. Whether it is war and peace, economics and the environment, justice and injustice, love and hatred, cooperation and competition, common good and selfishness, science and technology, progress and poverty, profit and loss, food and population, energy and water, disease and health, education and family, we need the big picture in order to understand and solve the many pressing problems, large and small, regional or global.

In order to focus on life's bigger picture and guided by the principles of hard work, commitment, volunteerism, and service; with a great passion for dialogue of cultures, civilisations, religions, ideas and visions, at an international conference in Oxford in 2002 the GCGI and the GCGI International Conference Series were founded.

We recognise that our socio-economic problems are closely linked to our spiritual problems and vice versa. Moreover, socio-economic justice, peace and harmony will come about only when the essential connection between the spiritual and practical

aspects of life are valued. Necessary for this journey is to discover, promote and live for the common good. The principle of the common good reminds us that we are all really responsible for each other – we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers – and must work for social conditions which ensure that every person and every group in society is able to meet their needs and realize their potential. It follows that every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well being of the whole human family.

One of the greatest challenges of our time is to apply the ideas of the global common good to practical problems and forge common solutions. Translating the contentions of philosophers, spiritual and religious scholars, and leaders into agreement between policymakers and nations is the task of statesmen and citizens, a challenge to which GCGI adheres. The purpose is not simply talking about the common good, or simply to have a dialogue, but the purpose is to take action, to make the common good and dialogue work for all of us, benefiting us all.

What the GCGI seeks to offer – through its scholarly and research programme, as well as its outreach and dialogue projects – is a vision that positions the quest for economic and social justice, peace and ecological sustainability within the framework of a spiritual consciousness and a practice of open-heartedness, generosity and caring for others. All are thus encouraged by this vision and consciousness to serve the common good.

The GCGI has from the very beginning invited us to move beyond the struggle and confusion of a preoccupied economic and materialistic life to a meaningful and purposeful life of hope and joy, gratitude, compassion, and service for the good of all. Perhaps our greatest accomplishment has been our ability to bring globalisation for the common good into the common vocabulary and awareness of a greater population along with initiating the necessary discussion as to its meaning and potential in our personal and collective lives. In short, at GCGI we are grateful to be contributing to that vision of a better world, given the goals and objectives that we have been championing since 2002. For that we are most grateful to all our friends and supporters that have made this possible.

To focus our minds, assisting us to see the big picture, I very much wish to offer for consideration and reflection the values of the GCGI, which we hold very dearly. I firmly believe that if these or similar values are adopted by all the stakeholders, and then seriously adhered to afterwards, then the attainment of these goals becomes much more possible:

We value caring and kindness;
We value passion and positive energy;
We value service and volunteerism;
We value simplicity and humility;
We value trust, openness, and transparency;
We value values-led education;
We value harmony with nature;
We value non-violent conflict resolution;
We value interfaith, inter-civilisational, and inter-generational dialogue;
We value teamwork and collaboration;
We value challenge and excellence;
We value fun and play;
We value curiosity and innovation;
We value health and well-being;
We value a sense of adventure;
We value people, communities, and cultures;
We value friendship, cooperation, and responsibility.

Conclusion: Co-creating ‘The Future We Want’ in the Interest of the Common Good

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One thing is clear: the main problem we face today is not the absence of technical or economic solutions, but rather the presence of moral and spiritual crises. This requires us to build broad, global consensus on a vision that places values such as love, generosity, and caring for the common good into socio-political and economic practice, suggesting possibilities for healing and transforming our world.

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