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Sustaining Ourselves

How Can We Best Meet the Needs of Today and Tomorrow?

The world is using its vital natural resources much faster than the planet's natural processes can replace them. Americans consume a particularly large share. How much longer can we maintain this way of life? How can we meet our needs today without hampering our ability to meet those needs tomorrow?

OPTION ONE

Take Action to Repair and Protect Crucial Resources

Critical resources, such as clean water and farmland, are dwindling quickly. Well-meaning individual efforts and neighborhood recycling programs are not enough to ward off looming catastrophe. We must take urgent measures, including government regulation and pressure on businesses, to solve this problem.

OPTION TWO

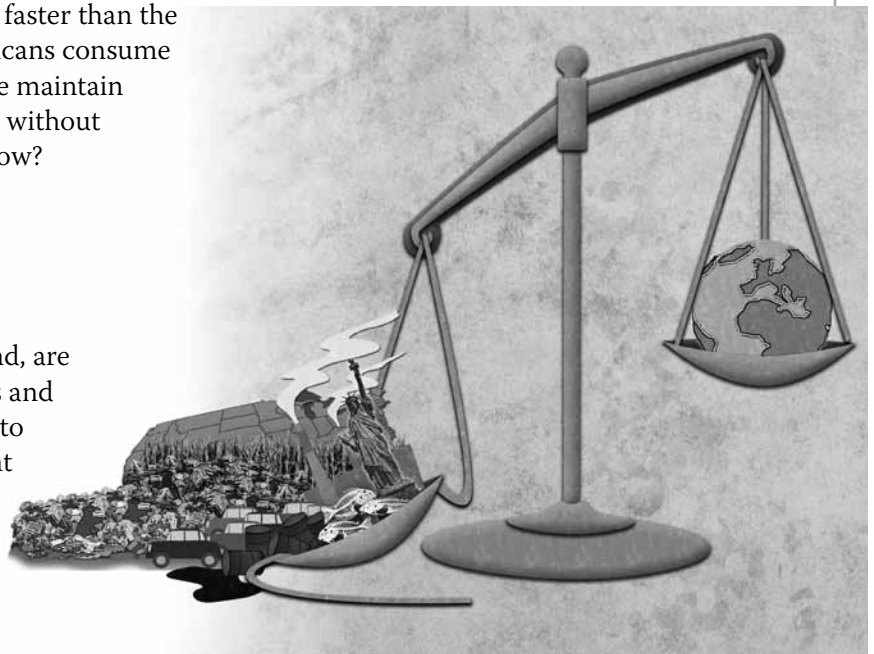
Focus the Power of Markets and Technological Innovations

While we face problems related to humanity's overuse of natural resources, many dire predictions of the past have been rendered irrelevant by technological and social advances. Invention, innovations, and the free market are our best tools for saving ourselves.

OPTION THREE

Transform Our Culture

New rules and technological breakthroughs will only nibble around the edges of the real problem we face. We have to scale back our lifestyles to reconnect with traditional American values, such as frugality, altruism, and self-reliance. And we need to strengthen our communities and our attachment to them.



>>National Issues Forums and Study Guides

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the ADVANTAGES and DISADVANTAGES of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

>>Forums in the Community

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

>> Stages of a Forum

Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

Deliberation

Participants examine all the options. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each option.

Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

>> If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions are on Page 5.) Listen to others.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's hard to move on to another option when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

>>Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

>>Ending a Forum

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

I. Individual reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other peoples' views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

III. Next-step reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some examples:

O P T I O N O N E

- Do you think it will require government action, such as raising taxes on gasoline or rationing the use of water in dryer areas, to make Americans less wasteful of natural resources?
- What steps, if any, are your local government taking to conserve resources? Are they in the form of restrictions or incentives? Which ones are more effective?
- Would you be willing to pay higher energy bills for electrical power generated by renewable resources, such as windmills and solar arrays?
- Do you think today's young people are more or less guilty of over using energy and polluting their environment than their parents were?

O P T I O N T W O

- Can technological advances continue to ward off the effects of food, water, and arable land shortages that result from ever-increasing population growth around the world?
- What might be the consequences of wholesale changes in our consumer society—buying far fewer new cars and appliances, for example—on economic growth?
- Do you think over use and contamination of natural resources are the biggest threats to the well-being of people around the globe? Are there worse problems we should be focusing on instead?
- Do you think global warming poses a threat to our well-being? Or is it just another dire prediction like others that did not materialize?

O P T I O N T H R E E

- In many ways, the variety of consumer goods available to us today has served to improve the quality of our lives. What, if any, are the downsides?
- Do you think it's possible for Americans to simplify their lives? What would it take for this to happen?
- Would you favor stricter planning and zoning regulations in your community to prevent commercial and residential sprawl?
- Do Americans have a moral obligation to scale back their lifestyles, even if other large nations ignore the problem?

>>Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

A national report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>The Role of the Moderator

- to provide an overview of the deliberation process
- to ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- to encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- to remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>For More Information

To order issue guides or starter tapes, call 1-800-600-4060, FAX (937) 435-7367, or mail to NIF Publications, 1800 N. Stonelake Drive, Box A, Bloomington, IN 47402. Other issue guides and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

For more information or to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at www.nifi.org or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to: National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ E-mail address _____

Date and location (state) where forum was held _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants? _____

What common concerns were most apparent? _____

What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? _____

Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? _____

Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with most? _____

Did the group identify shared directions for action? _____

Return with questionnaires to:
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