

1.8. BEYOND WESTERN MEAL FRAMEWORKS

SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL (SGI) WORLDWIDE



Soka Gakkai International

How this story represents an international-local faith partnership in MEAL



International element

International Buddhist faith-based network working on peace, culture, and education



Local faith element

Network consisting of local Buddhist community groups



Project country

Worldwide



Website

<https://www.sokaglobal.org/>



The organisation and activities

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is an international Buddhist network, originating in Japan, with 12 million members in 192 states and territories. The organisation's headquarters are located in Japan, where SGI's predecessor organisation was founded in 1930. Educators Makiguchi and Toda were the founding presidents and the organisation initially focused on educational reform. The organisation has since developed into a worldwide movement promoting the betterment of society through individual inner transformation. In its current

form, SGI was founded in 1975 by the current international leader, Ikeda, to bring together members from across the globe. SGI members follow the philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism. The organisation used to have close connections with Buddhist monks, and now operates independently as a Buddhist lay network. Each international SGI organisation is organised independently. As part of their faith practice, SGI members across the globe regularly hold local meetings of between 10 and 30 members, who gather at members' homes and in community centres to chant, study, and share experiences of transformation with one another.

Beyond members' daily practices and local meetings, SGI has established itself as an international organisation working in the fields of peace, culture, and education, with a focus on nuclear disarmament, human rights education, sustainable development, and humanitarian relief. The organisation has affiliated schools, universities, and cultural associations based on broad Buddhist values such as respect for the dignity of life. It organises events, publishes books, raises awareness about critical issues such as nuclear disarmament, runs advocacy campaigns in Geneva and New York, and is involved in emergency response following natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods. In Japan, SGI is involved in national politics and has close relations with the Komei Party. This is not the case, however, in other parts of the world where the organisation operates. SGI is funded through community contributions and does not receive funding from any other donors.

MEAL approach and rationale

A process of learning outside of/beyond Western MEAL frameworks

SGI and its members embrace an ongoing process of learning and empowerment, which is supported by daily practice and the sharing of experiences through regular local meetings as well as the SGI magazines and websites. As a network for empowerment and education, the emphasis on learning within SGI is strong. The organisation does not frame these activities as MEAL, nor do they engage with Western MEAL methodologies. Instead, they draw on the rich repertoire of their Buddhist faith.

Buddhist concepts of accountability

The concept of individual responsibility and accountability to oneself and one's environment are central to the approach of SGI. The focus is on taking the right action or materialising one's Buddha nature. Indicators of what is being achieved externally are important but so is one's inner state and growth. This notion of individual responsibility is closely linked to a belief in human revolution or inner change, which describes the process by which a person learns, develops, and becomes more compassionate and less self-centred. Often, this results in an increase in contributions to society. In line with their Buddhist faith, SGI stresses spiritual development as much as other forms of development, as they believe that outward efforts are futile without internal transformation. Underlying this approach is the concept of the oneness of life and its environment, according to which there are no clear boundaries between individuals, families, communities, and nations, who are all part of the one life, and therefore interconnected and interdependent. Causing positive change anywhere will therefore cause positive effects everywhere, with the root cause of all problems being of a deeper, spiritual nature.

Sharing of experiences

Learning is shared through two main channels: the sharing of experiences in the local SGI meetings and the SGI magazines.¹⁴ Experiences are stories of change (with a focus on the personal change a person went through), which highlight that inner change of the individual is manifested through outer change. Examples range from people dealing with personal

¹⁴ Some experiences can also be found on the SGI website.

insecurities, overcoming drug addiction, finding their true purpose in life, or working with the most vulnerable. Most experiences follow the same structure by outlining the problem, the process (consisting of faith and practice in the form of chants or meditation and the study of the scriptures - the three tenets of Buddhism), and the outcome. Experiences are seen as a manifestation of the transformational power of faith and practice; sharing them aims to encourage others to also focus on change. Experiences are primarily shared in meetings of between 10 and 30 SGI members at members' homes and in community centres. The meetings usually start with chants and recitation of scriptures, followed by the sharing of experiences and open discussion. Members put a lot of effort into preparing to share their experiences, which are often written up and then read to the members of the congregation, but they are also often shared spontaneously. Moreover, most large country branches of SGI have their own newsletters and magazines where some experiences are published. The UK branch of SGI, for example, publishes several experiences in each edition of their monthly magazine *Art of Living*, taking up around three pages per experience, with a photo of the person at the heart of the described change. A collection of experiences can also be found on the Soka Gakkai (global) website.

The organisation's activities to promote peace, sustainability, human rights, and humanitarian relief are also shared in its publications and online resources so that their members can learn about these issues and gain a global picture of what SGI contributes. In this way, the organisation demonstrates a sense of accountability to its members.

Lessons learned

Beyond MEAL

Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning come in many forms. Formalised Western approaches are by no means the only tools available to organisations with an interest in monitoring and evaluating their activities and sharing lessons learned. Buddhist organisations such as the SGI have developed methods that stem from their faith tradition and focus on the priorities of the group. SGI's reliance on community funding (rather than funding from institutional donors) grants them the independence to decide which forms of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning are of relevance to their members, the organisation, and their work. The motivation to incorporate them into their work is internal and not driven by external requirements. The organisation does not refer to these activities as MEAL but frames them within a terminology stemming from their faith.

Recommended resources

Joan Anderson: Buddhist Values, Action for Sustainability and the Earth Charter. <http://www.iop.or.jp/Documents/1424/Anderson.pdf>

Personal experiences on the Soka Gakkai (global) webpage: <https://www.sokaglobal.org/practicing-buddhism/personal-experiences.html>