

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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2010



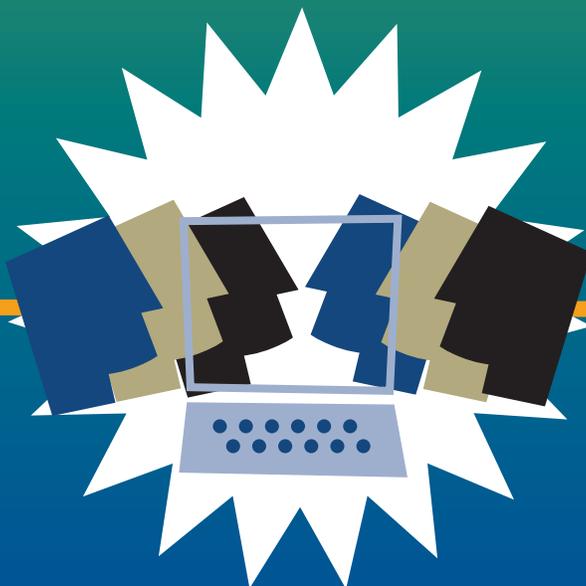
The role of  
**Civic**  
**Organizations**  
in today's  
society

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# CONNECTIONS

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# Governmental Agencies *as* Civic Actors

By Phillip Lurie

One facet of the Kettering Foundation's research, especially in the arena of Institutions and Professions in the Public Realm (IPPR), explores how institutions could align their routines with the democratic practices of citizens. To that effect, our collaborative research efforts speak to the lessons that might be learned from community organizations, institutions, philanthropy, and, in particular, the work of centers for public life that have positioned themselves as facilitators of citizen decision making and action in a community context.

This reflection and exploration stems from the following thesis:

1. That many nongovernmental and civic organizations are being "colonized" by organizational structures and cultures previously most common in governments and the corporate sector.
2. That citizens see themselves increasingly disconnected from these organizations.
3. That many organizations, some of which might have seemed unlikely candidates, appear to be filling the void.

Some of these unlikely organizations are located within government, where particular administrative agencies seem to be acting as civic entities. The foundation has recently received two reports that analyze two interesting cases.

The first case explores the work that Allan Comp has done through the Department of the Interior, with the Friends of the Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team. His recent report reflects on the ways that citizens build their capacity to address local challenges and bring their

communities together, particularly around local environmental problems, which often requires participation by government. Much of this work had been done in the Appalachian coal towns that were totally dominated by the companies that formed them. This posed a particular set of challenges because residents quickly learn that in such towns, you had to keep your head down, or get beaten or fired, which meant loss of house and being blackballed by every company around. As a responsible family person, you learned

not to be civically engaged. This is an enduring feature of such towns, with little sense of challenging the establishment because the consequences were so dire. However, these habits begin to change when somebody suggests they clean up the stream, which they do, and then other neighbors stop to help. This begins a process in which the people in these small towns decide they need to do something. As they start to come together, they realize they are able to do something so they seek out resources to help and this leads to a need and a readiness to engage with others.

This report highlights those processes—the depth and diversity of citizen-government partnerships by sharing some of the ways in which citizens affect and often enhance the functions of government and vice versa. Five main themes emerged, including: [1] Watershed organizations give citizens a space to discuss community needs and an avenue to meet those needs; [2] Citizen-based watershed groups act as the intermediary to establish personal contacts between citizens and agencies; [3] Citizen leaders often play dual roles as government administrators; [4] A government agency's willingness to genuinely partner differs depending on the system, the administrators' own attitudes, and the citizens'



## Governmental Agencies as Civic Actors

attitudes; and [5] Government administrators understand why working with citizens is important, but they also think that involving citizens and citizen groups slows down the process and increases the likelihood that plans will fluctuate.

These findings are relevant to the Kettering Foundation's ongoing research in several ways. One is that the focus has shifted to the citizen and community side of things, where citizens are the primary actor and the government is seen as the complementary actor. This, in turn, highlights the importance of safe spaces and venues in which citizens can come together to talk through their problems, using deliberative and nondeliberative approaches. Moreover, these watershed groups appear to facilitate a type of "coming to public judgment" that would either be missing or fragmented in their absence. Another important distinction is that we tend to dichotomize things when exploring these relationships [i.e. citizens from administrators; certain decision-making practices] but these findings clearly suggest that they are far more dynamic. The report also highlights the importance of networking, especially when it comes to public acting, and the coordination and (at times) the technical expertise needed to affect acid mine drainage issues. These watershed groups essentially act as boundary-spanning organizations, bridging the gap between the relevant stakeholders. Finally, this work and others continues to characterize true public engagements (for lack of a better phrase) as something that requires public officials to "go above and beyond agency mandates." It is not seen as part of their job, their routine.

The second case explores the work that Barnett and Kimberly Pearce have done with Common Sense California and their efforts in supporting civic engagement. The results of their study focus on public administrators' orientations, knowledge, and communication abilities in aligning the daily routines of administrators with the democratic practices of citizens. The report concludes with six findings, including: [1] Public administrators question the public's will or ability to communicate responsibly in civic engagement; [2] Public administrators think of civic engagement in the context

of their professional responsibilities; [3] Public administrators are reassured by the experience of their peers and adaptable examples; [4] Civic engagement involves "culture change" and "authenticity"; [5] Public administrators have powerful motivations to support civic engagement; and [6] Public administrators know that they need to develop new skills for supporting civic engagement, but they are not sure what those skills are.

These findings suggest that many public administrators have simplistic concepts of civic engagement, and I suspect that the notion that citizens can't communicate responsibly is derived from assimilation of the term to nondeliberative forms of discourse among citizens, which continue to be contentious and unproductive. Similarly, administrators want a partnership with the public, but only if they could be assured that the public would act responsibly, meaning that they wouldn't deliberately subvert the process and that they would listen to each other, think systematically, and not engage in political theater. Also, the "culture change" required reflects a number of tensions that administrators face in proceeding with this kind of work, including: authenticity, or a tool in a toolbox; power; motivations; openness to initiative; control, and how they respond to losing it; and time constraints. Administrators want citizens to act more responsibly and want a well-designed, well-facilitated process. This is in tension with actual public life. Lastly, structural needs include an awareness that the existing system doesn't work; that they must do something else. Relationships exist or must be cultivated; skills must be taught to manage these types of exchanges.

So, what do we still need to know about how governmental organizations (GOs) act as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or civic organizations? Building on our existing work, I offer the following questions to frame future discussions:

1. What are the organizational forms necessary to engage in this type of citizen-driven work, and how can GOs adopt these forms?
2. How do GOs manage this work given the roles they are typically or legally asked to play or the results they are typically or legally bound to deliver?
3. To what degree do "politics" come into play at the governmental organization?
4. What are the obstacles that prevent individuals or organizations from doing this type of work? What are some of the ways around these obstacles?

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**Administrators want a partnership with the public, but only if they could be assured that the public would act responsibly, meaning that they wouldn't deliberately subvert the process and that they would listen to each other, think systematically, and not engage in political theater.**

5. How does the emphasis on accountability affect the ability of individuals or organizations to engage in this kind of work?
6. What are the conditions under which the feelings, desires, and characteristics of leaders (champions, perhaps) permeate the organizations in which they operate, and do so in such a way that causes a fundamental shift in the working of these organizations?
7. If experts are less inclined to engage in a deliberative mode of politics, then what does this suggest about the ability of GOs, or the experts, to engage in this type of work?
8. How has the media reported on this work, and what effect has that had as the work moves forward?

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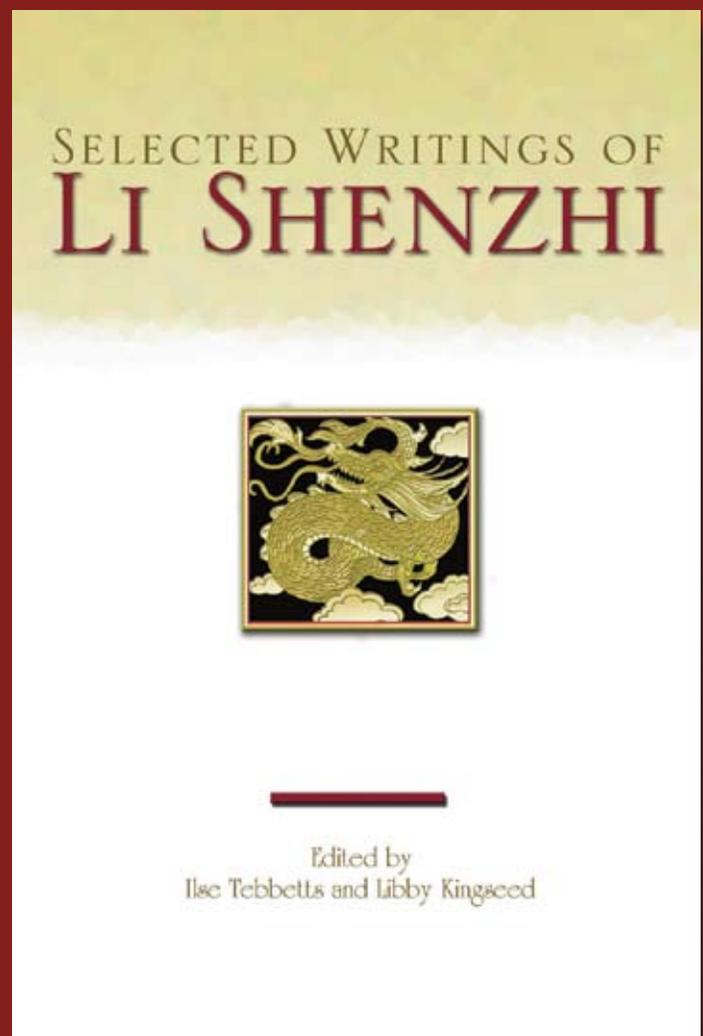
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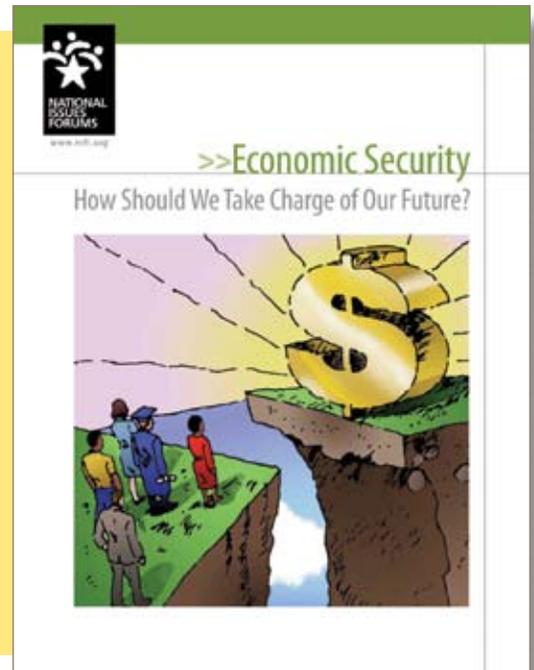
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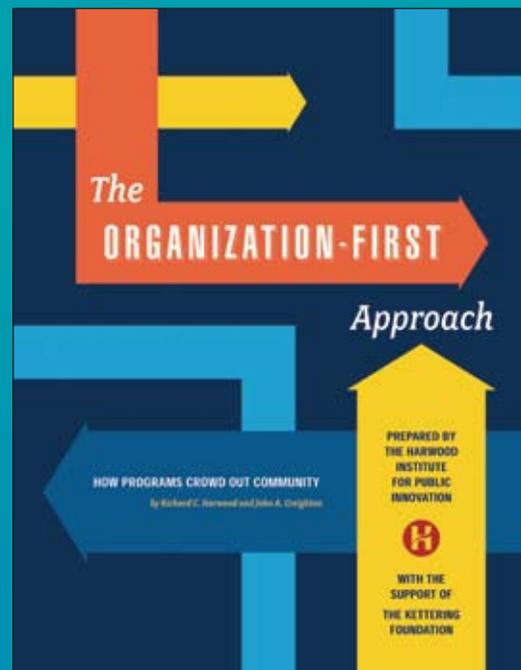
# The Organization-First Approach

## How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

*"The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization's programs and agenda instead of the community's needs or aspirations."*

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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# Doing Democracy

## A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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