

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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2010



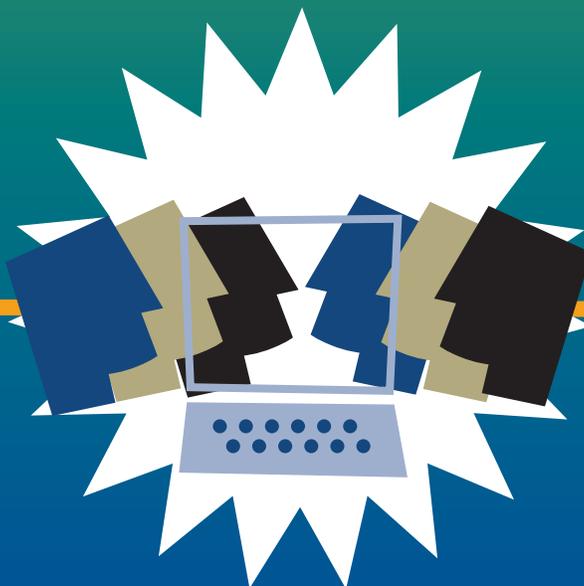
The role of  
**Civic**  
**Organizations**  
in today's  
society

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# CONNECTIONS

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# Finding a Different Path

By Janis Foster

**D**o all paths philanthropic lead to a nonprofit? With philanthropy's focus on legally established and professionally managed nonprofit organizations, does that mean—as evidence suggests—that the primary way to community vitality and resilience is through the nonprofit door? Or is philanthropy's focus on nonprofits an unintended consequence of policies that limit the range of philanthropic giving or pressures that philanthropies feel to be more accountable and to deliver guaranteed results?

As executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers, a network of funders investing in active citizens at the block level as a key, place-based funding strategy, I see this issue surface on a regular basis.

- It was there in discussions about the theory of change that we are developing for Grassroots Grantmakers: are we assuming that the ultimate objective of grassroots grantmaking is to move groups from “emerging” to “successful” nonprofit organization?
- It was there in a presentation by a colleague who manages a grassroots grantmaking program. When asked about indicators of success, this colleague listed the number of grassroots groups that had become fully established nonprofit organizations after they began receiving grants.
- It was there in a conversation I had with someone about technical assistance to grassroots groups receiving grants—with “technical assistance”

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## Finding a Different Path

framed in terms of learning how to operate as a nonprofit organization.

- It was there in a thoughtful conversation with a colleague about the next step for groups that want to do work that requires a more substantial structure than a group of neighbors can provide.

So what does this mean for philanthropic institutions? What's next?

In recent remarks at the Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence conference, Bill Schambra of the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal provided an important reminder to those of us in funding about the genesis of so many nonprofit organizations. Speaking about the origins of a charter school, here is what Schambra shared:

*It was the act of everyday citizens coming together around a shared vision and forging their own community to embody that vision.*

*From nothing except a shared purpose—and in the face of all sorts of obstacles, ranging from the bureaucratic charter application process to the hostility of the teachers unions to the scorn of the education professionals telling them that parents know nothing about teaching children—they nonetheless created a nonprofit organization to solve their own problems their own way.*

If your aspiration is to start a school, you may indeed need the structure and management that comes with operating as a nonprofit organization. But what if your dream is not a school but a community garden that replaces an overgrown vacant lot?

It is probably no coincidence that as the number of philanthropic organizations in the United States has grown, so has the number of nonprofit organizations. In both direct and subtle ways, the funding community has told everyday citizens that in order to be taken seriously and be worthy of a philanthropic investment, you have to associate with a legally established and professionally managed nonprofit organization.

I believe that we are now seeing the unintended consequences of this position. When funders, especially those that focus

their funding in a particular community, say that their mission is to strengthen the nonprofit sector, what message does that send to ordinary people about their role? The proliferation of nonprofits has sent a signal to good-intentioned people everywhere: that we as people can't or shouldn't act in powerful ways—that nonprofits have the know-how and responsibility to solve problems and create change. Have nonprofits essentially moved into the space that active citizens once occupied—pushing people, as active citizens, to the sidelines as recipients, clients, consumers, participants, complainers, and advisors?

The question for me is how can we honor, encourage, and support people with good hearts and an orientation toward action, without either explicitly or implicitly pointing them to the nonprofit path as the only path? How can we avoid sending the signal—

either intentionally or unintentionally—that people who want to continue doing what they are doing in a way that is manageable for them but may seem small-scale to us, are not contributing in a way that has value? How can our works, policies and actions communicate that it is okay if you want to continue to

have your neighborhood's summer paint program and do not want to form a community development corporation that is equipped to do more significant home rehab? Or that it is okay if you want to continue with the two-week program for kids in your neighborhood every summer without growing the program to be a year-round youth-serving nonprofit? We need to say that it is really more than just okay—that by doing the paint program or the two-week summer program, you are contributing to community viability and resilience in a way that cannot be replaced by all the nonprofit service programs in the world.

When we measure the success of our programs by the number of nonprofits

that have been created or focus our funding exclusively on nonprofit organizations, we are making an explicit value statement—that we value nonprofits more than we value active citizens and the groups that they create to get things done. We are saying that grassroots groups are all essentially “baby nonprofits” and that the goal is to help the “babies” grow up to be full-functioning nonprofit “adults”—those that do not chose this path fall into the category of failed attempts or unrealized potential.

How could a funding organization do this? They would need someone who spends time out of the office building relationships and doing work at the micro level but who is also present and participative in in-house discussions at the organization. This would be someone who can get beyond the typical “funder

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## How can we honor, encourage, and support people with good hearts and an orientation toward action, without either explicitly or implicitly pointing them to the nonprofit path as the only path?

conversations” with community residents and group leaders and take what they learn back into the funding organization—even if it's uncomfortable. This person would have to have a position of sufficient influence within the organization in order to ask a question, expand a conversation, bend a rule, speed-up a process, open a door, take a stand. All in all, a funding organization would not only need “personal smarts” and courage, but also “institutional smarts” and institutional courage, taking the funding organization to a different type of relationship with its community.

*Janis Foster is the executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers. She can be reached at [janis@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:janis@grassrootsgrantmakers.org).*

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# SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

In these pieces, written between 1991 and 2002, Li Shen zhi considers centuries of history; presents a worldwide view of cultural, social, and political differences; and offers glimpses of the possibilities for a truly free and democratic People's Republic of China.

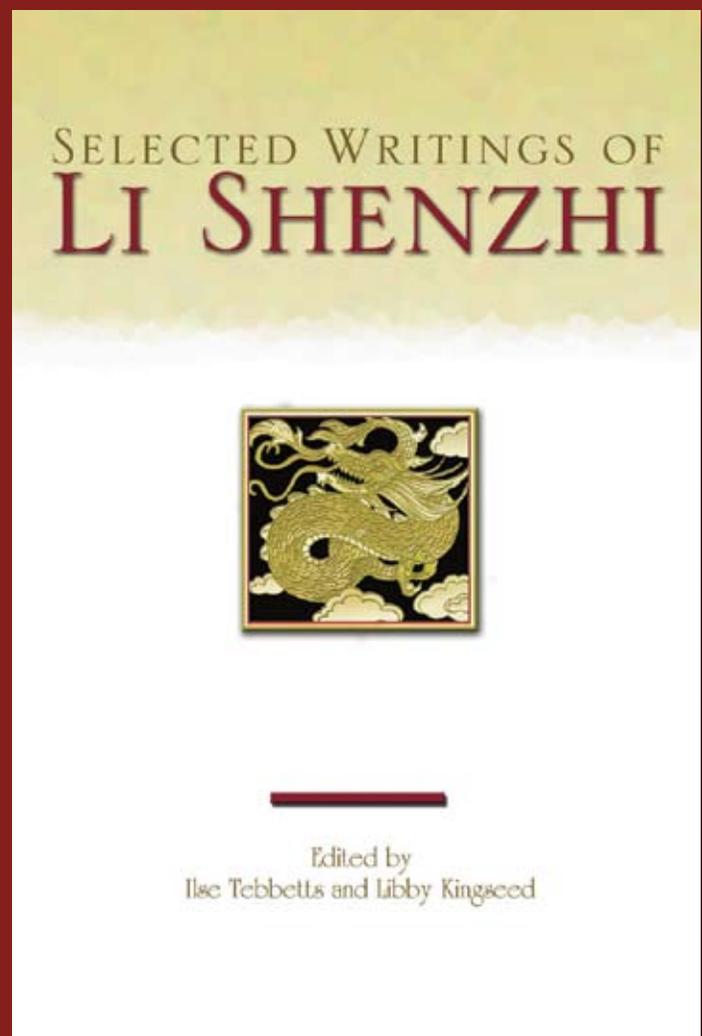
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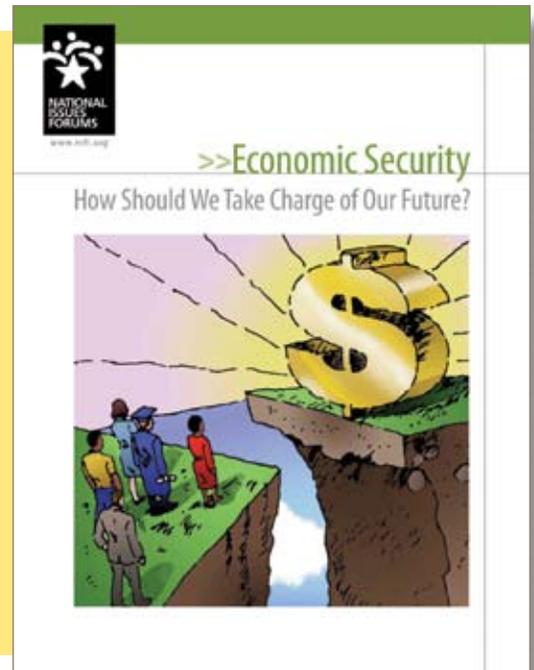
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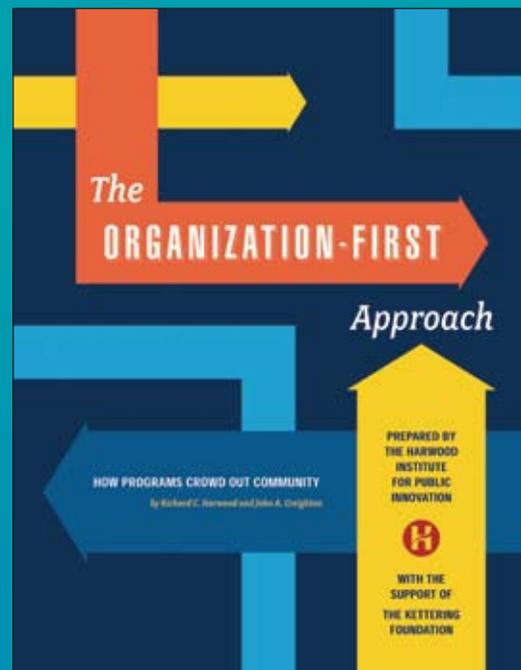
# The Organization-First Approach

## 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.



Kettering Foundation | 2010

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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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