

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Summer/Fall 2005



June Board Summary

At the Kettering Foundation's spring board meeting this past June, trustees and staff explored different options for Kettering's international research, listening to the remarks of three longtime research partners about the challenges of exporting democracy. They were Daniel Yankelovich, founder of Public Agenda and former Kettering board member; Ramon Daubon, Vice President for Programs at the Inter-American Foundation; and Randa Slim, the executive director of the Institute for Sustained Dialogue.

Debate over the current U.S. policy of imposing democratic reform by force in places like Iraq has divided not only politicians and policymakers in Washington, Yankelovich noted in his opening remarks, but also citizens in much of the rest of the country. Elections alone, he cautioned, are not a cure-all for political instability or social injustice. Hitler, he pointed out, was democratically elected in Germany, while more recent elections in the Arab World in places like Algeria and southern Lebanon have brought hard-line fundamentalists to power—hardly the result U.S. or European interests had hoped for.

Current efforts to promote the spread of democracy, however, have created a number of interesting opportunities for both exploring insights from the foundation's past work and focusing the direction of future research: 1) that elections alone do not make a democracy; 2) that true democracy requires the work of both officials and citizens; 3) that public deliberation can help get citizens from *me* to *we*; 4) and finally, that we must find ways to translate citizen deliberation into action.

While Yankelovich's comments focused on the importance of citizen work to creating an effective democracy, Daubon's remarks addressed the link between democratic life and economic growth.

For the past 35 years, the Inter-American Foundation has been working on the issue in Latin America. "What we've come to learn, is that without an undergirth of a democratic way of concertation, of learning to talk and make decisions together, economics doesn't work," Daubon said. Democracy he suggested, is really a capacity to talk, identify what's important, consider alternatives, and make decisions. It is done in many places, he added, but seldom in Latin America where there is both a rigid



class structure and a strong tradition of authoritarian rule.

"The culture cannot be taught. It has to be learned, and it is learned by experiencing it," Daubon explained. Working in small, often poor communities, Daubon's foundation has been in the business of engaging citizens in defining economic goals and projects. The idea has been enthusiastically embraced not only by grass-

roots organizations, but also by an unexpected ally—business interests who see it as a powerful economic tool. To date, some 53 corporate sponsors have been involved. They see the work as not only improving the region's economy, but also its political stability. Kettering's research in civil economics, Daubon pointed out, laid the groundwork for this new approach.

Business interests, interestingly enough, also played a role in Randa Slim's discussion of political reform efforts in the Middle East. Since 9/11, she noted, a host of foundations and government agencies, ranging from USAID to the United Nations, have tried to promote the spread of democracy in the Middle East, but have met with little, if any, success. Most have little, if any, understanding of Islam, she said. As a result they are seen as trying to import something entirely alien to the region. Secondly, their efforts are largely mechanistic: they focus on voting and multiparty elections and the like.

Locals are interested in a far more fundamental conversation. Broad-based coalitions of Islamicists, nationalists, civic activists, and business interests have emerged in places like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, Slim explained, and they are engaged in a dialogue about both citizenship and public life. Business interests are critical, she added, because they can provide a moderating influence to help resolve conflicts between the old and new. They also have a great deal of credibility—something most governments in the region and outside interests lack.

Kettering Foundation president David Mathews concluded the meeting by noting that the Kettering Foundation's understanding of democracy as a culture rather than a process could be valuable in a wider study of these kinds of problems. At the same time, research with international partners could provide valuable insights into a number of other areas of Kettering's research about the role of both citizens and institutions in a democracy.

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their time or even supplying blankets to soundproof a makeshift studio to help the station itself survive. It has turned communication between the radio station and its audience into a two-way street.

National and international broadcasters are no less interested in these kinds of projects. Concerned about polio and HIV/AIDS, for example, the Voice of America sent correspondents and producers to Africa to convene forums and community meetings. When religious leaders in Nigeria's northern Kano State urged their followers not to have their children vaccinated for polio—charging that the plan was a plot by Western interests to kill Muslims—the station started a series of radio programs. These featured local public health nurses and residents who talked about their concerns and their experiences with the vaccine. With local mothers stressing that the vaccine had not made them sterile, the programs helped fuel a reversal not only in public attitudes, but in the attitudes of political and religious leaders as well. These forums, often held on market days in regional capitals, sometimes drew 5,000 to 7,000 people, and put political and religious leaders on the spot.

At one time, it would have been impossible to have children discuss controversial issues like HIV/AIDS on a public radio station in conservative, predominantly Muslim areas, but innovative radio programs in the region have done just that. Radio broadcasters have found that the use of children's voices makes it possible to pull adults into the discussion. Wary of discussing such issues with outsiders, adults began to participate readily once children were involved—they wanted to be involved in an issue that their children cared about.

These efforts are just beginning. Still, they might well prove important for others outside Africa. A number of them, even at this early stage, have already produced definite results on difficult public problems. The techniques radio journalists in Africa are developing for engaging citizens with their political leaders may well offer useful insights for journalists and citizens in other countries.

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Books Worth Reading

Citizen Democracy

by Stephen E. Frantzich
New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.

In response to his students' political cynicism, Stephen Frantzich, a professor at the United States Naval Academy, wrote *Citizen Democracy*: a collection of "real examples of relatively typical individuals who overcame cynicism to affect public well-being." Frantzich's primary message is that one person can change the political landscape. He aims to create a Rosie-the-Riveter type of determination in the minds of students—an "I can do it" mentality. After all, look at what the citizens featured in his book accomplished. Letters from Barbara Brimmer and Valeria Schoen to their respective congressmen led to the admission of women at the U.S. Naval Academy. Merrel Williams illegally copied private documents from the major tobacco company where he was employed and initiated the tobacco suits of the 1990s. In the 1950s, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus and helped launch a campaign for African-American civil rights.

The individualistic message of *Citizen Democracy* is both its major strength and its weakness. Certainly, stories of Americans rising from unfair circumstances or personal tragedy to become political engines of change are inspiring. But what practical lessons are they sending to Frantzich's college students and others?

One lesson evident in *Citizen Democracy* is that political change often involves tremendous personal sacrifice. Gregory Watson, in his effort to put a cap on congressional paychecks, describes his political experience as "practically my life's work at this time, taking up all my



spare time and making the question of a social life academic." Lois Gibbs had to suffer insults and resentment from her neighbors as an activist against a chemical company. In fact, Frantzich mentions that Gibbs' divorce was in part the result of the stress of community activism. Although an extreme example, in consequence of his efforts to assist terminally ill patients to commit suicide, Jack Kevorkian went to prison. The idea that to participate in politics might mean losing one's spare time, friends, close relationships, and even one's freedom might be discouraging to college students.

Another problematic element of *Citizen Democracy* is Frantzich's analogy of politics as a game. "American politics can be compared to a game. . . . Like all games, politics has players, rules, strategies, winners, and losers. Politics . . . includes fans in the stands who cheer their favorite partisan or ideological teams but seldom

get involved personally. The focus of this book is fans who became *players*. They are the heroes of the American political process, who make it legitimate for us to be called a democracy." Here, students learn that politics is something they can join or not join. It is a game that goes on with or without them. They can play or sit out. In using this analogy, Frantzich fails to recognize that his students are inherently political.

By defining the realm of politics as narrow and the corresponding political action as drastic, Frantzich, rather than inspiring students, risks further alienating them from the breadth of possible political experience. *Citizen Democracy* teaches students what they may do individually—with great time and sacrifice—to affect the political process. It does not, however, teach them what they may do together.

—Rebecca Rose

Across the Great Divide: Explorations in Collaborative Conservation and the American West

Ed. by Philip Brick, Donald Snow, and Sarah Van de Wetering
Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001.

This book bears witness to "the movement of one very potent idea across a region"—namely, the emergence of collaborative conservation as an alternative to what former Montana Speaker of the House Daniel Kemmis terms "the trench warfare of adversarial politics and decision making" that had surrounded environmental issues in the American West. By integrating case studies with testimonials and opinion pieces, editors Brick, Snow, and Van de Wetering present a comprehensive examination of the role of collaborative initiatives in the environmental movement. In language that is both hopeful and honest, this text offers a very

real sketch of collaborative conservation, acknowledging the failures, barriers, and paradoxes that can undermine collaborative efforts, while analyzing collaboration's triumphs.

The editors hold that there are three fundamental implications of collaborative conservation: the deep involvement of communities in local conservation efforts; the conservation of the community itself; and a sense of community that extends beyond local surroundings—a "community of all who share a passion for accessible nature." Consequently, this book evaluates collaborative conservation in local community and extended community contexts. It addresses issues such as where and where not to collaborate; how people can reconcile local and national authority in issues related to public lands and resources; how the results of collaborative conservation are to be evaluated; and whose voices are missing from discussion and how those voices can be located and heard.

movement and the American West over the past three decades. In essays that chronicle the factors contributing to the emergence of collaborative conservation, the authors decipher the changes in Western economics and demographics, the policy gridlock that developed within the environmental policy arena, and the need for a new kind of politics when confronting environmental issues. The authors couple historical facts with personal accounts and create an illustrative map of the birth and development of collaborative conservation in the American West. The editors then segue from essays explaining how collaborative conservation can function in the environmental movement to case studies that illustrate how collaborative conservation actually has functioned in specific communities facing specific environmental issues. These case studies provide an intimate look at how people, institutions, and resources can connect to the work of environmental conservation. The strength of the book arguably lies in these case studies, for they expose collaborative conservation at its most vulnerable and paint for readers a very honest picture of collaborative conservation that theory alone could not provide.

Across the Great Divide does not offer a blueprint for implementing collaborative conservation in the environmental movement. For that reason, the book should appeal to a broad readership. The goal of the book is to shed light on the emergence of a conservational phenomenon moving through the American West. This it vividly does. Ultimately, Brick, Snow, and Van de Wetering conclude that, "while we do not see collaborative conservation as a replacement for traditional environmental conservation approaches, we do believe that collaborative initiatives will enrich, deepen, and make more effective the environmental movement as a whole."

—Kara Rademacher



"Collaborative conservation did not emerge in a vacuum," the editors maintain, but rather appeared in response to a series of changes and tensions that have culminated within the environmental

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving 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 corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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**Graphic Design
and Production**

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*Kettering
Foundation*

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