

Letting Foundation

# CONNECTIONS

Summer/Fall 2005



## June Board Summary

**A**t 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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# International Research Opportunities:

## Research through Joint-learning Agreements

By Randall Nielsen

*“(A)mong the great variety of developments that have occurred in the twentieth century, I did not, ultimately, have any difficulty in choosing one as the preeminent development of the period: the rise of democracy.”*

Amartya Sen

**A**t the foundation’s semiannual retreat last January, staff and associates discussed opportunities for—and challenges to—engaging our research in international contexts. Some proposals focused on new lines of research. Others identified existing areas of Kettering research that might be usefully illuminated through wider international experience. As always, we tried to identify critical problems that the particular strengths of the foundation’s research might speak to. What have we learned about what people in other countries see as the central challenges to their efforts to strengthen democracy?

Participants noted the problems resulting from viewing democracy as a Western import. Subsequent discussion quickly led to insights about the importance of thinking clearly about how international research into the challenges of “making democracy work” should be done. One unique strength of the foundation’s research is the result of what we call joint-learning agreements. How might a similar approach in the interna-

tional research help alleviate the “Western import” problem?

In a widely cited article published in the *Journal of Democracy* (1999), Amartya Sen argues that the “recognition of democracy as a universally relevant system, which moves in the direction of its acceptance as a universal value, is a major revolution in thinking, and one of the main contributions of the twentieth century.” However, Sen notes a critical challenge to democratic experiments, one identified by the Kettering Foundation a decade ago—a thin notion of what democracy is and what it requires of people, communities, and institutions.

Sen identifies one symptom of the problem: the tendency to equate democracy with the mechanics and structures of majority rule in elections. This implies that democracy is largely a technical challenge and can be exported—or even imposed—by creating formal institutions that structure representative voting. As such, democracy is correctly seen as a Western concept. In many countries, this makes experiments with democracy harder to legitimize, and therefore less secure under the inevitable tensions brought on by change.

We may be witnessing the impact of that “thin notion” in Latin America. A recent report issued by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) found that over 50 percent of Latin Americans say they would support an authoritarian regime over democratic government if authoritarian rule could restore order and resolve their economic problems. If democracy is viewed principally as a means of choosing officeholders, it may not seem like much to give up.

The foundation’s research is based on a deeper, more general vision of democracy. It is grounded in a focus on the roles people need to play as problem-solving actors in democratic politics. As such, democracy is seen not as a destination—which when reached will deliver particular outcomes—but as the ongoing journey of people struggling with challenges to their collective ability to rule themselves. The challenges to citizen self-rule are not fixed; they emerge from changes in technology, demographics, and global political forces. Kettering research thus emphasizes the study of practices—ways that citizens, communities, and institutions can work together—that hold the promise of increasing the ability of people to act in concert on problems they share. It also recognizes that because circumstances change, constant study and refinement of the ways those practices work is required.

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**Democracy is not a thing that can be granted to people, exported to people, or imposed. Democracy has to be made to work by the people who make up the citizenry of a place.**

Seen that way, democracy is not a thing that can be granted to people, exported to people, or imposed. Democracy has to be made to work by the people who make up the citizenry of a place. What does that paradigm suggest about alternatives to “exporting democracy”?

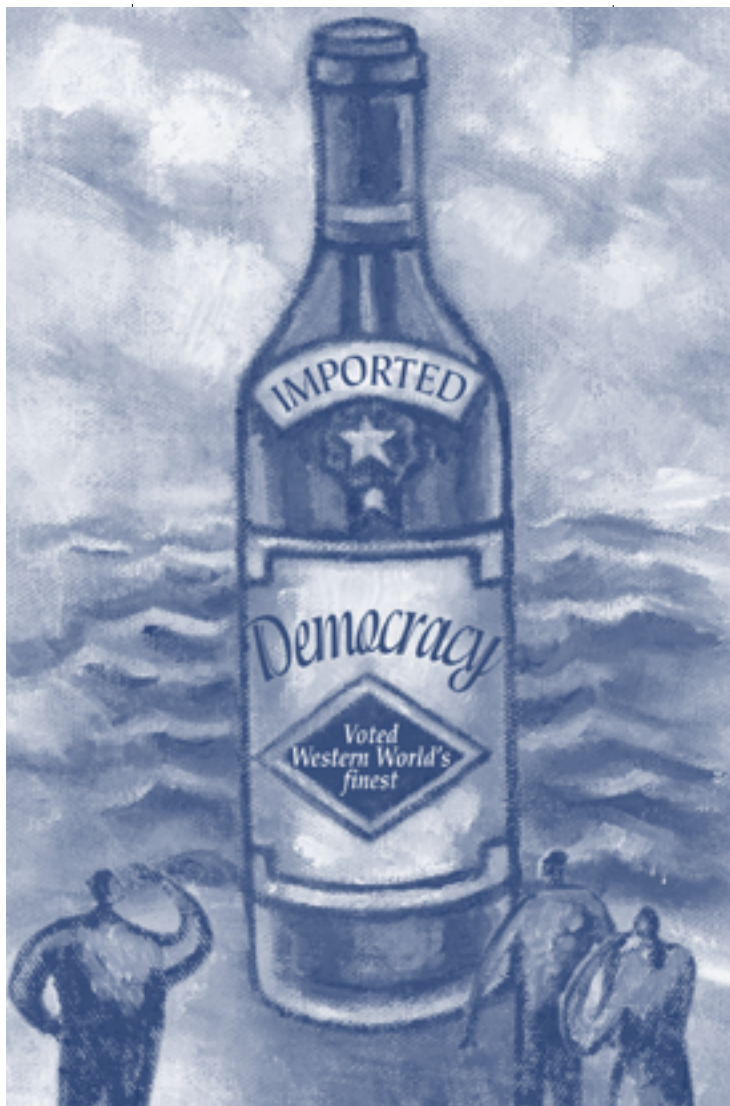
One way the foundation develops and tests insights is through learning



agreements with organizations that have their own reasons for attempting to “make democracy work as it should.” These organizations have chosen to explore how they can facilitate the public engagement of issues. Furthermore, they hope to learn from their efforts and share that learning systematically. The foundation’s joint-learning agreements do not fund the organization’s activity, but rather support the costs of documenting and sharing what is learned about mutually agreed-upon lines of questions.

The Kettering Foundation has two general goals for the joint-learning projects. First and most obvious is to develop our practical understanding of how to make public life work better, and report findings in ways that can inform other organizations struggling with similar challenges under different conditions. Kettering realizes that organizations exploring their impact on civic life need to learn their way to more effective practice. Learning is also necessary for efforts to continue to grow through time. The development and growth of effective democratic practice does not come from building on success so much as from learning from experience. Although it is difficult for any organization to reflect on unsuccessful efforts, it is exactly those “failures” that provide some of the best opportunities for shared learning.

However, we also know that many organizations lack the capacity to interrogate their experiences in productive ways. Most are set up to do things, not to reflect on and record what they are learning in ways that allow findings to be shared. The foundation’s shared-learning relationships deliberately intend to address that dilemma. When successful, they have the long-term effect of changing the way organizations see themselves as civic



actors, especially through the development of their capacity to learn and document what they are learning and thus continue to innovate in practice.

Recent meetings with international organizations revealed some intriguing possibilities for shared-learning agreements. As described in Ileana Marin’s article (see p.18), an increasing number of organizations around the world are coming to see the potential of deliberately exploring how to interact with citizens in public life. Some have recognized that, although there are no simple techniques for doing so, lessons from experience can be derived and shared so that efforts can complement and build on each other. There are clearly more opportunities for international shared-learning agreements now than ever before.

However, these meetings also reinforced our understanding of the challenges to doing international research through joint-learning agreements. By far the biggest obstacle is in distinguishing the goals of the foundation as a research organization from those of grantmaking organizations. Many of the standard protocols that tie organizations in other countries to U.S. grantmaking foundations are in direct tension with the development of joint-learning relationships. Joint-learning relationships depend on keeping the responsibility for the work, and the learning that results, located in the organizations and their communities. Extensive experience with grant evaluations, however, has taught many organizations to document instrumental activities rather than record their reflections on experiments.

Conventional practices of evaluation often hinder effective, self-generated learning, perhaps more so

in international contexts. Still, we have reason to believe that the challenge can be dealt with successfully. At a recent meeting with organizations from various countries, one participant argued that he saw no tension between acting and learning in his organization’s protocols. He noted that organizations that proceed without reflection inevitably fail. Successful organizations are constantly learning. The challenge, he noted, is in capturing the learning in ways that can be shared with others. Although that challenge may be more difficult when dealing with organizations in other countries, the growing recognition of the potential of shared-learning agreements gives reason for hope.

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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](http://www.kettering.org).

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