Focus on Communities
As regular readers of Connections know, the Kettering Foundation organizes its work into research on citizens, communities, and institutions. Each year, the foundation reviews and evaluates possibilities for new lines of research through the "lens" of one of the areas. The current focus is through the lens of community, a term which refers to the places where people develop networks of civic relationships to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. In communities, people educate future generations in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and create the conditions that allow them to prosper economically. The interactions among the people of a place—joined in ever-changing alliances of civic associations and formal institutions—are what determine the capacity of a community to address those goals. Maintaining and building the community is a matter of maintaining and building these relationships.

Early in the current review, it became clear that behind many of the concerns about the role of citizens in politics is a critical and largely unrecognized problem: the idea of communities as arenas of collective acting is increasingly unrecognized. And it is not only that that frame of reference is missing in the formal institutions and agencies charged with serving the public interest; as recent reports by Richard Harwood show, the insight is lacking even in the community-based organizations that have historically been the entryways for citizens into public life. (See the review by Connie Crockett on p. 29.)

One symptom of the problem can be seen in the widely documented reports of people’s sense of their collective political impotence. People feel there is little chance that they, or “people like them,” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. What is the problem? Our review recognized one well-researched part of the challenge: citizen-directed civic initiatives are often blocked by formal organizations and government agencies. But there appears to be an even more fundamental underlying problem. The thin notion of the role of public life in community leaves many such initiatives unimagined and thus untried. With that problem in mind, we identified the logical follow-up question as the overarching theme of the year’s review: how can the concept of communities as arenas for collective acting be recognized and illuminated? The question is motivated, of course, by the foundation’s primary interest in how people can more effectively marshal their civic resources in order to shape their collective future.

The following essays provide a partial record of what we are finding. They highlight the challenges faced by citizens, civic associations, and formal institutions in identifying and making practical use of the concept of communities as places of public work. They also provide a sense of the various networks of exchange through which the foundation works. The foundation conducts its research with community groups, government agencies, research organizations, and scholars through joint-learning agreements. Throughout the year, workshops bring together people working in related areas to exchange findings and make sense of what they mean. In what follows, readers will find what we hope are illuminating references to the various ways the foundation goes about its work.

Based on an understanding of research through networks of exchange, we want to encourage readers to share with us their own experiences and suggestions for others who might collaborate in the research. Authors of the essays that follow were encouraged to write with that sort of reader in mind, which suggests posing questions rather than answering them. You are encouraged to join the conversation, through the Readers’ Forum found at www.kettering.org.

—Randall Nielsen

A Note from the Editor
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How does one maintain public engagement in solving common problems after a popularly driven transition to democracy succeeds? This is the challenge facing democracy in South Africa in the postapartheid era. Whereas before the first democratic election in 1994, the public was broadly mobilized and focused on changing the government, now that the transition has taken place, many ask what the proper roles of government and citizens should be in addressing the many developmental and human rights challenges facing the country. Despite early enthusiasm for government to directly solve these problems through newly created institutions, many South Africans are once again asking what role citizens must play in these matters.

The Dialogue Unit at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) has been working with communities since 2003 to identify that role and to develop the civic practices needed to fill it. The challenges are twofold. First, in areas of...
Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities

the country where the government has taken a robust role in implementing programs to promote development, citizens have lost a sense of ownership over public problem solving. The lack of participation and ownership means that when citizens are dissatisfied with government actions, their most natural resource becomes protest. Second, in the areas where the government has not taken as active a role, but expectations for the postapartheid system nonetheless abound, there has developed a sense of helplessness and a reliance on government grants.

In both of these types of settings, IDASA has experimented with deliberative dialogues as a means of restoring a sense of local agency, generating new ideas for development initiatives, and helping citizens break out of the zero-sum mindset that so often leads to conflict within communities over resources. A description of representative projects in both settings demonstrates how deliberative practices can help citizens better realize their own role in solving public problems.

One area where IDASA has been repeatedly asked to provide support to citizens and government has been public transportation facilities in the formerly black townships that exist on the periphery of South Africa’s metropolitan areas. These facilities provide train, bus, and mini-bus taxi transportation to township residents. Because of the vast number of people that pass through these stations on a given day, they have become lively hubs for informal trading activities, involving people setting up stalls to sell goods like vegetables, snacks, and toiletries, or to provide services like shoe repair or haircuts. Until 1994, such facilities were completely ignored by the government. Government provided minimal infrastructure, the platforms for boarding or alighting from trains and buses, and the traders operated in open fields, or parking lots, regulating their own activities through local associations.

This changed dramatically after 1994. The removal of migration restrictions on black South Africans created a massive influx into townships of poor, unemployed people, many of whom turned to trading in transportation facilities, thereby increasing competition for those already there. Also, the government took responsibility for developing these facilities, regulating trader activity, and providing training so that traders could develop their activities into fully matured businesses. In the facilities where IDASA has worked, these changes have broken down the existing means of regulating trader activities and created distinct interest groups that frequently clash, sometimes violently. Along one dimension, there are those well-established traders who think the number of people trading in the facility should be limited, clashing with the more recent arrivals who advocate for their right to make a living. Along another dimension, there are those who favor maintaining the traditional, community-driven, system of self-regulation because it particularly favors their interests and who resist those traders and other stakeholders that favor the more egalitarian regulation, which can be provided by government.

In a third dimension, there are trader groups that have been better able to capture government and NGO-sponsored development assistance, who in turn have attempted to monopolize it to the expense of those groups that were less successful or failed to take the initiative to benefit from it.

In the places where IDASA has been asked to help, it has consistently found a stalemate; none of the interest groups prevail and development efforts consequently stagnate. IDASA’s response has been to create dialogue spaces where people from all sides can learn to collectively name and frame their concerns, thereby moving in a direction where stakeholders can generate more cooperative local governance. One example of a reframing took place in a meeting where participants agreed that the problem was not so much conflict among cohesive interest groups, but rather lack of accountability and self-dealing among the leaders that represent the groups. The response was to organize new elections for informal trader association leaders. Another example was a meeting where trader groups complained to government officials about poor facility maintenance. By the end of the discussion, however, it was agreed that ensuring cleanliness, for example, was a collective responsibility. The group reached an agreement that government would supply cleaning supplies and the traders would organize to clean up for themselves.

IDASA has also been asked to provide support in rural parts of the country that are seriously underdeveloped. A feature of many of these areas is not just competition over external resources, but also underuse of resources that the communities have at their disposal. This has partially been the result of overavailability of government grants, which are easier to spend on consumption than to invest, but it has also been caused by missing links in the economy that prevent people from being able to sell the goods or services they produce.

In these settings, IDASA has trained community leaders to facilitate their own deliberative processes, aimed at resolving conflicts over past misuses of resources and generating interest in launching new income-generating activities. A key element of this has been developing the skills and patience, not only to start new projects, but also to collectively assess and resolve challenges to those projects as they arise, rather than simply giving up on them. One example of this was a community-generated project to raise poultry for commercial sale. After setting up the
required infrastructure to raise chickens, the group realized that they had not fully figured out how they would get the chickens to market. Rather than abandoning the enterprise at that point, which had in the past often been the response in such situations, the group turned its focus to generating a marketing plan and identifying potential outside partners who could help them gain access to distribution networks.

Another interesting result in successful rural area projects that IDASA has run has been a subtle change in attitude towards government development assistance. In most places where IDASA starts an initiative, community groups look to government as the primary driver of development efforts in their areas. At the end of a successful project, project participants still believe that government assistance is required for development, but only to address specific infrastructural or other gaps that prevent their own initiatives from succeeding. Thus government comes to be seen as a strategic partner in development, rather than as its agent.

The accomplishments in all of these projects are made possible by a focus on creating spaces where people can learn to talk about problems without the pressure to produce solutions. Generally a dialogue is needed in communities when the solutions proposed by stakeholders fail to take account of the entire public’s interest in a problem. Thus, clearing the space of the need for solutions enables people to listen more carefully and take a fresh perspective. Yet convincing people of the need to talk about problems without immediately trying to solve them is often the most difficult step in any deliberative project. Indeed IDASA has found that this is not only an approach it must advocate, but a skill that its projects must teach. The core message of its work is that development is not signified by material goods, but rather in a community’s improved capacity to respond to increasingly difficult public and private challenges. Material progress is simply a result of that deeper development of civic capacity.

Teddy Nemeroff is with IDASA Kutlwanong Democracy Centre. He can be reached at tednemeroff@hotmail.com.

When I went to Michigan State University (MSU), a land-grant institution, I was told its history: In 1855, farmers in Michigan went to the state legislature and demanded they be given access to the resources of higher education that were available to elites through the University of Michigan (UofM). They wanted a focus on agriculture and wanted to learn what they needed to develop and run their own communities. The legislature told the farmers if they could find the land within 10 miles of the capital, they could have their university. A farmer donated the land—mostly swamp—and Michigan State was born with a four-year curriculum and a degree program to rival that of UofM. (Of course some say it was the largest wetland devastation in the
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—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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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.

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