

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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2010



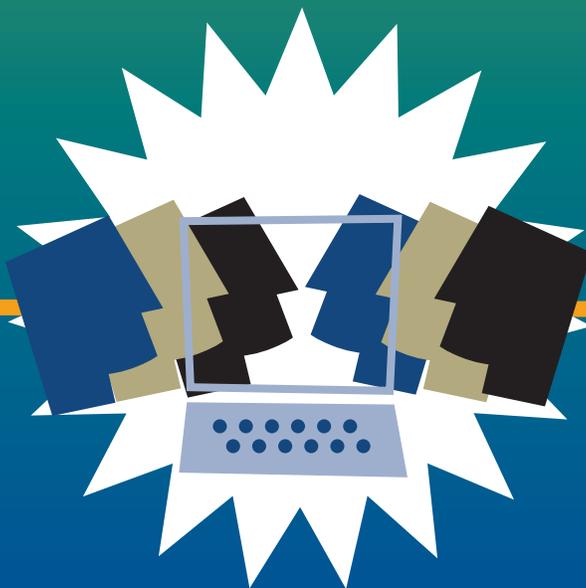
The role of  
**Civic**  
**Organizations**  
in today's  
society

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# CONNECTIONS

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*By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach*



## The Challenges of Civic Life

### *Editor's Note:*

*The foundation has a longstanding research interest in understanding some of the barriers to democratic practice. During the past year, we have focused our attention on the kinds of organizations that help promote civic skills and opportunities to address collective problems within communities. We are not alone in noting that a once thriving network of civic organizations has become less “civic” and more “organized,” limiting the opportunities for citizens to feel they can make a difference. The first section of this issue describes some of the challenges this change has had on collective self-rule. Derek Barker provides a brief history and literature describing the reduction in civil society. Martín Carcasson highlights the polarized nature of public discourse and describes a center for public life that is passionately neutral, and thus an honest broker of difficult conversations. Dorothy Battle describes the gap between what citizens might bring to collective problem solving and how organizations often fail to recognize these citizen resources. Scott Peters and others relate the need to connect different ways of communicating and how cooperative extension might weave connections among different perspectives. Finally, Dallas and Marin share a series of multinational perspectives on the need for an independent sector; without it, democracy fails to deliver its promises.*

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# Uncovering Organic Community Politics:

## A View from the Inside

By Dorothy Battle

Ordinary citizens are always talking to each other about conditions and circumstances that they would like to see changed in their community; I've been listening in. So, What are people saying? Who is listening? Who should be listening?

Community talk is important, unique work that citizens must do. When it doesn't happen, citizens can become sidelined, which can lead to frustration and anger. At one point in U.S. history, civic organizations provided the bridge between the issues citizens talked about and the many institutions within a com-

munity. But over time that bridge has been weakening, leaving an ever-widening gap between citizens and their contributions and their community.

The following story offers a classic example of how citizens are sidelined from helping address the problems they care about.

It all began when people in my community recognized the number of high school dropouts were a *community* problem—a problem that the schools and parents alone, were not able to handle. Community members saw youth on the streets during school hours and noticed an increase in juvenile crime. They knew that what happened with local youth would have profound, broad, community implications.



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## Uncovering Organic Community Politics

These community members met for months, talking through the problem and determined that the issue would require a collaborative response from citizens, school district board members and administrators, local government officials, and nonprofits. Here's a summary of what was done:

*A citizens' group had gotten together to deal with school dropouts. They met for months to define the dropout problem, figure out what could be done, and then see that something was done. They formulated a plan and asked county officials to endorse the effort and provide financial resources. The county officials complied. The citizens' group also sought to link planning with the mission, strategies, and structures of a local educational institution. Citizens had invited administrators to participate with them as they looked at how they might go about shaping a program for dropouts. For a brief period, collaboration seemed to exist between citizens and the administrators. Suddenly, citizen capacity was challenged. The leaders of the local educational institution agreed that generally the citizens had a good plan. However, when it came to who would control and manage the program for dropouts, the institution's administrators declared that they should be in charge of making decisions about the program. The implications were that citizens were no longer needed to solve the problem. Citizens left the table and professionals and experts from various community institutions who proceeded to establish a program for dropouts replaced them.*

This institution failed to see what citizens might provide and may have even failed to recognize the concerns that were framed when the citizens talked together.

An inside view of organic community politics is helpful in understanding how the collective contribution of ordinary people makes democracy work as it should. There is a natural interdependence between communities and their institutions, but sometimes communication breaks down. That's why citizen-to-citizen deliberation should be a key part of many of the systems set up to support democracy. These exchanges evolve from simply

being concerns that citizens share with each other, but they progress in no particular sequence or in any standardized manner. Rather, community politics unfold as people confront the complex realities of their lives to help create change that is consistent with what they value. There are no predetermined structures, strategies, or incremental outcomes. People engage, using their own resources and capacities as a starting point. Beyond that, they may begin networking with others and reaching out to public and nonprofit institutions for additional resources.

So much of my own experience in community politics happens by chance. Typically, it happens informally face-to-face or with a phone call, on an Internet social site or by e-mail. Communication about community affairs might be initiated by questions like *Did you read the article in today's paper about the closing of a city swimming pool? Have you heard more about the school district's plan to close more schools? What do you think about the plan for streetcar transportation? Did you notice the decrease in high school graduation rates? Do you think the people in that meeting reflect the views of our community? Are they focused on protecting the interests of people just like themselves?* These types of questions, and their responses, might prompt people to meet and continue to talk about the issue; they ask others to join them. Ownership of a problem and taking responsibility for solving that problem can happen when people talk together in a way that is deliberate.

In the community where I reside there are an abundance of institutions and organizations that claim dedication and willingness to help citizens deal with community issues. Yet, some citizens in my community have said that our public institutions and organizations have fallen short on their claims and responsibilities in regards to community growth and progress. One woman who is quite active in the community has repeatedly stated:

*They don't know what community is because they have not taken the time to know. Instead they sit in their offices and decide what is good for the community. They think they know the answers, but they can't without practical knowledge of what is taking place in the lives of people in the community.*

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Another woman, a neighborhood leader, declared:

*They send experts to train us in a process in which each of the neighborhoods have to compete for the resources. We only participate in their process because we need the funds. Their process does not change or address what we in our community believe should happen.*

A gentleman who is concerned about schools in his neighborhood explained:

*They asked us to participate in designing our neighborhood school. All along, they knew what they wanted the design to be. They just wanted us to approve what had already been decided by the architects and other planners.*

In addition to listening in on community conversations, I am a member of a civic organization. So I have seen both sides of the issue. Members of this organization are expected to maintain a high level of civic engagement. The organizational structure configures groups of members to address educational, social, and local governance issues. But this structure unintentionally keeps the membership somewhat fragmented. A mission statement, goals, and strategies guide the

## Uncovering Organic Community Politics

work of each group. In one group, people who do not have children or other relatives in any of the schools, and in many cases do not even live in the school district, make the complex decisions about the education and schooling of children in urban public school districts. Likewise, a major focus of another group is very technical and quantitative. In meeting after meeting, the emphasis is on the number of people involved in programs and activities that have been aligned with a strategic plan, informing the public about our efforts, and raising money to perpetuate activities. Occasionally the question is raised: *what difference are we making?* The response usually involves indicating

by saying: *Their idea of solving community problems is bringing in people just like them.*

The human meaning that develops from engaging one another in shared concerns has been pushed aside and replaced by scientific problem solving. This has left us with a world that is dependent upon professionals and experts. This expert-driven world is only sufficient for solving problems of an instrumental or technical nature. To solve problems that are complex, multidimensional, and tied to human meaning, the experience of people who are driven by their desires and commitments must be factored into changing community conditions for the better. Some citizens have stepped

aside for professional problem solvers; others have not. I have participated with groups of people in my community who come together when necessary to change circumstances that are not in accordance with their collective beliefs, hopes, and aspirations.

In another example, a group of citizens were more successful in becoming "part of the process." An organization, formed with

backing from corporations and large nonprofits in the community, commissioned a study to determine progress with community-police relationships. Community members were invited to a presentation of the major findings in this study. When the ordinary citizens (rather than professionals or experts) left the meeting, they convened at a restaurant to not only reflect on what the report said, but also to raise questions about the merits of the report. The following comments came from that discussion:

*Now what? We heard the report. What should we be doing?*

*The people in that room were a small representation of community. In fact the people who should have been in the room were not invited. Those who convened this meeting really don't have an idea of who community actually consists*

*of. They think community for the most part, are people who look and act like them. How can police-community relations really improve without the people who are most directly affected?*

*Let's help by setting up a meeting with the people who commissioned this report and are responsible for continuing the work of improved police-community relations. We should tell them that they must become more inclusive with their efforts to involve the community. They must listen to the community more broadly. We can map out who should be included. Actually, if we look at our neighborhood councils as ways into getting broader community participation, we have begun to map a strategy.*

The group carried forth on their plan to advise the organization's leadership that broader community participation was necessary. Several members of the group met with the organizational leaders and presented an outline of a plan. The overall response from the organizational leaders was: *Can you prove that this will work?* Technical approaches to problems rely on quantification, linearity, precision, results orientation, standardization, replication, and proof. This approach has dominated problem solving in communities and may actually constrain the civic capacity of citizens by leaving them with no work to do. For citizens, the proof comes when they recognize change by strengthened relationships and a clear understanding of shared values.

The complex nature of our community and the problems affecting the well-being of citizens, have implications not just for experts who solve technical problems. These complex problems require meaning making and norms that are based on trust and relationships. This meaning making rests with the civic capacity of citizens to transform their communities through a process of well thought out exchanges. For citizens, time or notions of efficiency do not necessarily bind this process. Instead the process becomes a weaving of relationships and collective values, which unfold as transformative possibilities.

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how many of the group's materials have been distributed, which community leaders are aware of the organization's efforts, and how the group might influence and attract the attention of other community leaders.

While each and every member of the organization is a volunteer and no doubt deeply cares about the community, there is a mind-set about solving complex community problems. This mind-set suggests that those privileged by formal knowledge, skills, expertise, and station in life know best how to define the problems and decide what should be done. They rarely think to connect the association's work with others in the community who could bring a new perspective to what it means to live in the community or who may have resources to address problems in concert with the organization. One former association member summed it up

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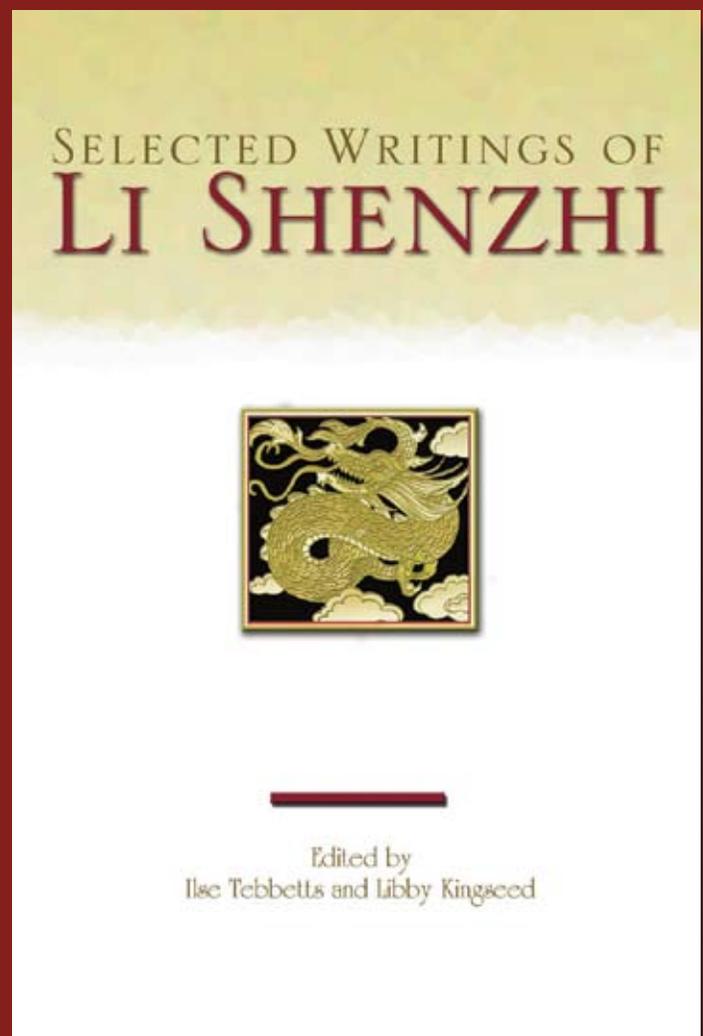
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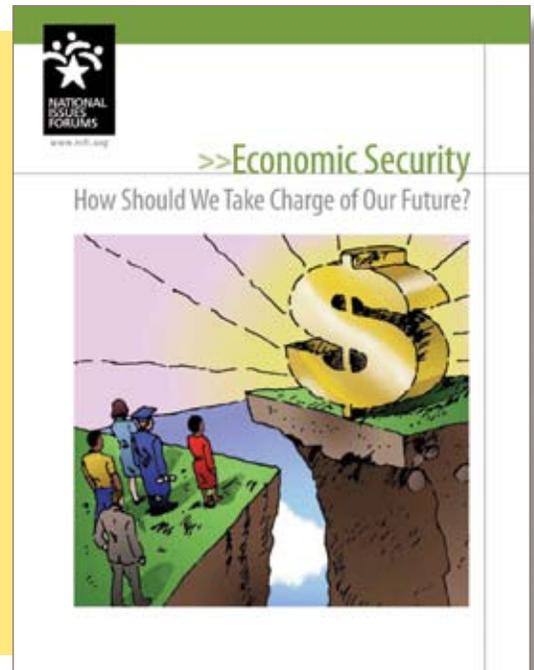
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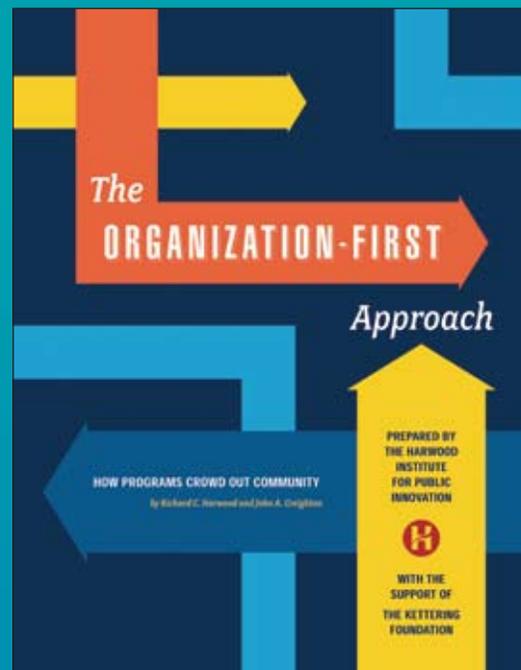
# The Organization-First Approach

## 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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