

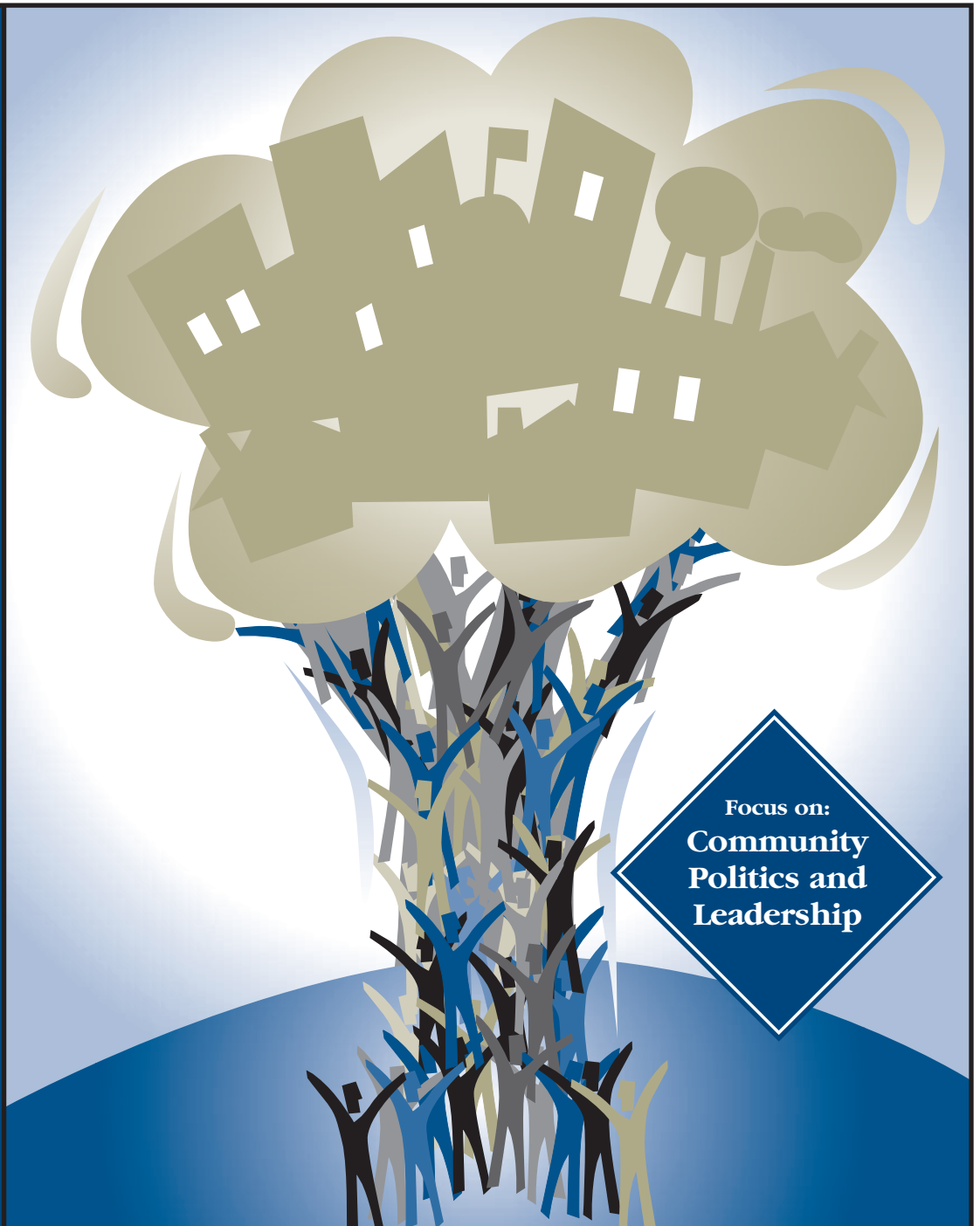
CONNECTIONS

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Inactive Communities: Lessons from Rebuilding

By Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Kettering Foundation research on “inactive communities” is an important aspect of community politics and leadership research. Instead of focusing on communities with vibrant, healthy civic lives, “inactive communities” research sheds light on how civic life gets going in places where social ties are weak. Weak social ties exist in many different kinds of communities. Wealthy, gated communities and suburban neighborhoods are as likely to have inactive civic lives as inner-city neighborhoods and poor, rural communities. The difference is that financial resources can cover up the absence of public or community life. Where resources are few, however, the absence of public life is more deeply felt. The Kettering Foundation is interested in these kinds of places. Where crime, unemployment, or economic dislocation have overtaken a community, the presence of a vibrant civic life is essential to building the quality of community life.

The research on inactive communities seeks to uncover the spark or element that prompts citizens in communities where the social fabric is coming apart to engage with their neighbors in civic discourse or action. It examines how the absence of certain civic factors causes or contributes to a community's decline. Even in cases where there is cause for little hope, people in some communities continue trying, people in others simply give up. Our research tries to identify what leads to public-acting in one community and public inaction in another. It probes questions that enable us to gain some understanding of the relationship between civic engagement and neighborhood stability. It seeks to understand how civic engagement triggers positive change in community life. It asks, What gets public engagement started and, also, what keeps it going?

Public engagement is a continuing, dynamic process, and staying the course, especially in what can seem to be inac-

tive communities, is difficult. Experience in observing inactive communities reveals that change requires strong commitment. People often continue to work despite tremendous obstacles and setbacks, but there are barriers to progress, as KF research shows. In inactive communities, where the need for action is critical, the nature of that action is also important. Relying on experts or on government can relegate people to the sidelines and stop the community-building process.

The successful resolution of a problem can also slow or halt progress. In the absence of a problem to draw them together, people may return to business as usual. Their sense of themselves as public actors diminishes, and they turn inward, ignoring their role in public life. In other cases, citizens faced with seemingly intractable problems simply give up in frustration because they are tired of getting no place.

Understanding how some communities shift from having inactive to active civic lives can provide insights that will enable people who are attempting to rebuild civic life in their communities to plot a course of action. This research is enriched by people in many communities in the United States and in other countries. In war-torn countries such as Tajikistan and in places like Cincinnati, Ohio, where racial tensions have divided the community, people are working to repair civil society and improve public life.

Success in communities that change their public practices is often attributed to activities that occur after people in the community did whatever they did to get the process going. Since change in communities takes place over many years, people tend to forget what actually happened.

Our research finds that most people in communities are seldom aware of the significance of community engagement and of their role as citizens in helping promote a healthy civic life. When asked, “How did your community come to be the way it is?” respondents often tend to focus on

Even in cases where there is cause for little hope, people in some communities continue trying, people in others simply give up.



It is possible for communities to change their public practices. Even in the worst social and economic circumstances, we have seen people generate positive change and transform places where there was little hope.

Cleveland, Ohio, is an example of a community that changed itself from the inside out. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it was a city in decline. Over the course of the two decades, many of the industries that had once contributed to a thriving community moved to other places or went out of business. The downtown suffered, and many of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown were left to deteriorate. Today, Cleveland is a different city — it is known as a renaissance city. At a recent conference in Cleveland, civic leaders were asked how this transformation had occurred. They gave credit to the political leadership, they noted the importance of their public-private partnerships, and their ability to attract state and federal dollars. When pressed to share something they did that others, in smaller communities without resources, might learn from, they pondered the question. Finally, one person said, “We started to listen to one another, and we started to understand that change was in our mutual self-interest.”

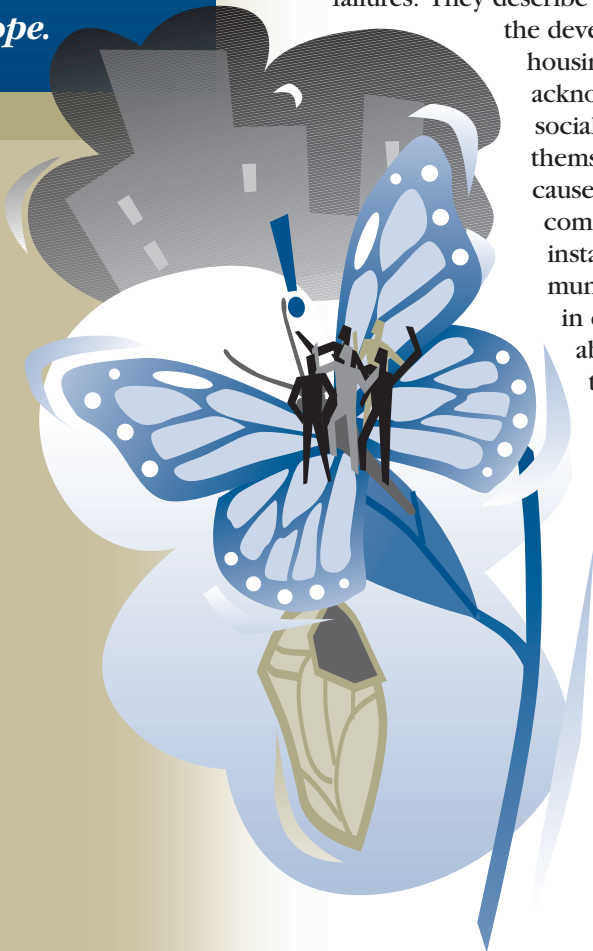
The success in Cleveland underscores the value of civic engagement as a key element in the public-private partnership equation that is often touted by city planners and business leaders. The commitment to consider what is best for people in the community made an important difference in the Cleveland community’s ability to succeed where other communities have faltered.

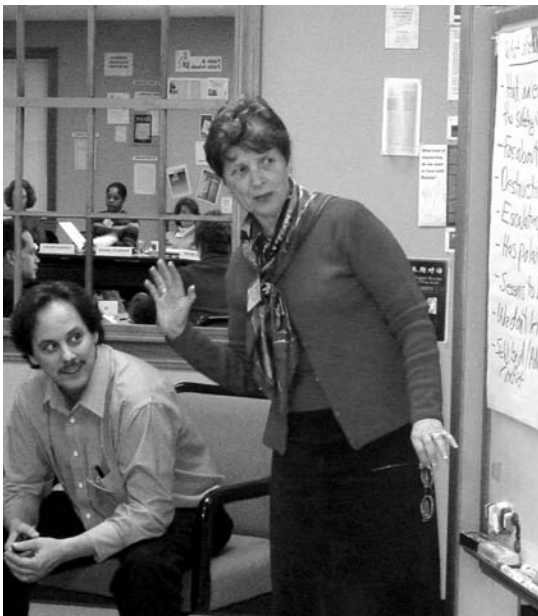
economic or institutional successes or failures. They describe resources, such as the development of new housing, without acknowledging the social capital that they themselves invested to cause the housing to come about. In instances where communities are failing or in decline, they talk about how they lost their primary industry, describe government corruption, or focus on some other manifestation of their failed circumstance. Most people view their community as static. Yet the reality is that communities are always

changing and what people tend to do, or not do, affects the nature of that change and the manner in which they view their community’s civic capacity.

A study of Tupelo, Mississippi, by Vaughn Grisham, Jr. (*Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community*, [Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999]) provides insight on how a community can change its sense of itself for the better. What is significant and what the experience of Tupelo shows is that as the attitudes of people within the community change, attitudes of people outside the community also change. Tupelo, for example, has been able to attract new business and industry because people now see it as a place worth investing in.

Kettering research suggests that there may be a connection between the economic and social health of communities. In Tajikistan, for example, a sustained dialogue that began nearly ten years ago in an effort to bring an end to a vicious civil war has given rise to regional citizens’ groups composed of former enemies, now united in an effort to sustain peace and build economic prosperity in Tajikistan.





We suspect that change begins when people in a community decide that they need one another in order to solve a common problem that is too great to ignore. Usually, the problem has reached crisis proportions and there is nothing to lose by attempting to work together — and everything to gain. Findings also suggest that a certain type of leadership is necessary. This style of leadership serves as a catalyst, energizing the talents of others in the community.

KF research also suggests another thing that causes or encourages people to become engaged: a type of human interaction that generates among people a

sense of what is possible. J. Herman Blake, a scholar and educator, witnessed this sense of possibility and its power to motivate, during his work with community groups in the late 1980s in Indianapolis. Blake operates within the asset-based framework articulated by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann in their book *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. Instead of needs, he sees resources. Instead of “inactive” communities, he sees untapped capabilities and capacities. People without physical or economic resources sometimes feel they lack the ability to solve the problems confronting their communities. But Blake’s experience as well as our research suggests otherwise.

Findings from our research in communities demonstrate that it is possible for communities to change their public practices. Even in the worst social and economic circumstances, we have seen people generate positive change and transform places where there was little hope. As Herman Blake says, “There is no known limit to the capacity of the human mind to learn, grow, develop, and change.”

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