

CONNECTIONS

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2007

A Year's Review
from the Perspective
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the
READERS' FORUM
See page 33

What You Need to Know about *Connections*

With this issue of *Connections*, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change *Connections* from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering's review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation's research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering's hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing *Connections* once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation's research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you'll find throughout the following pages, this issue of *Connections* reflects the foundation's research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the "Readers' Forum." As its name implies, the new section



features reactions and comments by *Connections* readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the

foundation's hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The "Forum" is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true "Readers' Forum," the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—*Connections*. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation's Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you'll find a new section devoted to this issue of *Connections* and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online "Readers' Forum" is an attempt to help readers better connect to *Connections*—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

CONNECTIONS

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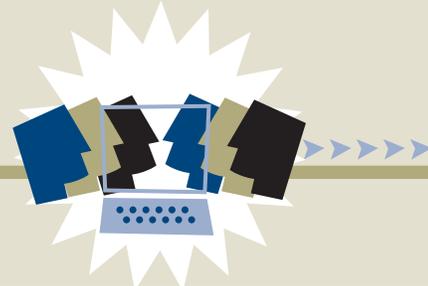
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The Persistence of **POWER** Changing the System When the System Won't Listen

By *Kenneth A. Brown*

In 1994, South Africa's first truly free elections brought Nelson Mandela and his African National Congress to power. It marked an end to apartheid rule and the end of decades of political discrimination and social injustice brought on by the country's longstanding policy of strict racial segregation. The economic inequalities created by apartheid rule, however, have proved harder to tackle. Five years after the end of apartheid, with an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent and a murder rate six times as high as that of the United States, as many as one-out-of-five black South Africans were telling pollsters they were better off under apartheid rule.

No one, of course, is seriously advocating a return to apartheid rule—but the poll numbers suggest, at least at the surface, how deep the public's sense of frustration runs. "What people say is that we have the crown but not the jewelry," said Mpho Putu with the Institute for Democracy in South Africa and a former Kettering fellow. What they mean, he explained, is that while democracy is flourishing, the country's economy is still struggling. "The question is," he said, "how do you merge the two?"

Beyond Politics: Democracy and Economics

The problematic relationship between democracy and economics issues is a recurring theme among those in Kettering's informal international network whether one is talking about the unpredictable political and economic world of post-Communist Eastern Europe or the struggling economies of Africa and Latin America. Meaningful citizen engagement in political affairs, as many in the network term it, is a revolutionary idea—but the idea of meaningfully engaging citizens on major economic questions is an even more radical one. Many, however, suggest

that it is impossible to have one without the other. The question, as Putu suggests, is how to go about it.

Critical economic decisions today are typically made by professionals—the economic and financial elite—with little or no public input. At issue are not only the actions and policies of international groups like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, but also major corporations and private financial institutions. As one representative from Ghana termed it, "I believe there will be no democracy in Ghana until there is democracy all around the world." Economic decisions, like political decisions, they suggest, will be significantly better if they truly engage citizens. Democracy, they say, needs to reach beyond simply political issues into the all-important question of economic development. Power, however, is persistent and this notion will undoubtedly need time to take root and find its way into practice.

Changing the System and Engaging Institutions

Citizen engagement then is not enough on its own if it is not coupled with institutional engagement—if institutions are not ready and willing to recognize the capabilities of citizens for action. That hard lesson has been clearly demonstrated in Latin American countries like Brazil. While the country has a number of innovative aspects of its constitution to encourage citizen involvement and many cities have provisions for direct citizen involvement, there is a growing sense that there is a larger, more powerful, and yet indefinable system in place that makes real public action impossible.

When the current Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, first took office in 2003, he was not only the first left-leaning candidate to win office in nearly half a century—he had also grown up

poor himself, leaving school at age 12 and working as a shoeshine boy and street vendor to help support his family. Hopes were high, not only because he had made addressing Brazil's extreme gap between rich and poor a cornerstone of his campaign, but also because he understood the plight of the disadvantaged so clearly. Once in office, however, his ambitious plans proved hard to implement, and Lula himself was soon forced to make compromises with the Brazilian congress and international banks.

"After a few years we're seeing that it's not that easy," said Telma Gimenez, a former Kettering fellow who teaches at Brazil's University of Londrino. The inability to change the system, in turn has created a lot of frustration—with not just Lula, but with the possibilities of politics and democracy as it currently exists. "The question is, how can we—with a diverse country like ours, with this enormous gap between the rich and the poor—make a conciliation of our different conflicting interests?" Recent events have taught people that "it's not just a question of replacing one group with another," she explained. "It is more complicated. We have learned that politics is not just black and white." But this is not entirely a bad thing, she said.

I think it helps our understanding of democracy—because we may start thinking in terms of our own engagement instead of just looking for a savior, for someone who's going to do everything for us—because we know that's not going to happen.

The question is, however, will people be able to change the system if the system is not willing to listen?

Kenneth A. Brown is an associate with the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at kbrown@kettering.org.

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. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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