

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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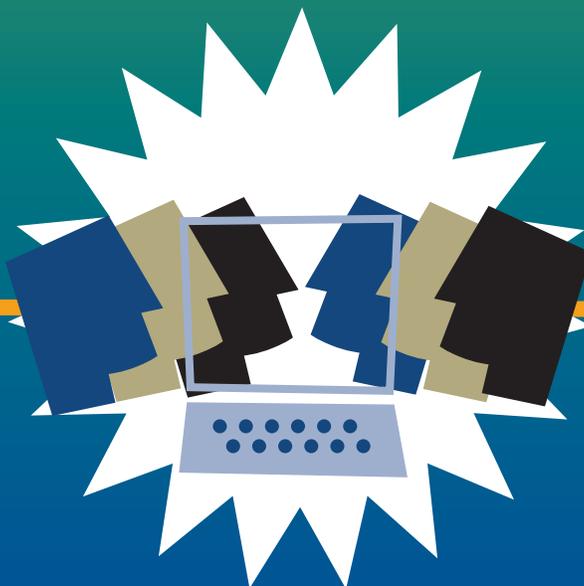
The role of
Civic
Organizations
in today's
society

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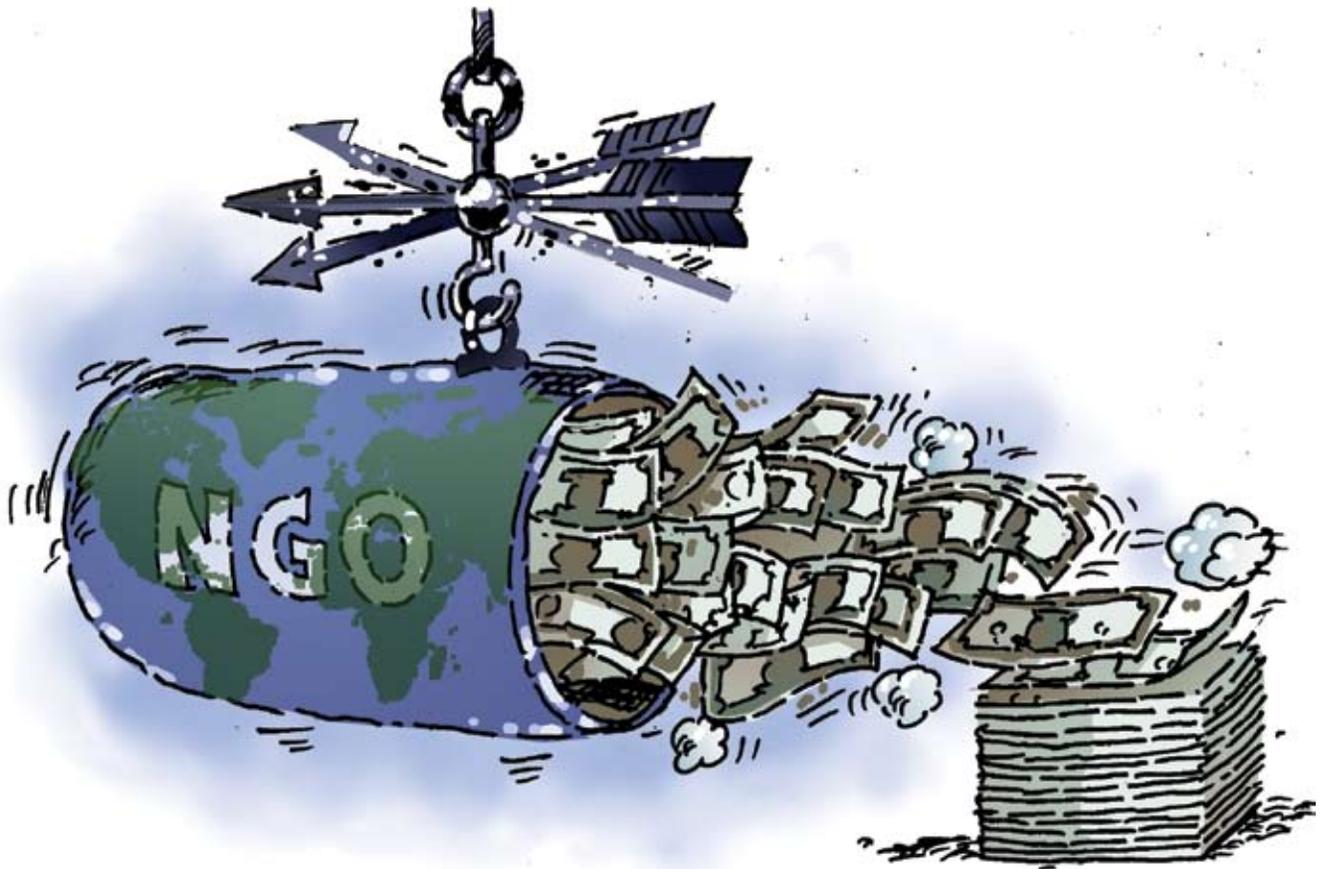
By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



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.



Multinational Perspectives on Civil Society

By Paloma Dallas
and Ileana Marin

As the Kettering Foundation has focused this year on the trends that seem to be distancing civic organizations from the people and communities they represent and the effect this may be having on democracy in this country, we had an opportunity to share our current findings and concerns with colleagues from 14 countries, including the United States and Puerto Rico, to see whether any of them had experienced a similar phenomenon.

They had. And what was striking was the extent to which these former and

current leaders of nongovernmental organizations from four different continents have been struggling with many of the same challenges as their U.S. counterparts. For some of those who had lived through a democratic transition, there was also a sense that civil society is often forgotten in the focus on elections.

A Chilean law professor, for instance, said that civil society was very important in ending that country's dictatorship. During elections, however, "civil society was sort of tired," he said, and power was handed over to the government. Today, formal democracy in Chile continues to work pretty well, but it is not enough.

A Romanian colleague agreed, describing a sense that democracy has not delivered after what he called "the Romantic Period" following the end of his country's Communist regime. Talking about NGOs like the one he works for, he said that, in spite of greater professionalization, they are increasingly alienated from communities. "We are able to survive because we developed bureaucratic skills . . . to be funded by European public money, but at the same time, we involve less and less the citizens in our projects."

Multinational Perspectives on Civil Society

People working in NGOs from Zimbabwe to New Zealand talked about a similar disconnect, as well as the tendency of their organizations to act on behalf of communities without asking the communities what they want. Others noted a problem at the other extreme: that many communities suffer from “consultation fatigue,” without ever really feeling listened to. Either way, there was widespread agreement among those we spoke with that NGOs are becoming less connected to the citizens they were created to help.

As with the NGO, or independent sector, in the United States, there has been an increased focus on accountability and transparency, but few felt this was helping to increase NGOs’ legitimacy. Instead, many of the people that we spoke with felt that the measures have created new layers of bureaucracy, which have further distanced them from the people. A Ghanaian journalist spoke about the perception that much of the money NGOs receive is being spent on bureaucracy or overhead, rather than on helping people. And an Irish colleague spoke of the insidious way that such measures have of undermining creativity.

No one challenged the need to track how money is being spent, but many questioned how standards are determined and assessed, echoing concerns we have often heard from civic organizations in the United States. An Argentine colleague said that NGOs often operate like “bags in the wind.” “They will blow according to where money is going,” he said.

And a Puerto Rican colleague challenged the very premise of NGOs being accountable to the citizenry. “It is not by chance that there has been an explosion of NGOs as the state has been shrinking,” she said. “The state is shrinking and yet citizens still have needs to be taken care of collectively. But NGOs are not accountable to citizens; they are accountable to the same forces and donor agencies that are shrinking the state.”

The difficulties in countering these problems are numerous. “My first challenge is helping my colleagues understand that we even have this problem,” said the colleague from Romania. Another challenge that many voiced is one of Kettering’s perennial concerns: how to engage with communities so people take

ownership over the problems they face.

“We are trying to get engagement to belong to the people rather than to the institutions,” said a colleague from South Africa. “Often they want to do things for people; they do not think about people doing things for themselves. If people own an issue, they will be engaged.”

Part of the challenge, said a Puerto Rican colleague, is to move away from a critical stance to imagine solutions. “We know what we don’t want, but what is it that we want?”

... It’s very hard to imagine the country that we want and work towards that.”

This challenge was echoed by many. “People are asking for more democracy, even when they don’t participate in society. It’s because there is no way out,” said a colleague from Guatemala. “I think we need ... to answer, what kind of country do we need for the next 50 years?”

In tackling this question, many spoke about building on local democratic practices and capacities rather than seeing democracy as something that must be imported or taught.

For instance, the Guatemalan colleague noted important successes that his country might build on. “We signed the peace agreement after 35 years of armed conflict inside the country. So, we happened to end the war, but we didn’t succeed in building peace. Now, we are facing the same old problems ... corruption, lack of transparency ... opportunistic action of civil society.” The challenge, he said, is “to ... construct a new social capital which is needed in the modern times.”

A colleague from New Zealand who works with the Maori said, “Democracy has not worked for Maori, and it isn’t working for Maori.” She described working to translate traditional models for the modern world. “We are reawakening what we call the ancestral mind in our peoples.” Others also noted democratic traditions among the indigenous people of their countries, what a colleague from South Africa

described as “a style of talking through an issue until you resolve it.” He went on to add, “Democracy in most societies was not a foreign concept, but just formalized.”

Despite these traditions, many felt that shifting notions of identity have affected the conceptualization of the collective and, therefore, people’s ability to work together. During the liberation struggle, said one South African colleague, many embraced a collective identity as African. Now, different ethnic identities are being used to divide.

An Indian colleague said his country struggles with the same. “The challenge for us is, how do you have enough space for identities to be expressed, but at the

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same time have a national fabric we can all relate to?”

The parallels with the challenges currently faced in the United States are many and varied and suggest the value of more opportunities to further explore these themes in multinational contexts.

And while the charges leveled at NGOs around the world were great, greater still was the implicit charge for citizens: to imagine what kind of a community or country they would like to live in and to think about how they would begin to work toward that goal.

Paloma Dallas is a writer and editor at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at dallas@kettering.org.

Ileana Marin is a senior program associate at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at imarin@kettering.org.



New Forms of Organizations

Editor's Note:

The lessons from organizations that are trying to address the decline in civil society are important reflections on what is being done in a variety of organizations, from higher education, to foundations, and even to governments. Randall Nielsen describes a model of civic, learning networks and how one organization in Chattanooga is attempting to foster them. I have a short article that describes how some centers (such as Carcasson's in section I) in the network of organizations using National Issues Forums (NIF) have evolved to focus on changing the nature of politics. Connie Crockett reflects on how communities come to "own" their problems—in this case education—thus improving youth development in ways schools cannot manage alone. Phil Lurie relates two stories about how government agencies recognize the ways citizens can contribute to improving communities well beyond what government can do on its own. And finally, Janis Foster suggests ways philanthropic organizations can turn their attention toward cultivating community-building activities if they look beyond the development of a nonprofit organization as their only important outcome.

**NEW from
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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

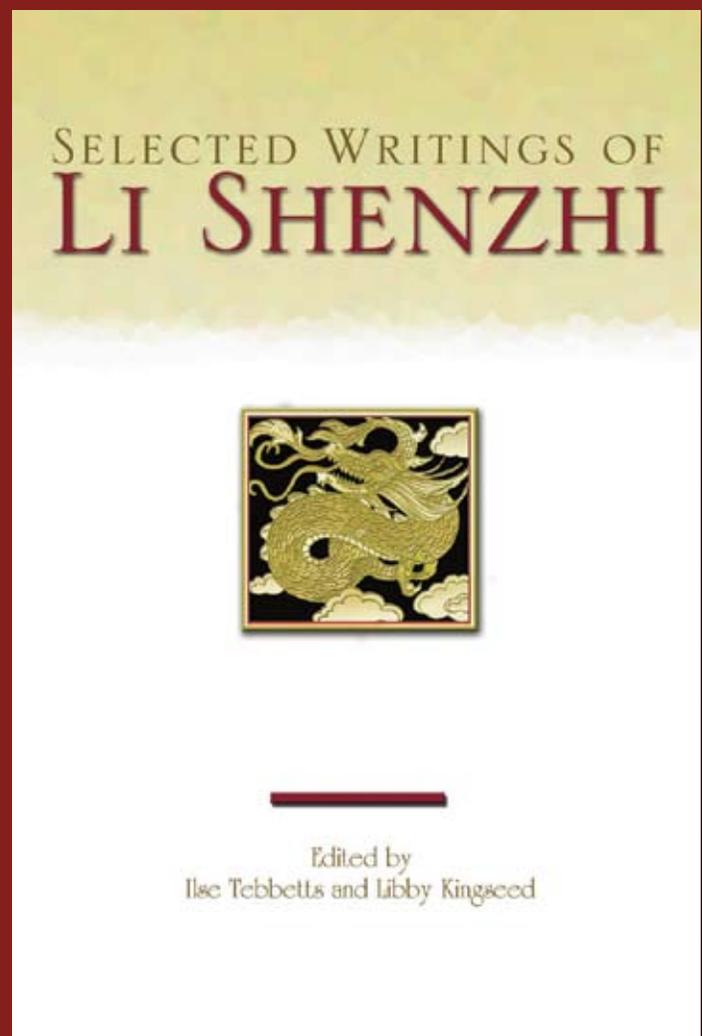
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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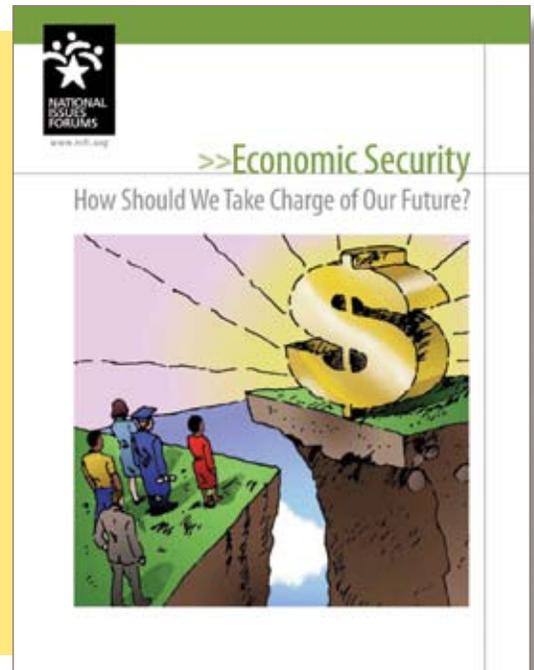
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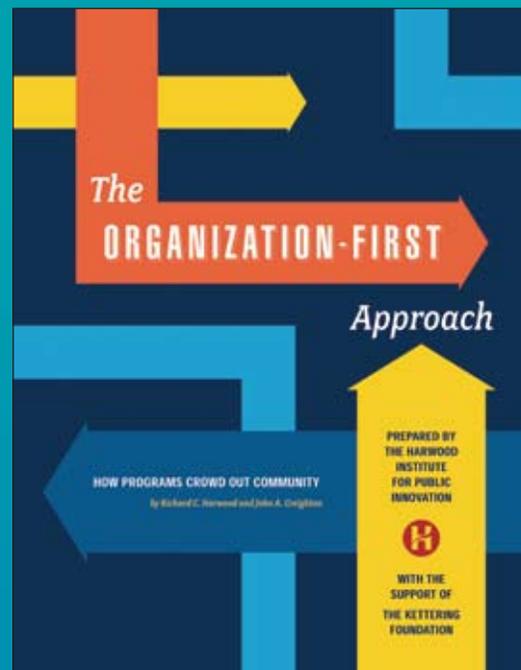
The Organization-First Approach

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.

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