“Democracy contemplates citizens joining forces and taking action on common problems through civic associations.”

At Kettering, every year we review our research by looking at all of it through one particular lens. This year, we have had our eye on the role played by civic associations, particularly nongovernmental organizations. We’ve become aware of a range of forces that appear to be reshaping what some call the independent sector. What we have learned has come primarily through observing what is happening in the large network of communities, organizations, schools, colleges, universities, and government agencies that we have gotten to know over the years. In addition, we try to keep track of what others are finding and what scholars are writing about. The Review brings some of this literature to the attention of our readers so they may join in the conceptual journey we have taken as we reflect on our research.

Our objective is to try to determine if changes in the independent sector may be contributing in some way to the anxiety and frustration that Americans now seem to feel about the direction the country is headed and about their seeming inability to affect the course of events. The concerns that worry citizens are familiar: an economic recession, global competition, the rising cost of health care, terrorism, and so on. These concerns are coupled with, indeed seem to reflect, a loss of confidence in the ability of the political system to respond effectively.

Last year, when we were looking through the lens of the economy we found that people had similar concerns. They were buffeted by job loss, mortgage foreclosures, and debt. Individually, they knew they could relocate, learn a new skill or profession, and be more frugal; yet collectively, they were at a loss about what they could do as a citizenry. People had little sense...
of political agency. Now, this same frustration with being unable to solve problems reappears when the issues aren’t only economic. So we wonder if the civic organizations that have been available to citizens as vehicles for their collective efforts are less available or less relevant these days.

We are aware of what scholars have documented: some national organizations that once had local chapters that organized citizens have closed their chapters, consolidated their operations in Washington, and hired lobbyists to carry out their missions. At the same time, the balance in the independent sector between organizations that serve the general interest and those that serve particular interests seems to have shifted toward the latter, so much so that one organization, calling itself Common Good, has emerged to address the imbalance.

Kettering research done with the Harwood Institute and reported this past year in The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community shows that even national organizations that continue to support the general interest are turning inward, focusing on their existing programs while being pressured to demonstrate immediate and tangible results from their interventions. This tends to create a disincentive for organizations to build civic capacity in communities because it might well be difficult to prove that their intervention and not indigenous forces brought about any changes that occurred. David Ellerman, formerly of the World Bank, has written persuasively on this phenomenon. Moreover, local civic organizations argue that the requirement to show measurable results quickly ignores those accomplishments that are intangible. As Bruce Sievers points out in the chapter we print from his recently published book, there are fallacies or blind spots in the prevailing epistemological assumptions in philanthropy—primarily the assumption that there is a kind of “scientific” knowledge that can lead to effective social and political controls. Bruce argues for greater appreciation of practical, local knowledge. And some public administration scholars have found that reliance on best practices and benchmarking inhibits experimentation and inventiveness. We hear about these inhibitions’ effects when we talk to the civic entrepreneurs who drive community initiatives.

Nongovernmental organizations are intended to be vehicles for citizens and play a role different from governmental institutions. Several years ago, however, we at Kettering were rather surprised to find that citizens don’t make the traditional distinction between governmental and nongovernmental organizations. They see the two as essentially the same: large, bureaucratic, and inaccessible. Like governmental agencies, today’s civic organizations tend to bring their agendas to communities rather than derive their agendas from them. In a word, independent organizations may have become “colonized” by government agencies, a case that Derek Barker makes in his essay on this trend. Even in smaller civic organizations, professional staff have come to do the things that citizens once did; and these organizations are not necessarily citizen-controlled, or vehicles that people can use for their own purposes. Although such nonprofits may act on behalf of the public, they don’t necessarily act directly with or through the public. Consequently, civic organizations may no longer have the legitimacy to mediate, as they were once understood to do, between the citizenry and the government.

But what about citizens’ ability to create new organizations, perhaps ad hoc, to serve their purposes? This does continue to happen, although some argue that it happens less often because modern society fosters social isolation; we “bowl
Another way to proceed has been to assume that if traditional civic organizations are changing their roles, it is logical to assume that they will leave a vacuum in which new organizations or ways of organizing may emerge in response. In other Kettering periodicals, Connections and the Higher Education Exchange, we lay out what we have learned so far about the evolution of some academic centers into what may become NGO-like organizations. In one paper, “Democracy’s Hubs,” Martín Carcasson has described the opportunities for such an evolution that occur as part of the civic engagement movement that is sweeping higher education; and Scott London’s study, mentioned above, reports on what such centers in colleges and universities are already doing to strengthen citizens’ abilities to participate in public life, revitalize communities, mend the social fabric, and advance the common good. Such centers are already working beyond traditional forms of citizenship education to give students opportunities to practice a deliberative democracy they can use every day, not just in elections.

One of the most intriguing stories about alternatives to conventional civic organizing concerns an effort in small, community-based foundations not to follow “best practices” and insist on getting projects up to scale but rather to “start small and stay small.” Philanthropies with this orientation may provide better opportunities for citizens to come together and act on
agendas they have set for themselves. Freeing its grantees from the obligations to scale up to a nonprofit organization, the Battle Creek Community Foundation, for example, is supporting resident-led associations through its neighborhood investment program. This could be a novel way of civic organizing that makes use of what Bruce Sievers calls practical, local knowledge.

In our analysis this year we are as yet without a definitive conclusion as to whether the established civic organizations are less relevant and less accessible to citizens than they used to be. Still, we have seen enough evidence to be concerned and hope to move on to these follow-up questions: what kind of civic associations do citizens need, and what would enable new or existing organizations to respond to those needs? When I ask myself these questions, I come back to the citizens on the Gulf Coast we heard about after Hurricane Katrina. They wanted organizations that could talk to them about how they might come together, as a community, to rebuild their community. While most communities haven’t been decimated by a natural disaster, they have faced wicked problems that require them to come together and to act as a community. Their citizens have to make sound decisions that reflect what remains more important to them—in the face of inevitable disagreement over what is most valuable to them individually. And they have to make choices about how to organize their efforts so they will complement and reinforce one another. Communities have a lot of this choice work to do on their own, and they would benefit from civic, nongovernmental organizations that understand this work and how it is done.

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