

CONNECTIONS

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Engagement**

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Kettering's Multinational Research



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through inter-related program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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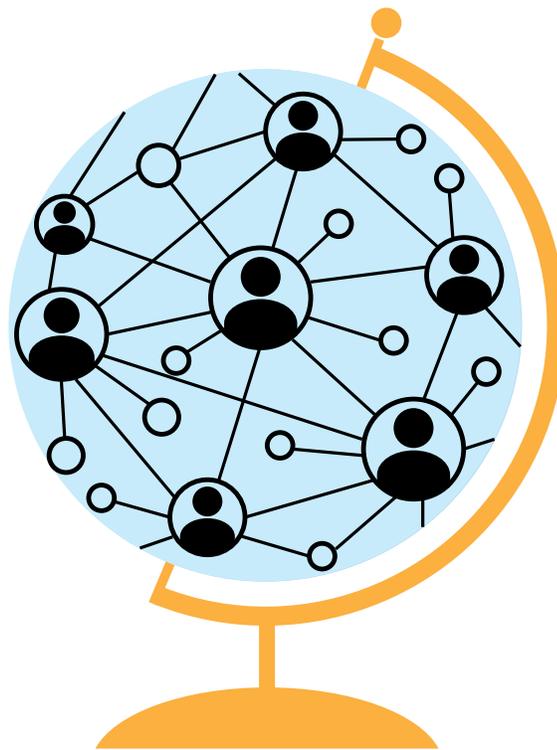
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The International Residents Network: A Self-Sustaining Instrument for Learning and Sharing

By Ruby Quantson

Responding to growing international interest in democracy research, in 1991, the Kettering Foundation established international residencies. These residencies, initially called “fellowships,” include the international residents, the Katherine W. Fanning Residents in Journalism and Democracy, and staff exchanges with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Peking University.



Residents usually spend several months at the foundation’s headquarters in Dayton, Ohio, exploring questions central to Kettering’s research program. Thus far, about 130 people have participated from around the world.

In the spring of 2014, I embarked, along with Leonardo Correa from Brazil, on a new research project to locate as many former international residents as we could. Both of us are former international residents, which put us in a unique position to interview others and analyze what we heard. This article focuses on the insights gathered from the research, expressed through the thoughts and voices of those we interviewed.



Let us lend our eyes to our colleagues in the network . . . provide an outsider's perspective; let's talk about our failures, what is not working and what interventions we can introduce; let us turn the meetings into an innovation lab and investigate why our political cultures are destroying our democracies.

—resident from Puerto Rico

It particularly highlights existing foundations and structures for building a formidable international network and how this platform could be sustained for learning across the world through self-responsibility as a principle of democratic practice.

A key interest in this research was whether former residents (at least a critical number) were self-motivated enough to be responsible for sustaining the network. This interest was particularly driven by two questions posed in the research interviews:

how might you work with the international network, and how can the network be managed and sustained?

MAPPING OUT OPPORTUNITIES FOR NETWORKING

Interactive Database

The core product generated in this research, critical to the sustenance of the network, was a database or directory on former residents. Intended to operate as an online interactive map, the directory describes careers, interests, and contact details of former residents and therefore offers the international alumni a platform to connect, exchange ideas, and promote collaborative work across a broad range of careers. Several former residents are applying the knowledge acquired during their residency in innovative ways. Their stories have the potential to ignite citizens' actions elsewhere.

For instance, a former resident who currently works as a wood sculptor observed inter alia:

I then took a few chairs and tables of wood; I went to a park near my place, . . . I made a circle, then I invited a few friends and the community. A lot of people came, people from my neighborhood, women that worked around the place, some of my students. . . . Now this place is a space where people can get together and talk about their issues.

What is needed is a means of sharing and learning from these experiences.

Global Voices and Actions for Democracy

The conversations with the former residents also revealed a broad knowledge base enriched by diverse cultures, practices, and experiences useful for knowledge exchange and transfer. The thoughts expressed were not abstract or whimsical; it was a rich and pressing struggle. They spoke to us about the challenges to democracy they see or seek to address within the contexts of a world facing a variety of challenges, including ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram; immigration and refugee crises; polarized politics; diminishing roles for NGOs; and coup d'états and unsustainable development goals in the developing world. When these voices and actions come together, they depict a challenging, yet engaging, global effort toward stronger democratic practices. If these conversations were to take place in a regular (even virtual) space among the residents, the learning and insights would be profound.

Building on Existing Initiatives

Former residents are interacting in many ways all around the world. We have learned of small gatherings in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Fiji, Ireland, New Zealand, Russia, and Tajikistan, to mention a few.

Residents from Ghana have assisted in offering training programs and participated in programs for organizations led by former residents from Zimbabwe and South Africa. The interactions range from simple dinners to exploring democratic practices in policymaking, as well as naming and framing issues. Several former residents are focused on boundary spanning, collaborating with each other to coproduce civic goods that strengthen democracy and promote learning in their respective institutions, as we heard in Kosovo and Tajikistan.

Mapping out these formal and informal connections with the aim of sharing with the larger network



There's been at least 50 people through my Kettering network . . . whom I've visited in the world . . . and developed deep, deep relationships and knowledge and experience exchange over the last 16 years.

—resident from South Africa



Writing papers on general issues that can be related to different people on the network . . . would allow the network to exchange ideas and experiences.

—resident from Guatemala

and upscaling can lead to greater learning and sustenance of the network.

A Sense of Community

We left the conversations with the sense that a community was being woven globally within the network. As we talked on Skype, the telephone, and over e-mail, the geographical boundaries melted, the issues raised from all countries were sharp and pressing, and the need to continue this kind of work around democracy became even more critical. For some it was “consoling” to know they are not alone in this work. There was a sense of “we are in this together.” As one resident from China remarked, “It is also wonderful to learn about what people . . . focus on.” These conversations revealed great interest in sustaining the interactions, and many sought to be part of an interactive platform.

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES TO INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING

While the interest expressed by the alumni toward an active learning network was inspiring, it is certainly not enough for the network to function in a self-sustaining manner. The chances of the network thriving are higher when a number of elements are present.

First, there ought to be a willingness by people to continue to connect. This may sound like a given, but this willingness goes beyond sharing contact details. Indeed, websites and social media platforms for networking do not necessarily get this to happen. As observed by a resident from Jamaica, “[We] need to be more intentional in accessing diverse works . . . around democracy.” This willingness comes with commitment that translates into some concrete actions with roles.

Second, networking thrives on goals. General chats on social and political issues are great—but only for a while. Such conversations are usually useful for homogeneous groups, often from the same country, with shared sociopolitical activities. International networking works better around a mutually beneficial idea, a particular aim, or piece of work.

Third, it is not enough to introduce a subject or piece of a project. We learned that no matter the support shown toward an innovative

piece of work, people need motivation. Self-motivation in networking is critical, but in the face of geographical barriers, the group ought to devise creative ways of animating the platform in ways that keep the network active and motivated to engage.

Fourth, while some things can be done through technology, others are better done in face-to-face meetings. For an international network this is challenging and particularly expensive. We assume that people in the same country do meet and connect, but this is not necessarily so. That said, this research was almost solely conducted through technology. With a lot more creativity, the international network could function at minimum cost through online activities, while building on little country initiatives that help to infuse the face-to-face elements.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If the interest expressed by the alumni is anything to go by, there is great momentum for a self-sustaining learning platform. The stories we heard illustrate the role that people in the networks around the world could play.

Promoting Regional Learning Centers

How might we build on the informal country meetings we heard about in the interviews? Many of the residents

proposed regional meetings. A resident from India remarked, “We should look for different forms of collaboration—national, regional networks or . . . build a network in different areas. . . . For example, we could build a network of journalists.”

The attractive part of these proposals is that first, they emanate from the former residents themselves, not directed by any central body. More important, the proposed “centers” could bring a larger number of residents in a given region or field of work together, say Africa, than one can have in any particular meeting in Dayton. Additionally, this will enable participants to focus on democratic questions peculiar to their regions and learn from experiments in similar environments.

Interconnecting International Activities

Apart from the common-interest groups we see in some countries,



Some people very far off are lone rangers and may not have many people in their country to support their work.

—resident from Australia



The fellowship just plants a seed and . . . we need to help grow that seed.

—resident from Kenya

there are constellations within the broad international network that require linking nodes. The alumni could connect with the various international projects as another way of updating and learning from organized centers. It will, for instance, be useful to connect more directly and intentionally with the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy and the Citizens' Accord Forum in Israel, as well as with the work in China, Cuba, and Russia. The residents were quite keen on knowing what others are doing. From Zimbabwe we heard: "There's huge expertise in the network, but we do not know what people are doing; I would like to know what other people are doing around issues I am working on."

Creating a Learning and Documentation Cycle

With the amount and quality of civic resources available within the international network, it is our hope that a self-facilitated process will trigger a series of exchanges and documentation of outcomes from which others can learn. As a former resi-

dent observed during the interviews, "The important thing is not to get 60 people talking but to create the avenue for two people who need to talk and for others to be informed and ask questions across countries." This happens when the stories and what we learn from them are consciously documented.

CONCLUSION

After 25 years of the residency program, we are at the point at which the international network should produce tangible outcomes. How can we sustain the network for long-term benefits? It will be useful for new residents to know they can engage in a global conversation with former residents when they are selected for the residency program. This requires some level of commitment from the international residents. The platform will also need champions, animators, or moderators.

More critically, this research, and by extension this article, serves as a renewed call to the international network to reactivate self-responsibility for sustaining the network. We invite alumni to think about how we might continue to interact and share our stories, research, and experiences in building stronger democracies around the world. ■

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