

# CONNECTIONS

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## Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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 interrelated 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](http://www.kettering.org).

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# Citizens' Accord Forum: An Issue-Based Strategy to Address Conflicts

By Phillip D. Lurie

**C**onflict among social identity groups presents one of the most fundamental threats to democratic self-governance. A common response is to design settings in which representatives of groups—defined by race, ethnicity, ideology, religion, gender, or the like—meet in dialogue to repair relationships. The Citizens' Accord Forum (CAF), a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization based in Jerusalem, works to build a shared society in a sustainable democracy in Israel, characterized by mutual responsibility, full participation, and equal opportunity among all Israeli

citizens. One of CAF's strengths lies in its ability to work with groups generally excluded from discourse on social issues, including ultra-Orthodox Jews and traditional Arab women.

The Kettering Foundation has been working with CAF in exploration of a related, but different, approach. The experiment began with an insight expressed by Ibrahim Abu Shindi, codirector of CAF, at a recent Kettering Foundation Multinational Symposium. He argued that he, like everyone else, has multiple identities. His identities include Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and man, among others. He noted that his unwillingness to be reduced to simply one thing runs counter to the identity politics narrative that typically defines conflicts in that geographical area. Many others at the symposium recognized implications for their geographical areas as well, including the United States.

Shindi's insight suggested an alternative approach. Would it be possible to identify issues of universal interest to Israeli citizens, including Jews, Arabs, and others? Examples of such issues might be education of youth, safety of neighborhoods, and the desire for good-paying jobs. Engaging in deliberative work around

issues will cause people to expand their understanding of the nature of these issues, which will, in turn, expand their sense of identities of others and themselves. People are much more likely to work together if they see themselves as responsible for the problem and can participate in the decision-making about what to do. That sense of responsibility and decision-making power results from the names that problems are given, and in particular, the extent to which such names reflect concerns that are valuable to everyone. Working through these concerns, and the tensions that arise between what people would like to do and the resulting negative consequences, can result in a better understanding of how a situation that affects people *variously* may best be borne by all of them, *collectively*. As such, development in the ability people have to govern themselves, *even in the face of identity conflict*, increases because people are no longer willing to be reduced to singular identities, nor do they see themselves as confronted with binary choices. When people get together with others who share an interest and capacity to deal constructively with issues of shared concern to all who live together in a place, the issues serve as a lever to think differently.

For more than three years, CAF has been convening around issues. In 2014, they began working with groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews and religious Arab Muslims, as representatives of non-liberal groups, to identify a shared problem, which they eventually named “We are losing our youth.” They then created a guide that would foster public deliberation among concerned Israeli citizens on that issue. Another effort has focused exclusively on ultra-Orthodox and Arab women. They’ve been able to express shared concerns and come to a shared understanding of issues around women and society, particularly regarding “spiritual violence”



**Engaging in deliberative work around issues will cause people to expand their understanding of the nature of these issues, which will, in turn, expand their sense of identities of others and themselves.**

or the use of religion to harass or abuse a spouse. This joint work caused a shift from seeing the issue as “my problem” to one of “our problem.” The issue came to be understood in such a way that each person could see herself (and her community or religious group) in the problem and the solution, which also gave them the courage to come together.

In our joint research, we have identified two challenges to an approach that starts with issues.



**When people get together with others who share an interest and capacity to deal constructively with issues of shared concern to all who live together in a place, the issues serve as a lever to think differently.**

One is that it can be seen as a rejection of the need to talk through identity. Indeed, a typical response to an issue-based approach is for someone to claim, “Oh, you want to talk about education, but you don’t want to talk about race,” for example. That is, the issue-based approach is understood as being mutually exclusive from an identity-based approach. Rather, the true challenge is getting people to recognize that, through deliberation on universal, community-based issues, people will necessarily have to deal with the myriad inherent identity-based issues.

Another challenge is that focusing on issues can be misunderstood as accepting of the current situation, including existing power structures. Again, the true challenge is stimulating the recognition that, through deliberation on universal, community-based issues, people will come to see themselves as responsible for addressing shared problems, and thus begin to rethink and reshape existing power structures.

Perhaps the best way to understand this issue-based approach is to learn more about it from those directly involved in the work. Philip Stewart, a Kettering senior associate, recently interviewed people who

work for and with the Citizens' Accord Forum. The following excerpts, edited for clarity, put this work in the voices of those closest to it.

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*Eyad Amer, imam and high school headmaster, talks about how deliberation on issues can bring about change on how people see themselves and others:*

I lead a religious group of imams. We have real power to change the communities in which we work. They have a lot of work to do to help their communities and the people who pray with them. If they want to say anything about the community or other people, they now talk about dignity, the neighborhood, and about others as like brothers. We cannot do things as we did in the past; power and force are not the best way to solve the conflict between us and the other.

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*Marwan Athamneh, journalist, describes how seeing issues as universal is critical to effect change:*

One project involved working with local councils about budget matching. Under rules at



*Eyad Amer*

that time, the state would match the amount of money that local councils could raise. But, this meant that the poorer councils, mostly in Arab communities, were not able to gain their fair share of these state funds, thus keeping their communities poor. As a part of this effort, we cooperated with the Haredi [ultra-Orthodox Jews] who faced the same kinds of problems. The more I came to understand their problems, the more I recognized that we faced the same problems. We then moved to other projects.

There was a magazine being published in Arabic, and we brought in other Arab, Haredi, and Jewish journalists. The Jewish writers wrote about Arab problems and vice versa. So, I met Haredi and Orthodox journalists and developed a deeper sense of what's going on in their communities.

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*Building on insights learned from these experiences, Athamneh continued to focus on issues:*

We stopped the focus on Arabs and Jews. We shifted the focus to different communities with different identities, recognizing that they have more shared interests than divided. So, we brought together some Arab journalists from the north of Israel, with some person from the Negev, and one from the center, an Ashkenazi. I keep asking them, is your influence greater or less when you attack these kinds of local issues, as compared to your focus on the conflict? I challenge the journalists by asking them, what change have you achieved with your coverage of the conflict between Jews and Arabs? What is different? Nothing! If you were to

do a small amount of research using what they published on local issues as compared with the conflict and then measure whether you have made any difference, you will find that the only changes come regarding our local problems. You have more credibility and less suspicion from the populace who you want to buy your paper when you write about their concerns. Otherwise, they feel you do not care; they become deeply suspicious of your motives. Once you publish this kind of local story you will see more interaction from the street.

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*David Steinberg, CAF's financial administrator, discusses how people can broaden their sense of identity through joint work:*

We have the Youth Parliament project, which is both Jewish and Arab youth from mixed cities. We learned that if they work jointly to gain something together, then an actual change will take place, both within them and within their community. When they start the project, a lot of the baggage they come with is just mumbo jumbo, stereotypes, and

slogans, and some of it is even slurs. When they do this joint work, they get to see in their own eyes what is real and what is not, and get to decide what they want to take into themselves and what they want to throw away because it is not real. It clarifies their own identity to themselves yet opens them to other identities that they were less familiar with before. They are committed even after the project ends. This is new, but within the last two years, we started having alumni sessions. It wasn't just, you finished your cycle and now goodbye. They continue to meet and to do stuff in their community together.

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*Tsega Melaku, journalist, talks about how, through deliberation on shared issues, people come to see themselves as responsible for those issues:*

Sometimes issues arise directly from the people. The politicians don't know everything. This deliberation enables participation by the people. Who is it who understands what the people need in their daily lives? It is the people themselves. They may need a tub of water, electricity, or an educa-



*Tsega Melaku*

tion for their kids. When decisions are made from the ground up, they are more successful. Also, the feeling of the people in participating together with the leader in making decisions, this helps them feel like real people, like citizens.

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*Evan Muney, director of operations at CAF, speaks to the misunderstanding that the issue-based approach is seen as being mutually exclusive from an identity-based approach:*

We have a program called the Religious Peace Initiative. Rabbi Melchior, who is the leader of

this initiative, wanted to see if he could involve religious people and in essence broaden rather than narrow the attempt at peace. After they are in the room, they get to an authentic conversation that gets to their shared concerns and their shared values very quickly because religious leaders talk every day. It is shared values and shared concerns that allow them to work across deeply different identities, identities that have been in violent conflict. And, no one is asking anyone to give up their identity. No one is asking a Palestinian Muslim cleric to become Zionist or even accept the other's narrative. The same with a settler Rabbi. No one has to give up their identity. The question they are dealing with is how we can remain completely true to our own identity and still accept the existence and legitimacy of the other and the fact that the other exists in the same geographic location. Deliberative dialogue enables people to get beyond positions.

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*Udi Cohen, codirector at CAF, in various correspondence with Kettering Foundation, describes how people and groups can move from a focus on a single identity to a more nuanced understanding of how people relate to problems:*

There is no need to prove to the other side that we are right, but to understand each issue's multiple aspects, while trying to assess the extent to which an informed joint choice can be reached. And if a joint choice cannot be reached, we seek to help citizens understand what the difficulties or motives are behind the lack of agreement. To run real discussions about identity is very difficult. It can be either simply meeting and coming to know each other and to really understand your identity and compare it to my identity. A good deliberation is that people seek understanding and not picking fights. One of the things that motivate people to do that deliberative work is if they understand this as responsive to their identity. ■

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