

# CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2019

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Exploring the  
Relationship between  
**THE PUBLIC  
AND GOVERNMENT**

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).

*Connections* is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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ISSN 2470-8003

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# Felt Democracy: Multinational Research Exchange Week, 2019

By Wendy Willis

It has become axiomatic that citizens' trust in government is at an all-time low. The 2018 Democracy Perception Index found that "a majority of people around the world

feel like they have no voice in politics and that their governments are not acting in their interest (51% and 58% respectively)." As it turns out, citizens of nations deemed "democratic" by Freedom House have even less trust in government than those living in "nondemocratic" countries. More than half the respondents from democratic countries said their voices "rarely" or "never" matter in politics, and nearly two-thirds said they believe their governments "rarely" or "never" act in the interest of the public.

It was against that backdrop that 54 participants from 21 countries gathered with Kettering Foundation staff and associates at the foundation's campus in April 2019 for



Multinational Research Exchange Week. Through a series of plenaries and breakout sessions, the group considered:

- How can both government institutions and communities approach public challenges in ways that make them better able to solve problems?
- What gets in the way of such approaches? How might alignment between the two be further developed?
- How might that change the current relationship between the citizenry and government institutions?

The focus of the gathering was 1) to consider how citizens work with governments and other institutions to improve their communities and accomplish public goals and 2) to explore instances of citizens and governments—both local and national—engaging in “complementary production” to create public goods. As the foundation’s longtime director of international affairs, Hal Saunders, once put it, “There are some things that only governments can do and some things that only citizens can do.”

Over three and half days, those 70 people shared examples of citizens engaging in complementary production alongside governments and

other institutions, sometimes under very challenging circumstances. Several themes emerged over the course of the week:

- In a democracy, citizens are the source of power, and they need places and opportunities to recognize and develop that power;
- It is much more common for citizens to engage in complementary production with governments at the subnational level;



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*Martin Ochoi*

- Complementary production is often most robust when citizens identify and begin work on an issue and then later partner with government (rather than the other way around);
- Mediating institutions play an important role in bridging the gap between citizens and government; and
- There are a number of preconditions necessary for complementary production to thrive.

### **CITIZENS AS THE SOURCE OF POWER**

Ottón Solís, member of the board of the Central American Bank of Economic Integration and former candidate for president of Costa Rica,

kicked off the exchange by reminding participants that citizens—rather than government officials—hold the power in a democracy. As he put it, “Citizens do not need to surrender power to officials. . . . In democracies, citizens are the owners of power. If you are an owner of something, you must exercise responsibility.”

While there was wide agreement about the source of power, a few participants warned that most citizens are disconnected from their own power and that significant complementary production often requires widespread culture change.

Martin Ochoi, a media and communication consultant at the University of Namibia, and Chaacha Mwita, a consultant from Internews, both said that Kenyan citizens don’t often see themselves as empowered actors *vis á vis* the government. Rather, they see themselves as “helpless,” waiting for the government to come to the rescue.

Several participants suggested that social media can ignite citizens’ sense of their own collective power. Using social media channels, citizens are able to organize quickly and in large numbers, allowing grassroots movements to spring up in communities all over the world. Germán Ruiz, professor of social communication from the University of Cartagena in Colombia, told the story of a group

of activists who used social media to organize large street protests in response to the ongoing marginalization of indigenous people. Eventually, an indigenous senator started working with the activists, and together they applied a traditional deliberation tool—minga—to start a conversation among themselves and with government officials. Ruiz suggested that the citizens first had to get a sense of their own power through protest before they could begin to work with government and elected officials in other, more deliberative ways.

## **BIGGER IS NOT USUALLY BETTER**

In discussing citizen mistrust of government, a majority of the participants' stories involved national governments. Some participants believed that even when citizens are "invited" to participate, the invitation is often tokenistic and is issued to serve government's—rather than the people's—interests. Or worse, sometimes national governments invite citizen participation only once something has gone seriously wrong. As Tendai Murisa, the executive director of the SIVIO Institute in Zimbabwe, put it, "Why are we being invited to clean up the mess that they made? Citizens don't have ownership over the mess. Why should they have to clean it up now?"

As the unit of government—or the size of the national government—got smaller, there were more meaningful examples of citizens working with government to address community issues. Antonella Valmorbida, secretary general for the European Association for Local Democracy, argued that any unit of government representing 16 million people or more is too large to meaningfully engage with citizens.

The participants shared many more examples of complementary production—or at least positive engagement—between citizens and governments at the state (or provincial) and local levels. As Idit Manosevitch, senior lecturer at Netanya Academic College in Israel, contended, it is important for citizens to "feel democracy," and that feeling is much more palpable at the local level.

Nonetheless, participants identified barriers to meaningful complementary production, even at the smallest scale. Robust local initiatives often require devolution of authority from national governments to local ones, creating more opportunities for citizens to work on issues in their own communities. Many times, however, the devolution of authority does not include additional resources, and local governments and



*Antonella Valmorbida*

communities then struggle to sufficiently fund locally led initiatives. Because local governments are burdened by unfunded or underfunded federal mandates, they are often set up to fail, which increases the spiral of mistrust between citizens and government. Svetlana Gorokhova, director of international and educational activities for the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature, also reminded the group that in some places—such as Russia—citizens may actually see local governments as more corrupt and more susceptible to political pressure and bribery than the national government, creating a dynamic by which citizens go around local officials to seek help from the federal government.

## COMPLEMENTARY PRODUCTION GROWS FROM THE GROUND UP

Participants offered several significant examples of citizen-generated complementary production. In most of those cases, the citizens themselves identified the problem and then acted together to address it before inviting government into a supporting role later in the process.

Nadia Aissaoui, a sociologist with the Mediterranean Women's Fund, told the story of a remote village in eastern Algeria that was without a hospital or any other medical facilities. The women of the village began a campaign to build a health-care unit in their town. They successfully raised the resources to build a clinic for women and children, and the village started getting positive press coverage both in Algeria and abroad. As a result, the government reached out to local leaders to join the new initiative. Eventually, government officials both helped supply medical equipment and also spearheaded other infrastructure improvements in the community. Aissaoui summarized, “[W]hen citizens organize themselves, they can challenge the local government, and they become real partners because they show that they are creative and they can appear as able to solve their problems



*Tendai Murisa, Nadia Aissaoui, and Nabil Baladi*

without waiting for the solution from the government.”

Tendai Murisa also shared two instances in which citizens led, followed by government. One involved women in a local cake-baking association who organized themselves to clear out street drains so that children wouldn't play in standing water and potentially be exposed to cholera. After the women began their work, the government stepped in to support them.

Murisa's other story, however, displayed a more complex dynamic between citizens and government. After Zimbabwe was hit by Cyclone Idai, many communities were unreachable for days and, in some instances, weeks. Citizens began to work on disaster relief and recovery themselves. Once the government could reach most communities, officials tried to centralize the recovery effort. But the citizens pushed back, arguing in favor of the informal systems they had developed. Eventually, after some struggle, government relief agencies agreed to work alongside the systems established in the communities rather than impose a top-down framework driven by government.

As Antonella Valmorbida colorfully put it, it is up to governments to “monitor the sparkle,” to determine where citizens are putting their energy and then support those efforts.

## MEDIATING ORGANIZATIONS

As demonstrated in several of the stories above, democratic complementary production is deeply rooted in relationships, and often those relationships are nurtured by institutions outside of government. Participants identified a range of organizations—from private consultancies to large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—that play that nurturing and mediating role. Abdullah Rehman, director of community engagement at the Sultan Bahu Trust in the United Kingdom, offered a very instructive case featuring a low-income neighborhood in Birmingham, England. After decades of neglect from the police, there were several murders of young people in the neighborhood. A few residents began to protest; then more and more joined them. Eventually—working with the police—neighbors founded a street watch program. And then, they founded the Balsall Heath Forum, a community-based organization that organizes the neighborhood around a wide variety of issues. They focus on everything from on-the-ground neighborhood safety to lobbying on behalf of citizen priorities. Balsall Health Forum even garnered the attention of former Prime Minister David Cameron, who advocated for a similar nationwide model, which he called “the big society.”



*Abdullah Rehman*

None of this comes without risk, however. Several people cautioned that NGOs and other mediating institutions can be co-opted by government and—if they are not careful—turn their attention toward the needs of government at the expense of the needs of the people. As Rehman said to the group, “It [takes] years to build trust. It takes seconds to lose it.”

### PRECONDITIONS

Participants identified several important preconditions that support citizens’ ability to engage in meaningful complementary production. One of those preconditions is gathering spaces—both physical and digital. Time and again, we heard that citizens gathering together is often the beginning of complementary public work. Sometimes, that work began as protest and later evolved into other activities to benefit the broader community.

Another of those preconditions is a “learning culture.” We heard many stories about citizens learning together about the needs of the community before they began to work together to address those needs.

Finally, one of the most important preconditions is basic trust among citizens. Even if citizens don’t trust government, they can find a way to work together if there is a baseline sense of trust among themselves. If citizens cannot disagree and still

trust one another to do the things that “only citizens can do,” a significant power vacuum will develop that antidemocratic forces can and will fill. The question of trust was one expressed by Kettering president, David Mathews, and echoed by Idit Manosevitch: “What does it take to move to that point that citizens join together not because they like each other and not because they want to really spend time together socially but because they realize that they need each other?”

### CONCLUSION

Nearly every day there is a new report about the deconsolidation of democratic values, yet the almost 70 people who gathered in Dayton last spring found reasons for hope, particularly at the local level. They shared stories of citizens who are working together to identify problems and solutions, seeking help from intermediary organizations and government officials when necessary. In many places around the world, citizens are working with government to address issues important to communities and community members and, in the process, building a stronger democratic culture. ■

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