

CONNECTIONS

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**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
between Communities and Local
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THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

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.

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Democracy Is a Snowball Rolling Down a Hill: The 2021 Kettering Multinational Symposium

By Wendy Willis

On March 22-23, 2021, nearly 100 people—including representatives from more than 20 countries as well as Kettering staff and associates—came together for the first fully online Multinational Symposium. The previous year’s symposium, scheduled to take place just as the global COVID-19 pandemic was beginning, had been canceled. This year, as the pandemic continued to spread and create tragedy, the theme of the sessions was “Responses to the Pandemic: Citizens’ Relationship WITH Governing Institutions.”

Kettering president and CEO David Mathews offered a vivid conception of the moment: “We are trying to understand democracy



PHOTO BY MELINDA GILMORE

itself and whether it is now subject to an enormously destructive force.” He likened the question to a drive up a mountain, wondering if the rumbling beneath the tires is the result of just a few small tremors—or a warning that the whole mountain is about to erupt. “Is what we are seeing here [a] populist revolution?” he asked. “Or is the very structure of democracy being jeopardized here? Is there a volcano underneath the surface?”

OVERLAPPING CRISES AND A “PANDEMIC WITHIN A PANDEMIC”

The symposium took place nearly one year after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. At the time of the gathering, most participants had been in and out of lockdowns and

other forms of government restriction for months. As a result, the pandemic and their communities’ responses to it were at the forefront of both the participants’ minds and their conversations with one another.

Nonetheless, as they shared their stories about COVID-19, it became clear that not everyone’s experiences were the same. Italian journalist Federica Marangio observed that the virus is “democratic,” in the sense that it has affected the entire world but that the most severe consequences have not been evenly distributed. Several participants noted that the health and the economic burdens of COVID-19 have fallen hardest on poor people and people of color.

Michael Knight, a physician from Washington, DC, noted that COVID-19 disproportionately affects African American patients in his practice and across the country. As he reminded the group, essential workers—which often include low-wage workers—cannot “stay home and stay safe.” Rather, they have been required to work, often in highly public settings, throughout the pandemic. As a result, though Washington, DC, is just less than 50 percent Black, 80 percent of the COVID-19 deaths have been among Black people.

Jaco Roets from South Africa put it bluntly: “South Africans are not sharing the same society.” While



The pandemic did not just expose and exacerbate health inequities. It deepened preexisting inequities in other arenas as well, including education.

people from all walks of life are getting sick, wealthy and White South Africans have access to private hospitals. The vast majority of other South Africans are forced into crowded public facilities—if they can find a hospital bed at all.

The pandemic did not just expose and exacerbate health inequities. It deepened preexisting inequities in other arenas as well, including education. Bernita Bradley, from the National Parents Union in the United States, described the inequities revealed and intensified by the decision to close school buildings and move to an entirely remote learning model. While wealthier, whiter districts had sufficient technology, money, and capacity to support students and families, a majority-Black district in Detroit was left with significantly fewer resources with which to make a rapid transition to online learning. Sumana Suwan-Umpa told a similar story about Thailand, where poor students were struggling with multiple barriers to pursuing their education. In one instance, a student had to ride a motorcycle 150 miles to get sufficient internet to take a school assessment.

In some places, the pandemic is one of several overlapping crises that have drained community resources and inhibited communities from responding collectively and imag-

inatively. Annette Ruiz-Morales, from Puerto Rico, described the overlapping crises in her community. In addition to the pandemic, they included a 15-year recession, overwhelming debt, and recovery from a historic hurricane and an earthquake.

As Brian Williams, from the University of Virginia, succinctly put it, “I want to tap into the . . . pandemic within a pandemic: racism within the COVID-19 environment. And I want to do that because I saw a shared symptom—*I can’t breathe*—as the motif.” He went on to ask, “[W]hat are the implications of breathing, of life, for and with the people?”

While COVID-19 may have exacerbated problems, many participants commented that the overlapping crises in fact revealed opportunities for citizens to lead in the democratic transformation of institutions. As Williams noted, perhaps we should be in a process of “continuous remodeling” of our democratic processes and institutions.

CITIZENS LEAD THE WAY

Because the pandemic was worldwide and institutions—including governments—were often overwhelmed and underprepared, citizens led the initial response to the pandemic.

Tendai Murisa reported that, in Zimbabwe, when a well-known

journalist died of COVID-19, it revealed how underresourced and ill-prepared the medical system was for such a crisis. Because hospitals were struggling to find sufficient supplies and equipment, more than 60 citizen-led initiatives sprung up to help health-care workers acquire personal protective equipment, testing kits, and masks. In the months that followed, citizens worked together to get closed hospitals back online and fully operational. Citizens also began to create and support food programs to feed those who were hard-hit by the pandemic.

Similarly, in New Zealand, Phoebe Davis emphasized that communities “knew what they needed to keep themselves safe.” Citizens banded together and “created a community of care of five million.” As communities—particularly indigenous communities—took charge of their own well-being, tribal leaders served as liaisons to the government, which supported the solutions conceived and executed by citizens. As she put it, communities taking charge of their own care and well-being is the definition of sovereignty, and that governments “being the ally and listening to what people have done” is a demonstration of complementary action.

As the pandemic wore on, intermediary institutions became

important in supporting the work of citizens. Federica Marangio shared her experience in Italy, where journalists and citizens coproduced information about the pandemic and its effects on children. She realized that the experiences of children were underreported, so she began soliciting drawings and paintings from families to tell their stories. At first parents were reluctant to share information about their children, but the program took off, and children began writing and drawing messages of encouragement for hospitalized patients and health-care workers.

In Romania, Australia, and the United States, trusted local organizations played important roles in facilitating communication between citizens and government. In Romania, libraries played a crucial role in distributing information. In South Australia, public health officials realized at some point that their messages were not reaching everyone in the community and that some cultural groups were not following public health guidelines. To understand the situation better, the chief health officer brought together 250 people from 18 cultures and cultural organizations in an online forum to learn more about cultural beliefs and practices and how they intersected with COVID-19 protocols. The health officer learned much more

about what protocols might work for specific languages and cultural groups. But even more important, the groups began to support one another in sharing information, space, and other resources.

Similarly, in Washington, DC, Michael Knight reported that there was a tremendous amount of justifiable suspicion and mistrust in the African American community about COVID-19 protocols, and about the vaccine in particular. Knight and his colleagues first asked patients what they needed and wanted to know to help make health-care decisions. In response, he and his colleagues developed partnerships with churches and other houses of worship to provide medical information and access to vaccines.

CITIZEN FATIGUE, POLARIZATION, MISTRUST

Despite tremendous citizen leadership, several participants noted that community members are showing signs of fatigue as the pandemic and its associated stresses have continued. Tendai Murisa noted that citizens mobilized less as each wave of the pandemic crested because they were tired, and that more and more people were adversely affected by both the health and economic effects of the crisis. That discouragement and fatigue were compounded



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when government bureaucracies got in the way of citizen innovation. As Murisa described it: “[G]overnment was following its usual bureaucratic systems despite the fact that we’re in the middle of a pandemic. So, all those things actually create fatigue and tiredness amongst those who are actively involved.”

In Zimbabwe, supporters of the political party out of power accused those citizens and civil society organizations working with government to address COVID-19 of being “enablers of the regime.” In Egypt, Ahmed Naguib reported that there is a widening gap of trust between the community and government leadership. He noted, “Definitely, the ever-present lack of trust between the

community and the government—it’s there. And it’s lost. The connection there is no longer available.”

Jaco Roets described the situation in South Africa: “We have very strong buckets of trust within isolated spaces. But I think our linking social capital has grown even weaker under COVID-19. There are increasing cases of xenophobia.”

An exception appeared to be Australia. Darryn Hartnett, from the University of Melbourne, reported that the government quickly pulled together a cabinet that coordinated a national response to the pandemic. According to Hartnett, the effort was a bipartisan and unified approach, and the government was transparent in its motives and policies. That approach increased public trust and created an environment in

which people complied with a “very brutal lockdown,” which included extreme restrictions on movements, heavy fines for violators, and sealed borders.

DEMOCRACY IS A SNOWBALL ROLLING DOWN A HILL

Democratic practices are not linear. Several participants described the effort to rename and reframe shared problems as an opportunity to bring new information, issues, and people into the conversation. Aldo Protti, from Costa Rica’s Citizens’ Action Party said, “With these naming and framing practices, yes, collective judgment emerges more easily.” In Israel, an ongoing dialogue between Jews and Muslims was challenged by the stresses of the pandemic. But Evan Muney, Udi Cohen, and their colleagues at the Citizens’ Accord Forum found that they could return to the core practices they had established prior to the pandemic. It was, as they described it, a source of resilience. As Muney put it: “[I]t’s actually a cyclical process. And it builds on itself like a snowball rolling down a hill. So, we were able to go back to naming and framing issues, and that only built further trust amongst those participating.”

As citizens and governments learn to work together, Phoebe Davis noted that “deliberation provides us



with the opportunities to learn and reframe and to build and rebuild so that we are always moving forward.”

Several participants wondered aloud whether the democratic innovations that emerged during COVID-19 would last after the pandemic eased. Some described how citizen-led initiatives were beginning to solidify into more formal arrangements with civil society institutions and government. Tendai Murisa described Solidarity Trust Zimbabwe, which was created in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the grassroots efforts that arose out of it: “Our first mandate was to have an engagement with government.”

Stuart Comstock-Gay of the Delaware Community Foundation described a similar shift among funders in the United States. He shared that the “technocratic approach” that was dominant in philanthropy a few years ago has started to wane and that there is a new “acceptance of funding that allows grantees to build their own version of systems in their communities.”

IS THERE A VOLCANO UNDER THE SURFACE?

The 2021 Kettering Multinational Symposium took place while the mountain described by David Mathews was yet rumbling. Despite



Despite the challenges of a worldwide public health crisis, rising global populism, and racial and economic injustice, the participants in this year’s symposium identified and shared many examples of citizens leading—and institutions joining in to work with them.

the challenges of a worldwide public health crisis, rising global populism, and racial and economic injustice, the participants in this year’s symposium identified and shared many examples of citizens leading—and institutions joining in to work with them. While it is unknown whether the volcano is near erupting, this path points to a way forward. ■

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