Democracy and Economic Change
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in the Readers’ Forum on
www.kettering.org
4 Democracy and Economics
David Mathews

7 How Citizens Talk about Responding to Economic Change
Steve Farkas

10 Discovering Capacity
Harold H. Saunders

12 Chattanooga Chugging
Ramón E. Daubón

14 Journalism as a Civic Practice
Doug Oplinger

16 Cooperative Extension and Community Development: How Politics and the Academy Mix
Alice Diebel

19 University Outreach in Communities: The Limits of Expertise
Joe Sumners

22 Getting Grounded: An Interview with Linda Hoke on Listening to Southern Communities
Alexandra Robinson

25 Institutes Using NIF Strengthen Civic Life
Alice Diebel

28 Experiments in Communicating the Results of Public Deliberation
Phil Stewart

31 Jordan's Public Forums Initiative
Ibtesam Al-Atiyat

34 Effects of Deliberation on Secondary School Students: The Experimental Sowing the Seed of Deliberation Project in Nigeria
Moshood Folorunsho

36 The International Civil Society Consortium for Public Deliberation.Org
Ileana Marin

38 Books Worth Reading

Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness
By Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, reviewed by Scott London

Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe
By Xavier de Souza Briggs, reviewed by Zach Vandeveer

The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies
By Scott E. Page, reviewed by Dana Walker
By David Mathews

Early on in its research, the Kettering Foundation recognized that politics has to be studied in light of what happens in the economy, just as the study of the economy has to take into account what happens in politics. At the same time, we reminded ourselves that our strength is in democratic politics, not in economics, and certainly not in macroeconomic policy. We look at what is happening in the economy through a democratic lens. So our focus is on the role of democratic practices in responding to the ongoing challenges of economic change, particularly challenges at the local or community level. In this piece, I’ll try to explain how we came to this focus and where it is taking us.

Looking through a democratic lens, we have been taken by how little confidence citizens have in their ability to do anything to affect the economic changes that seem to sweep over them like a tsunami. Factories move out of the country. Unemployment rates grow. Credit isn’t available. Market values fall. Individually, there are things people can do: move, open their own business, retrain for a new occupation. Collectively, however, people
feel helpless. Protests have little impact on global forces that even national policy can only influence at the margins. Communities are flattened; their ability to bounce back is in doubt. And the institutions that are players in the global economy, like the Federal Reserve System, appear remote and esoteric.

When we looked at the key variables that determine a local economy’s resilience, however, the collective citizenry is, in fact, implicated in nearly all of the things that allow a community to bounce back. Experts in economic development say regions and communities that do well have a sense of possibility, a conviction that they can meet any challenge. Their citizens have developed the skills and habits of working together. Their culture encourages innovation and enterprise. They experiment, learning as they go. And they have networks and associations that link people in a free flow of communications.

Even if people are aware of what experts say about how important the citizenry is, they aren’t sure of how to act on the insight. Knowing that a sense of possibility and a willingness to take risks are key doesn’t tell a community how to develop those attitudes. Major economic institutions don’t seem to know what to do with this insight about the citizenry either; they seldom see anything for people to do other than become better informed about what institutions are doing.

Given the inconsistency we found between expert research and citizens’ attitudes, our next task was to search for others who are concerned about the same or similar problems. In this issue of Connections, note a study done by the Farkas Duffett Research Group, which documents just how “nervous and worried” Americans have become because of what has happened to the economy—worried to the point of being somewhat fatalistic: “If I get laid off, I get laid off. There’s nothing I can do about that.” Citizens feel they are “just all along for the ride.” Most people are acting individually by cutting expenses, but few could imagine effective actions they could take with others.

In this search, we also found a literature that shares our focus on communities. Some of it comes from members of our board. In Smart Communities, Suzanne Morse writes about the craft industry that developed in Asheville, North Carolina, and surrounding communities, relying on local craft traditions. And Dan Kemmis makes the case for place-centered economic development in his book, Community and the Politics of Place. Kemmis believes that a “marketplace” implies a real place, and he argues for a place-sensitive strategy for development that combines environmental protection with economic well-being.

We drew heavily on studies that discuss the role citizens might play in building economic resilience, including those done by J. Mac Holladay, a seasoned veteran of state economic development, and Vaughn Grisham Jr., author of a book on Tupelo, Mississippi’s evolution from rural poverty to sustained economic progress. Holladay reports a shift from a federal and state orientation for economic development to a more regional and community focus. In an occasional paper done for Kettering, Economic and Community Development: A Southern Exposure, he argues that “economic development is part of a larger, more important process involving and reflecting the life and activity of the community.” That life is determined by what citizens do or don’t do with other citizens: organizing youth development programs to reinforce schools, creating support groups for those with chronic diseases, expanding the scope of the local historical society to include everyone’s history. Working together on projects like these is a democratic practice that creates civic relationships, which are one of the keys to resilience.

Grisham’s longitudinal study of Tupelo documents the importance of the politics that occurs in small places like the neighborhood gatherings where people make decisions about improving their community—and then act on what they have decided. Collective decision making and action are also democratic practices; they form habits that build resilience.

A recent study of a Russian community is adding to what we are learning in the United States in rural sociology and is prompting us to pay more attention to another phenomenon that contributes to resilience—community self-organizing. This study is discussed in the forthcoming Kettering Review and is based on the Pomore people in far northern Russia, who faced numerous economic challenges in expanding from reliance on fishing to a broader agricultural and industrial base. Autonomous development, as self-organizing is sometimes called, doesn’t involve a central authority or third-party intervener. It seems to be based on certain innate tendencies, particularly that of turning to others when faced with danger. Self-organizing is a practice that fosters local self-determination; it suggests that human beings are naturally “programmed” for more collaboration than they are given credit for.

With the Pomore, self-organizing appears to be deeply rooted in the political culture, so much so that they have been able to survive elaborate “reforms” to restructure the community. These reforms took place largely under the Soviet system, yet the Pomore have a tradition of local decision making, which is key to self-

Democracy and Economics

When we looked at the key variables that determine a local economy’s resilience, the collective citizenry is, in fact, implicated in nearly all of the things that allow a community to bounce back.
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Economic challenges, but Allentown fared better, not because of a dense network configured tightly around a central hub like a wagon wheel but, to the contrary, because of loose civic networks that facilitated “interaction—and mobilization—across social, political, and economic divisions.”

We hope to learn more about self-organizing, specifically what promotes—and what blocks—it. And, given our extensive research on collective decision making, we want to find out more about what happens when people try to make decisions on economic problems, particularly those where morally charged disagreements are likely to derail progress.

Some decisions are about solving practical problems, and the choices are about what is most efficient and cost effective. Other decisions are much more difficult to make because they involve things people hold dear. Something is happening that concerns everyone, yet there is no agreement about what should be done. The current economic crisis is a perfect example. The lack of a consensus on what should be done often results in polarization, and that undermines resilience.

There is no agreement because the choices bring into conflict things that people value, some of which will have to be compromised, deferred, or sacrificed. But, which ones? Since there is no expert answer, citizens and officeholders have to exercise their best judgment.

Kettering’s contribution to the development of sound public judgment, along with organizations like Public Agenda, has been to identify the normative or morally charged disagreements, describe the inherent tensions and trade-offs that have to be made, and then try to stimulate the public deliberation that is necessary to make sound decisions.

The question we are addressing now is, what disagreements on current economic issues are morally charged and likely to result in polarization?

Another line of research that seems promising for understanding economic resilience is the role of civic learning. Communities that are continually learning as a community are usually able to bounce back from failure. As we have said before, they know how to fail successfully. This kind of learning is collective, and it involves more than acquiring information from what others are doing or from expert sources. It draws on people’s experiences and the insights those experiences offer about the nature of the problems at hand, as well as the community itself, how it works, and what its assets are. This learning results in discoveries, and it requires a political environment open to experiments and not restricted to doing only those things that are likely to show immediate, measurable results.

Kettering, a foundation started by inventors, should know something about this kind of politics.

As reported in previous issues of Connections, we have already seen discoveries occurring in certain situations. For example, when citizens name a problem in their own terms—that is in terms of what is valuable to them—they discover what the problem actually means in their lives. They don’t get that insight if the problem is only named in professional terms. Also, as people deliberate over what decision is best for solving a problem, they often discover dimensions of the problem they hadn’t seen before. That happens when people listen to others who face different circumstances and see the problem from a different perspective. This tends to expand or broaden the definition of the problem. It is no wonder that the ancient Greeks called the deliberation used in making sound decisions “the talk people use to teach themselves before they act.”

In researching how democratic practices may give communities a greater capacity to survive economic downturns and promote positive change, our greatest challenge is, as always, finding experimenters to learn from and with. These allies are essential because our research is based on what experimenting groups learn from novel ways of responding to economic change. Connections is one way of reaching out to those who might be fellow travelers. And we hope the Readers’ Forum will also open the door.

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In the fall of 2008—just as the nation began feeling the enormity of the current economic crisis and the federal government began gathering its response—the Farkas Duffett Research Group was conducting a series of four focus groups with Americans on economic issues. The purpose of the research, conducted in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, was to understand: 1) how citizens name and talk about the economic issues that affect their lives and their communities; and 2) how people see the possibilities for organizing and acting with others to deal with economic challenges. Here’s what we found.

When it comes to the national economic picture, citizens talk as if they are bystanders. The focus groups were an unusual chance to track the evolution of an economic crisis in "real time" through the eyes of ordinary Americans. Core financial institutions were experiencing meltdowns, the federal government responded with unprecedented initiatives to salvage them and press attention was intense. But ironically, the people in our focus groups talked about the situation as if they were bystanders. They were alert, they were worried, and they were already taking steps to prepare their households for harder times. But no one thought they had any say or influence over what was going to happen on the national stage. Most did not even understand the basics of what was happening.

I think it’s to the point now where there’s nothing anybody sitting in this room can do. We can change things years from now . . . but right now we’re kind of just along for the ride. All they’re doing is arguing in Washington. I just think we kind of got to see what happens, and then decide where we go from there, just be ready to change what you need to change. (Centerville, OH)
People make personal adjustments in hard times.

Certain aspects of people’s immediate economic circumstances—for example, whether they have a job, what happens to their 401K plan—are beyond their control. A bit of fatalism is perhaps inevitable.

If I get downsized—if I get laid off, I get laid off. There’s nothing I can do about that. . . . Just going to go. Do I worry about it each and every day? I probably could but I don’t, because if the day comes, the day comes, you know? If it’s going to happen, it’s going to happen. (Westchester, NY)

But people do have some sense of control over their personal economic situations. In the focus groups they talked about saving more and spending less, for example, by taking fewer or more modest vacations, shopping more carefully or postponing major purchases. They may not be able to control whether they get laid off, but they can prepare in case it happens.

Citizens seem better equipped to understand local economic trends in their communities.

Citizens have their own take on the economic strengths and weaknesses of their communities, using their own leading economic indicators: How busy are the restaurants? How crowded is the mortgage company’s parking lot? People also understand the interconnected nature of their local economy—knowing for example that abandoned property in their neighborhood will affect the value of their home or that the opening of a megastore will push out the local mom-and-pop retailer down the street.

In places like Sunnyvale, California, they refer to the role of talent, innovation, or diversity when talking about economic growth in Silicon Valley, making connections that are not obvious or simplistic. In Greenville, North Carolina, they traced the trends transforming their community in recent years.

Greenville was a farming community at one time, but because of the hospital, we have gotten all these different people from everywhere. If you’ve got different people from different walks of life, and those people can come together, and communicate together, I mean that’s what you want. You got different cultures, and it’s more interesting. (Greenville, NC)

Values often drive citizen discussions of economic concerns.

Incidentally, we found that when people talk about local economic issues, values and core priorities are often behind the talk. For example, after discussing their resistance to a new stadium for a while, residents of a Raleigh, North Carolina, suburb revealed that beyond concerns about traffic was their sense that for several years their neighborhood had been losing its identity, that they were becoming a community of strangers. Meanwhile others in the focus group pointed to the benefits that change had brought—better roads, rising property values, and greater diversity. In Centerville, two focus group participants contested what should be done with undeveloped property in their area: one thought it should be developed so that jobs and the tax base improve; the other wanted to keep the area wooded—green space and biodiversity were more important to her, she said. It may not be newsworthy, but it is worth keeping in mind: questions of economic change are intimately tied to values in people’s minds.

Citizens look to leaders to respond to economic challenge—even when talking about the local economy.

In our focus groups, people found it hard to articulate how they could respond civically, together with others, to economic challenges. Even when the challenge is
local, citizens often defer economic issues to leaders to handle.

You can’t control any of this stuff. . . . I’m completely powerless. Not unless you’re involved and you’ve been tasked with some sort of resolution on that, or you’re an expert in the area, or you’re some sort of contributor to the committees at the end of these things.

(Sunnyvale, CA)

In Centerville, when the conversation turned to what to do to help Dayton’s downtown area, several participants began playing the role of “amateur experts”—what they would do if they had the responsibility and power to act. But they quickly returned the role of leadership—the real power, they believe, is in the hands of leaders.

You tell me to go dig a ditch, I’ll dig the ditches as hard and fast as I can, but [we need] to have visionary people who have an idea of where they can leverage the community, leverage the Dayton area for the future. I don’t think Dayton has had that type of leadership.

(Centerville, OH)

Impressions from a Washington, D.C., roundtable

On March 11, Kettering convened a panel of discussants to talk about the problem of creating opportunities for citizens to engage economic challenges. Some of the issues raised echoed the focus groups findings:

• Several comments during the panel discussion noted that the most promising level for citizens to have an impact was the local community.
• Several discussants brought up the relationship between the American public and its leaders and organizations. One commentator rhetorically asked: “What do leaders need of us?” The point was that citizens have a role to play but that leaders need to call upon them—an echo of what we found in the focus groups.
• Related to the above was the sense that mediating institutions through which citizens would make an impact were necessary—local government agencies or nonprofit or religious organizations. And indeed, when people reported civic action on economic issues in our focus groups, they talked about channeling their actions through their local church or a local governing board or homeowners association. Otherwise, it was very difficult for them to imagine having an impact in concert with other citizens.

• Part of the panel discussion revolved around the issue of moral culpability. Some felt that people needed to vent grievances before moving forward—“How did we get to this point anyway? Who is responsible for the economic mess?” Others felt that such a conversation would get muddled and that it was more important to talk about what to do next rather than how we got there. The “who-is-to-blame” conversation also surfaced in the focus groups we conducted. In Centerville, for example, some people talked about irresponsible neighbors who took on mortgages they could not afford, spent frivolously, and lost their homes to foreclosure. But others countered with personal stories about having to resist the entreaties of institutions—banks, mortgage companies, and credit card companies—that had been busy exhorting them to take on debt they could not afford.

Responding to Economic Change

Efforts to foster conversations among citizens need to be structured around two questions: what is the problem in our community? and what can we do about it? Research has identified some promising topics: sprawl and economic growth in communities; homes and foreclosures; jobs and unemployment; tax revenues and public services in local jurisdictions; saving and spending, consumerism and credit; and concerns about younger generations: their work ethic, capacity to endure hard times, and their American Dream.

But the research also points to a number of challenges to fostering public engagement of economic concerns. First, economic challenges shift from community to community, making the naming of concerns to be addressed a distinctly contextual problem. Moreover, economic issues are in many ways moving targets.

Citizens typically can feel like victims or bystanders, rarely like people who can act with other citizens to influence the economic destinies of their communities. The question, what can we do about it? can imply readiness to roll up your sleeves or a shrug of the shoulders.

In the fall of 2008, the downturn was mostly defined as a financial crisis. Now jobs are the key public concern. Indebt- edness and overconsumption were a key topic of the discussions then—but experts are now more worried about cutbacks in consumer spending. It’s not inconceivable that six months from now the context will shift again.

But perhaps the greatest challenge for citizens is to recognize that they have something to say in the economic realm, an issue where the ground has been ceded for so long to the experts. Citizens typically can feel like victims or bystanders, rarely like people who can act with other citizens to influence the economic destinies of their communities. The question, what can we do about it? can imply readiness to roll up your sleeves or a shrug of the shoulders.

All of this means that innovation and experimentation will be necessary and that the only guaranteed result is that there will be surprises. At the end, the most important question we will ask is, what do we learn from the process?

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How can spaces be created in which citizens can discover their capacity to generate or respond to economic change?

As the Kettering Foundation has focused its annual program review on the politics of economic change, this has emerged as the central research and operational question. The national and global economic environment has given the question compelling urgency that we could not have anticipated as we started down this path a year ago.

Cogent as this question is in today’s economic context, its importance reaches far beyond the economic. It is the paramount political question before us today. And it may be that economic health and progress are ultimately more about politics than about economics.

On March 11, Kettering put this question to a panel and to an audience of approximately 80 interested individuals from inside and outside government in a high-ceilinged room in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C.

In setting the stage for the meeting, moderator Hal Saunders presented the challenge this way:

We are tackling a critical complex of problems on the minds of all Americans today—the cascading effects on their communities of the deterioration of the economy. Our purpose will be to probe for a fresh approach.

Responding to this challenge begins with the following seemingly contradictory observations:

First, the greatest untapped resources for meeting the challenges of the 21st century are the energies and capacities of citizens outside government.

Second, in countless settings, citizens express feelings of powerlessness to deal with economic problems beyond making decisions about their own personal next steps.

Yet, third, many steps to address larger economic problems ultimately depend on the behavior of these same citizens. For instance:

How individuals have handled credit—whether the credit card or the mortgage—has been a not insignificant factor in bringing on the present crisis. Our new administration has called on citizens to come together to “rebuild America one neighborhood at a time.” Leading figures in the field of international economic development have
described the “missing ingredient in a half-century of economic development theory” as failure to recognize that “economic development is not just about economics; it’s about politics—how citizens decide collectively to act together to use the resources of a community to develop it.”

The overarching question we have come together this morning to address is this: how might spaces be created for public discourse in which citizens can discover things they can do in their communities to address the consequences of such problems as the housing crisis, unemployment, declining resources?

A subtext of this question emerges from the fact that what often blocks collaboration is not disagreement on how a problem might be solved but moral disagreement about what broad direction to take.

In concluding these introductory remarks, let me state the obvious: This is not a discussion about government policies. We are focusing on the role of citizens.

One more word about what was in our minds as we approached this question. Kettering since the early 1980s has focused not on the institutions of democracy—parties, governments in all their branches, interest groups, lobbies—but on citizens as political actors. Some of us would say that this kind of politics is not just about power but about relationship—how citizens interact so they can define problems, decide what they might do, and design action that broadens participation in a course of action.

Thinking this way, we have recognized that, as citizens begin to “buzz” around a problem, it may be that a few citizens may act as catalysts in helping a group to form, to talk through the problem to affect them and begin talking with friends, neighbors, and colleagues about them. We have used the metaphor of the “political wetlands” to capture politics of this organic character.

We are reaching for insight into the moments when citizens take the steps that bring them together and then organize them to do work they could not have conceived of when they took the first step.

This confluence of insights and events made now the moment to embark on an experiment—an experiment to learn how experienced citizen catalysts might reach into the political wetlands in a way that would help create conditions in which citizens could come together, talk about the problems they face, and gradually discover capacities and resources for dealing with them.

In the language that we have used for 25 years to describe and teach the work of the National Issues Forums, we need to learn how a few citizens can create conditions in which citizens might “name” their own issues, “frame” possible approaches in dealing with those challenges for a deliberative dialogue, assess resources in their community for dealing with them, and put those resources together in a course of action—all of this in an organic way.

The challenges in such an approach will be (1) to find colleagues who are prepared to collaborate as designers or as catalysts in this experiment with sensitivity to its underlying purpose; (2) to find points of entry into communities where citizens may be receptive to such an approach; and (3) to craft questions that would elicit citizens’ thinking about the nature of their communities’ problems, about resources they themselves might marshal, and about steps putting those resources to work. We would welcome your thoughts and help.

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Discovering Capacity

We are reaching for insight into the moments when citizens take the steps that bring them together and then organize them to do work they could not have conceived of when they took the first step.

We have also learned to think of public life as a complex political process of continuous interaction—relationships—among citizens and then among signifi-
For 35 years, the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, has been undergoing a remarkable economic and social transformation. What had once been a dismal economic, environmental, and social wasteland has morphed into a vibrant, engaged, and livable showcase. The story of what happened there has been amply reported. But scrutiny of its civic underpinnings allows a look at the public politics behind the economic change and addresses the why and the how.

Chattanooga is located on the Tennessee River in the southeast corner of the state. By the turn of the 19th century it had become a budding industrial city and railroad junction. The city continued to benefit after World War II as textile and tanning industries migrated from the U.S. northeast. These plants caused heavy pollution to the local area. Eventually though, the industries themselves began to decay and in the 1960s, their downfall added abandonment, unemployment, street crime, and physical deterioration to the worsening quality of life in Chattanooga. The decay was concentrated in the industrial areas and nearby working-class neighborhoods, emphasizing the racial and class segregation that characterized the city. At the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1969, Chattanooga was declared "the dirtiest city in America," and was "unfit" to receive federal funds unless drastic measures were taken.

The epithet and warning stung city leaders and promotional actions were taken. But by late 1978, it had become clear that results were not forthcoming; new industries were not coming fast enough to replace the dying ones and reinvigorate the city. The deepening problem and the failure of the first strategy led to a reassessment and an effort in the early 1980s to engage a broader swath of the public in deliberations about the future of Chattanooga. By 1982, hundreds of community discussions had taken place, involving several thousand residents, and a new collective vision began to emerge. While still not fully representative of the diversity of the general population, the discussions conveyed a more organic sense of self-governance and involved a broader cross-section of neighborhoods, race, and class than ever before. A recommendation to broaden engagement reshaped the municipal governance—away from an appointed commission of notables and toward a city council elected directly by neighborhood wards. This change in the composition of the council is generally recognized as the beginning of a widespread base of support for the effort.

Fast forward 25 years, and Chattanooga is a changed city with a sparkling restored downtown and residential districts, a new economic base of tourism and service industries, a deep environmental conviction, and a conspicuous civic pride. Racial and class separations were always a part of Chattanooga. The rift was highlighted by the physical layout of the city, with the wealthy residential neighborhoods on the mountain across the river and above the pollution, the middle-class neighborhoods on the outskirts, the working-class neighborhoods near the factories and plants closer in. The downtown lay in the middle, where the social classes came together during the day. The city prospered while settled industries provided jobs. But there seems to have been no vision beyond the industrial era.

The initial crisis response was inspired by expert advice prevalent at the time, based on “chamber of commerce” incentives and built upon the historical power structure: well-intentioned people with authority would hire experts and make decisions. It took almost a decade to
Chattanooga Chugging

realize that it wasn’t working and that a broader base was needed. Meanwhile the civil rights movement’s convolutions elsewhere in the South had largely bypassed the crisis-ridden city but left an awareness of changing values. This helped the community discover that it could, and would need to, collaborate across racial and class lines. That the first concerted “flagship project,” a freshwater aquarium aimed at attracting tourism, was carried out over the objections of many experts is symptomatic that a different way of making decisions was at play. That it remains the visible symbol of the renaissance offers clues to the relational changes involved.

For instance, interpretation of the economic challenge, the “naming” of the problem, changed over time as attitudes evolved with the process: toward a public—rather than technical—decision and toward collaborative—rather than directed—action. Most important perhaps, people’s heightened sense of their collective capacities for improvement dramatically altered the relationships involved: within each of the city’s class and racial segments as they began to respond affirmatively about their own effectiveness, what might those conditions be? These would be the key elements to a community taking charge of its own change. It is clear that such learning about capacities needs to take place before a community can change. But what precisely does a community need to learn about itself in order to change? And because collective learning must be also internalized by individuals, how does one generate such learning on an individual level but in a shared, public way?

Changing the Ways People Relate

Another factor required for stimulating change is altering the way people relate. Patterns of interaction are established in culture and habit precisely to maintain a certain order. As such they are designed to inhibit alterations of that order and seldom contain mechanisms for their own evolution. A conscious effort has to be made to instill that evolution, but without generating defensive reactions that would shut down the process. A strategy of change would thus need real-life examples whereby networks of social interactions have been modified and the ways people interact have been redefined. But patterns of relating are simply reflections of underlying power relationships, and changes in the former will perfuse imply changes in the latter. A crucial question then is the manner in which power will be newly created by developing new spaces of power, reflected in new ways of relating. How can that power allow for new wealth—will community change result in broad economic development or just in the generation of selective new sources of income?

Change in Civic Infrastructure

Finally, structures and processes are also important to community change. It is critical to ascertain which organizations—old or newly minted—will promote change. Within them will be issues about their funding, their permanence, the diversity of their leadership and governance, and their openness to community input.

Crucial to the continued sustainability of the efforts in Chattanooga are issues of the precise kind of collective learning that has taken place, how that learning happened, and how it can be continually encouraged. With their accumulated learning and their need to face their changing circumstances, Chattanoogans are now asking the question that only they can answer: what can we do better or differently now?

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Not all problems have been solved in Chattanooga. . . . They are looking back and reassessing what they did and what universal lessons their admittedly unique experience might contain that could be useful to others as well as to themselves in their process of continued learning.
The Akron Beacon Journal—with its four Pulitzer prizes—has a rich tradition of journalism and community service. “The Akron Beacon Journal was where it all began,” said Rem Rieder, editor and publisher of American Journalism Review. “This was Jack Knight’s first paper, the initial building block in constructing the magnificent newspaper company that Jack and his brother Jim put together.”

The newspaper was sold in 2006 as the Knight Ridder era ended. That was the beginning of a sea of change in journalism as revenues declined and newsrooms became smaller. Journalists like Rieder wondered: Can newspapers continue to chronicle and be the conscience of the broader community as new owners face a discouraging set of economics? The answer for the Beacon Journal is yes.

Without compromising its journalistic integrity, the newspaper collaborated with its media “competitors” and the city’s “special interests” on a civic journalism project that addressed the financial fears of 2008.

The foundation for the Beacon Journal’s work was laid in 2006 when computer-assisted reporter David Knox secured a Kiplinger Fellowship at the Ohio State University to analyze U.S. census records for pay data. The idea of using a fellowship to conduct research for a story was new for the Beacon Journal.

The numbers were unsettling. Knox found that the middle class is disappearing, and the current generation of working Americans is the first in modern times that can’t expect their children will do better. Included in that September 2007 reporting was an interactive database on the Beacon Journal’s Web site (Ohio.com) where users could see how their standard of living compared with previous generations.

Next came seven focus groups to explore whether people were conscious of this changing dynamic. Alice Rodgers, who worked with the Beacon Journal on many projects over the previous 20 years, facilitated those discussions.

We were stunned by the expression of latent fear, as one after another member of our community revealed anxiety that they were one unexpected event away from falling out of the middle class. This
That focused attention on the question nagging the newsroom: what can people do? At that point, we added a new component to our series, originally titled “The American Dream: Hanging by a Thread,” by examining personal responsibility and solutions in a series of stories called, “Reclaim the Dream.” Our food writer, health writer, home writer, consumer columnist, and others presented a weekend package in June that offered practical advice for household budgets.

Beacon Journal consumer columnist Betty Lin-Fisher recruited five families who volunteered to open up their financial lives to advisors who explained what each of them was doing right and wrong. And she issued a challenge: Join us in pledging to save money and pay down debt.

The project blossomed.

We invited non-newsroom employees, the University of Akron, financial counselors, and public radio and television to join us. The Beacon Journal partnered with WKSU-FM by providing stories to the public radio station before they were published. The result was simultaneous radio and newspaper reports on the middle class. Cleveland public radio station WCWN invited our reporters to speak on interview programs. The nonprofit Consumer Credit Counseling of Northeast Ohio provided us with advice and financial counselors.

At the invitation of the Beacon Journal, community leaders, who competed in the marketplace, collaborated on solutions-oriented essays that were published.

Two public events—a forum and a financial fair—went beyond the reporting to reach into the community. The forum at the University of Akron brought voices from the community together with public policy leaders in a spirited dialogue. The effort involved several community organizations, attracted more than 400 people, was simulcast on public radio, rebroadcast on Western Reserve public television, and streamed on a special Internet site, reclaimthedream.net, established by WKSU-FM.

Economic models come and go, but journalism is and always should be a near-religious commitment to inform and inspire a community toward constructive dialogue and action.

Journalism as a Civic Practice

The mayor of Akron, Summit County executives, and the John S. Knight Convention Center provided the resources to open the convention center for the financial fair. The Beacon Journal’s marketing director worked with Consumer Credit Counseling and dozens of groups to assemble a daylong program of educational classes and displays. About 1,000 people attended.

Some journalists will argue that such efforts cross a line from reporting to advocating. But we were comfortable with our decisions each time the topic came up in our newsroom. After thorough analysis, we had identified needs and solutions. Public engagement was a natural outgrowth of sound journalism.

Collaborations such as the Beacon Journal’s middle-class project may begin a rewrite of the rules of engagement for civic journalism, a practice rooted in Jack Knight’s papers. This worked in Akron because the journalism not only reported on the problem, but helped drive the discussion. In that way, the Beacon Journal remained an independent voice in its community.

So, in the end, does this suggest that financially imperiled news organizations can continue to be chronicler and conscience of our communities?

Most certainly. Not only are we able to continue as before, we must. Economic models come and go, but journalism is and always should be a near-religious commitment to inform and inspire a community toward constructive dialogue and action.

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Higher education prides itself on generating objective research and cultivating inquiring and critical minds. Many educators posit that schools don’t give the answers, but give the tools to find the answers. And yet when it comes to community engagement, the academy seems stuck in the mode of teaching rather than educating, or of giving the answers rather than the tools to find them.

Cooperative extension would seem the likely locus for strong community-university engagement because of their historical mission of bringing the resources of the academy to strengthen communities. Yet cooperative extension has its own challenges using community engagement as an approach in commu-
ties and often falls back on the technical transfer of knowledge and research: giving answers. First, extension often wants to avoid controversial, “political” issues to preserve a sense of scientific truth and objectivity seen as central to research. Second, they are funded through project lines on a budget—programs that seemingly have no space for an engagement line item. And finally, they do not believe they have the tools to engage the public effectively.

These challenges reach into the heart of the university and the nature of knowledge. While science, budgets, and tools are needed and should continue to be cultivated, today’s world needs something more. Extension could be the ideal place to shift the relationship between the university and the community. The space between the two can be an opportunity to democratize knowledge by engaging in the co-creation of not only the solutions, but also of identifying and selecting what problems provide the basis for the university’s resources. New knowledge comes out of places other than the university. We need a new kind of scholar, developing an expertise of engagement.

Extension professionals who are engaging communities require expertise of a different sort. Their work embraces the political, gravitates toward problems without solid, technical, or objective, research-based solutions, and learns while practicing in the community without a net. Three Kettering research initiatives are exploring these issues and actively trying to understand how some in extension are changing their approach to their work.

Michigan State University (MSU) has been working throughout the state to create and facilitate the space for public deliberation on contentious agriculture and natural resource issues. One case study in Grand Haven was highlighted in the last issue of Connections. As is always the case in engagement work, the story did not end a year ago.

In the first phase of the work, the university was invited by the Grand Haven city council to help the community address public concerns about large numbers of deer in residential areas—deer were considered a nuisance by some and a benefit by others. A citizen advisory group—with facilitation support from MSU—deliberated about how to manage the deer population and how the issue relates to the kind of community Grand Haven should be. Such questions are typically the sort of value discussions that citizens need to engage but seldom have the opportunity.

The public was able to agree on a public education plan to help reduce the deer population; the public would be encouraged to avoid feeding the deer and make the community less attractive to the animals. The community stopped short of deciding whether and how to eliminate (cull) the deer population. However, Michigan State learned a hard lesson about the politics of a community when a member of the advisory group wrote a letter to the editor and reignited polarized politics. This action broke trust of the advisory group. As might be expected, the community organized into opposing activist groups and the local government turned inward. MSU concluded that clearer rules of engagement might have encouraged the community’s willingness to stay in deliberation with one another.

Such responses reflect politics—and some might argue the very reason the university should stay away from political concerns. However, the natural resource-public intersection creates exactly the kinds of political difficulties that communities and cooperative extension offices are facing. No longer is a fact sheet on deer populations sufficient to deal with such problems. Instead, the university had to learn—along with the community—what information would be of use and how to engage the issue in ways that improve the political decision making of the community rather than return it to politics-as-usual.

It is a challenge to create the kind of community that is willing to face its problems through an agreed upon process that encourages deliberation of the strong, moral tensions among difficult choices. In the Grand Haven case, the community stopped short of tackling the difficult question of whether to cull deer—and how many. The dilemma the community shrunk from in its new politics reflected competing values of preserving an environment with its messy—sometimes dangerous—wildlife, or creating an environment that has property values as its foremost concern. Safety and prosperity are core community values that reside in tension with one another in this case.

The good news is that the citizens are engaged—perhaps more than ever. And, by some political means they will address these issues. This time the citizens organized themselves without the MSU deliberation experts and they are paying attention to their relationship with the local government and who represents them. What we do not yet know is what it will take for this and other communities to push themselves to deal with hard choices by getting at those deeply held values. We need to experiment more with how extension could build a greater understanding of how to encourage deliberation in the political environments they operate in.

We hope a research plan by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) will provide some insights into how extension can develop a different awareness of the political environments they enter. In the South, communities with a high poverty rate often appear helpless and unable to create the changes needed to prosper. What makes one community thrive while a neighbor continues to falter? We hypothesize that the politics of the community make a difference. How might an extension agent enter a community and assess its political strength? What are the capacities that might be developed as extension learns along with the community?
A survey of constituents and stakeholders of SRDC identified the need for more effective means of engaging citizens on difficult issues. Recognizing that traditional approaches of economic development tend to leave citizens out, the SRDC is pursuing new ways extension might approach the community. The SRDC has identified four states with extension departments interested in engaging citizens in high-poverty communities so they can find a way toward prosperity.

One of Kettering’s key insights this past year is that in difficult economic situations, many citizens fail to see themselves as actors able to remedy community problems. In most communities, economic decisions are made by elites working to bring in outside resources to “save” the community. This approach fails to recognize that citizens may have resources to help. John McKnight has developed this approach to asset-based community development, but too often neither extension agents nor citizens recognize those internal resources.

Furthermore, communities have political histories in how they solve their problems. Who are the decision makers? How are citizens engaged? What is the role of the media? Who “names” the problem? What do the networks of interaction look like? How are decisions finally made? How open are those in power to a different approach that makes it explicit that the outcome is uncertain? (Never mind that outcomes in such endeavors are always uncertain.)

We hope to learn how extension comes to understand citizens and their communities. What are the beginning assumptions extension agents make about citizens? What do they understand about their impact on citizen capacity? What do they learn through their political engagement in these communities? What do they do that helps citizens recognize and develop their resources?

Finally, Cornell University will examine the politics of engagement across the country. They have created a research plan to examine the breadth and depth of civic engagement through cooperative extension. Cornell’s “call for stories” will help catalog the kind of engagement practices extension is using and what they gain from it. Such stories will help create a vision for what extension might be if engagement became a key part of what agents do in their communities.

By creating a series of narrative descriptions, Cornell hopes to develop a model that describes how the democratic potential of extension may be strengthened. For Cornell and all of Kettering’s extension partners, engagement is not about eliminating the important research that universities have to offer communities. Rather, engagement is about doing the work of outreach, scholarship, and practice differently. What would it look like if universities listened first instead of spoke first? What if ideas from the community generated research on problem solving? What if the work of extension helped citizens learn how to find the answer within their communities before looking outside? How would this approach strengthen communities and our democracy?

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University Outreach in Communities: The Limits of Expertise

By Joe Sumners

Until recently, the logo tagline for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System was “Your Experts for Life.” That tagline describes pretty well the traditional view of university-citizen relations. That is, we at the university are “experts” who enter a community to solve local problems—extending the knowledge and resources of the university to inform, assist, and educate. Under this traditional approach, universities have a stockpile of projects, programs, and initiatives that can be employed to solve whatever problems (often defined by someone from the university) they find in a community. There is a mostly one-way, producer-consumer relationship. Citizens, and, collectively, their communities, are viewed as customers who need the specialized expertise that only the university can provide.

Despite a widespread movement toward a new “engaged” model of university-citizen relations, my guess is that this traditional model probably remains the dominant practice.

Lessons from Uniontown, Alabama

I understand this approach pretty well since I practiced it for many of my years working in outreach leadership positions at Auburn University. But my perspective changed beginning in 1999 when Auburn’s Economic Development Institute was called to assist a small, west Alabama community facing severe economic distress.

Our initial approach in Uniontown was to work through the mayor to help the community create a strategic plan for economic development and redesign a local community development organization. This was nothing new for us. Strategic planning and organizational assistance were among the cache of programs and services we regularly provided to communities throughout our state. But in Uniontown, our project was a complete failure.
The planning process never attracted very much citizen involvement. The few citizens who “participated” tended to be elderly friends of the mayor. They generally took a passive role and appeared reluctant to express their views. They tended to look to the mayor or the outside “experts” from Auburn for answers to community problems. (Of course, what we perceived as apathy might have simply reflected the fact that our customer-service approach, which put them on the receiving end of our expertise, gave participants little chance to express their own needs or affect the process used to address them.)

Our planning and organizational assistance project in Unıontown had little impact, because this community needed something more basic than a plan or a community deliberations and ownership of problems. Indeed, it may have the reverse effect of perpetuating a continued feeling of dependency. What communities really need from us is to listen to how they define their needs, to help connect stakeholders with local assets and other resources, and to facilitate community deliberations and interactions.

**Connector and Catalyst**

Based on our experiences in Unıontown, we changed our perspective on community outreach. We understand that we don’t have all of the answers. We know that citizens produce and create their own fate. We understand that, like Unıontown, many communities are not really looking for technical assistance, service, or education, but rather ways to come together as a community. Expertise and specialized programs do not have much to say about that. Thus, the most fundamental community problems are not amenable to the solutions found within our usual bag of tricks.

Those of us in university outreach will have much more relevance if we substitute the role of connector and catalyst for the role of expert. We need to understand that the most intractable community problems must be defined and attacked (if not solved) by the local citizens themselves. They have the innate power and capacity to be the solution to their own problems. Outsiders’ coming in to define and solve problems does not build community capacity or facilitate community ownership of problems. Indeed, it may have the reverse effect of perpetuating a continued feeling of dependency. What communities really need from us is to listen to how they define their needs, to help connect stakeholders with local assets and other resources, and to facilitate community deliberations and interactions.

**Engagement, Community, and Economic Prosperity**

As an economic development organization, Unıontown was a turning point in our understanding of the link between citizens, community development, and economic prosperity. Everything we say and do now reflects the basic idea that citizens are the community’s most important economic resource; that community vitality is determined by the quantity of leaders in a community and how, individually and collectively, they talk, decide, act, and interact with one another; and that community development lays the foundation for economic prosperity. This contrasts with the prevailing view of economic development dominated by issues of business marketing, financial incentives, and recruitment.

The changes at the institute—now called the Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI)—are not only reflected in new public deliberation or civic engagement programs and initiatives, although we are involved in such activities. The change is a more fundamental transformation of our organizational culture. It is a paradigm shift in how we view the field of economic development and our place in it. Civic engagement is now integrated into each of our programs and activities—whether in education, research, or community outreach.

One manifestation of our change in philosophy is a new emphasis on community leadership. ECDI is now the home of the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN), which connects, and provides resources for, adult and youth community leadership programs throughout Alabama. We see these local leadership programs as having great potential for building more “leaderful” communities, increasing the capacity of citizens to address the challenges they face, and thereby strengthening civic life in communities throughout Alabama. This is the type of civic infrastructure upon which we believe prosperous economies are built.

We have redesigned our education programs to engage the Alabama economic development community in new ways—both in topics addressed and in course format. While we still address the traditional issues related to business recruitment, our focus is heavily oriented toward community development. Course formats are structured to be very interactive, employing deliberative forums, roundtables, and group exercises. This reflects our philosophy that ECDI staff and course instructors do not have a monopoly on good ideas or strategies. Engagement within our courses produces a healthy
exchange of perspectives that is far superior to a lecture-only format. We also travel around the state conducting deliberative forums and roundtables on topics related to economic and community development.

Civic Mission versus Measurement and Money
One of the tensions that we have faced is between our commitment to a civic mission and the university’s demand for measurable results and the generation of extramural income. While we embrace accountability and entrepreneurial strategies, the things we value most are sometimes difficult to measure or less amenable to immediate generation of income. The economist Stephen Rhodes said, “Politics and public policy are more like love than math.” That sounds about right. We tend to be able to measure the things that are of the least importance. It’s easier to count the number of people who attend a training class than it is to measure the impact of a rekindled sense of civic efficacy among citizens of Uniontown. It’s pretty easy to make money by securing a contract for an economic impact study of a potential plant location. It’s harder to earn money by sparking a community’s interest in public deliberation and civic engagement. But which has the most value? Getting universities to truly align themselves around their civic mission will require finding a workable balance between the university’s civic purpose, on the one hand, and the demand for accountability and funding on the other.

Not “Your Experts for Life”
To summarize, we have learned the limits of our expertise. Nobody knows or cares about a community’s problems like the citizens themselves. And only they have the power and capacity to solve them. For those of us in university outreach, our most useful contribution is probably to serve as connector and catalyst with the goal of increasing the community’s capacity to successfully address problems on its own.

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Southern Growth Policies Board, a public policy think tank based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, has been experimenting with new ways of working in and with communities. Formed in 1971 by the region's governors, Southern Growth aims to strengthen the South's economy and increase the quality of life for Southerners by developing and advancing economic-development policy recommendations.*

Since 2001, Southern Growth has charted a listening process, which has as its centerpiece a series of deliberative forums in communities all across the South. The community deliberations serve a dual goal for Southern Growth—they fundamentally inform the organization's research and they endeavor to strengthen the participating communities in the

*Southern Growth Policies Board, see their Web site: http://www.southern.org.
process. I sat down in March of 2009 with Linda Hoke, director of the Council of the Southern Community at Southern Growth, to talk about the organization’s new ventures with communities, and she described the journey to becoming a listening organization.

* * *

**Can you tell me a little about how Southern Growth Policies Board has changed over the years?**

When I first came to work for Southern Growth—and it will be 20 years ago this summer—it was really a very different organization than it is today. At that time, we were primarily doing what I would call academic research. I spent a lot of time in the library researching economic-development topics. I also spent a lot of time interviewing people on the phone—mainly the experts that were involved in a particular issue. And then we would publish reports on those different topics before moving on to another topic.

The pivotal moment for us really happened when David Mathews spoke at Southern Growth’s annual conference following the 1998 Commission on the Future of the South. At the time, we felt like we were losing our connectedness. We were looking at ways to connect to more people in the region, and at the same time we were very interested in the research that was going on about social capital and how that might contribute to stronger communities. And so when David came and talked about leadership—he talked about “leaderful” communities rather than communities full of leaders—it really struck a cord with some of the thinking that was going on in our minds. We learned more about the work at the Kettering Foundation and then decided—as an experiment—that we would try to get more people talking about economic-development issues in their communities. We produced our first issue guide in 2001, *Pathways to Prosperity: Choosing a Future for Your Community*, which took a broad look at how to make our communities more prosperous. The guide looked at growth issues, and it looked at both the more traditional economic-development approaches where you would try to recruit companies, and also what Southern Growth was increasingly trying to promote—growth from within, building entrepreneurship, and that type of thing.

This was a little bit scary for us because we had always had control over our message before. At the time, we really felt pretty strongly that one path was perhaps the right path. So it was kind of scary to open it up to the possibility that people might tell us something that was wrong. It was a real leap for us to go down that path.

**That is particularly interesting. You quoted Jim Clinton, Southern Growth’s executive director at the time, as saying “Pathways to Prosperity as a project . . . became a vehicle that changed me and changed my approach to where we were headed.” However, people were admittedly a little frightened of the prospect of losing control of the message. But, deliberation just won’t work if you try to lead people to one option over the other, right?**

We were really more used to an educational kind of role—of going out there and presenting the message to the public: *this is what you should be doing*. So it was very different to not be delivering the message.

**Right. So it seems like the nature of the organization has sort of flipped.**

The organization has changed such that we are a lot more about connecting people now. We have always had an interesting combination of people, but I think we’ve done even more. I think that this whole listening process, as we call it now, has really contributed to that in terms of bringing different people together that aren’t normally connected. I think that that’s been a real strength for the organization, and I think it’s strengthened communities where there are people who come together from different perspectives and who don’t normally have the opportunity to talk about economic-development issues together. For example, we might bring together the business community with educators, and maybe with community-development people or young people. So, that’s definitely been a new direction that the organization has moved in.

**It seems like a pretty dramatic change. How has your work changed?**

It is a dramatic change. In terms of my day-to-day work, yes, it has changed a lot over the past 20 years. It’s probably a little less writing and more convening and listening to people now. One of my favorite parts of the work now is the forums. I think they are really interesting and we always learn a lot from them.

**And how does the community deliberations piece fit into the larger mission of Southern Growth?**

When we started this we really had dual goals. One goal was contributing to our research so that we felt like it was grounded in reality. We were trying to get away from this ivory-tower mentality, so we were not just doing academic research that had no basis in reality. We wanted to get out and see what people at the community level were really thinking. And another motivation for doing this was that we tended before to have more connections at the state government level and fewer connections at the community level. And yet so much change occurs at the community level. We felt that in order to really strengthen the South we needed
Our mission I would say is to improve the economy and quality of life in the South. So part of it is learning about the specific topic that we are focusing on each year. But part of it is this process. We hope the process of doing the forums is strengthening communities, and we hope that that will strengthen the South in turn.

Have you learned something from this work about how people can come to see themselves as economic citizens—actors in their communities that can actually do something to change their communities?

In a lot of communities we found, especially early on when we first started doing this, that a lot of people would say: this is the first time anyone has ever asked my opinion about anything in the community.

We found that a lot last year, when the forums focused on young people and their engagement in communities. Because this was the focus, we had a lot more young people involved. I think there was a lot of eye opening on both sides, especially when there were young people and adults in the room together. The adults expressed surprise that young people were often thinking the same things they were—they didn't expect that. The adults were excited about youths’ enthusiasm about doing something in the community—they didn't really expect that young people would be interested. And for their part, young people were surprised that adults listened to their ideas and opinions.

Another thing I feel good about are the changes you can see in communities from year to year. We had one community last year—Richmond, Kentucky—that had a forum involving a lot of young people. And they were so excited about what came out of that forum that this year they did a forum on energy. They had more than 170 people come to the forum. And they made sure that young people were a key part of this forum. Because they were such a large group, they needed to break into smaller discussion groups at different parts during the event. They made sure that there were a couple students at each table, and then asked the students to do the reporting out for the groups. So, they are really seeing young people as much more of a resource in their community.

One of the other interesting things that we found, starting early on, was that—no matter what the topic being discussed—some communities would report on benefits outside of the topic. This is one thing that we were hoping might happen. One of the things that we were hearing from them was that they thought this might help with race relations. We weren't talking about race relations—we were talking about rural development, or technology-based development. But, the forums brought together people who hadn't really come together before to talk about the community. And they found that to be really valuable.

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Related Kettering research conducted with the Harwood Institute revealed that community-based, nonprofit organizations increasingly tend to focus on building their institutional strength and responding to mandates for accountability from funders. Therefore they have less energy, freedom, and creative potential to focus on working in, and building, civic life. Engaging citizens in solving problems is often seen as time consuming, fraught with uncertainty, and as inadequate to the task. Citizen engagement work is hard to measure and justify.

Kettering’s research has demonstrated that this decline in civic-minded associations and organizations has left citizens frustrated and disconnected from opportunities to take ownership over the problems they see around them. When people have limited opportunities to participate in meaningful ways, they resort to saying “no” to block an action or to partisan bickering. Democracy needs citizens to work through the problems that face them. Without citizen engagement, our communities and our nation lose the needed values check on public issues. And citizens need to feel a part of something larger than themselves. In an economic climate like the one we are in today, civic associations that can impact these problems are needed more than ever.

One of the primary means people have had to develop their capacity to actively participate in their democracies is to work in associations of civic life. These are the very organizations Tocqueville cited as a significant and distinctive strength for democracy in the United States. However, all is not well with these associations. Theda Skocpol reported a disturbing decline in civic organizations since the 1950s, as professional disciplines developed in higher education and activist social movements turned their attention to lobbying in Washington, D.C. This trend and what it might imply for citizens got our attention.
en community prosperity. Communities that wait for the next big factory to come may wait a long time. What will it take for citizens to recapture their economies without these associations of civic life? With the decline in opportunities to exercise their democratic tendencies, few organizations have stepped in to build civic capacity. One exception is the so-called Public Policy Institute (PPI), which Kettering has been studying for the past 25 years. PPIs started by offering National Issues Forums (NIF) and moderator preparation through a network of small organizations around the country. Most of these institutes were associated with higher education and the issues—framed in deliberation issue books—and tended to focus on significant, large, national dilemmas, such as Social Security reform.

The issue books used a framework of at least three approaches that were intended to deal with the concern by emphasizing the tensions among things held valuable in the approaches. This kind of deliberation helped citizens see themselves as actors in the problem and recognize that any direction taken would have its trade-offs. The PPIs began to see NIF as a means of building skills in deliberation that were needed for civic life. As PPIs made use of NIF they recognized its value in reframing local issues as well. This kind of deliberation helped reveal the opportunities for citizens to act on their own behalf in some cases. This respectful talk was in sharp contrast to community public hearings where citizens could only voice their opposition to plans already made. What if this talk became more common? What if local issues were framed in a way to encourage deliberation? The PPIs were beginning to address these questions about the basic civic life of their communities. While PPIs still got their start using NIF, it seems that local issues and local acting were becoming of greater interest to the communities the PPIs serve.

Several of the PPIs are engaging citizens in such a way that the citizens can begin to affect their concerns through deliberation and action. While some PPIs have long looked for the connection between deliberation in a forum and action, these community-focused PPIs see their work as facilitating, convening, and building civic capacity. This focus engages the community in a different way than providing the opportunity to engage large national topics for the purpose of education. It is intended to help citizens see themselves as actors.

The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (ICDD) at Kansas State University seems to be one of these community-based PPIs. This land-grant university serves the entire state through its county extension offices. As an agricultural state, the economy of Kansas has many small towns that serve farming communities. But local economies are harder and harder to sustain, as transportation to larger cities is more available, taking business away from the community. People are willing to travel to get lower prices on food and other goods.

Kansans were concerned about the cornerstone of small, local economies—the rural grocery. Between 2004 and 2007, approximately 1,300 small grocers had gone out of business in the state, so ICDD surveyed rural grocers and their customers to frame the issue for public deliberation.

As is common in economic development, the issue can be viewed through a variety of lenses. They framed the issue themselves, identifying three approaches to the economic concern: 1) competing with big-box stores, 2) preserving a community, and 3) improving health by making nutritious foods locally available. As a result of the deliberation, cooperative relationships among grocers were formed to meet the community and economic development needs of these communities.

Some anecdotal changes that have occurred as a result of connecting the storeowners and the citizens include simple things that citizens could do themselves. Yet these actions would not have occurred without the space to deliberate—catalyzed by the ICDD. For example, the stores changed their hours and added product lines that citizens needed and wanted. And, the grocers have been able...
to expand their product lines by working with regional distributors who sell healthy food in smaller quantities—a service the large distributors would not provide.

ICDD learned several lessons from their facilitation and convening work with these rural communities. Not only did the community create a way to deal with the concern out of its own resources, ICDD learned to approach the issue differently. They see themselves less as content experts—the traditional role in the university—and more as process convenors. By working from the grass roots up they were able to make personal connections, create neutral space for deliberation, and catalyze community action. The new network of interaction is a strong example of the kind of actions that can result from deliberation.

The University of Michigan (U of M) is another example of a PPI that operates like a civic-life association. They did not start that way. Faced with a struggling economy in Michigan, the governor went on a listening tour to identify the citizens’ budget priorities. She heard citizens say clearly that its priorities were for public education at the K-12 level and health care for vulnerable populations. Higher education was a low priority to citizens. Yet there was recognition on the part of the governor that higher education was important for the state to grow economically. The governor’s office sought help from the PPI at the U of M to better understand the public’s thinking about higher education.

What started as a traditional policy-focused series of forums turned into something much more. U of M was unprepared for the interest of forum participants in the topic and the urgency to act that often develops from such discussions. They did not anticipate that the “move to action” was even needed. They believed there was an intrinsic value in deliberative forums as informing, educating, and sharing a public voice with policymakers.

Learning as they went along, they began to consider their work, not as organizing an event, but as convening a community around an issue. What they discovered was that the community had many resources to bring to the issue—without which, government actions alone were likely to fail. They reflected on their efforts in five communities and generated insights about how PPIs might engage communities differently, depending on the networks and relationships they found.

U of M learned different ways of entering communities as they moved across the state to hold forums. In their early work in Ann Arbor, they simply collected the results of the forums and compiled it as information for the Governor’s office. When they moved on to the cities of Grand Rapids and Jackson, they tapped into networks that were willing and ready to deliberate, such as a mediation center. The work in these two communities helped build stronger relationships and facilitated action around education. When they moved on to Detroit, they lacked relationships to build on, so the university had to create “transactions” that would build those relationships first, through trust. This work had to occur before any deliberation would be successful at building the network for action.

Finally, Sault Ste. Marie—a community more than eight hours away from Ann Arbor—required another approach altogether. Again, they lacked existing relationships. Building on what they learned from Jackson and Detroit, they contacted established groups to build a network of strong, sustainable relationships. The network became responsible for the public participation rather than the PPI as event organizer. Furthermore, this relationship with the community placed the community as the expert with the university responding with the information, data, and experiences the community requested. They believed they left structures and capacities in place that would overcome the distance and time required for action.

Beyond building the capacity in the communities, these PPIs are bringing deliberation to the university. Kansas State works across disciplinary lines in the academy and builds capacity across the university. The provost funded a start-up institute there, which enabled the institute to focus less on satisfying internal institutional mandates and instead focus on the community it serves. The University of Michigan makes extensive use of graduate students from a variety of disciplines. This builds the capacity of future generations.

Other PPIs operate in this capacity-building frame of mind as well. Kettering is embarking on a new line of inquiry to discover the roles that PPIs play in communities, how they enter political environments, and how they relate to the citizenry. We want to understand more about how these institutes are able to accomplish what they do in an environment that is full of institutional and external mandates that typically discourage the kind of innovations in civic life they are experimenting with. Without strong community networks and the desire to experiment, we believe it is much harder for a community to develop and prosper. And, it helps democracy work better by rebuilding an associational, civic life.

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For more than 25 years, through the National Issues Forums network, tens of thousands of citizens have gathered in small groups in libraries, churches, community halls, schools, and colleges to do the most fundamental work of democracy: to decide together the direction they feel their own community, state, or the country should take to address some of the most challenging problems Americans face. Issues have ranged from kids at risk to death and dying, from where our energy policy should focus to, most recently, how we should control the costs of health care.

Experiments in Communicating the Results

By Phil Stewart
These deliberations differ from polls of individual opinion and other measures of public opinion. Unlike polls, deliberations enable citizens to think together; to weigh alternative options against what they hold most valuable and consider thoroughly all relevant costs and consequences. Public deliberation is always about what should be done. It is about making difficult moral choices among things that may be seen as equally important. Public deliberation, then, can enable citizens to move toward a more stable, durable opinion.

But, why should the results of public deliberation be of interest either to the media or policymakers? After all, where is the drama or “news” from the media’s perspective? Elected lawmakers say, “I have my polls to consult. I hold town hall meetings where I hear citizens’ complaints. How can the results of discussions among as few as several dozen or even as many as several hundreds in my district or state be of value to me? Why should I pay attention to what only a few constituents have to say? It’s hard for me to make much sense of citizen views when they neither directly support nor oppose positions I have or might take.”

The Kettering Foundation has long wrestled with how to communicate the public voice that emerges from such deliberation, and in its own estimate, without a lot of success. In the early years, Kettering would bring together former U.S. presidents, the media, and members of the policy community to Presidential Libraries to hear experts, such as Dan Yankelovich, and ordinary citizens who’d participated in forums talk about why public deliberation is important and to tell stories from the forums. While the reception was always polite, these meetings, essentially, were without consequence. The media and policy community tend to view expert declamations as one more lobbying effort, but here without clear relevance to any specific policy position.

One conclusion from this experiment was that if only we could expose policymakers to powerful examples of public deliberation and show how opinion changes in the process of deliberation then, perhaps, the Washington policy community could come to recognize the nature and value of how citizens together make decisions. In a series of annual events, over nearly a dozen years, the TV program A Public Voice brought together elected officials, distinguished people from the media, and the policy community to view clips selected from public forums and then discuss their implications for the relevant policy topic. Follow-up interviews over five to six years showed that a handful of elected officials, perhaps one or two members of the media, but not one policy thinker came to recognize the nature of public deliberation and/or its potential relevance to their policy or political work.

A review of our understanding of public deliberation and in what precise ways its results should be valuable to the policy community led to a new experiment. We began with Dan Yankelovich’s conception of the stages of public opinion. This enabled us to recognize just what it is about the results of public deliberation that policymakers need to know and why. To put it simply, once citizens have done the difficult work of making tough trade-offs among things they highly value, once the public has come to judgment, elected officials not only have a mandate to act, they fail to act at their peril. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and ending the Vietnam War are two such instances. Instances like these, however, are relatively rare.

More commonly, the public struggles for years to reconcile conflicts about what should be done. For example, health-care reform in 1993 failed at least in part because the public had not yet made the tough choices required. As a result, President Clinton and his party lost a lot of their political clout and momentum. Today, the Obama administration has committed itself to major reform of our health-care system. Is the public ready to support this effort? Opinion polls suggest, yes. But, polls nearly always tap “top of the mind” views. They cannot reflect well on whether citizens, indeed, have done the work of seriously weighing choices. Public deliberation, perhaps uniquely, can provide the kinds of sophisticated insights into “where the public is” that policymakers need. If, as is often the case, public deliberation shows that the public is working on but has not yet fully resolved tough choices, as appears to be the case today respecting health-care reform, knowing this, policymakers can either delay action or act in ways that encourage and stimulate public thinking and deliberation.

So, having clarified why the Washington community should be interested in the results of nationwide public deliberation on critical issues, and what kinds of information from public deliberation they can use, we turned to the question of how we might more effectively raise awareness of the “why” and communicate more credibly the “what.” We began by asking what sources of information are regarded as “credible and useful” by the policy community and media. That is, what do they pay attention to? Two types of sources constantly came up: opinion polls and analytical policy papers, such as Brookings or American Enterprise Institute publications. While Public Agenda over many years has published an annual report on nationwide public deliberation on various issues, it has never gained the desired “traction” in D.C.
Now, searching more broadly for other politically credible information sources we recognized a third type of information with these qualities: court verdicts or decisions, particularly those of the U.S. Supreme Court. Might the use of the metaphor of a court and verdict, organized in an appropriate way, better raise awareness of the “why” and more effectively articulate the “what” of public deliberation to the policy community? This became the key proposition of our current experiment, which began in 2008 and, after considerable further refinements, was tried again in 2009, and which continues.

Emerging from our 2008 experiment, Kettering recognized that there is a lot to learn about how to use this metaphor before we can adequately test whether it offers a better way to communicate the “why” and “what” of public deliberation. Perhaps our most important insight from 2008 is that “where the public is” on an issue cannot be determined analytically or scientifically. It is, rather, a matter of judgment. Public thinking is far too nuanced, much too complex. Indeed, what might be most attractive and valuable to the media and policy community is demonstrating nuance and complexity in a compelling way. Here was the “case” that was missing in 2008, and here was what would enable us to make fuller use of the court analogy.

So, in March 2009, the foundation hosted an event at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Designed to emulate a civil trial, “attorneys” analyzed all of the information from the forums and developed their cases—Mike D’Innocenzo from Hofstra University, made the best case allowed by the data that the public is at an “advanced” stage in its thinking, and the opponent, Maxine Thomas, a former prosecutor and Kettering vice president, argued the evidence against. These cases were heard by a panel of five “judges,” chaired by Rich Harwood, founder and president of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. These two cases then gave the “court” something that they themselves had to deliberate and decide. After weighing the evidence, the court found that the public continues to engage in some level of wishful thinking and to struggle with some difficult trade-offs. Probably only a small portion of the public, the panel decided, has today reached a firm “judgment” on health-care reform.

After announcing their decision, the judges offered their own views on implications for health-care reform, suggesting that elected officials would be wise to encourage and stimulate further public thinking on this issue prior to acting on far-reaching reform legislation.

So to speak, “the jury is still out” on this experiment. While we sent the court’s decision and a more complete story to numerous media outlets, only three have picked it up. The event itself was attended by about a dozen representatives from eight D.C. policy organizations, in addition to numerous NIF and other participants. No elected officials took part. However, the outcomes of this process will be part of briefings for elected officials this spring, and the experiment continues. These proceedings will also be part of a documentary that seeks to capture both the essence of public deliberation and this court process and will be distributed to public television stations.

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Ibtesam Al-Atiyat

Jordan’s Public Forums Initiative

It was against the background of a series of UN human development reports (2002-2005) that a group of Arab researchers and activists joined forces to address the challenges associated with the region’s intricate democratic transition. In 2005, the group established the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy (ANSD) to respond to the major deficits highlighted in the UN reports, including a varying lack of freedom and a general lack of women’s emancipation.

Supporting a bottom-top democratic transition was set as the main goal for the network, as well as a major challenge. Indeed, our work as a group and as individuals has often proven that citizens in the seven Arab countries represented in the network have not only limited access to political processes but also, and most important, less interest therein. It was time to seek an alternative approach. An approach that holds the potential of rebuilding people’s trust in democratic governance and helping overcome the alienation of citizens, which was created by seasonal elections of dysfunctional institutions and merely ‘cosmetic’ participatory approaches to decision making.

To realize this objective, the ANSD entered into a joint-learning agreement with Kettering Foundation in 2006 and launched the Arab Public Deliberation Initiative. The teams representing Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, and Bahrain selected issues of major concern prevailing in their respective countries and started creating issue books and...
undertaking nationwide issue forums. Several forums on political participation and electoral law took place in Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, and Lebanon; in Algeria, environment was the issue of focus; in Bahrain, the issue of equal pay; and in Jordan, the issue of unemployment was deliberated in as many as six forums.

Public issue forums were new to the network members who have moderated and conducted the forums. The method of deliberation was also new to the Arab public although it reminded them of a process of a “democratic” public consultation known to Muslims as Shura. To the Arab public in Bahrain, Algeria, and Jordan, the forums identified the often-missed connection between people, social and economic interests, and democratic transitions.

In what follows, I focus on Jordan’s forums on unemployment. I describe why the issue of unemployment was picked, discuss the challenges often associated when governments, civil society actors, and the general public address issues and seek solutions; and finally speak about the potential of issue forums from a participant’s perspective and thrash out challenges faced by the team conducting the forums.

Why Unemployment?

The economic crisis Jordan suffered in the mid 1980s led to a push for a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) prescribed by the World Bank and the IMF, aiming at stabilization at the macroeconomic level and controlling the country’s soaring debts. By the end of 1980s, the socioeconomic side effects of the SAP began to unfold. Jordanians were confronted with a new bitter reality, in which their fuel and food would no longer be subsidized and an era of almost free health services and quality education ended. Even worse, in a resource-limited, non-oil producing country, the government would not provide jobs and spend unlimited amounts on civil servants’ retirement plans. Poverty and unemployment became every Jordanian’s nightmare.

The lack of efficient methods to make their voices heard led citizens to riot in 1989. On April 18 of that year rioters marched the streets in the big cities, expressing their frustration and disagreement with the new changes and blending the social with the political. Citizens rejected the changing role of state and the end of subsidies, and they also demanded an opening of the political arena and the sacking of the then-prime minister.

Unlike speculations, the government did not respond with the use of force. In that year, elections took place after over two long decades of suspension under the application of martial law. Political parties became publically active, and the National Charter—one of the major national documents in addition to the constitution—was collectively drafted guiding this new era of democratization and ensuring that all political actors were devoted to the country’s progress. With a new press law and more freedoms of association granted (which later became more restricted), Jordan became the model in the Arab world. A model where every voice, including that of the Islamists who are banned in other Arab countries, are granted the right and access to political power.

The Government and Civil Society Failing Citizens

Since then, the government continued with its controlled political opening and initiated a reform agenda that includes a political, economic, and judicial reform. While keeping the focus on macroeconomic policies, political reforms kept focused on civil and political rights. Civil society became more preoccupied with the best electoral system to follow and campaigned against restrictive laws and regulations framing associational life. This has left social and economic issues without any serious attention.

Over time, poverty and unemployment, although seen as important social and economic issues, have become less recognized as political. The more civil society demanded civil and political rights and the more the government responded to such demands, the more citizens have felt alienated from debates and processes creating the democratic project. To express their frustration, citizens rioted again in 1996, and incidences of citizens selling their votes were reported 11 years later during the elections of 2007.

The message in these actions was clear. What is being debated, at the government, as well as civil society, level does not represent people’s interests or demands.

Deliberative Forums: The Potential and the Challenges

When it first started experimenting with issue forums, the Jordanian team did not realize that it had touched the heart of the democracy problem. Indeed, people needed more effective channels to express themselves and spaces where they could state their views. As the government has its experts, and civil society has its activists and intellectuals who debated democracy in closed circles, people looked at both institutions as elitist and less representative.

Through the forums, citizens felt the difference immediately. “It feels like someone has eventually decided to listen to what we have to say,” said a participant in one of the issue forums in Karak, a city in southern Jordan. In the forums many marginalized groups, such as youth and women, have also felt included in the discussion and search for solutions.

Jordan’s Public Forums Initiative
The Civil Society Fellowship

The Kettering Foundation provides a limited number of fellowships for staff members of organizations in other countries that are working with citizen-related matters. The fellows participate in the work of the foundation, in addition to pursuing their own research. The fellowships usually last for five months, beginning either in February or in July. The core elements of the fellowship curriculum include:

• exchanging ideas and insights based on the fellows’ experiences and triggered by a set of readings on deliberative democratic approaches that serve as an ongoing theoretical orientation to the overall work of the foundation
• attending workshops, seminars, and other meetings to learn about aspects of deliberative democracy, including framing issues for public deliberation; convening and moderating citizen forums; and other ways of engaging citizens in civic life
• a research project that explores topics directly related to the foundation’s priorities for research at the time of the fellowship
• moderator training for conducting public forums through attendance at a Public Policy Institute
• a major independent research project developed by the fellow in conjunction with his or her sponsoring organization
• participation in regularly scheduled foundation meetings and project groups

The Civil Society Fellowship is open to citizens from countries and territories outside the 50 United States and the District of Columbia.

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groups, such as youth and women, have also felt included in the discussion and search for solutions. A young participant from Zarqa, a city in the middle of Jordan, explains: “I always felt that unemployment is a problem for adults to solve; but how can they, since they are not affected by it as much as my age group is?” To many women the mentioning of their unemployment status in the text of the issue book meant a lot. A female participant in a forum in Irbid north of Jordan said, “Even today, many would still argue that solving the unemployment problem requires sending all women to ‘where they belong’ that is, back home.”

Also in the north, participants said that the forums help them understand that there is a political facet to unemployment. A participant said, “I attend most of civil society activities on democracy and political participation. While many of these were useful, one always feels more weight given to panelist’s views over that of the audience. Also, no one takes the time to explain the links between electoral systems, which are always brought up when democracy is debated, and the increasing prices of commodities and endless unemployment problems. These are the issues that concern us as people.”

However, despite sensing significant differences between the forums and other forms of events they used to participate in, participants also highlighted some challenges. “What is next? How is this going to help solve the problem? What should the forum’s outcome look like and where should it go to?” These were a few of the questions raised by some participants as the forums ended.

Indeed, leaving participants to puzzle with such questions did serve the purpose of the forums. It showed that this process, if as inclusive as it should be, has the potential of arriving at well-informed, thoroughly deliberated decisions that meet the needs of everyone. And this is what Jordanians were always looking for, right from the moment they went rioting in the streets in the spring of 1989.

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Jordan’s Public Forums Initiative
The Experimental Sowing the Seed of Deliberation Project in Nigeria

By Moshood Folorunsho

Since Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999, it has been observed that there is a continuing decline in civic knowledge, engagement, and participation among young people. This portends a great danger to the nascent democratic setting because young people have the numerical strength and energy that can make or mar the development of democracy anywhere in the world. More so, they are the future of the country and therefore need to be adequately equipped for the present and the future challenges of democratic life.

Making democracy work as it should in Nigeria requires, among other things, inculcating basic democratic practices in the youth, especially secondary school students before they graduate on to colleges and universities. The practices, which are some of the activities citizens should engage in to properly govern themselves, would definitely turn the youth into informed, responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens in the not too distant future. These practices are embedded in the concept of deliberation, and informed adults could help to teach them to the youth.

Sowing the Seed of Deliberation (SSD) project is an attempt to increase the capacity of youth leaders in secondary schools in Nigeria on democracy and democratic practices.

Drawing heavily from the ideas and ideals of the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forums Institute, the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, and several reports from developmental partners on deliberation and National Issues Forums in the classroom, a three-day experimental workshop on the Sowing the Seed of Deliberation project was organized between April 28 and 30, 2009, in Nigeria. The workshop, which had in attendance 15 youth leaders from 8 secondary schools, was first and foremost used as an experiment to find out the best approach to the planning and eventual implementation of the SSD project later in the year, taking into consideration the contextual framework in Nigeria.

The three-day workshop engaged these youth leaders on the six basic democratic practices as spelt out in David Mathews’ Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy. To explore the students’ understanding of these democratic practices, a group discussion on the meaning of democracy, politics, and decision making was carried out. At the end of this interactive session, it was observed that students’ understanding of democracy and politics has been negatively affected by the information they are getting from the media, teachers and parents, and the behavior of professional politicians. It was obvious that students have been spoon-fed only with what David Mathews usually refers to as “politics-as-usual,” and they are only familiar with “institutional democracy.”

One student drew the attention of other participants to the recently concluded re-run governorship election in Ekiti State, which was marred by violence and ballot rigging. To this student, politics is a dirty game and democracy is the government by the selfish few, for the wicked few.
Another participant viewed politics as the best money-making venture in the country. He believed people are into politics just to make money and serve their selfish interests. To him, democracy is making the poor, poorer and the rich, richer. Another participant gave the classical definition of institutional democracy as taught by their government teacher: “Democracy is a political system, a type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political legislative and administrative decisions. It is a system by which the individual acquires the power to participate in decision making by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.”

This girl gave approximately 13 elements of institutional democracy, 2 of which qualify as elements of the ‘different kind of democracy’ that Kettering Foundation advocates. These two elements are citizens’ involvement in decision making and civic education.

Most of the students have "participated" in decision making in schools as mere spectators and observers, rubber-stamping predetermined decisions by school authorities and teachers. The most interesting experience came from a 16-year-old participant who is a member of Red Cross Society and a Time Keeper at his school. “In my school, we have Students Representatives Council (SRC) that regularly meets with the school authority on many issues affecting the school. . . . Though there are some issues the school authority does not discuss with the SRC, it makes the students part of the decision-making body in the school.” The boy was asked how SRC is constituted. He responded by saying, “SRC is constituted by the Principal. . . . SRC members are nominated by the teachers, and a majority of the members are school prefects.” All of them are decision makers in their school clubs, but they make decisions through opinion polls, voting, debate, oratory prowess, and interviews.

It is widely believed that the school environment is a microcosm of the larger society where decisions on topical issues, especially those that are affecting the youth, are made on a daily basis, and can provide a good space for the experimentation of democracy and democratic practices among the students. Thus, this space can be created within the classroom, outside the classroom, or both. And, it should be noted that deliberation in the classroom and deliberation outside the classroom could be used to complement one another.

The SSD project may lack resources and capacity to timely cope with the initial intricacies and idiosyncrasies of teachers and school authorities in adopting deliberation/NIF in the classroom, hence it will explore the strengths and the opportunities of the outside-the-classroom activities, especially through the existing school clubs. It is hoped that with time, the effect on the students within the school club activities will snowball into the classrooms.

It was from this background that being a school prefect and member of a school club became the criteria for participating in the three-day experimental workshop on the SSD project. It is also hoped that these youth leaders will become the seed of deliberation that will eventually germinate into informed and responsible citizens and grow into participatory, committed, and justice-oriented citizens in the future.

The session on the naming and framing of The Rising Costs of Access to Secondary Education in Nigeria and the test deliberative forum on the developed issue map enlightened the students about what David Mathews refers to as ‘citizens politics’ in his book, Politics for People. They were engaged in a unique way of talking, making decisions, and acting together. Though the entire process was time consuming and somewhat tedious, they all agreed that the session improved their understanding of the issue. It must be noted that the involvement of the participants in extracurricular activities through their various clubs influenced their level of understanding and the rate at which they grasped the concept.

For sustainability of the project and stimulation of students’ interests in democratic practices, the participants desired to incorporate deliberation into the activities of their various clubs. They all showed a significant level of commitment through workshop assignments and various group work. In order to monitor their activities and their progress, an Internet account was opened for every participant—for some of them, this was the first direct encounter with a computer and the Internet.

At the beginning of the workshop, it was observed that the participants have a certain level of civic knowledge and engagement through their involvement in extracurricular activities, but their participation in the workshop further developed this capacity. They are more informed and committed. Because all of them will still be in secondary school during the next year, there will be enough time to carry out an impact assessment and determine how responsible and participatory they have become before graduating on to colleges and universities.

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The International Civil Society Consortium for Public Deliberation
.Org

By Ileana Marin

The International Civil Society Consortium for Public Deliberation (ICSC) is an international, nonprofit network of civic organizations from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, the Americas, and Africa whose main focus is to enhance cooperation in promoting responsible democratic institutions and public deliberation around the world.

In an effort to further define, support, and encourage collaborations within the consortium, its Web site has been redesigned—www.icscpd.org. The new Web site offers a more engaging experience for the members and supporters of the consortium. By adding new capabilities, its members have the ability to collaborate more effectively, allowing the consortium to provide a more robust presence.

Members of ICSC have been gathering since 1991, when they started meeting informally under the coordination of the Kettering Foundation. Since then, the network has grown to include civil society activists, researchers and academics representing nongovernmental organizations, university departments, foundations, and journals. The following countries are currently represented in ICSC: Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Hungary, Ireland, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Kosovo/FRY, Lebanon, Morocco, New Zealand, Nigeria, Poland, Puerto Rico, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, Yemen, and Yugoslavia. Their primary goal is to enhance international cooperation in promoting responsible, democratic, and widely participatory deliberation over public issues around the world. The consortium believes that such deliberation is essential for the reinforcement of democratic progress and welcomes the inclusion of other organizations.

Today, ICSC members regularly participate in exchanges to learn from one another and to strengthen democratic practice by enriching democratic thought.
Our challenge is to spur new interest in the site from people in the network, who historically have not stayed in contact outside of KF-related events (such as the March and June multinational workshops). We aim to create an online space where people in the network can engage and support one another.

In the mid-1990s, I initiated a quarterly newsletter that included news and outlines of reports that a variety of folks in the consortium provided for wider distribution. The newsletter was distributed via “snail-mail.”

Then in 1999, I created the first ICSC Web site. The newsletters became a distinct part of this site. But later, due to a lack of response from people in the consortium, it became clear that the collection of materials was too thin for a quarterly distribution. Overall the Web site proved to be a good background for the network’s activities; nevertheless, it became obvious that ICSC members were more actively involved in communicating amongst themselves around events organized by KF.

In 2004, I conducted a large effort to update the content of the Web site, while also redesigning it. All member organization representatives were contacted and requested to provide updated materials, as well as ideas for better communication through this Web site. While some updates arrived in a timely manner, the communication within the network continued to lag, except during Kettering events. A message board was added to the Web site with the expectation for more interaction. But only those network members who had always been responsible used the forum.

The new ICSC Web site, however, has been created with the following ideas for best usage in mind:

1. **A content initiative to give members a sense of investment in the site and to develop the roles that we want the international fellows to fill in the ongoing management of the site.**

The fellows have been tasked with making direct contact with each member organization for the purpose of obtaining a responsive point-of-contact, in addition to defining and then acquiring the content used to make up each member’s presence on the site.

The advantage we have in this area is that the fellows rotate out approximately every five months. This gives us an opportunity to review the process and make adjustments in between each group of fellows. It also removes the often-tedious aspects of breaking established work patterns and approaches in order to refine the processes.

Additionally, when we become aware of fellows who are not returning immediately to full-time work in their home country, we have the option of enlisting them to continue their efforts on our behalf even after they have left the United States. From the fellows’ perspective, and from the perspective of prospective employers, the investment of time in this pursuit demonstrates commitment and work ethic that will contribute to the fellows’ attractiveness as potential employees, as well as introducing the fellows’ employers to our work.

2. **Capitalizing on already existing groups of former fellows and others who are already collaborating on a variety of initiatives.**

The consortium’s Web site has the capacity to offer the initial structures and collaborative environment and tools that people need in such instances.

There is a web of good relationships that have been developing for years with some of the participants in one endeavor or another. Capitalizing on these relationships and using the work papers and communications that were passed back-and-forth in the production of, let’s say, a new publication, we can translate this into a model to demonstrate how the site can be used to facilitate collaborations of this type in the future.

For example: A newly drafted chapter has been prepared by a member and is ready for review and input from the larger group. By posting the new chapter in the online Discussion area that has been created for this group, an area that only the assigned participants can access, they can give their feedback in a threaded discussion format.

3. **Defining areas of expertise and professional experience among the members and creating specific centers of collaboration to match, complete with sample material demonstrating experience and expertise.**

For example: Not all ICSC member organizations have an expertise or focus in journalism, so if a member is looking to start a new initiative in this area, it would be helpful for them to know specifically who in the consortium to contact for collaboration.

The primary mission of the ICSC Web site is to offer yet another venue to exchange insights and knowledge. Any contribution is welcome; we look forward to having various perspectives, as well as many questions, to allow for an authentic and professional exchange to unfold.

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www.icscpd.org
Books Worth Reading

Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness

By Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein
Yale University Press, 2008

With its snappy one-word title, this book calls to mind recent releases like Blink, Sway, and Flip. And in the spirit of bestsellers like The Tipping Point and Freakonomics, books that purport to reveal the “hidden dimensions” of this or that, this work is targeted at a broad, general audience. But unlike so many books in the genre, this one tries to do more than just inform and entertain. It takes a serious academic subject and makes a strong case for more enlightened social and economic policies.

Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein contend that the way public choices are framed and presented goes a long way toward determining the kinds of decisions people make. Summarizing four decades of research in what they call “the emerging science of choice,” they show that people do not always act logically or in their own best interests. They eat more from large plates, care twice as much about losing money as gaining it, and agonize about rare events like plane crashes instead of common ones like auto accidents. While we like to think of ourselves as rational creatures, studies show that the choices we make tend to be unrealistically optimistic, biased toward the status quo, and undercut by a subtle and unthinking conformity.

What such research suggests, Thaler and Sunstein say, is that choice architecture—like the architecture of a well-designed public space—can guide, or “nudge,” people toward making better choices. A nudge is a way of organizing and presenting choices “that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives.”

To count as a nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. “Nudges are not mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.”

By understanding the power of nudges, they argue, choice architects—those charged with the responsibility of organizing the context in which people make decisions—can help to coax people into making decisions that serve them better. Much of the book is given to practical examples of how this can be done, such as taking advantage of people’s propensity to expend a minimum of effort (ensure the default option serves the greatest good for the greatest number) or making use of subtle social influences (suggest how other people are inclined to choose under similar conditions).

Thaler and Sunstein acknowledge that nudges might be viewed by some as an infringement on people’s liberties. But at bottom, they say, there is no such thing as a context-free choice. Knowing this we can either leave the framing to chance (or, perhaps, to advertising and PR firms), or we can consciously decide on it. What is needed is an approach that both preserves freedom of choice and guides people to make decisions that are in their personal and collective best interests. They use the term libertarian paternalism, a deliberate oxymoron, to describe this philosophy. The term is useful, in their view, because it sums up the underlying rationale for nudges—to influence people’s behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and happier while, at the same time, preserving their basic freedom to choose as they please.

If people want to smoke cigarettes, eat unhealthy foods, pick an unsuitable health-care plan, or fail to save for retirement, libertarian paternalists will not stop them, or even make the choice difficult for them, Thaler and Sunstein write. “Still, the approach we recommend does count as
paternalistic, because private and public choice architects are not merely trying to track or to implement people’s anticipated choices. Rather, they are self-consciously attempting to move people in directions that will make their lives better. They nudge.”

—Scott London

Scott London is a long-time associate of the Kettering Foundation. His Web site is www.scottlondon.com.

Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe

by Xavier de Souza Briggs
MIT Press, 2008

Briggs is a professor of sociology and urban planning at MIT, now on professional leave as associate director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. His recent book argues that “many ideas about making democracy work stop at asking the question: how might we improve the relationship between citizens and their government?” Though this is an important problem, he, following John Dewey, proposes a broader one: “how might we improve the relationships among citizens, government, and private parties (including businesses and unelected interest-group advocates and philanthropies that bring vital resources and capacity) in relation to important public problems?”

Briggs contends that democratic theorists and practitioners have often assumed one of two pictures of democracy. The first sees it as a contest between interest groups, in which public participation is limited to lobbying against other power brokers. The second understands democracy as an instrument of deliberation, where increasing opportunities for rational debate will produce better answers to problems and reinvigorate people’s faith in politics. Despite the vast differences between these positions, Briggs worries that both leave the implementation of solutions to governments and ignore the possibility of citizens themselves taking action.

In order to talk about democracy in this broader sense, Briggs develops the concept of civic capacity, or “the extent to which the sectors that make up a community are (1) capable of collective action on public problems and (2) choose to apply such capability.” He argues that dealing with problems may often require more than interpersonal relationships and shared norms, as Putnam’s “social capital” might suggest. In fact, complementary action, bargaining, and multidimensional forms of accountability may be essential parts of effective problem solving in complex and heterogeneous societies.

Civic capacity is also distinguished from social capital in recognizing the need for intermediary organizations, such as stable coalitions that authorize action and alliances that actually get things done. Such structures provide space for naming problems, blend service delivery and policy enforcement, bring together different types of knowledge, and convene and coordinate disengaged citizens. Problem solving depends upon these and similar institutions as well as their continual reconstruction. If democracy is to be scaled up from the face-to-face community level, it must build upon these structures of civic capacity.

Once democracy is seen as a process of solving problems that depends upon and extends civic capacities, it becomes clear that there are no certain formulas for realizing either. The potential for creating and utilizing civic capacity depends upon a community’s history, the array of tasks at hand, and the forms of accountability that are at issue. To learn from previous problem-solving attempts and to trace the limits of this concept, Briggs undertakes a comparative analysis across a number of problems, domains, and borders. Issues of urban growth, economic development, and investment in youths in Brazil, the United States, South Africa, and India all provide insights into the barriers to and opportunities for expanding civic capacities.

— Zach VanderVeen

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In problem solving, diversity is powerful stuff,” so begins Scott Page in his book *The Difference*. The main argument of the book is that diverse perspectives can lead to better results. So much so, that Page employs a phrase throughout the work: *diversity trumps ability*. He argues that diverse groups of problem solvers consistently outperform groups made up of the best individual performers, concluding that diversity should be considered as, or even more, valuable than ability. He writes: “Without collective intelligence, decentralized markets and democracies would have little hope of functioning effectively. Yet we do not fully understand the causes of successful collective performance. We tend to think that it rests in ability, that if we make the individuals smarter, we make the group (or mob) smarter. . . . Here I show that if we make the individuals more diverse, we get the same effects.” (p. 4)

Page posits definitions, frameworks, and models in order to understand the role of difference in problem solving, prediction, and information aggregation. He defines the concept of diversity as cognitive differences and unpacks it into four tools: *perspectives* are the ways that people represent or name problems; *interpretations* are the ways that people categorize or frame their perspectives; *heuristics* are the ways that people almost automatically generate solutions to problems; and *predictive models* are the ways that people infer cause and effect.

He rightly notes, however, that difference is not a cure-all. For diversity to produce benefits, certain conditions must exist. First, diversity must be relevant to the problem at hand, so, for example, adding a poet to a medical team won’t miraculously enable them to find a cure for the common cold. Second, in order for the diverse group to function, its members must get along, if not, the differences between people can lead to a kind of siloing of ideas.

Page’s work is relevant for those interested in collective decision making. Importantly, he argues diverse collections of people, none of whom are experts, have been able to make accurate predictions and more critically have been able to find more and better solutions to complex problems. Second, his work comprehends that complex decisions require a diverse set of individuals working in conjunction. He concludes his Prologue by writing:

“I’ll end with an observation: as individuals we can accomplish only so much. We’re limited in our abilities. Our heads contain only so many neurons and axons. Collectively, we face no such constraint. We possess incredible capacity to think differently. These differences can provide the seeds of innovation, progress, and understanding.

*The Difference* is written in an approachable, but in-depth manner. Page, a complexity scientist, moves beyond the anecdotes that have become prevalent in much work on collective problem solving and provides theories, evidence, and models about the value of difference, as well as when difference is valuable. While using a series of mathematical models to defend his claims, the book is accessible to a nontechnical reader. Indeed, one of the book’s strengths is its skill at linking the highly technical literature of scholarly literature to work targeted to a general audience.

—Dana Walker

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