

A Report from
the 2003-2004
Dialogues on
Civil Investing

By Scott London

**INVESTING
IN
PUBLIC
LIFE**

Kettering Foundation
Pew Partnership for Civic Change

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating foundation that conducts research on democratic political practices and develops frameworks for citizens to use in acting on public problems. The objective of the foundation's research is to learn how democracy can work better. The foundation welcomes partnerships with other institutions and individuals who are working on political concerns. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants.

Pew Partnership for Civic Change

The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is a civic research organization that provides consulting and program support to communities, governments, foundations, and nonprofit agencies. The Partnership helps clients identify and implement solutions and strategies crucial to making communities stronger. It was established in 1992 with primary funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The Partnership is funded today by foundations, nonprofits, and governments.

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Executive Editors: John Dedrick, Suzanne Morse

Editor: Ilse Tebbetts

Copy Editor: Betty Frecker

Art Director/Production: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

In the fall of 1993, the Council on Foundations, the Kettering Foundation, and the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy convened the first in a series of groundbreaking discussions on civil investing. The meetings brought together a small group of foundation executives to explore how philanthropy could build and strengthen American public life. The impulse for the gatherings came from a growing recognition that, despite its best efforts, the foundation world had done very little to stem the decline of civic engagement and the crisis of confidence in many of the nation's public institutions. In some cases, philanthropy had actually exacerbated public cynicism and mistrust by pursuing its own ideas about advancing the common good without cultivating a genuine dialogue with the communities it was bent on serving. The seminars, which continued over the course of eight years, stimulated a rich and lively discussion in the grantmaking community, one that spread to the pages of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *Foundation News & Commentary*, and other places and inspired an array of innovative funding initiatives.

Over the past decade, the idea of civil investing has taken hold in the foundation world. Such terms as “social capital,” “public will,” and “civic infrastructure,” once brushed aside as abstract and academic, seem more relevant than ever, cropping up regularly in trade journals, mission statements, press releases, and even grant-application guidelines. Still, there is a perception in the grantmaking community that conventional funding strategies, for all their good intentions, too often fail where they matter most. Rather than tapping or cultivating the inherent strengths of the communities they set out to support, grantmakers fall back on tried-and-true formulas and copycat prescriptions. Instead of backing comprehensive community-building strategies, they invest in short-lived projects and piecemeal measures that may bring temporary benefits but seldom produce lasting changes. And rather than developing indigenous leadership and building strong, working relationships, they rely on institutional partners with different agendas, working styles, and degrees of commitment.

What is needed, many funders acknowledge, is a better understanding of the community problem-solving process — how people come together to identify common needs and interests, how they frame potential solutions to their problems, how they act collectively, how they seek out partners and build coalitions, how initiatives and programs are administered, and how organizations from outside the community, such as government agencies, service providers, and grantmakers, can help the process of community change.

There is a perception in the grantmaking community that conventional funding strategies, for all their good intentions, too often fail where they matter most.

In 2003, ten years after the launch of the civil investing seminars, the Kettering Foundation and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change convened a second round of dialogues aimed at exploring these issues. The purpose of the talks was to tap the insight and experience of not only foundation executives but community leaders and nonprofit directors whose work in the field holds promise for a new and different kind of grantmaking. The planning team recognized that while philanthropists and civic leaders tend to work side by side, both striving to build community and promote robust democratic practices, they rarely come together simply to listen and learn from each other. The dialogues were designed as an opportunity for the two groups to share notes, identify common concerns, and develop joint strategies for change.

The agenda was organized around six primary questions: 1) What is civil investing and how is it different from other types of grantmaking? 2) How do communities come together to identify their problems and frame potential solutions? 3) How do government agencies, service providers, grantmaking institutions, and other outsiders enter into relationships with communities, and to what effect? 4) What role do intermediary organizations play and how do they help (or hinder) community development efforts? 5) What is the relationship between community-building and accountability? And 6) how do current trends in American philanthropy, such as the growing emphasis on measurable outcomes and the rise of new donors, affect grantmaking initiatives aimed at revitalizing community and nurturing public life?

In his welcoming remarks at the first gathering, Kettering Foundation President David Mathews described it as the beginning of “phase two” of the civil investing seminars. The talks were an attempt to take the dialogue to a level deeper, he said, by bringing in civic leaders who know about the process of engaging people, forging networks, and building capacity at firsthand. “What we hope to do in these dialogues,” he told the group, “is to bring together people who are engaged not just in solving problems but in actually *building* communities.”

According to Mathews, the original civil investing dialogues had led to several important findings. Among them was the recognition that community-building is impossible without the existence of some civic infrastructure. “In order to invest in a community,” he said, “there has to be a community.” At a more basic level, the discussions had also reexamined some of the reigning assumptions about the meaning of community. “The civil investing group defined with some precision what a community is by clearing away a lot of the romantic underbrush,” he explained. But what the seminars had not done was to engage practitioners working at the community level. “Our hope in this second phase of the dialogues is to learn from their experiences and see what implications that may have for the operation of community and other grantmaking foundations.”

The dialogues brought together a core group of about 20 foundation executives and community leaders for three daylong roundtables. In teaming up with the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, the Kettering Foundation was mindful of the importance of bringing community-based perspectives into the discussion. Established in 1992, the Pew Partnership had initially provided grants and training to projects in 14 smaller cities — collaborative efforts ranging from communitywide youth-mentoring programs and affordable housing projects to comprehensive leadership-training initiatives and workforce development programs. According to Suzanne Morse, president of the Partnership, the projects and the community leaders who helped make them successful offer a wealth of practical wisdom about the nuts and bolts of civil investing. The goal of the dialogues, she said, was to bring those perspectives to bear in addressing the broad public purposes of grantmaking foundations. “The long-term value of this conversation is to create a set of questions, or entry points, for foundations to examine the issue of democratic practice.”

LESSONS FROM THE ORIGINAL CIVIL INVESTING SEMINARS

What did we learn together in the civil investing seminars? I think we came to recognize how intertwined civil society was with the operation of our own foundations and we began to look closely at the intellectual underpinnings of American philanthropy. We looked very carefully at how we staff ourselves, how we make decisions about what grants are, how we mold solutions when we think something is wrong, and who we talk to (and don't talk to) as part of that process.

We also came to understand that our field was very mechanistic. We had this idea that if you identified a problem and pared it down to its bare essentials it would yield itself to a solution. But we began to recognize that the issues that concerned us the most were deeply embedded in society and there wasn't necessarily any agreement about the right solution. Since we didn't have a firm handle on how to address such problems, we began to realize that our own practices were getting in the way of really engaging communities in finding solutions.

We also began to understand just how strong the institutional culture of philanthropy could be — how much we push for risk-taking, for example, and how much we are willing to let our grantees take the risk while we hold ourselves harmless from the consequences. Internally, we began to ask ourselves, what do we mean by accountability? To whom and for what are we accountable? If we take such pride in being able to document success, what kind of measurements do we use? And given that what we count is what counts for us, what might that blind us to? What occurs in communities that we can't, or don't want to, see?

In addition, we began to ask ourselves about the

implications of the unavoidable imbalance of power when you enter into a dialogue between those who have money and those who want it. Can you come in and say, “We've got these ideas and this money; let's forget about the money for a moment and just talk about the ideas”? Can you have an honest conversation under those circumstances?

Finally, we asked ourselves what kind of resources we bring to the table besides money. For example, our board members and staff have access to sources of power in the business community and within government that community members may not have access to. Can we use those resources just as well as our finances?

We looked at each of these questions. Although there was a great deal of learning, I don't think we were ever fully satisfied that we had answered them.

As much as I treasure and love philanthropy, my experience is that it's a fickle field. Its attention span is relatively limited. But it seems to me that the Kettering Foundation, because it's an operating foundation and because it has had consistent leadership over an extended period of time, has not lost focus on the issue that brings us here today. Interestingly, it had that focus before philanthropy thought it was important. It maintained that focus, while philanthropy was enamored of it. And it will hold it while it takes who knows how long for many of our colleagues in philanthropy to come back to it. My hope is that these dialogues will accelerate that process of rediscovery.

Marvin Cohen

*Assistant Vice President for Donor Advised Funds,
The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago*

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WHAT IS CIVIL INVESTING?

Civil investing can be broadly defined as the use of philanthropic resources for building community and strengthening public life. Like all philanthropy, it strives to make private wealth an instrument of public purpose and social improvement. But unlike other types of grantmaking, civil investing is explicitly aimed at cultivating a robust civil society — the institutions of family, community, and public life that lie outside the direct influence of government and the marketplace. Civil investing strives to promote community participation and engagement, stimulate public dialogue and deliberation, nurture civic capacity, and encourage the sort of grassroots activities that are the hallmark of a strong democracy. Over the course of the three dialogues, the group identified five core principles at the heart of civil investing: 1) it is rooted in a commitment to democracy; 2) it places equal importance on the ends and means of community development; 3) it is focused on long-term change, not merely short-term benefit; 4) it puts a premium on relationships; and 5) it attempts to span boundaries and bridge sectors.

Civil investing is aimed at building and strengthening democracy

The goals of philanthropy are often framed in terms of community, social capital, civil society, and other important public goods. But many philanthropists are reluctant to use the word *democracy*, fearing perhaps that it sounds too vague, too grandiose, or too closely associated with political affairs. But dialogue participants stressed again and again that civil investing is fundamentally aimed at promoting and sustaining a healthy democracy.

Unlike conventional grantmaking — which may or may not be concerned with developing democratic communities — civil investing is bent on nurturing capacity, promoting engagement, and fostering collective action. Robert Kingston, senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, referred to this process as “public-making” since it helps people translate their private concerns into public issues. The goal, he said, is to “bring people together to name and frame issues, to design courses of action, then to act.”

The notion that private wealth can serve the public good, though it is a basic premise of American philanthropy, does raise some vexing questions. “The whole relationship of money to social causes is a conundrum,” said Bruce Sievers, visiting scholar at Stanford University’s Haas Center for Public Service and former executive director of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. “Either you just give the money away or you do it in some directed way, but the minute you do it in a directed way you’re bringing a power relationship into the equation.” The challenge facing civil investors, he said, is to move from an “aristocratic mode” to a “community mode,” where the public has some role to play in determining how foundation money is administered and put to public use.

At bottom, civil investing is aimed at nurturing the bonds of community. According to San Francisco-based nonprofit consultant Craig McGarvey, the best metaphor is that of barn-raising. When done well, he said, civil investing “is about bringing people from different backgrounds together to build something.” Ideally, the process not only strengthens democracy but also exemplifies it by allowing people “to identify and frame the issues and collectively make and implement plans.”

Civil investing emphasizes “doing with” — not simply “doing for” — communities

At the outset of the dialogues, there was much talk about whether civil investing is concerned with process or product. Is civil investing embodied in specific types of grants and programs or in the way that foundations and nonprofit organizations go about their work? After probing this question at some length, the group came to the conclusion that it stems from a false dichotomy. “The two cannot be separated,” said Cathy Jordan, program manager with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. “Civil investing is about both the kinds of programs and grants *as well as* the way the work gets done.”

In practical terms, this means that good works cannot be measured solely in terms of their outcomes — even if those results include laudable achievements such as economic revitalization or civic engagement. An effective civil investing effort is one based on community-driven processes that are open and inclusive. It is one that engages the public in the work of identifying problems and setting shared goals. In John Dewey’s formulation, it is one that emphasizes “doing with,” not simply “doing for,” the community. Good civil investing recognizes that the process of achieving a goal and the goal itself — the means and the ends — are two sides of the same coin.

Civil investing requires a long-term commitment

The process of building and strengthening community is slow — sometimes painstakingly so. “Civil investing takes time,” said Yoke-Sim Gunaratne, executive director of Cultural Diversity Resources in Fargo, North Dakota. Because of their short-term funding cycles, conventional development efforts sometimes bring temporary benefits but seldom produce lasting changes. Civil investors, on the other hand, take a more comprehensive and sustained approach. They recognize that while it may not always be possible to extend funding over, say, a five- or ten-year period, they can make themselves available to the community well after the grant has ended by offering information and technical assistance, providing opportunities for networking and further support, and continually asking the hard questions.

Long-term strategies for community-building differ from episodic programs because of their emphasis on collective learning. They focus on giving people not only the skills but

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Valley Foundation

the tools necessary for working together. Civil investing helps people create processes for public work that build confidence and a sense of ownership in the community.

Civil investing puts a premium on relationships

Perhaps the most common word used to describe successful civil investing initiatives was *relationships*. “We’ve become really clear in these dialogues,” said John Dedrick, director of programs at the Kettering Foundation, “that this is about relationships — relationships to problems, to people, and to places.” Relationship-building is at the heart of civil investing, he noted, because community development depends on trust and reciprocity among people, groups, and organizations.

But in using the term *relationships*, the group was referring to more than simply social bonds and networks within a community. Above all, it means a willingness on the part of foundations and nonprofit organizations to engage with their grantees in common work. “Foundations have to be real partners, not just funders,” said Kim Tieman, senior program officer at the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation in Charleston, West Virginia. “They have to have the strength to roll up their sleeves and convene and facilitate and provide training and learning opportunities. The key to civil investing is real partnerships that involve time, talent, encouragement, and money.”

Civil investing spans boundaries and sectors

Civil investing is fundamentally concerned with strengthening democratic civil society. Citing a metaphor popularized by former Senator Bill Bradley, Anna Faith Jones, president emeritus of the Boston Foundation, likened democracy to a three-legged stool. Government, the marketplace, and civil society each represent one leg of the stool. “Without the third leg of civil society, democracy is not going to work,” she asserted. “That is especially true of American democracy, which is heterogeneous. Unless we foster relationships and build bridges, we’re going to fragment into isolated camps that are set against each other ethnically, religiously, economically, and in other ways. There has to be some force that keeps mixing us up and keeps bringing back a sense of balance between the genders, between the races, and between those who have and those who don’t. Only the voluntary sector plays that critical role in American society. It’s something that people in philanthropy and the nonprofit sector need to understand.”

What distinguishes civil investing from other forms of grantmaking?

Not all community development efforts fall under the rubric of civil investing. Several participants stressed that while foundations may seek to serve communities and address pressing social problems, their giving patterns often act as a hindrance rather than a help to civic renewal. Short-term funding cycles and misguided systems of evaluation are

examples of institutional practices that tend to get in the way of long-term community development. Programs also fall short of their goals by not tapping into vital civic resources and energy, building effective relationships with the public, developing broad-based networks and coalitions, or simply sustaining the commitment over the long haul.

Speaking from firsthand experience about what makes community development initiatives a success, the civic leaders in the group pointed to a number of common characteristics. They stressed that civil investing confers a range of benefits, not just money. It emphasizes process, not simply end results. It is comprehensive and sustained, not limited to short-term goals or funding cycles. And it puts a premium on leadership development and relationship-building, not just “getting things done.”

- ***Civil investing is not simply a matter of funding.*** Examples of successful community development efforts show that while grant money is an essential ingredient, it is only one of many factors that contribute to good grantmaking. A grant can give local organizations increased visibility and legitimacy in the community, for example. Cathy Jordan described how a grant from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change gave her organization “instant credibility” in the community. “We had been preaching our game in the community for several years,” she said. “But we were just local folks, what did we know? When the Pew Partnership invested in us and said we might be on to something, that really began to change the tenor of the discussion.” Beyond credibility, grantmakers can provide a range of benefits, including ideas and information, technical and administrative assistance, training and capacity-building, networking and access, and marketing and public-relations know-how.
- ***Civil investing focuses on the process, not simply the outcome.*** Creating real change in the community requires that people come together, build trust, listen and learn from each other, deliberate about their common concerns, and ultimately take some form of collective action to address them. While each of these steps is a critical part of the community-building process, traditional accountability systems are mainly concerned with final outcomes. Civil investing takes a more comprehensive and multidimensional view of change, one that sees the means and the ends as inextricably bound together.
- ***Civil investing takes time.*** It goes without saying that strong communities are not built in a day. Yet conventional community-development efforts are often limited by narrow objectives and short-term funding cycles that may bring temporary benefits but seldom produce lasting changes. By contrast, civil investing takes a more comprehensive and sustained approach. The primary difference between civil investing and ordinary grantmaking is time, according to Becky Anderson,

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executive director of HandMade in America. “A lot of grantmaking is project-specific,” she said. “When it’s over you move on to the next project. In civil investing, you don’t ever let go. That’s an important difference.”

- ***Civil investing emphasizes leadership development and networking.*** While traditional grantmaking often works for change by launching new initiatives or organizations, civil investing focuses on connecting people and nurturing leadership. A community’s greatest resource, after all, is its people. “A significant piece of civil investing,” said Jo Granberry, former executive director of the Albany/Dougherty Community Partnership for Education, is the “ongoing relationship not only with organizations but with people who have an opportunity to have impact as they move in different directions.” Good grantmaking is about checking in with community leaders, ensuring that they stay connected, and offering fresh insights and recommendations — even after the funding cycle has run its course.
- ***Civil investing embraces uncertainty.*** While many foundations are moving toward a business model of grantmaking that emphasizes benchmarking, efficiency, and clearly measurable outcomes, civil investing recognizes that the most important effects are typically the hardest to evaluate. Long-term outcomes, such as civic capacity and collective learning, are difficult if not impossible to assess using conventional measures. Civil investing, therefore, encourages communities to explore, deliberate, and reflect together before finalizing a course of action, and then to go back and reassess and readjust the process as needed — not simply to conclude and report. In the words of Craig McGarvey, it is an “inquiry-based” process aimed at “intentional learning.” The process works best when it is “iterative and evolutionary” rather than carefully planned out in advance. “It enables learning to take place and enables groups to make changes as they go along,” he said.

Civil investing has “a high tolerance for uncertainty,” John Dedrick added. Embracing uncertainty is difficult in an increasingly risk-averse philanthropic environment. Yet civil investors recognize that community-building, at its best, is about learning together. And learning can only take place where there is a willingness to make mistakes, a willingness to fail, and a willingness to try new things.

NAMING AND FRAMING ISSUES

A decade ago, the city of Albany, Georgia, created an innovative communitywide partnership for at-risk adolescents aimed at providing academic intervention through the school system, an internship program to develop job skills, an arts component to build self-esteem, and an outreach initiative to identify family concerns. According to the partnership's director, Jo Granberry, the effort grew out of an ongoing series of town meetings on the issue of education. With support from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, Granberry and her colleagues organized several meetings to determine how the community felt about its schools, how they could be improved, and what would be needed to bring about substantive change. While Albany was deeply divided at the time, people from different parts of the community all expressed similar concerns, Granberry recalled. Once the problems had been identified, committees were formed to address each need and a large town meeting encompassing all the different sectors of the community was held. "What was amazing," Granberry said, "was that it was the first taste we had of community development. It was one of the most humbling and unifying things our community ever undertook."

In the adjacent cities of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota, a similar process led to the creation of a regional collaboration aimed at bridging an increasingly diverse and polarized population. Through extensive educational and outreach strategies, the initiative was designed to promote increased understanding of the different cultures in the region. The project's director, Yoke-Sim Gunaratne, explained that when people came together in town meetings in the early 1990s, they did not recognize diversity as a significant problem. Despite an influx of refugees and migrant workers, along with a sizable Native American population, people in the region saw unemployment and juvenile delinquency as their most pressing problems. It was only after a forum was created where community leaders and volunteers from diverse ethnic backgrounds could share their stories and work together that diversity was recognized as one of the critical issues facing the community. Once the problem had been named, Gunaratne said, the search for solutions took on an entirely different character. So long as it was identified as unemployment, the Chamber of Commerce and the business community saw it as their responsibility. And so long as the problem was seen as family dysfunction and juvenile delinquency, the Department of Human Services and the nonprofit community tried to step in and solve the problem. But once people acknowledged it as a problem affecting the community as a whole, everyone had a stake in finding a solution.

Both of these examples illustrate the importance of public processes by which issues can be collectively identified and addressed. They also suggest a role for grantmaking institutions in promoting the sort of dialogue and deliberation that can lead to new,

There is an important role for grantmakers in promoting the sort of dialogue and deliberation that can lead to new, community-driven initiatives.

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community-driven initiatives. Unfortunately, foundations do not always recognize the value of this kind of process. Sometimes they try, as David Mathews put it, “to pass over the definition of the problem as if it were self-evident.” When the process of getting to the heart of the issue is artificially cut off, he said, “communities are forced into partial definitions and partial solutions involving only some of the actors. This almost guarantees that they won’t be able to solve the problem.”

Another concern is that institutions often try to frame an issue before it has been adequately identified and described, only to discover later that the real issue has been left unaddressed. “People want to jump straight to framing,” observed Kim Tieman. “People don’t want to spend the time it takes to name the real issues. Or they will put out superficial issues — the ones they are willing to deal with or think they can solve. Or they want to jump straight to action.” Very often, she said, people will point their fingers at crime, drugs, or juvenile delinquency when the real problems involve racism, poverty, or a lack of social trust. “It takes a long time for people to name the real issue. They want action. They say, ‘Well, we’ve talked long enough.’”

Who determines when an issue has been adequately named? “I think we all agree that it’s naïve to say that any problem the community names is *the* problem,” said Bruce Sievers. “The next step is to ask, how do we come together and engage around the real problems? Who is finally in a position to say, we think we have a handle on it and we’re going to move on this?” According to Sievers, this is a critical challenge facing grantmakers as they determine how best to invest in civic change.

Suzanne Morse recalled that when the Pew Partnership for Civic Change was launched in the early 1990s, a decision was made not to focus on specific issues. The Partnership was designed so that communities could come together to identify their own concerns. In the requests for proposal for the Civic Change Project, eligible cities were asked to name the three most urgent issues facing their communities and then outline a program to solve one of them. In retrospect, Suzanne Morse felt that the success of the Civic Change Project owed a lot to the fact that communities came together to define their own problems. “Because the Pew Partnership didn’t define the problems for them, they stayed at the table and kept working at it,” she said. As a result, communities often found themselves addressing different — sometimes altogether new — issues. “In Fargo, for example, nobody recognized that diversity was a problem until the Cultural Diversity Project provided a forum for community leaders to share and work together, which brought the issue forward.”

ENTERING INTO COMMUNITY

In the early 1990s, Waco, Texas, had high rates of juvenile crime and teen pregnancy. Academic achievement ranked low in the state. Looking back over her development work in the community, Cathy Jordan recalled that it was not uncommon for outsiders to come in seeking to redress the city's problems. It was a stark contrast from the experience of working with the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. From the very outset, she said, the relationship with the partnership was marked by collaboration and the search for new ideas. "They related to us as a coach and a partner," she recalled. "They helped guide us through the process of considering the issues facing our community and taking responsibility for them."

For many government agencies, service providers, grantmaking foundations, and other outsiders, the process of entering into relationships with communities tends to be a thorny and complex one. But Jordan's account illustrates that collaborative and supportive partnerships between funders and communities are certainly possible. The group emphasized three factors essential to making the process work: 1) listening to people and building trust, 2) promoting public dialogue and deliberation, and 3) helping the community identify its unique strengths and capacities.

Listening and building trust

The group underscored the need for outsiders to listen deeply to the communities they are intent upon serving. But listening is only the first step. For community members to be open and forthright about their hopes and concerns, there needs to be a sense of trust and reciprocity. The best way to develop that is through active working relationships. For communication to be meaningful and effective, it must be coupled with common work and a sense of shared purpose.

Several members of the group looked to the Industrial Areas Foundation and the community-organizing movement as a powerful example of how that can be achieved. When organizers enter into communities, they tend to look for expressions of common interests, opportunities for public work, and signs of indigenous leadership. "They go in gently and they listen," said Craig McGarvey. "They spend time getting to know residents in the community and building relationships. They try to learn about the issues that matter to families — about the dreams and aspirations they have and the challenges and frustrations they are feeling — and from that understanding to engage them in civic life."

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Promoting dialogue and deliberation

For the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, the process of entering into community usually begins not just by listening but by encouraging conversation. When the Civic Change Project was launched, Suzanne Morse recalled, “we sent out requests for proposal to four different people in each community — the head of the Chamber of Commerce, the director of the United Way, the publisher of the newspaper, and the school superintendent. We said, ‘If your community is interested in participating in this project, get together and talk about it.’” The approach worked well, she said, garnering a remarkable 80 percent response rate.

But dialogue cannot be confined only to civic leaders and local activists. The public must play a part in naming and framing the issues facing the community. Engaging the public in the process engenders a shared sense of purpose about how to deal with common problems. According to the group, the public has to play a *central* role — token participation is not enough. Foundations and nonprofit organizations must be prepared not just to listen to citizens and other groups, but to actually include them in the process of identifying issues and framing potential solutions.

In practical terms, promoting open dialogue and deliberation means finding neutral conveners and effective public spaces where the community can come together to explore issues. Carlyle Ramsey, president of Danville Community College in Virginia, stressed that “if you don’t have a neutral convener in a community you’re going to have to find one. It is very difficult for an outsider to do that.” He related several examples of how his college has served as a venue for community conversations, which have subsequently led to foundation- or government-funded initiatives.

Identifying local assets

For a community to effectively mobilize to address a pressing problem or need, it has to survey all of its assets — from financial resources and human capital to social networks and civic infrastructure. Alice Day, former director of policy and planning at the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, pointed out that investing in community means taking stock of not only its needs but also its capacities. “We have to help people identify what they have and what they can build on,” she said, “not just focus on their deficits.”

Foundations have a potentially crucial role to play in encouraging communities to do this. Several community leaders underscored the important role played by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change in helping them identify their community’s strengths and weaknesses. Cathy Jordan, for example, described the effect the grant-application process had on her and her colleagues in Waco. “As we looked at the questions that were being posed in the application, an amazing thing began to happen. Once we had begun to bring a number of

new voices to the table to talk about how we might address the opportunity with the Pew Partnership, we began to turn our attention from what were our problems to what we did have that we could bring to the table. So from the very outset, the application process stimulated our group to do some rather new and creative thinking.”

Who speaks for the community?

A recurring theme throughout the civil investing dialogues was the importance of genuine community engagement. People in neighborhoods, towns, and cities must feel a sense of ownership in the process for a community-development project to be successful. As several members of the group attested, this can be a formidable challenge. All too often, they said, outsiders come in and strike up a dialogue with elected officials, business leaders, or other people in public positions without recognizing that these individuals represent only one part of the community. Participants recalled the initiative of one foundation that tried to revitalize a poor inner-city neighborhood by bringing together a group of community leaders. About a year into the project, one member of the community stood up and announced, “These are not our leaders.” According to Anna Faith Jones, organizations sometimes forget that change is impossible without a commitment to really listening to people and respecting their dignity. “People are so used to government agencies and big private institutions saying to them, ‘These are your deficits and this is what you need to do about it.’”

Several participants distinguished between different types of community leaders, noting that those who have influence and engender trust are the most valuable working partners. They may be public officials or prominent citizens, but they may just as likely be quiet and unassuming individuals, such as the local family doctor or the school bus driver. Grantmakers need to ensure that they identify the right leaders and potential partners, not just what Paul Gilmer, former vice president of the United Way of Central West Virginia, called “the usual suspects.” “Many times,” he pointed out, “the true leader is not a person that is vocal at all. It is a person that everybody goes to when they have questions.”

Foundations sometimes work around the problem of identifying authentic community leaders by encouraging partnerships and collaboration. The presumption is that if you are unsure who represents the community, the wisest approach is to bring together as many civic leaders as you can and encourage them to work together. This is not a bad idea in theory, but it does not always work in practice. At the community level, partnerships are sometimes little more than disguised sponsorships. Organizations lend their name to projects without being active collaborators in any true sense.

Part of the problem is that “collaboration” has become a buzzword in the foundation world. Community leaders know that their proposals will never see the light of day unless they provide an impressive list of community “partners.” But just because a local group

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— Marvin Cohen
Jewish Federation of
Metropolitan Chicago

or organization is listed as a partner does not mean it will serve as an engaged actor. “As much as I believe in collaboration,” Marvin Cohen said, “I can’t tell you how many times I have thought to myself that we are promoting it to an almost absurd degree. I spent six years of my life on a \$30 million initiative promoting collaboration. We were promoting it as if it were a deity rather than a means to an end.” There was a clear sense in the group that only the community can define that end for itself. The challenge is to provide opportunities for this to happen most effectively — for communities to come together to explore public issues and engage in common work.

THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS

Over the last decade or two, intermediary organizations have come to play an increasingly pivotal role in American philanthropy. The trend can be attributed in part to the growth of foundation resources during the 1980s and 1990s and to the increasing philanthropic concern with supporting whole fields of interest — health care, the environment, minority rights — rather than individual institutions or piecemeal projects. There has also been a growing tendency, particularly on the part of larger West Coast foundations, to maintain small staffs and to delegate to regranteeing institutions much of the administrative work of selecting and supporting smaller nonprofits.

The rise of intermediaries is generally regarded as a good and healthy development for the foundation community. As *Philanthropy* magazine put it in a 2002 article, “intermediaries are a strategic and highly remunerative philanthropic investment. These organizations are building capacity, enhancing impact, catalyzing new initiatives, connecting problem-solvers, and brokering successful public-private partnerships.”

Among the chief benefits of intermediaries, according to the civil investing group, is that they can provide a point of entry for funders intent on working in communities. In the words of Ruth Shack, president of the Dade Community Foundation in Miami, they can “tell you which door to enter.” Community foundations are ideally suited to this role, she said, because of their credibility, access, support, and close ties to the community.

An intermediary can also serve as an “impartial body that stands between two organizations with vested interests,” Shack explained. “The intermediary can help both parties come to something that will be beneficial to the community.” The goal, after all, is “not just to make the foundation happy or make the grantee get money, but to bring about some change in the community.”

Intermediaries can enhance community development efforts by acting as neutral third parties, serving as potential buffers between funders and grantees and, perhaps most importantly, by providing an entry point for foundations intent on working in a specific community.

In addition, an intermediary can serve as a convenient go-between. A large and prominent foundation may want to minimize its visibility in a community, for example. “Sometimes the reason foundations want to use intermediaries is as a buffer,” Marvin Cohen said, “so that when things blow up it’s not some poor program officer who is responsible for it but rather the folks ‘out there.’” Community foundations, again, are ideally suited to this role because of their historic mission, according to Cohen.

Intermediaries are also freer to experiment and take risks. A case in point is the Pew Partnership for Civic Change which, as Suzanne Morse pointed out, operates outside the traditional foundation framework. “Because of that,” she said, “we could take a chance on HandMade in America, for instance, which was not a 501(c)3 and had to work with the Chamber of Commerce until they got tax-exempt status. We bore the risk for the Pew Charitable Trusts and that made the difference.”

Bruce Sievers noted that small family foundations are perhaps best positioned to benefit from the use of intermediaries. A sizable portion of grantmaking institutions in the United States are private family foundations, he said, not large institutional funders or community foundations. “I think they are the ones that need intermediaries the most. Many of them work and have experience in their own communities. But the disconnect between these foundations (especially their boards) and the community can be pretty large. So even if you’re a single foundation working in a single community, there might be a very good role for an intermediary.”

There are, of course, potential pitfalls involved in working with intermediaries. They may add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy to the grantmaking process, for example, or siphon off a portion of the grant money that might be better spent in other ways. On balance, however, intermediary organizations — particularly those that are neutral, transparent, and community-based — do contribute to community development efforts. They enhance the process by acting as neutral third parties, by serving as potential buffers between funders and grantees, by providing training and building capacity and, perhaps most importantly, by providing an entry point for foundations intent on working in a specific community.

THE PROBLEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the central themes of the civil investing dialogues was the thorny and often vexing issue of accountability. To whom and for what are foundations accountable? How do they justify their investments in civic life? And do their performance measures help or hinder the process of community development?

In a brief presentation, Bruce Sievers pointed out that accountability has several dimensions, including financial responsibility, transparency, effectiveness, and responsiveness to the public. While often the last thing considered in the grantmaking process, it tends to be the “tail that wags the dog,” he said. Accountability is “both incredibly complex and incredibly important because, ultimately, how we account for ourselves and our actions steers the whole enterprise. The issue is especially problematic because we don’t have any natural feedback loop. By and large, foundations set their own criteria of success and their own accountability mechanisms.”

According to Sievers, more and more foundations are embracing a marketplace conception of accountability. The trend makes sense given that the field is driven by private wealth. But it is a worrisome development because the bottom line is not an accurate measure of success in public life. “Ironically,” he said, “the more foundations gravitate toward the business model, in the narrowest sense, the worse the problem becomes. Market issues are not irrelevant, but they are not the whole story. What is missing is the democratic piece. If you are applying money to social problems, there is the problem of finding a proper balance between your ultimate interests as an investor and the self-guided results of the community. That problem gets compounded when you are investing in a community process.” There seemed to be a broad consensus in the group that marketplace values, exemplified by conventional systems of evaluation, are inimical to community development. Assessment is of little use unless it reflects the slow and often painstaking process by which communities come together to build a foundation for common work. “We do this technocratic thing,” said Ruth Shack, “where we focus narrower and narrower and look at results on a shorter and shorter basis when we are really in the business of building human capital.”

By what standard should foundations hold themselves accountable if not by the bottom line? The group put forward a number of ideas. Ricardo Millett, president of Woods Charitable Fund, made a case for using the mission statement as a yardstick for measuring success. “If we examine what we do against the mission statement,” he said, “that could be a real wake-up call, or at least a good mirror, for assessing accountability.” Another option, he said, would be to judge the success of a project by the health and well-being of the community in which it is investing.

“More and more foundations are embracing a marketplace conception of accountability.... Market issues are not irrelevant, but they are not the whole story. What is missing is the democratic piece.”

— Bruce Sievers
Haas Center for
Public Service,
Stanford University

According to Millett, foundations tend to think of accountability in terms of whether grant dollars were spent the way they were originally allocated. “But a better question is whether the grantee made a difference in the lives of people in the community,” he said. “Did the programs or policies incorporate the views of the people served? And did the community have some part to play in naming and framing the issues? Very rarely do grantors get out into the community to address those questions and engage people as partners in making their programs effective.”

Some participants argued for finding a middle ground between strictly quantifiable assessment criteria and qualitative, process-oriented performance measures. As Paul Gilmer pointed out, some foundations have started using social capital, public trust, and other types of alternative benchmarks in their evaluations. Hopefully, he said, that practice will spread as the foundation world begins to pay attention to community-building processes and practices, not just outcomes. Suzanne Morse echoed the point. “There are ways to be accountable,” she stressed, “without eliminating or downgrading the notion of democratic practice.”

There was broad agreement in the group that the social goals at the heart of civil investing efforts cannot be measured using the blunt instruments of social science. “This is an inexact science,” Anna Faith Jones observed. The question we need to ask is why foundations “keep trying to make it an exact science when it never can be.” Ultimately, philanthropy is about answering to the public, not quantifying the success or failure of programs, she said. Recent scandals in the business world show what happens when private interests run amok and lose sight of some higher, public purpose.

In a similar vein, Marvin Cohen cautioned against limiting accountability systems to purely instrumental values. He spoke of the importance of high ideals, such as justice, equity, and diversity. “In the world of philanthropy, we are loathe to talk about those because they sounds too darn airy-fairy.” But in his view, building and strengthening community has a lot in common with raising a family. “When we look at our children and take pride in them, we can’t *quantify* what got us there. We can describe it and give it some numbers, but that is not the last word. So I think the issue begins not with accountability but with saying what really matters.”

“Foundations tend to think of accountability in terms of whether grant dollars were spent the way they were originally allocated. But a better question is ... did the programs or policies incorporate the views of the people served?”

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Woods Charitable
Fund***

CURRENT TRENDS IN PHILANTHROPY

American philanthropy has undergone a profound change over the last decade as a result of several converging trends, including the influx of new wealth, the shift away from institutional grantmaking toward other mechanisms of giving, such as venture philanthropy and donor-advised funds, and the growing emphasis on accountability and measurable outcomes. How do these trends affect the ideas and practices of civil investing?

In recent years, donor preferences have shifted to communities defined not by geography, but by interest and self-identification.

The new philanthropists are in many cases fostering one type of community at the expense of another.

There was widespread agreement that recent changes in the foundation world do not bode well for civil investing efforts. “Philanthropy has shifted,” said Marvin Cohen. “I think it is less accommodating to our interests now than it was ten years ago. It’s not merely the capriciousness of philanthropy, it’s also what has happened in the larger field.” Among the more worrisome developments, he said, is the growth of donor-advised funds. “‘Donor-advised’ means that individuals, in their isolation, are making decisions about what to do. It reflects a shift of donor preferences away from institutions that see it as their responsibility to respond to the needs of the communities in which they operate. Community foundations are basically acting as ATM machines instead of figuring out how to advance the interests of the community.”

A closely related development is the influx of new players who bring with them not only significant wealth but often an entrepreneurial mind-set and a problem-solving approach that expects a demonstrable “return” on the investment of their philanthropic dollars. Wary of conventional foundation practices, they prefer a hands-on approach to giving that is more closely aligned with business than traditional grantmaking. A common example of this is the push for quick and measurable results.

“All of us agree that at a certain point it’s useful to look at outcomes and get some numbers out there,” Bruce Sievers observed. “But if the entire field sees its mission in those terms, it’s only going to exacerbate our social problems.” What many of the new donors fail to recognize, he said, is that addressing social problems is not the same thing as building a dot-com company. “Civil society is a different environment.”

The call for oversight and accountability is rooted in a healthy impulse, according to Malka Kopell, program officer at the Hewlett Foundation. “It came from funders wondering whether what they were doing was of value.” But the drive to measure results has gone too far, she said. For many grantees, the process of tracking outcomes now swamps the actual work being done in the community.

The growing emphasis on results is only part of the problem. In recent years, donor preferences have shifted to communities defined not by geography, but by interest and self-identification. Concerned with broad social causes, such as education, the

environment or the welfare of specific populations, the new philanthropists are in many cases fostering one type of community at the expense of another. While they may be forging new connections among those with common identities and interests, these very efforts are working to undermine local community supports.

The natural response to these concerns has been an effort to educate and enlighten the new donors — or at least to engage them in dialogue. But this approach is rarely successful. “The overwhelming majority of these folks act independently, on the basis of the limited universe in which they operate,” said Marvin Cohen. “In some ways they see traditional foundations as part of the problem. They don’t trust that foundations will take their money and invest it wisely.”

“We try to sneak in donor education in any way possible,” Kim Tieman added. “We give them surveys, we give them options. We ask them, ‘How do you want to know about what’s in the community?’ But only about 25 percent of the respondents say they want us to educate them. They want to educate themselves. They want to manage their fund themselves. They want to be on-line and check their fund like they check their bank account. They already have their minds made up about where they are going to give their money. They don’t want our input or the community’s input on avenues to consider in making a different impact.”

In his book, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns distinguished between what he called “transactional” and “transformative” leadership. While most leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another — a swap of goods for money, for example, or a trading of votes between candidate and citizen — there is a more complex and at the same time more powerful form of leadership, Burns argued. A transformative leader engages the full person of the follower and strives to satisfy his or her higher needs. The result of transformative leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and often converts leaders into moral agents. At its best, Burns wrote, transformative leadership advances the common good while at the same time appealing to the highest good of both leaders and followers.

The distinction is useful in the context of philanthropy, given that the majority of community development grants are transactional rather than transformative in nature. More often than not, they amount to one-time transactions aimed at effecting a specific outcome. Transformative grantmaking is more complex but at the same time more powerful. It recognizes that the act of building a strong community requires the active engagement of all its members, the nurturing of people’s unique talents and capacities, and the call of some higher purpose worthy of the community’s passion and commitment. Transformative grantmaking suggests the possibility of change on the part of not only the community but also the grantmaker.

Transformative grantmaking recognizes that the act of building a strong community requires the active engagement of all its members, the nurturing of people’s unique talents and capacities, and the call of some higher purpose worthy of the community’s passion and commitment.

As Craig McGarvey pointed out, an appropriate metaphor for this kind of philanthropy might be learning rather than investing. The trouble is that few grantmaking foundations have the institutional capacity for learning. The knowledge gained from working with communities tends to be carried by individual program officers, not by the institution as a whole. Every time someone retires or leaves the foundation, part of the institution's memory is lost.

Several participants lamented the difficulty of spreading new ideas in the face of recurrent leadership changes at both the community and foundation level. The challenge, they insisted, is not how to introduce new ideas in philanthropy but rather how to rethink the prevailing norms and assumptions about what works. As Robert Heinlein once observed, "the hardest part of gaining any new idea is sweeping out the false idea occupying that niche." The first step for grantmakers might be to simply acknowledge that, good intentions notwithstanding, too many community-building efforts fall short of their goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GRANTMAKERS

How do foundations and nonprofit organizations embrace the ideas of civil investing and infuse them into their day-to-day programs and activities? The group identified four key strategies for creating an organizational culture committed to building and strengthening public life: 1) embedding the principles of civil investing in the mission; 2) supporting communities with more than just funding; 3) encouraging civic engagement; and 4) promoting essential democratic practices.

Embedding the principles of civil investing in the mission

A powerful step toward embracing the principles of civil investing is to incorporate them into the organization's mission statement. They have to be an integral part of the way the foundation does its work. "Civil investing cannot be a phenomenon, it cannot be a program, it cannot be something that you just invent or adopt for six months 'to see if it works,'" said Ruth Shack. In the case of the Dade Community Foundation, she said, the mission statement makes it clear that "improving the quality of life and building a more cohesive community can only be done by bringing together diverse groups. So we started by putting this right into the grant guidelines that we distributed to the community. We did not speak about program categories, we spoke about *community-building*." For civil investing to work, she insisted, "it has to be the bedrock, the reason why the foundation exists."

But it's not enough to simply rewrite the mission statement. As Ricardo Millett pointed out, "the trick is to have some kind of operational definition of the elements of that mission so that it becomes a management and administrative driver for the way you do business. It all depends on how you operationalize those concepts."

Anna Faith Jones concurred. "It has to be grounded in the mission. If you can't get your board to agree somehow that this is what the foundation should do, you're not going to get anywhere." The process is a tough one, she acknowledged, because "a lot of the people on the board don't walk the same path in the community that we do. So it's a continuous education process." Still the best hope of bringing trustees, program staff, and grantees into alignment is to structure the organization's work around a set of clear and concise principles.

Supplementing grants with other forms of support

Examples of successful civil investing efforts show that while funding is an essential ingredient, it is only one of many factors that contribute to good grantmaking. The community leaders in the group spoke of a wide range of benefits conferred by grantmakers that go beyond financial support. These include ideas and information, technical and administrative assistance, training and capacity-building, networking and access, even public-relations know-how. As several participants observed, money is sometimes the least useful thing a grantmaker has to offer. Funding is usually limited to very specific types of programs and activities, they said, whereas other forms of assistance can be more freely offered and tailored to a community's unique needs and circumstances.

Encouraging civic engagement

An important dimension of civil investing is the impulse to organize people and pressure powerful individuals and institutions to provide services, honor rights, and fulfill obligations. This type of engagement is sometimes viewed as a reactive strategy involving campaigning, complaining, and confronting. But several participants emphasized that there are other ways of advocating on behalf of the community. One of the most important strategies, they felt, is engaging people in the process of identifying their own needs, helping them uncover their capacities for effecting change in the community, and developing a plan to get the job done. This approach assumes that the public itself will take some responsibility both for identifying workable solutions and for carrying them out, rather than simply waiting for the powers-that-be to "fix the problem."

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***— Ruth Shack
Dade Community
Foundation***

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“One of the most powerful things we do is advocate on behalf of issues,” said Ruth Shack. While the foundation remains apolitical, in the strict sense of the term, her staff and board members are deeply committed to a wide range of issues, she explained. “Whenever a new board is established in the community — to protect kids or promote ‘empowerment zones,’ for instance — we work assiduously to get someone from the foundation on that board so that we are on the inside helping them fashion the policy and the way they are going to go about doing their business.... This is a way for us to ‘infiltrate’ and help fashion the policy.”

Speaking as a community leader, Paul Gilmer stressed that “We are all advocates. We have to be. I think we need to begin to focus our advocacy on different targets. We need to advocate to foundations, we need to advocate to corporations, we need to advocate throughout our universe to encourage people to think differently about the issues that affect our community.”

Promoting essential democratic practices

The advocacy approach illustrates the important role that foundations and nonprofit organizations can play in bringing people together to name and frame issues and work toward common goals. It is this function of “public-making” that is perhaps the most vital aspect of civil investing. Every time a community coheres as a public to deal with a pressing issue, it nurtures the kind of civic capacity that can be applied toward other needs and challenges, much like a muscle that grows stronger by exercise.

Foundations and grantees committed to civil investing should design their program activities so that they build and strengthen essential democratic practices. In practical terms, this means 1) promoting the habits of public participation; 2) nurturing a capacity for dialogue and deliberation; 3) fostering the practice of identifying challenges and laying out potential strategies for meeting them and, most importantly; 4) encouraging people to take matters into their own hands and engage in public work.

According to Cathy Jordan, foundations bent on civil investing must recognize the importance of these kinds of public-making activities. Among the most powerful ways to build community, she said, is to encourage people to collectively identify the challenges facing them and to engage them in the process of finding potential solutions. “Funding institutions need to adopt some approach that allows communities and organizations to name and frame their own issues, and then to be there to provide the support and the training that are needed.”

Through a combination of these kinds of efforts, grantmakers can foster an organizational culture that encourages authentic dialogue with communities, fosters relationships based on trust and reciprocity, cultivates intentional learning and development and, ultimately, nurtures vibrant and self-sustaining democratic practices.

PARTICIPANT LIST

Becky Anderson

Executive Director
HandMade in America
Asheville, North Carolina

Marvin Cohen

Assistant Vice President for
Donor Advised Funds
The Jewish Federation of
Metropolitan Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Alice Day

Former Director of Policy
and Planning
Texas Commission on Alcohol
and Drug Abuse
Austin, Texas

John Dedrick

Director of Programs
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, Ohio

Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Program Officer
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, Ohio

Michael Gilliard

Economic Development Specialist
City of Pine Bluff
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Paul Gilmer

Former Senior Vice President
United Way of Central West Virginia
Charleston, West Virginia

Jo Granberry

Former Executive Director
Albany/Dougherty Community
Partnership for Education
Albany, Georgia

Yoke-Sim Gunaratne

Executive Director
Cultural Diversity Resources
Fargo, North Dakota

Anna Faith Jones

President Emeritus
Boston Foundation
Boston, Massachusetts

Cathy Jordan

Program Manager
Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory
Austin, Texas

Robert Kingston

Senior Associate
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, Ohio

Malka Kopell

Program Officer
Hewlett Foundation
Menlo Park, California

David Mathews

President and CEO
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, Ohio

Craig McGarvey

Independent Consultant
San Francisco, California

Ricardo Millett

President
Woods Charitable Fund
Chicago, Illinois

Suzanne Morse

President
Pew Partnership for Civic Change
Charlottesville, Virginia

Carlyle Ramsey

President
Danville Community College
Danville, Virginia

Ruth Shack

President
Dade Community Foundation
Miami, Florida

Bruce Sievers

Visiting Scholar
Haas Center for Public Service
Stanford University
San Francisco, California

Kim Tieman

Senior Program Officer
The Greater Kanawha Valley
Foundation
Charleston, West Virginia

Deborah Witte

Program Officer
Kettering Foundation
Dayton, Ohio

Scott London

Rapporteur

Scott London is a journalist and consultant based in southern California. During the 1990s, he was host of the cultural affairs program “Insight & Outlook” heard on many National Public Radio stations. A longtime associate of the Kettering Foundation, he has authored reports on a range of important public issues, including the state of American journalism, the rise of electronic democracy, and the social responsibilities of higher education.





*Kettering
Foundation*

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300
444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016
www.kettering.org