The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s website at www.kettering.org.

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Tendai Murisa
My job every year is to write a piece for Kettering’s three annual periodicals: Connections, Kettering Review, and Higher Education Exchange. Each piece is about a specific area of the foundation’s research on democracy. This year, the focus is on nongovernmental institutions, which include foundations, civic organizations, and universities. The question behind this research is, What role should these institutions be playing in our democracy?

We are looking specifically at problems of democracy that are found in the relationship between the large, professionally run, hierarchical institutions, which we have called “Squares,” and the smaller, often ad hoc civic associations that inhabit what we have described as the “wetlands” of the democratic ecosystem. We have called these organic associations of citizens “Blobs” because they are often loosely organized. There are significant difficulties in the relationship between the Blobs and Squares, even when they try to work together, and these difficulties weaken democracy.

One of the problems is that the large, professionally staffed institutions may not recognize the importance of the smaller associations of citizens, or Blobs, as the cellular building blocks of democratic life. Because some may only involve a handful of citizens and have none of the structure of a Square, they may seem insignificant. Another more serious difficulty is that even when the Blobs are recognized as valuable, Squares may dominate or colonize them in their efforts to help them—although they do so quite unintentionally. That “colonization” can turn the Blobs into little Squares, which robs them of their civic legitimacy and effectiveness.
Even though the Blobs are essential to democracy working as it should, Kettering has not been able to find any Squares that are fully able to prevent this colonization. The heart of the problem, as I will try to explain, is that what the culture of the Squares considers valuable is nearly the opposite of what the culture of the Blobs prizes. And the culture of the Squares dominates the relationship between the two, leading to colonization.

All three of this year’s publications address this problem. In Connections, you will read about institutions that are experimenting with what it would mean to align their work with the work of Blobs. In the Kettering Review, you will find some thoughtful scholars exploring this problem, identifying both challenges and opportunities. And in the Higher Education Exchange you will hear from those in academe who have been wrestling with this problem in their own work.

Kettering discovered this problem when asked by some grantmaking foundations why their funding in certain communities was often ineffective in solving problems. The grantmakers knew that grassroots associations of citizens could be effective in combating community pathologies like drug abuse and crime. And the grantmakers wanted to help them, but something was going wrong. That was when Kettering discovered the colonization of the Blobs, which undermines their authenticity and legitimacy.

Edgar Cahn drew on our research in his book No More Throw-Away People. He then turned the foundation’s findings on the Blobs and Squares mismatch into a clever animation, The Parable of the Blobs and Squares. Cahn noted that the Blobs have the energy and networks that can be useful in combating many community problems. Squares, on the other hand, know how to manage

This year, the focus is on nongovernmental institutions, which include foundations, civic organizations, and universities. The question behind this research is, What role should these institutions be playing in our democracy?
money and organize institutional action. They have equipment and professional expertise. The problem, as Cahn explained, is that “no matter how much the Squares promised to reach out in the community and get at the root causes of the problems, the Squares never got there.” They couldn’t “mobilize the energy of the community.”

The Squares try to meet this challenge by giving money to the Blobs. Naturally, this has meant that the Blobs have had to show financial accountability. Many Squares have also insisted on measurable results. “Grass roots groups,” Cahn wrote, “were taught to develop mission statements and strategic plans in order to remain ‘true’ to mission. Neighborhood leaders were trained in how to be Board members, how to conduct ‘proper’ meetings, [and] how to write and amend by-laws.” The sad result was that the Blobs lost the very qualities that made them effective at the grass roots.

Blobs play an essential role in democratic life in a number of ways. They convert energy, even cynicism, into constructive action. They connect and engage people. They also promote values that are essential to a democratic culture, norms like cooperation and respect. Blobs are self-generating because human beings are social creatures. People are continuously building ties to one another and forming all kinds of Blobs, from neighborhood associations to street gangs. We ignore their importance—good or bad—at our peril.

A WAY FORWARD

The relevance of the problem of the relationship of Blobs to Squares today was impressed on us by one of our international residents, Tendai Murisa from Zimbabwe. Tendai is attempting to create a civic organization in his country that will strengthen democracy from the grass roots up. He is trying to create a

These days, major non-governmental institutions—from academic ones to those in philanthropy—believe that democracy is in trouble and that they need to do more to be of assistance. But they aren’t sure what they should do or how.
Square that is Blob friendly. Despite criticism that his understanding of democracy is impossibly utopian, Tendai knows that there are many Blob-like associations in Africa to work with. He has in mind citizen groups that aren’t registered officially yet already exist. They pool financial savings for economic development, form bereavement societies, protect the environment, and enhance village security. He wants to create an institution that will listen to and learn from what these Blobs are doing. At Kettering, Tendai is asking, How can both established NGOs as well as newly created ones be more supportive of Blobs without colonizing them?

What Tendai is asking resonates with similar questions we have heard from many other Squares. These
days, major nongovernmental institutions—from academic ones to those in philanthropy—believe that democracy is in trouble and that they need to do more to be of assistance. But they aren’t sure what they should do or how. Part of the difficulty is that they are all Squares and, as should be expected, they have Square-ish norms and cultures. This makes relating to the Blobs a challenge. The way Squares work is very different from the way the Blobs do democratic work. It is as though the two are gears on the same machine that don’t mesh.

The solution for how to mesh the gears is elusive because the obvious answers don’t work. It can’t be for the Squares to become more “Blob-ish,” because their cultural norms are appropriate for what they do. And it certainly isn’t for the Blobs to become more “Square-ish.” The culture of Squares properly values things such as efficiency, good management, and professional expertise. However, the culture of the Blobs has different values, which leads to different ways of working. Blobs are responsive to the intangibles that people hold dear, such as the feelings of security that come from having personal control over their future. They identify problems in terms that reflect what is deeply important to people, not in terms that professionals use. Blobs do their work mostly by connecting small groups of people rather than by building organizations. They foster collective decision-making that spurs myriad complementary actions.

As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel Prize-winning research, despite their differences, the Squares need the Blobs because even the largest and most powerful institutions—hospitals, school systems, governments, and NGOs—can’t do their jobs as efficiently as they need to without reinforcement from what citizens contribute through the work they do in Blobs. The example I often use is in health care. Hospitals can care for you. But only people can care about you. Blobs organize this
Caring and make it available in many ways to those who are ill.

**OUR FIRST RESPONSE**

Kettering’s first and perhaps natural impulse was to respond to questions like Tendai’s by reviewing what our foundation, which is Square-ish, has done to relate to Blobs. We went through boxes of files to recover our history. Yet as soon as we started down this path, we stopped suddenly in our tracks. We stopped when we realized that Kettering would appear as a model to copy with best practices to emulate. Whatever we did, our experience (that is, our mistakes) taught us not to do that. Our reaction has to do with the importance of learning in a democracy. Following a model or copying best practices can be imitative, and that can inhibit learning. Coming to Kettering, Tendai was intrigued by the idea of not following a foreign model or copying best practices but finding his own answers. He was open to looking at the way democracy benefits from and grows through collective learning.

**EXPERIMENTING AND LEARNING**

Democracies depend on collective learning because they do not accept any authority about what should be done except for that of the citizenry itself, “We the People.” This understanding of the citizenry as the ultimate authority in a democracy is evident in the roots of the word. The *demos* is the citizenry or a collective body, as in a village. And *cracy* is from *kratos*, which is supreme power, the kind Zeus has. This means that when there are problems, citizens have to “figure out” what to do themselves through collective decision-making in civic groups or representative assemblies. “Figuring out” means learning together, which involves more than copying or imitating.

What might these experiments look like? When gears don’t mesh, they have to be realigned. There need to be experiments to better align the work of each so they won’t clash as much and might even become mutually supportive.
On problems such as making the relationship between the Blobs and Squares mutually beneficial, answers have to come from collective learning, and that requires experimentation to see what might work. Finding ways to deal with the Blobs-Squares mismatch is going to take a lot of experimenting, along with the ability to fail successfully; that is, the ability to learn from inevitable setbacks and failures.

Realigning Ways of Working
What might these experiments look like? When gears don’t mesh, they have to be realigned. There need to be experiments to better align the work of each so they won’t clash as much and might even become mutually supportive. After all, there are things that Blobs can do that Squares can’t. And vice versa.

As I mentioned before, the ways Blobs work—and for good reason. Yet, whether done by Blobs or Squares, most every kind of work involves carrying out certain tasks—identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating or learning from what happens. Nothing exceptional about that. However, understanding the differences between the ways Blobs and Squares carry out these tasks is a necessary step toward realignment.

These are some of the differences. Citizens don’t usually identify problems in the expert terms often used by the institutions we have called Squares. As I discussed, people name problems in terms of the things that humans hold dear—their family’s safety, their freedom to act, the amount of control they will have. The options for actions to solve problems that citizens consider go beyond the things that can be done by institutions, such as the actions that families and civic associations can take. People make decisions about which options are best but not usually by methods institutions use, such as cost-benefit analysis. In the best cases, people decide by using the kind of deliberation that exercises the human faculty for judgment. The resources citizens draw on to act, such as personal talents and collec-
tive experiences, are different from institutional resources. Citizens also organize their work less bureaucratically than institutions do. And they evaluate results differently, using the things they hold valuable as standards rather than just quantitative measures.

Despite these differences, realigning ways of working to reinforce one another seems possible. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties. Either would be extremely difficult. Instead, realignment only asks that the professionals in institutions do what they usually do a bit differently, so their work reinforces what citizens working together in Blobs do.

It wouldn’t be too difficult for Squares to take into consideration the names people use when they describe how problems affect what they consider valuable, and it shouldn’t be hard to consider what citizens could do as actors. Neither would it seem impossible for Squares to take note of the way people go about making up their minds as they deliberate on controversial issues. Recognizing the resources Blobs use when they act—people’s experiences and talents, their ability to form associations—isn’t a big stretch.

Respecting ways of organizing that aren’t centralized and bureaucratic? Why not? How about evaluating results using the things people hold dear as the standard? Why not do that along with quantitative measures? There are all kinds of opportunities for Blobs and Squares to mesh what they do.

**THE GREATEST CHALLENGE: A MATTER OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE**

If realigning ways of working is possible, despite requiring considerable experimentation, Tendai’s question boils down to one of how to develop cultures in Squares that will support experimentation with Blobs. Tendai found an institutional cultural impasse in some of his early efforts to create an environment in which people could learn from their own experiences and those of others rather than following an approved development model. And he is certainly not alone.

**Using Democracy as a Focus for Experiments**

Democracy has many different meanings and, as an institution experiments with its role, the meaning may, and probably should, evolve and grow richer. This growth is learning. The evolving understanding of democracy makes settling on predetermined results difficult.
To complicate matters even more, it makes a difference whether institutions have in mind problems in or within a democratic country, which range from poverty to crime, or problems of a democracy, which prevent democracy from functioning because they are systemic. For example, citizens being unable to exercise power and make a difference in the political realm is a basic, fundamental problem of democracy. (That, by the way, is what many people say today: they can't make a significant difference.)

I am not suggesting that experiments by Squares in realignment be controlled by a rigid definition of democracy, but rather that returning time and time again to the question of what democracy is and what it requires is essential to experiments in realignment. An understanding of democracy, even an evolving one, gives consistency and coherence to the experiments; they can fit together and build on one another. And what the Squares learn from the experiments should expand and enrich their understanding of democracy.

One of the most important changes in the concept of democracy may have to do with the role of citizens. Squares are “built” to see citizens more as clients, people to be served, or consumers of services. Blobs, on the other hand, are “built” to see citizens as producers because they usually do most of the work. A crucial issue in realignment is for Squares to find ways to treat citizens as producers in their own right and
not just as the beneficiaries of the many things they provide. In the case of institutions of education, for example, the benefits include public service, publicly relevant research, and community engagement. These services are all commendable, yet they tend to treat citizens as objects of the good work of others rather than actors doing their own work. What would it mean for colleges and universities or other Squares to relate to citizens as producers? The answers aren’t clear. Finding them will take a lot of experimenting.

Such experiments could change the Squares themselves in constructive ways and not just in how they relate to the Blobs. A similar cycle can begin by institutions asking themselves whether the way they are going about their work is consistent with the way they are coming to understand democracy. To really be effective in strengthening democracy from the grass roots up, institutions have to behave themselves in ways that promote the kind of democracy they advocate. This process of reflecting and adjusting ways of acting is a process of constant learning, which is consistent with the way a democracy makes positive changes. It is also one way to change institutional cultures.

**Being Realistic about the Obstacles**

As I have acknowledged, the dominant culture in a Square admirably suits what Squares do: produce, solve problems, provide services. The usual expectations of Squares aren’t unreasonable. There are good reasons to have goals, timetables, and definite outcomes. Squares also speak admiringly of being innovative, taking reasonable risks, and “thinking outside the box.” So, what I have just stated could be written off as reformulations of what Squares already do. But that would minimize the real obstacles to realigning with Blobs.

 Returning time and time again to the question of what democracy is and what it requires is essential to experiments in realignment. An understanding of democracy, even an evolving one, gives consistency and coherence to the experiments; they can fit together and build on one another.
Blob-ishness can be, and often is, very off-putting to Squares. Blobs have purposes but not necessarily detailed plans and measurable goals. A bottom line or tangible outcome may be elusive. There may be no goal line to mark completion of an initiative or even to mark progress. What appears to be an endless journey can be maddening to Squares.

Even experimenting and learning from it can be troubling for Squares. In some institutions, experimenting may be impossible because their professionals don’t have permission to fail, as one school superintendent sadly told us. Furthermore, experiments dealing with the systemic problems of democracy don’t suddenly, or perhaps ever, yield to instant breakthroughs. It is necessary to play the long game. Dealing with such inevitabilities requires patience, tolerance for ambiguity, and acceptance of unresolvable tensions. Few of these may be valued norms in Square-ish cultures.

**WHAT ABOUT TENDAI’S QUESTION AND THE BLOBS-SQUARES MISMATCH?**

We are hoping to find others who share a concern about the Blobs-Squares mismatch. Because Kettering’s research is done with others, our first priority is always to find allies. Writing this piece for our publications is one way we hope to find them.

One thing does seem clear, looking ahead. Despite the obstacles, building and perpetuating institutional cultures that support democratic experimentation is crucial, particularly at a time when democracies and hope-to-be democracies around the world are facing more systemic problems than they have since World War II. Tendai’s question couldn’t be more on target, the challenge of the Blobs and Squares couldn’t be more relevant, and a culture that fosters experimentation and learning couldn’t be more valuable.

David Mathews is the president of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at dmathews@kettering.org.
Listening to Place-Based Philanthropies at the Edge

By Janis Foster Richardson

What does philanthropy have to do with everyday life for ordinary people in a community? My hunch is that if you stopped someone in a corner store, neighborhood park, or a community library, or even gathered a group of ordinary people together for a focus group and asked that question, you would get a range of responses that have one or two common denominators: “I don’t know” or “Not much.”

Nevertheless, philanthropies have made a difference in our communities in many ways, some of which are largely invisible to the everyday person. In my rural Texas community, a local family foundation’s investments have made a difference in very tangible ways. Grants from this foundation have been a big part of why
Some choices made in the interest of doing good have had unintended consequences on the space that ordinary people held in communities for problem solving and collective action.

Our tiny town has a library, volunteer fire department, ambulance service, rural hospital, and local historical museum.

This small community is a place, however, where people find it hard to come together to work on wicked problems. While we are a community of generous helpers during times of crisis, we have a tough time with the basic tasks of a democratic citizenry. We have few opportunities for people to connect with others who have differing life experiences or perspectives on an issue and even fewer opportunities for people to work together in ways that grow their citizen power and strengthen local democratic practices. Strengthening civic culture is not on anyone’s agenda here—including the generous family foundation that is right here in our community.

This observation is not a criticism. I know from my time as a foundation staffer that no matter how much money a foundation has in its coffers, it is never enough—and thus priorities must be set. Our local foundation, the only grantmaker in our area, has prioritized bricks and mortar investments and support for core community institutions, for without their investments we would not have community essentials.

However, some choices made in the interest of doing good have had unintended consequences on the space that ordinary people held in communities for problem solving and collective action. Organized philanthropy is a relatively new invention, and over the last 50 years, the number and asset size of foundations in the United States have grown tremendously. Grantmaking foundations are guided by legal constructs that encourage them to funnel their resources to legally established nonprofit organizations. A growing philanthropic sector has gone hand-in-hand with growing numbers of legally established nonprofit organizations. As the demand for accountability for philanthropic investments increased and more
I have seen wave after wave of philanthropic interest in civic capacity—but not much staying power after the wave crested.
I had a few years ago with Kettering Foundation president David Mathews. Mathews was talking about invention and innovation—noting that invention and innovation often happen at the edge of something rather than from the middle. Perhaps it was from organizations that are comfortable operating on the edge of organized philanthropy—some mavericks in a sense—that I could get some insights.

With that in mind, I began a series of conversations with people who are in the early stages of work that calls for their funding organization to challenge familiar notions of philanthropic roles and practice and to experiment with new ways of connecting with their community—especially with residents and associational groups. I was especially interested in funders who had jumped on board the current wave of interest in community or civic engagement in a significant way rather than just a new program that ran alongside their more traditional work in a detached fashion like a programmatic sidecar. Within these organizations, I was looking for people who are on fire about what they are doing and were eager to explore learning and possibilities.

**CORE IDENTITY**

One of the common themes that emerged from these conversations was related to their core identity. How does the organization define itself and understand its purpose?

Funders who are at the innovative edge of philanthropy have done some soul searching about who they are at their core. What I’m learning is that these organizations are putting values and practices that are closely aligned with civic capacity building in the forefront—with grantmaking as one of many tactics that they can use to help things happen.

These organizations are doing something different than I’ve seen dozens of others do over the last 25 years. They are not simply adding a new program or a time-limited special initiative.

The following quotes and near quotes around the theme of core identity offer snapshots into the grounding for foundations that aspire to be of
the community where they work:

- We are a community development organization that uses philanthropy as a tool.

- We strive for power with vs. power over—very different from a philanthropy or another organized charity that is in a superior position (to those that want their money or services).

- We are committed to having a visible role in the community as a convener and an advocate for social justice . . . and we do this because we can (by virtue of our philanthropic endowment) and because this is who we are.

- We learned that we had to take a hard look at ourselves—who we are and how we are doing our work—and really challenge the ways we were creating power imbalances and marginalization both within and outside our walls.

- We’re about investing all our capitals—moral, human, social, intellectual, reputational, and financial—while stewarding the natural capital in our community, in the interest of a community that works well for everyone. We know that we must change who we are—our own organizational culture—to be of service to that vision.
• We are values heavy and issues light. Most philanthropies are issue focused, but we believe that people aren’t that way. . . . There is never just one issue. Things are more complex than that. If we focus on issues and not on creating opportunities for people to grapple with the issues that matter to them, we are just creating another set of dependencies.

• Our mission is to help people envision a different future and pursue it in diverse ways that make sense to them.

• We work hard to think more about mission fulfillment than institutional stability.

• We believe that we are part of a community that will get stronger when we develop and nurture a shared culture that is characterized by more openness to new ideas and entrepreneurial possibilities, a community narrative that shows pride in our place, a way of working that is more inclusive and participatory, and a mind shift from “I cannot” to “I can” and “we can do better.” That’s what we’re about.

While very few philanthropies would admit that they are just about the money, it is not unusual to hear statements like “we’re a grantmaker, not a program operator” or “we are a resource for the nonprofit organizations in our community.” To me, these more typical statements grow from the understanding of a core identity that is indeed about monetary transactions to nonprofit businesses that deliver a product. It is understandable that funders that work from this understanding of their role might regard civic or community engagement as a customer-relations consideration, asking citizens to give input on the change agenda the foundation is offering.

In contrast, what I heard in these conversations was more about a funder being one of many players in a community—with players including the people who live there—and a real desire to be more open, accessible, and relationship-oriented.

I know that words are not enough and that a shift in core identity must extend past aspirations and make it into what organizations do and how they do their work. These are all organizations that do all the institutional things foundations must do—and thus can get pulled back into the mainstream at any moment. But maybe, just maybe, a shift in core identity is a key that opens the door for new possibilities about the role they can play in their communities.

Janis Foster Richardson served as executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers, a network of place-based funders in the United States and Canada, from 2004 to 2015. She can be reached at janis.foster.richardson@gmail.com.
The Cooperative Extension system can be considered one of the great national experiments in cultivating strong communities. Extension, established in 1914, is an outreach arm of the land-grant university system, “extending” the university’s resources to every county in the United States. This set of organizations holds great potential as a model for how professionals in institutions understand the work of citizens. But, as with any institution, actually “seeing” citizens as active participants in shaping the future of their communities can get lost in expertise and organizational structures.

Kettering Foundation Press recently published a book titled, *Jumping into Civic Life: Stories of Public Work from Extension Professionals*. Coeditor Tim Shaffer writes that Cooperative Extension was meant to provide resources from university research in the arts and sciences, as well as from the humanities. Throughout its history, Extension outreach has disseminated the technical skills of home economics and agriculture. It has also been a resource for citizens trying to learn more effective ways to deal with perennial challenges that require public choices in situations of moral disagreement and fundamental uncertainty.

This creative tension between providing technical support and acting as an integral part of community is of interest to Kettering. How can these institutions negotiate it?
Often technical support and expertise stifle the civic role of members of the community, especially when it comes to problems that require creative, place-based solutions. What is the role for citizens if experts provide the answers?

An arresting question.

In early 2014, a number of Extension professionals joined in a study of ways they might work to spark more widespread collaboration on issues of shared, local concern. The ongoing effort has generated a number of insights into the ways professionals can work in complementary ways with other people in communities, as well as ways professionals act within their own institutions.

Cooperative Extension is well positioned to use democratic practices in a way that will encourage citizens to organize as individuals and associations to address issues of community development. Thus the initiative drew on other local networks, especially the arts community. At Kettering, we wondered what effect Extension would have on community development when using democratic practices in this way. We also wondered to what extent the approach would affect how Extension educators understand their roles in community.

THE INITIATIVES

Participants from the Extension land-grant system in 13 states worked in their surrounding neighborhoods and communities to encourage citizens to find ways to shape their future using democratic practice. They created two common deliberative frameworks that community members in each state used. One was focused on rural community questions (2014-2017), and the other on urban community questions (2016-2018). In different ways, each framework was meant to spark people to deliberate about what kind of community they want to live in.

Developing materials to usefully support public deliberation requires those who do so to talk to commu-
nity members in unaccustomed ways. Finding the “public name” for a difficult issue, one that people will universally see as resonant, can’t be done in isolation or by a technical committee. Extension professionals had to talk to everyday people about their concerns, about what they hold most valuable, about what they see as threatened amidst the change that their communities are facing.

This deep level of contact was, in some ways, daunting. Extension professionals Eric Giordano and Sharon Gibson, who coordinated the networks of rural work, reflected on this in a report to Kettering. “Extension agents struggled with the notion of a concerns-gathering exercise and its relationship to framing an issue guide and future deliberative events. This is not surprising. Deliberative processes are new to many Extension agents. The idea of organizing a community event for the purpose of uncovering and prioritizing community needs is not foreign, but the notion of having to frame an issue so that all values are recognized, that permits people to weigh choices and consider trade-offs—and how to get to that point—is quite new to most agents. . . . [But] as the process wore on, Extension educators began to understand and embrace the nature of the work both conceptually and pragmatically.”

The networks of urban Extension experimenters, coordinated by Patrick Proden and Angela Allen, had a similar experience.

INTEGRATING THE ARTS
This initiative also contained a significant innovation in what was, in other respects, a straightforward effort to spark deliberation in communities. Both the rural and the urban effort sought to bring artistic and cultural approaches to bear on developing deliberative frameworks. In many cases they worked with local arts organizations. Their use of the arts went beyond simply using artistic gimmicks as ice-breakers,
having people tell stories, and then getting down to business. Instead, they tried to use artistic approaches substantively in gathering concerns or in stimulating deliberation. For example, in Perry, Iowa (near Des Moines), Extension agent Jennifer Drinkwater worked with local fifth-graders. “Students would each receive a disposable camera to capture aspects of their community that they valued, as well as things that they believed would entice them to return to Perry as adults,” she wrote in a report. “These photos would be publicly displayed and would ideally provide fodder for a public deliberation following the installation. . . . Over 100 students from Perry participated in the photography project and produced well over 1,000 images of their community.” And “Oregon introduced body art maps and interactive drawing to gather their input from their youth and adult participants,” according to Patrick Proden’s report on the urban Extension efforts. Aspects of the community that touched the head, heart, gut, or hands were placed on the body maps accordingly.

Incorporating artistic practice was a conceptual challenge. How could cultural artifacts that took other forms be considered alongside written and verbal content? Would approaching the work in this way have a substantive effect on the resulting issue frameworks? How about on the effort overall? How would it affect the resulting relationship between Extension professionals and community members?

We found that using different forms of expression in issue framing and in deliberative forums provided a useful and creative way to engage the community in the difficult work of imagining community change. For example, one poignant creative piece was initiated by Angela Allen, involving the use of spoken word poetry that engaged young people of color. Their poetry described what their community looks like to them and what they saw as valuable.
While facilitating talking sessions with community members might be a skill Extension agents already have, translating photography, poetry, art, or storytelling into a deliberative framework was new. However, the teams were able to pull it off.

**SEEING THEIR WORK IN NEW WAYS**

All professionals have challenges finding the space in their work to try something creative or different. Institutions by their nature are intended to create a sense of consistent practice to accomplish clear and measurable goals and objectives. Cooperative Extension is no exception. Extension agents tend to create annual “plans of work” that guide them in ways that ensure they are using well-researched approaches. However, problems such as working toward a new vision of community may require a different way of working. Therein lies a tension for any professional trying to change how they work, as they did in this initiative: how to be accountable to the institution while at the same time supporting creative civic change and community development.

Eric Giordano and Sharon Gibson report on this tension in the rural-focused efforts: “When deliberative work is perceived as an add-on, without adequate work plan legitimization, the incentives do not line up and the work is likely to fall by the wayside.” In this respect, Extension professionals are no different than any other group. But taking part in this work spurred them to see their own work in new ways and to see ways that they might alter their approach and thus deepen the significance of what they are already doing.

The Extension professionals in this set of communities began to recognize that they were able to do this kind of work even though their administrative structures seemed to them rigid at times. Because

We found that using different forms of expression in issue framing and in deliberative forums provided a useful and creative way to engage the community in the difficult work of imagining community change.
shaping a community’s future requires networks of interaction by its very nature, the administrators saw the value of linking to new partners. One said they are in, but not of, the institution, recognizing the freedom to practice in new ways. By finding that important connection to what the administration needs, the Extension agents can help bridge the institution and the community through fresh approaches.

These initiatives were never intended to be one-off projects. The question on our minds was, what capacity for democratic practice would be left behind? What was changed, and how might a particular set of professionals—Cooperative Extension agents—come to see their relationship with community differently?

In both of those registers, these experiments appeared to be particularly useful. The researchers found the practices adaptable to new contexts. According to Patrick Proden, “Five or six state teams will adapt some aspect of this research . . . to their local communities’ ongoing processes of community education and engagement.”

Angela Allen wrote a final note to her colleagues as the urban initiative came to a close: “I hope that everyone who participated in the project found value in the journey that the integration of [the arts with] public deliberation took us on. I hope our efforts have been useful. I have been most amazed and excited by how my Milwaukee and statewide Wisconsin partners have adapted the process as their own.” Agrees Proden: “[This] will continue to resonate with me.”

Connecting with community in these new ways seemed to energize a latent sense of the agents’ civic roots, touching on why they went into Extension in the first place. They talked energetically about the work in a way that was focused and creative. Rather than seeming discouraged by the institutional restrictions they all face, they began to see ways they might approach communities differently. The idea of engaging a community in development work was more than part of a plan of work. Rather, they could draw on people and organizations they had not used before—especially among youth groups or art communities.

Indeed, this democratic approach to community engagement work seems to be resonant with these professionals. Both the urban and rural initiatives have presented their work at conferences. Our hope is that the ideas lead to even more creative approaches to democratic practice in community.

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Vibrant Communities: Reinventing an Economic Development Organization

By Abby Straus

What does it take for communities to become more economically vibrant? Whose business is it? How might citizens best participate in developing their own economic well-being and that of their communities? How do we close opportunity gaps so more people can participate? What happens when we don’t? How might we think—and what might we do—differently to get a handle on these questions for lasting positive change? And what unique part might our organization play?

These are questions we’ve been asking at the Northeast Economic Development Association (NEDA), a 63-year-old nonprofit that has spent the last several years reinventing itself to be more relevant and useful to people who care about the economic vibrancy of communities throughout the Northeast. Originally founded as the Northeast Industrial Developers Association, NEDA’s fortune has waxed and waned over the years. In 2016, with membership numbers stagnating and a board close to burnout, the questions got tough and close to home: Should NEDA continue to exist? If so, what is our unique purpose? Whom do we serve? How might we best support our members in doing the things they care about? What capacity do we need to do this?
Two years and much soul-searching later, the organization is on its way forward with renewed purpose and vigor. Our questions were answered, in large part, by applying systems thinking to understand the complex world of economic development and the context we find ourselves in today.

WHOM DO WE SERVE?
WHOSE BUSINESS IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?
At its birth in 1955, NEDAs focus was on developing industry. Build a strong manufacturing base, the thinking went, and the economy will flourish. As technology evolved and industry began to undergo disruptive change, the organization’s view widened to include business in general, the development of land and infrastructure, and training people to be ready for the new types of work required to make business run. The new narrative was about the attraction of business, building the tax base, and creating jobs.

Mark Waterhouse, senior statesman of economic development and former NEDA executive director, feels that “we have made a mistake in thinking of economic development as ‘jobs and taxes.’ Part of the purpose,” he says, “is to create that better environment in which to exist.” This includes everything from healthy, affordable, and inspiring places to live and work to the social and political structures that enable us to meet our human needs. These are all aspects of a complex, interconnected system. While there is merit in understanding the parts, it is the ability of the parts to work together that allows the system to perform well as a whole.

To understand how this works, consider any aspect of economic development. The successful provision of skilled workers, for example, is informed by a multiplicity of factors, including family health, interaction with a caring community, education from early childhood on, transportation, access to healthy food, adequate health care, housing that people can afford, businesses that engage with

“Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole.”

—Margaret J. Wheatley
the community, and the enthusiasm of citizens to engage in the work that is available.

People whose work is critical to economic development may not understand themselves to be part of the system, and frequently they are not included in key conversations—to the detriment of all. We realized that it’s NEDA’s purpose to get the “whole system in the room” to support the most robust collaboration and problem solving possible. We therefore serve all representatives of the system that makes economic development happen in the Northeast. In addition to those who consider themselves economic development professionals, these include educators, health-care providers, community and faith-based groups, as well as planners, placemakers, and organizations working to achieve equity and capability for communities that have been traditionally unable to participate in the creation and sustainment of wealth. There are also institutions, such as libraries, that are reinventing themselves to play an increasing role in the economic well-being of their communities. We must include them, too.
Our inquiry also starkly revealed that, while we represent 11 northeastern states and the District of Columbia, our board and membership in no way reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of our region. Economic development as a profession has come a long way, but there's still work to do. Our hope is that, by reaching out to a broad range of sectors and disciplines, NEDA will truly be a microcosm of the system we represent.

We began by updating the language we use to match our new vision. We changed our name from the Northeast Economic Developers Association to the Northeast Economic Development Association, to identify with a topic rather than a particular profession. We changed our pitch from the daunting “Join the most respected economic development organization in the region” to “Economic development is everyone’s business. Please join us!” Our message is clear: if you care about the economic well-being of communities, you belong.

**WHAT IS OUR UNIQUE VALUE? HOW DO WE HELP FACILITATE OUR MEMBERS’ SUCCESS?**

Whoever our members are, they want solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face. They want to build local economies, create jobs, attract and retain businesses, and provide happy, healthy citizens with great places to live, work, and play.

In our complex, rapidly changing world, we can’t predict where solutions will emerge, and the sheer volume of information available today makes identifying and choosing solutions incredibly daunting. When stakes are high, and money and time are tight, reinventing the wheel is not an attractive option. Yet this is what frequently happens because people aren’t connected to one another in ways that facilitate the sharing of what works.

Because it’s a regional organization, NEDA is a natural choice as an aggregator and a connector, a hub of information and inspiration that spans the geography and interests of our membership. There are tremendous assets waiting to be leveraged in each state: examples of promising practices, professional development opportunities, and people who offer products and services to help communities thrive. Rather than providing solutions ourselves, as we had attempted to do in the past, our purpose is to facilitate connections across the system between people and solutions that already exist. Our goal is to connect, inform, and inspire.

Response to our idea was enthusiastic, from members and from potential partners who shared our vision and wanted to be part of the mix. A collaborative project with
a software startup is in the works. NEDA members will be able to subscribe to a regional calendar based on the activities they are interested in. We are cocreating an online, wiki-based tool to connect members with solutions to build and sustain local economies, and NEDA is partnering with organizations and individuals throughout the region to highlight education and training opportunities that will be of benefit to all.

By focusing the spotlight on our members and partners, not on ourselves, we're able to draw on the capacity of the whole system to help it succeed. Everyone can contribute and everyone wins. NEDA becomes the coordinator of a trusted network that provides quality connections and information about economic development in the Northeast.

**HOW MIGHT WE BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY?**

Even this lean role requires considerable capacity to perform well, and we were running on fumes with an overworked director and an exhausted board. How, we asked, might we find the staff functions we need despite our limited funds? The answer came in the form of an association management company that, for the cost of one moderate salary, will provide services including secretarial, financial, communications, and event and member management—all the things you'd want a good staff to do.

This left us more time to think about our revenue model, which was woefully out of date. Rather than depending solely on membership dues and an annual conference, we inquired, How might we provide value to a wider group of stakeholders, thus diversifying our revenue base? With our new identity as the connector of many, advertising—applied responsibly, of course—and a wide range of sponsorships become viable options. We began revenue sharing with partners on some of the programs we offer jointly. We are also designing a program where commu-

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nities will pay a fee to be supported in and acknowledged for sustainable and socially responsible economic development practices.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS PROCESS ABOUT OURSELVES, AND WHAT MIGHT WE PASS ON THAT WOULD BE USEFUL TO OTHERS?

Author Peter Block says that we don’t work on questions, they work on us. As we began asking questions about how NEDA could and should change, we felt doors opening all around us. Who has a stake in the economic well-being of our communities? How might we engage them, so they feel included and want to participate in the NEDA community? How might we connect members to ideas and to each other to create value that will produce revenue? How might we support local associations in their work in collaboration rather than competition?

Used in our process of strategic inquiry, these questions, and others like them, provided solutions we had never imagined, like finding a virtual staff and new partners with tools perfectly suited to help us realize our vision.

We discovered that our purpose doesn’t lie in solving problems for our members, but rather in connecting them to each other and to the solutions they—and we—create together. We learned that there is an appetite for connection and cocreation and that NEDA can provide an environment in which people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives might exchange knowledge and experience in service to creating an economically vibrant Northeast.

It’s early days yet. We’re experimenting and discovering and—as Peter Senge says of organizations that learn—continually expanding our capacity to create our future. We’re staying alert, feeding what works, letting go of what doesn’t. We’re using what we know about systems to nurture our own. We feel hopeful and curious, and we feel the weight of what we’ve begun as we chart a course into territory unknown.

Questions are fateful. . . . They are the chamber through which destiny calls.”

—Godwin Hlatshwayo

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Decentralizing the Center: Reflections from a Center for Public Life

By Cristin F. Brawner

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life (DMC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to increasing active citizenship, community collaboration, and effective decision-making in Alabama. The DMC’s interactive workshops equip Alabama communities to employ democratic practices in their unique contexts. We convene local, regional, and statewide learning exchanges that promote shared learning and decision-making among Alabama citizens, networks, and institutions. The DMC also invests in civic learning for Alabama’s next generation through teacher workshops,
undergraduate internships, and action civics opportunities for young people in grades 4-12. Additionally, we develop deliberative issue guides, author statewide reports on civic health, and share stories of Alabamians who are making a difference.

The center was founded in 2005 by former students of David Mathews: Robert H. McKenzie, Ray Minor, and Cathy Randall. I joined the center as an intern in 2009 and have held every job since, serving as executive director since 2015. As the Mathews Center has grown over the past decade, our perspective on our role has evolved. Rather than pursuing a franchise model, our dedicated board of directors and staff have intentionally worked to create “hubs of interaction” among networks, groups, and individuals.

HUBS OF INTERACTION
I believe that centers for public life should strive to create hubs of interaction rather than networks of franchises. We must eschew the copy-and-paste tactics of community engagement in favor of one that allows organizations to develop autonomously in response to the unique opportunities, challenges, and resources that meet them locally. This model promotes shared learning rather than organizational dependence. Instead of relying on a centralized architecture that prioritizes a single organization, the hubs of interaction approach proliferates like a rhizome, serving as the connective tissue among individuals, organizations, and institutions. Whereas the franchise model prioritizes the nodes of a network, the hubs of interaction approach give primacy to the connections. Although this approach requires an organization to cede power in many ways, I believe that the result is more powerful, sustainable, and effective.

Moving to a hubs of interaction approach can take different forms, depending on the organization. The DMC evolved from a service-delivery mode of programming to a model focused on convening, connecting, and equipping. In the early days of the DMC, we spent most of our time moderating forums—
our direct service delivery programming—in communities across Alabama. By doing so, we built trust and Alabamians began to see the transformative power of deliberative decision-making around their most pressing issues. The transition began when we started asking: “How can we work ourselves out of a job?” We shifted to convening local, regional, and statewide workshops that equip communities to use democratic practices in their contexts. As a result, communities—rather than the DMC—have ownership of the practices, the decision-making, and the outcome.

For example, this year the Mathews Center assisted the city of Montevallo, Alabama, to engage their community in deliberation around a contentious nondiscrimination ordinance. We provided support for naming and framing a deliberative issue guide, hosted training for moderating forums, and connected the organizers to partners at Auburn University who had experience bringing Alabamians together around difficult issues. Montevallo residents worked together to write the issue guide, convene forums, moderate and record the deliberations, and then communicate the emerging common ground and tensions to the city council members following the forum series. They engaged hundreds of residents in deliberation, and the resulting ordinance the city council passed reflected the common ground that emerged.

**FACILITATING LEARNING EXCHANGES**

The Mathews Center seeks to further a hubs of interaction approach by facilitating learning exchanges for Alabamians and their communities. DMC learning exchanges bring formal networks, informal associations, and groups of concerned citizens together to learn from one another. These exchanges prepare participants to utilize and

"DMC learning exchanges bring formal networks, informal associations, and groups of concerned citizens together to learn from one another."
adapt democratic practices for their diverse contexts, and they promote shared learning among communities. During learning exchanges, we at the DMC take a backseat role. We organize, host, and convene the exchange, often with the help of statewide partners and sponsors, but our community partners provide the lion’s share of the speaking, instruction, and facilitation.

In addition to local and regional learning exchanges, the DMC convenes an annual Civic Institute that brings together hundreds of Alabamians of all ages from every region of the state to find ways to work better together. The daylong gathering introduces attendees to the Mathews Center’s mission and work, but, most important, it features learning exchanges organized by community partners and spotlights Alabamians who are making a difference. Every year at the Civic Institute, we see the formation of new partnerships, the flourishing of mutually beneficial relationships, and the growth of dynamic networks among attendees. We measure the success of the event by the new nodes and connections that develop in an ever-evolving, growing network.

Facilitating learning exchanges, rather than organizing events where we impart knowledge and community members listen, requires giving up control. Control of the message and process is most organizations’ default mode. Moving away from this model is challenging work requiring humility and trust. The result might be the perceived weakening of the organization, but it leads to healthier, stronger communities rich in the capacity to solve their own problems. I believe the transition is worth the struggle.

**PROMOTING NETWORK LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

As the number of Alabamians engaging others through democratic practices grows, the DMC supports that work through a joint-learning approach to partnerships that promote network learning and development. We have developed organizational protocols and practices to emphasize
joint-learning with trusted partners rather than a strong centralized structure. For example, joint-learning agreements with faculty mentors at higher education institutions across Alabama serve as the foundation for the DMC’s undergraduate internship program. Faculty mentors, in partnership with community organizations, design and direct community-based programming for undergraduate interns. In this decentralized setup, rather than supervising a score of interns out of the DMC office, students live, learn, and work alongside communities across the state. Furthermore, learning is an expected outcome for all participants: students, faculty, community partners, and the DMC.

Promoting network development also means a shift from partnering primarily with individuals to working with informal associations and groups of citizens collaborating to solve a community problem. In the beginning, most of our partners were individual concerned citizens wanting to tackle specific issues. Today, most of our partners represent networks, small and large, of individuals and organizations working to tackle a range of issues more democratically. As democratic practices become embedded into the way they work together, interact, and address challenges across our state, we will make greater strides in solving our most deep-rooted problems.

Let me be clear: I love working with individual concerned citizens—they are often some of the most committed people I know. However, we as centers for public life would be doing a disservice to communities if we did not attempt to connect individuals and small groups as they work separately to address our most pressing issues. It is disheartening to discover in one small community disconnected individuals and organizations working toward a common goal around a particular issue, without attempting to work together because of lack of knowledge of one another, or worse, territorialism. If we serve as connectors and network builders, we are helping communities grow their own capacity rather than supporting the continued ineffective duplication of efforts.
supporting the continued ineffective duplication of efforts.

**RETHINKING OUR ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY**

I came to see the DMC as a hub of learning and experimentation about five years ago, after we had established a trusted reputation in Alabama. As we worked with more organizations and networks across the state, I saw that our partners were learning from one another rather than simply taking what they learned from us and applying it in their communities unmodified. As that began to happen, we came to see ourselves primarily as connectors, convenors, and equippers. In rethinking our role, we wanted to build on that dawning self-awareness and ensure that communities, networks, civic organizations, and others in Alabama did not need us to do their work across our state.

One thing has become clear about the nature of this work: the relationships you build cannot be transactional, they must be ongoing and mutually beneficial. Organizations that insist on a top-down, centralized approach to community engagement will struggle to build a foundation of trust on the shifting sands of their own self-referentiality. How to accomplish this has not been a straightforward path for us. Despite being committed to a joint-learning approach from the outset, in the beginning, we often took the direct service delivery model because we were an unknown organization. Becoming a trusted community partner takes time. People often have to “see” the work before they will trust you. Building that trust took more than five years of spending time in communities and walking alongside networks as they built and exercised their civic muscles. The work of building and maintaining trust continues today.

Much remains to be done for all Alabamians to be ready for active citizenship, community collaboration, and effective decision-making. We will have accomplished our mission in Alabama when democratic practices are embedded in the way individuals, communities, and networks work with one another to address the pervasive problems affecting our state. We believe that transitioning to a hubs of interaction approach helps us accomplish our mission by making us replaceable—the work can shift to others—and the emphasis revolves around the community rather than our organization.

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We often hear the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.” I believe it takes a village to support a community. A village, to me, refers to the webs of local relationships that people create in the places where they live. People have always worked through local networks to facilitate learning and complementary interactions. The village, as such, is the key resource to successfully address shared concerns. To revitalize our communities, we need to engage in iterative processes “in our villages” to develop the capacities of people to govern their lives together.
In 2012, I began to participate in the Kettering Foundation’s learning exchange with people developing centers for public life. The Kettering exchange resonated with my interest in the networks that make up community life. I have found it incredibly energizing and the insights have been tangible in almost immediate ways. Centers typically take the form of individuals and organizations working with citizens to strengthen norms of decision-making and, thereby, strengthening democracy. The nature of networks is critical here: the key to centers working as hubs of democracy is, in many ways, for them to realize that they are not at the center as one might imagine a hub to be.

Rather, the centers are most effective as part of larger, networked sets of interaction. The aim is to decenter themselves in the work. They do so by working with others in the mode of learning.

In the Kettering learning exchanges with new centers, participants learn the fundamentals of gathering citizen input in naming and framing problems in ways that can be used to create useful guides for making public choices. They also work on ways to prepare facilitators who work to convene deliberative forums and report on the work in ways that keep things growing. In so doing, the centers are learning to be resources for people who want to create the civic infrastructure that allows for democratic self-governance.

**CREATING A CENTER FOR PUBLIC LIFE**

When I first started participating in a Kettering learning exchange, I was confident in my skills of facilitation and communication learned through my college coursework and professional training. However, when it came time to apply democratic concepts in community work, the knowledge received and the experiments put into practice through these exchanges dramatically shifted the quality of my work and the approach I took.

"The centers are learning to be resources for people who want to create the civic infrastructure that allows for democratic self-governance."
The learnings and experiences allowed me to see ways to cocreate networks of community collaborators as a structural approach. Each center has a different compositional make-up. In my case, the work is housed at Indiana University’s Political and Civic Engagement Program in Bloomington, Indiana. Our initiative is called Voices for Democracy and Civility and is carried out through collaborations with people and organizations in the community.

Our work in Bloomington is an example of how learning centers can become cocreators in the work to engage community members in dialogue and deliberation, to identify problems, and to support movement toward solutions. The networks developed with other people concerned about the issue, in targeted all-inclusive ways, are a key aspect for the work of centers for public life.

Over the years, my work developing a center has changed and grown. The work grew most visible when I was invited to be at the table, in a figurative sense, to help design public engagement processes to address pressing problems in Bloomington. Being “at the table” can be a limiting concept if it is inferred that only key stakeholders are involved. Here the term is used to suggest a large, unifying circle (or an inclusive table) that pulls representation from the community together to do the work of implementing democratic practices. The skills and knowledge that I developed through the Kettering learning exchanges were sought after, listened to, and utilized in successful public engagement processes.

The foundational principles that brought me to the work were trust and listening. I had to trust that what I was learning about democratic practices would guide me in public engagement. To do so I needed to share these ideas with networks of community members. At the same time, I was also aware that I needed to be patient and be sure that I did
not espouse my work or skill as the only right way. I wanted to confidently contribute to the process because I knew it had the potential to be beneficial, but I was at the table to listen and learn at the same time. I think this approach of listening to learn has made all the difference in the success of our development of collective work.

A NETWORK APPROACH

In 2016, the mayor of Bloomington requested assistance for a new city initiative to address downtown safety and civility issues. He stated that as “we come together as community members, we will encounter neighbors from all walks of life and must ensure that we are able to do so in a way that is safe and expresses the value that each of us brings to our community.” In response to this initiative, a Downtown Safety, Civility, and Justice Steering Committee formed with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Bloomington’s Safe and Civil City Program, the Community Justice and Mediation Center, Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University’s Political and Civic Engagement Program, and the Shalom Homeless Shelter. Each person at the table contributed on an equal playing field. Leadership emerged in many ways, at different times, for the success of the project. Our steering committee developed the same intention: to create and utilize a three-stage public engagement process to identify problems associated with safety and civility and to move toward solutions. We were able to cocreate and implement an inclusive public engagement process through the unique conglomeration of this group.

Using a network approach wasn’t without its challenges. One thing I learned was that when a network, or a team, of people do the work, it is possible for things to fall through the cracks. With a more organic, networking approach, there is a need
for diligent oversight. Our project included a three-stage process and, in the final stage when we held a communitywide discussion to generate action ideas, the announcement of our public engagement work was not disseminated in an adequate manner. This slip caused public outcry and had potential to impede our work. Our team learned that when working with others citywide, careful attention to communications needs to be spelled out clearly, and include a timeline, to be sure it is accurately carried out by others.

Another difficulty of utilizing a network approach is that it requires a lot of time spent in meetings to collectively educate one another, make decisions, allocate responsibilities, monitor follow-through, share challenges, and move through the process in a manner in which all participants of the network are on the same page. I recall, at one point the way our steering committee framed the problem shifted. While the mayor requested that we facilitate conversations about “aggressive panhandling,” we wanted to hear what the community found most important and shifted the framing to open up the scope of issues. The naming of the problem moved from being about issues of panhandling to issues of safety and civility for all, with a focus on homelessness. In this way, we created an opportunity for citizens to...
identify problems in their own terms and to discuss potential solutions. During dialogue related to safety and civility, we also learned an important lesson about language.

Early on, we stopped using the term *homeless people* and instead started referring to *people experiencing homelessness*. This may seem insignificant, but it was an important distinction we learned in a focus-group session with participants who were panhandling, living on the streets, and staying in temporary housing. They asked us how we would feel if we were consistently referred to as mortgage-paying or rent-paying people. It gave us pause. From that point on, our steering committee altered the language so that all community members would be comfortable.

Another example of a center working in and with the community to contribute insights, knowledge, experience, and know-how, not as experts but rather as cocreators to discover what communities need, to design effective public engagement processes, and to help manifest a healthy democracy.

"It seems crucial that centers for public life and others doing this work remain solid and work with a variety of community collaborators to contribute insights, knowledge, experience, and know-how, not as experts but rather as cocreators to discover what communities need, to design effective public engagement processes, and to help manifest a healthy democracy."
In a recent NCEI project with our local library, a participant mentioned, “Boy, trying to have a conversation about an important topic is a lot harder than I thought it would be.” I laughed because I know many of us can relate. The work is important and not as easy as it may seem on the surface. These groups, through a network of interaction, provided input to design an approach to support effective civil discourse strategies.

**AN EXPANDING FIELD**

Enhancing democratic practices can require extremely hard work to design and implement, and takes a lot of focused time to approach issues in as all-inclusive ways as possible, and it is critically important. In a stark political era of divisiveness, it is refreshing to hear and read about dialogue and deliberation in mainstream ways, especially through national public media and other similarly spirited mediums. I believe it is critical for those of us trained to facilitate courageous and constructive conversations to continue within networks of interaction to encourage the work and maintain quality attention to detail that a truly democratic process of dialogue and deliberation deserves.

For those who have been working in the dialogue and deliberation field for several decades, some see this era as bringing an identity shift. No longer is this work relatively on the fringe, where others are surprised by its existence and have a hard time imagining how to do it. Many new participants in the field are jumping right in, some doing great things and others confusing the process. Without judgment, it seems crucial that centers for public life and others doing this work remain solid and work with a variety of community collaborators to contribute insights, knowledge, experience, and know-how, not as experts but rather as cocreators to discover what communities need, to design effective public engagement processes, and to help manifest a healthy democracy.

Living our lives and doing our work together, as a broad public collective of networks of interaction, provides opportunities to support, inspire, and learn with and from one another. This is our village. We have a shared responsibility to include, and be a part of, community life in a holistic way where we have opportunities to enhance democratic practices, energize community voices, and strengthen democracy.

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Collective Impact from the Inside Out

By Byron P. White

I recall standing a few years ago at the corner of Rockdale and Burnet Avenues in Cincinnati, a few doors down from Rockdale Elementary School, where I met one of the neighborhood’s education champions. He wasn’t a teacher at the school or a professional from the nearby hospital. He was Vince Morton, the longtime owner of a little carryout bearing his name that once stood at the busy intersection. Having been told of his reputation by a resident, I asked Morton how he had contributed to children’s education. He pulled from a shelf inside his sparsely stocked store a small trophy he had received from teachers at Rockdale. It recognized him for having attended and provided refreshments for school events for many years. Moreover, when grade cards came out, every student knew they could stop by the store to get a piece of candy for each top grade they produced.

The teachers who honored Morton as a partner realized something that I have come to understand after years as an urban affairs journalist, community organizer, and education professional. Schools alone don’t educate children. Urban youth learn within a network of influences that include family members and friends, schools and other education providers, neighborhood organizations from churches to recreation centers, and comprehensive systems, such as criminal justice and health. This education ecosystem conspires to influence their decision-making and actions—sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Communities educate children.

That is the conviction that is driving me as I return to Cincinnati to begin my tenure as the new executive director of StrivePartnership. StrivePartnership’s core mission is to understand all aspects of this complex ecosystem and to galvanize it so that it effectively nurtures every child, from cradle to career. Our success in fulfilling this goal will require a renewed recognition of education as a community enterprise.
We’ve been working on this for a decade. In the early days, StrivePartnership paved the way in convening the leaders of regional institutions devoted to education—school districts, universities, education nonprofits, foundations, and businesses. More recently, the work has moved to providing technical assistance, such as data support, to help drive those institutions toward improving shared outcomes.

Today, so-called “collective impact” organizations, such as StrivePartnership, have come under scrutiny for failing to be inclusive of community members in their coalitions. Collective impact organizations by design have not always sought to be deeply inclusive of citizen participation. Though local residents and grassroots representatives often are consulted to provide input to and endorsement of

“Schools alone don’t educate children. Urban youth learn within a network of influences that include family members and friends, schools and other education providers, neighborhood organizations from churches to recreation centers, and comprehensive systems, such as criminal justice and health.”
using data-driven analysis to identify precise strategies that can produce scalable change runs counter to the organic nature of community decision-making and problem-solving processes.

As Rich Harwood, founder of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, noted in a memo to the Kettering Foundation: “As collective impact has risen in prominence, connections to more informal community groups have fallen as a priority. Their potential for producing impact and scale is considered to be limited. Engaging communities also seems to be less important. Both of these practices suffer from a perceived ‘messiness’: they appear to be disorderly detours in a process that prides itself on efficiency,

“In every neighborhood there are committed parents and caregivers, devoted mentors, community volunteers, passionate teachers—and children eager to learn.
keeping things moving, and being 'professional.'"

Urban communities are often disparaged for their deficiencies when it comes to educating young people. The narrative of indifferent children, apathetic parents, and underperforming schools is familiar to many. However, in every neighborhood there are committed parents and caregivers, devoted mentors, community volunteers, passionate teachers—and children eager to learn. Neighborhood churches house tutoring programs in basements, celebrate graduations, and raise thousands of dollars for scholarships. Grandmothers, uncles, coaches, beauticians, and peers provide encouragement and counsel to youth.

These activities often are overlooked by those outside the community or overwhelmed by negative forces around them. I remember asking Morton if he thought he was having a positive impact on young people. He was doubtful that his contributions made much difference compared to the many challenges that Avondale youth face. Morton also was not aware that the barbers at Stag's Barbershop next door were pushing the same message about the importance of school with their young customers, as were the coaches of the youth football team that played up the street.

Had their efforts been connected, magnified, and expanded, perhaps the impact of these nonexperts could have been multiplied. And if they had been invited to bring their knowledge and passion to the table alongside the resources and technical expertise that is possessed by institutions devoted to improving education, maybe they could have been part of producing a truly transformational education strategy.

That is the brand of collective impact StrivePartnership is dedicated to activating. Going forward, StrivePartnership will be even more deliberate about engaging the entire ecosystem. StrivePartnership intends
to refashion its work in a manner that more deeply and authentically recognizes community talent and expertise as essential to achieving transformational education outcomes for youth. It intends to incorporate those assets into its work in a manner that promotes rather than hinders community authority.

Drawing upon premises of asset-based community development, democratic practices of community politics, and other citizen-centered frameworks, and inspired by efforts of other progressive collective impact organizations nationally, StrivePartnership is exploring ways to be informed by the expertise and authority of local residents, to be more inclusive of these participants as coproducers of solutions, and to integrate such leadership into the organization’s decision-making structure. The commitment is to go beyond simply enlisting community representation in order to tap into community assets as essential components of StrivePartnership’s work.

As it incorporates authentic community engagement as a core component of its collective impact agenda, StrivePartnership has begun an exploration into the community’s capacity to educate youth by partnering with a citizen-led organization to conduct a deep asset inventory in urban neighborhoods. The initiative supports community residents through an exercise to discover, connect, and mobilize various informal assets that exist within their neighborhoods and are used on behalf of youth to achieve community goals.

In advancing these strategies, StrivePartnership will work closely with other practitioners who are interested in pursuing more effective engagement between institutions and communities, particularly related to
education and youth development. These partnerships include other Greater Cincinnati collective impact organizations, such as the Child Poverty Collaborative, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, All Children Thrive, and Place Matters. It also involves StriveTogether, a national coalition of more than 70 education-focused collective impact organizations focused on education, as it seeks to share best practices among its membership.

In our work with these partners, StrivePartnership is guided by three fundamental challenges:

1. **How can the efforts of StrivePartnership provide citizens with greater capacity to design, lead, and enhance the work that they determine to be most critical to their communities?**

2. **How can the efforts of StrivePartnership create a legitimate vehicle for citizens who are working collectively in their communities to collaborate with institutions in a manner that does not diminish citizen authority?**

3. **How can these experiences lead to fundamental, sustainable changes in the operational practices and organizational culture at StrivePartnership—and other institutions that might model us—that make them more beneficial to citizen work?**

In the end, our intention is not to dismantle collective impact. As part of a network of more than 70 organizations nationally conducting work around educational achievement through the StriveTogether cradle-to-career network, I have seen tremendous work in cities across the country using this approach. However, a decade of results has made it clear that the work will never be truly transformative and sustainable until it is tethered to citizen action.

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

By Phillip D. Lurie

Conflict among social identity groups presents one of the most fundamental threats to democratic self-governance. A common response is to design settings in which representatives of groups—defined by race, ethnicity, ideology, religion, gender, or the like—meet in dialogue to repair relationships. The Citizens’ Accord Forum (CAF), a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization based in Jerusalem, works to build a shared society in a sustainable democracy in Israel, characterized by mutual responsibility, full participation, and equal opportunity among all Israeli citizens. One of CAF’s strengths lies in its ability to work with groups generally excluded from discourse on social issues, including ultra-Orthodox Jews and traditional Arab women.

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

Shindi’s insight suggested an alternative approach. Would it be possible to identify issues of universal interest to Israeli citizens, including Jews, Arabs, and others? Examples of such issues might be education of youth, safety of neighborhoods, and the desire for good-paying jobs. Engaging in deliberative work around
issues will cause people to expand their understanding of the nature of these issues, which will, in turn, expand their sense of identities of others and themselves. People are much more likely to work together if they see themselves as responsible for the problem and can participate in the decision-making about what to do. That sense of responsibility and decision-making power results from the names that problems are given, and in particular, the extent to which such names reflect concerns that are valuable to everyone. Working through these concerns, and the tensions that arise between what people would like to do and the resulting negative consequences, can result in a better understanding of how a situation that affects people variously may best be borne by all of them, collectively. As such, development in the ability people have to govern themselves, even in the face of identity conflict, increases because people are no longer willing to be reduced to singular identities, nor do they see themselves as confronted with binary choices. When people get together with others who share an interest and capacity to deal constructively with issues of shared concern to all who live together in a place, the issues serve as a lever to think differently.

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

Engaging in deliberative work around issues will cause people to expand their understanding of the nature of these issues, which will, in turn, expand their sense of identities of others and themselves.
or the use of religion to harass or abuse a spouse. This joint work caused a shift from seeing the issue as “my problem” to one of “our problem.” The issue came to be understood in such a way that each person could see herself (and her community or religious group) in the problem and the solution, which also gave them the courage to come together.

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the best way to understand this issue-based approach is to learn more about it from those directly involved in the work. Philip Stewart, a Kettering senior associate, recently interviewed people who
work for and with the Citizens’ Accord Forum. The following excerpts, edited for clarity, put this work in the voices of those closest to it.

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

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

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

One project involved working with local councils about budget matching. Under rules at that time, the state would match the amount of money that local councils could raise. But, this meant that the poorer councils, mostly in Arab communities, were not able to gain their fair share of these state funds, thus keeping their communities poor. As a part of this effort, we cooperated with the Haredi [ultra-Orthodox Jews] who faced the same kinds of problems. The more I came to understand their problems, the more I recognized that we faced the same problems. We then moved to other projects.
There was a magazine being published in Arabic, and we brought in other Arab, Haredi, and Jewish journalists. The Jewish writers wrote about Arab problems and vice versa. So, I met Haredi and Orthodox journalists and developed a deeper sense of what’s going on in their communities.

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

We stopped the focus on Arabs and Jews. We shifted the focus to different communities with different identities, recognizing that they have more shared interests than divided. So, we brought together some Arab journalists from the north of Israel, with some person from the Negev, and one from the center, an Ashkenazi. I keep asking them, is your influence greater or less when you attack these kinds of local issues, as compared to your focus on the conflict? I challenge the journalists by asking them, what change have you achieved with your coverage of the conflict between Jews and Arabs? What is different? Nothing! If you were to do a small amount of research using what they published on local issues as compared with the conflict and then measure whether you have made any difference, you will find that the only changes come regarding our local problems. You have more credibility and less suspicion from the populace who you want to buy your paper when you write about their concerns. Otherwise, they feel you do not care; they become deeply suspicious of your motives. Once you publish this kind of local story you will see more interaction from the street.

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

We have the Youth Parliament project, which is both Jewish and Arab youth from mixed cities. We learned that if they work jointly to gain something together, then an actual change will take place, both within them and within their community. When they start the project, a lot of the baggage they come with is just mumbo jumbo, stereotypes, and
slogans, and some of it is even slurs. When they do this joint work, they get to see in their own eyes what is real and what is not, and get to decide what they want to take into themselves and what they want to throw away because it is not real. It clarifies their own identity to themselves yet opens them to other identities that they were less familiar with before. They are committed even after the project ends. This is new, but within the last two years, we started having alumni sessions. It wasn’t just, you finished your cycle and now goodbye. They continue to meet and to do stuff in their community together.

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

Sometimes issues arise directly from the people. The politicians don’t know everything. This deliberation enables participation by the people. Who is it who understands what the people need in their daily lives? It is the people themselves. They may need a tub of water, electricity, or an education for their kids. When decisions are made from the ground up, they are more successful. Also, the feeling of the people in participating together with the leader in making decisions, this helps them feel like real people, like citizens.

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

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

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

There is no need to prove to the other side that we are right, but to understand each issue's multiple aspects, while trying to assess the extent to which an informed joint choice can be reached.

And if a joint choice cannot be reached, we seek to help citizens understand what the difficulties or motives are behind the lack of agreement. To run real discussions about identity is very difficult. It can be either simply meeting and coming to know each other and to really understand your identity and compare it to my identity. A good deliberation is that people seek understanding and not picking fights. One of the things that motivate people to do that deliberative work is if they understand this as responsive to their identity.

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Kindred is a diverse and loving community of parents committed to ending educational inequity. The organization, founded in 2016, shifts the way parents work with one another and with educators to create equitable access to the resources all children need to thrive. Research demonstrates that family engagement in education plays a key role in influencing a child’s life outcomes. Our theory of change hypothesizes that changes in parent beliefs, values, and networks will lead parents to take collaborative action that improves outcomes for all students.

Kindred works by building relationships among parents from diverse racial and economic backgrounds to address the longstanding educational inequity in their schools. Research on factors influencing a child’s well-being into adulthood substantiates three primary reasons for doing this:

1. Parents exude tremendous influence over the well-being and success of their children;
2. The reciprocal interactions between school staff and families influence how and whether families receive and follow the advice of teachers; and
3. How families engage one another in school affects a family’s sense of belonging in the school, which
Much of Kindred’s work focuses on helping parents see themselves as democratic actors, using shared issues associated with their young children as an entry point.

in turn influences how and from where the family receives information to support their child’s academic and socioemotional development.

Furthermore, a child’s early sense of socialization—the set of norms associated with expected behaviors—comes in large part from school. Beliefs associated with various aspects of individual and collective identity, including race, economic class, and expectations about what it means to live in and contribute to a democratic society, are often formed and perpetuated by one’s experience in school. Much of Kindred’s work focuses on helping parents see themselves as democratic actors, using shared issues associated with their young children as an entry point.

Kindred has entered into a learning exchange with the Kettering Foundation to explore our mutual interest in the fundamental idea that for democracy to work as it should, people must be able to shape their collective future. One of the most important ways of doing that is through the education of the next generation. At Kindred, we are exploring ways to mobilize parents of diverse racial and economic backgrounds to work collaboratively to ensure all children in their school community have equitable access to learning opportunity.

More specifically, we’ve identified the following opportunities for exploration:

- how cultivating parents’ connection with one another might transform their individual and collective identity to contribute meaningfully (through their time and resources) not only to the learning outcomes of their own child(ren), but also all children in the school community;
- determining whether and how Kindred’s desire to have parents generate these connections and collective commitment endures and morphs into their own versions of democratic actions; and
- how Kindred, working as a center for learning (that is, creating a hub where parents and other actors can share insights and ideas that
inspire each other to continue to take action), can aid in helping parents sustain their commitment to such actions.

CULTIVATING PARENTS’ CONNECTION

Tackling Deeply Rooted Challenges

Kindred has identified several challenges to motivating collective action around school-based issues. First, parents from different economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds bring those associated, diverse experiences to their interactions with the educational system. Take, for example, the grading system, which privileges individual student academic performance above almost all else, and how that may contrast with a collectivist culture, which prioritizes the advancement of all. Public education as manifested in schools is often positioned as a zero-sum game. Those with the knowledge about how to best access school-based resources and the time to do so glean more than those without this knowledge and time. Correlatively, parent efforts in diverse schools, which are often led by dominant culture families, are not usually directed at equitable access to opportunity for all children.

Second, socialized norms deter openly discussing economic, racial, and cultural differences and their influence on schooling. This further exacerbates advantage differences among children from low- and middle-to-high-income households and dominant and nondominant races and cultures. In the United States, those who are poor receive constant messaging that their situation should be a source of shame. Likewise, the fear of being called racist and the sometimes unintentional, but common demonstration of bias and prejudice toward people of color makes talking about race uncomfortable, so adults will often shy away from these conversations unless the setting is structured and predictable.

To combat these challenges, Kindred works to provide space and

[Image of a group of people]
structure for difficult conversations that will unpack socialized norms and restructure them so that talking about economic, racial, and cultural differences becomes an opportunity to reimagine what schooling could look like if it were more inclusive and grounded in the diverse experiences of families.

**Kindred’s Dialogue-to-Action Model**

Kindred’s first year working in a school is focused on building trust and authentic relationships among diverse parents. To do this, Kindred facilitates small-group dialogues of 15 to 20 parents over a 10-week period. These dialogues help parents recognize the role their backgrounds and perceptions might play in welcoming or alienating families and in limiting opportunities for children of color at their school. In these sessions, parents share personal stories with one another on topics such as family identities, histories, common aspirations for their children, and the role that bias plays in perpetuating inequity. Kindred then introduces data that shows the stories shared are actually demonstrative of trends in broader society and have implications for equitable opportunities for the children of the parents in their dialogue groups. This often brings feelings of indignation; Kindred then helps parents find a pathway to take action that benefits the entire school community.

The effect of the dialogues is multilayered. In some cases, parents feel compelled to personally reach out to other parents in their groups to connect and help with a resource transfer—such as information about
summer camp or a job or cultural norms. Kindred facilitates this by having parents connect one on one in between meetings, but we otherwise let the natural tendency to want to help one another flow without interference. At a group level, Kindred facilitates a discussion on the root causes of inequitable opportunities for children, and parents select one strand of that root cause on which to take action. Parents then take that action together. The effect is that several actions, led by parents, happen in schools where Kindred has created the conditions mentioned above.

For example, one group of parents is working to inform and improve the way that room parents (parents who assist the teacher with communication to other parents and organize class resource-gathering like teacher gifts) collect and share information with all parents in the class to make the information accessible and more useful to parents so they can better support their child’s academic progress.

In some groups, parents disagreed about which action to take, not because one idea was wrong, but because individuals were excited about their own ideas. In these cases, the facilitator centers the group back on the initial root cause analysis and asks the group to select an action that addresses that root cause most directly and can be completed by the group members, who are often quite busy. If one idea still doesn’t rise to the top, the group votes on which action to take and decides how the other idea(s) might be addressed later. At one school, a subcommittee from the PTO was developed that would follow up on the ideas that hadn’t yet been acted upon and provide parent support for their completion. Once an idea is selected, the facilitator builds enthusiasm for the action and assigns responsibilities for its completion.

In some schools, the actions complement each other. In one instance, a school had two groups, and both wanted to survey parents to gather information. The groups combined efforts and created one survey. At another school, both groups wanted to create a PTO, so they combined into one group to carry that action forward. The complementarity was realized because both groups share
at least one facilitator. The common facilitator identifies areas of complementarity and asks group members what they want to do with it. The groups may decide to pursue their actions independently or join forces.

**BUILDING PARENT INITIATIVE**

As a stepping stone to sustaining parent collective action beyond Kindred’s direct role, the second year of Kindred’s school support is focused on training and coaching parent dialogue participants to lead their own groups. At this stage, parents in teams of two facilitate new parent dialogue groups. The new facilitators follow Kindred’s curriculum, which helps them guide parents through the relationship-building that leads to collective action. We support parent facilitators as they continue their own personal work in identity development through coaching, as well as ongoing group support through regular meetings. The purpose of this stage is to build a team of parent leaders who are equity-minded and connected with one another to sustain and lead the work Kindred helped begin.

**KINDRED AS A CENTER FOR LEARNING**

Kindred believes that democratic citizenship requires that representative voices are truly heard. At present, across our country, the channels for these voices are often dominated by people from middle- and upper-income households. Kindred’s work is a study of what happens when conditions are created for truly representative voices to contribute to problem-solving—within the structures of dialogues and beyond.

Kindred is building its capacity to act as a hub of learning for insights on democratic practice and a resource for others who want to experiment with such practices. We currently define the approach as helping parents create spaces across schools and within schools to interact with one another outside of their school communities and determine actions they may take together and individually to promote equitable education outcomes for students. We encourage parents to create their own “tables” around which people may gather for deliberation and action rather than relying only on the defined table that Kindred has provided. Through the creation of this “hub,” Kindred hopes to engender a political awakening around shared problems related to education that will mobilize action on the part of parents and education allies.

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My home is Zimbabwe, where I work for an organization called the SIVIO Institute. The institute was established in November 2017 partly as a response to the change of government, which replaced the president who had been in power since 1980. There is a new excitement in the country focused on nurturing democracy and good governance. The organization’s work is organized around the idea that there are initiatives citizens are already engaged in that influence democracy. These include initiatives of solidarity, community-based coping mechanisms to economic shocks, and the various—but unnoticed—ways of engaging with officeholders. SIVIO’s approach is to map these initiatives and find ways of strengthening them without necessarily altering them. Since January 2018, I have also been in residence at the Kettering Foundation as a visiting scholar. I am learning and working to improve my understanding of how a new organization can act as a kind of learning center nurturing democratic practices that are citizen driven and citizen focused. This distinct focus on
The design of our organization is based on an alternative hypothesis: In order to succeed, democracy needs active citizens in engaged communities that hold their government accountable.

TRENDS IN ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AFRICA
Since the turn of the 20th century, we have seen fewer military dictatorships in Africa. Coups are no longer the norm. More countries have transitioned from one political party to another through peaceful elections. We are also seeing the successful introduction of multiparty democracy and routine elections. We have moved away from de jure one-party rule.

We still have challenges around the manipulation of constitutions by existing leaders in order to extend their terms, yet there are multiparty elections across the continent. It is a mixed picture, but we can say that Africa has chosen a trajectory of democratic representation. The consensus centers around democracy.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?
The problem in Africa is the quality and depth of the understanding of what a democracy requires of its people. We are importing institutions, and we are importing formal norms of participation, such as voting in routine elections. The multilateral agents of development are pushing an agenda of programs focused primarily on the state or formal NGOs. In essence, democracy has been equated with elections. We have invested heavily in the process of elections themselves. In Zimbabwe, for instance, elections were held in July 2018 at an estimated cost of $150 million, in a country with an 87 percent unemployment rate. We are spending a lot of money
and attention on one event, and not focusing on the everyday challenges of democracy.

The elections are yielding a limited kind of output. In countries that went through the liberation struggles, only the faces of those in power have changed—the ANC in South Africa, Frelimo in Mozambique, MPLA in Angola. Even in Botswana, the most democratic country in Africa, there has been no change in political party since independence in 1964. CCM in Tanzania has been in power since 1963, and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe has been in power since 1980. We have created a kind of aristocracy that has self-organized itself for succession, but we're not opening up the process of democracy beyond the party in power.

We are also experiencing increasing levels of inequality. Poverty remains the common condition, with huge levels of unemployment and a great disparity between a ruling elite and citizens. A related factor is a demographic challenge. Africa is young, bulging in the middle, with few jobs for youth. One result of these conditions has been protests like what we saw during the Arab Spring. The first food riots were in central Africa, beginning in Cameroon, then they moved to Chad and Mozambique. We saw them later in isolated pockets in South Africa. It tells you something about the quality of the democracy we have that the initial attempt by the states was to suppress these riots, not to engage with the issues. In response, some of these protests became violent and eventually toppled governments.

**HOW CAN WE REFRACT DEMOCRACY? WHAT ARE CITIZENS DOING?**

There are very few Zimbabwean studies of what citizens do as citizens, with each other, for each other, and with institutions. It is important to note this absence because the current status quo creates an environment ripe for manipulation of citizens by elites within society through patron-client relationships. It creates a culture of dependency on expert interventions and solutions. The resulting practices disengage citizens from the work of their communities.

We know that Zimbabwe’s countryside has historically been made up of a mosaic of associational forms. If Alexis de Tocqueville were to reincarnate and find himself in Africa, he would find associations everywhere. They include loose, unstructured, mutual networks such as faith-based groups, credit associations, women’s groups, and labor-sharing groups, as well as the more structured peasant organizations, which are both
We know that Zimbabwe’s countryside has historically been made up of a mosaic of associational forms. Their origins vary. Labor and asset-pooling formations tend to emerge out of the traditional institutional framework of cooperation, while those entailing the introduction of a new innovation, such as joint marketing or mobilization of savings, are founded by charismatic leaders.

Good statistics on the total number of local associations in Zimbabwe are not available. In the SIVIO Institute’s ongoing study of urban areas, we found more than 100 local associations within one low-income area. The associations serve a variety of purposes, covering a broad range that includes pooling together financial savings, providing assistance during bereavement (burial societies), creating security (neighborhood watch committees), and defending the commons (environmental groups).

In terms of activism, the broader political and systemic convulsions that have taken place since the Arab Spring were led by ordinary people working within and through ad hoc formations. They have literally changed the narrative around power and democracy. These movements are not limited to political issues. We have seen the emergence of #asakheni focused on economic revival of the second-largest city in Zimbabwe. The #KeepBulawayo-Clean campaign was started by brothers Tonderai, Willard, and Tinashe Shoko to ensure that the cleaning of the city’s roads, squares, and parks is not the responsibility of the local authority alone. The campaign has been running for more than a year and has received widespread support. They organize clean-up campaigns that take place mostly during weekends and also encourage citizens to take photos of themselves cleaning in their neighborhoods.

The civic capacities under discussion are highly fluid. In one instance they may manifest as membership-based associations, in another they could just be an ad hoc network of concerned citizens, and in another situation an NGO might be at the center of the organizing. At the SIVIO Institute, we do not have a definite model on how they are established. Through this initiative, the institute will seek to gain a more
SIVIO’S WORK IS ORGANIZED AROUND THREE AREAS

**Citizens & State**
- Enhance practices and innovations of philanthropy through training/seminars, networking
- Ensure adequate policy framework to support the growth of philanthropy: assessment of policy gaps, policy advocacy
- Level the political playing field—democratic consolidation
- Improve understanding through mapping studies, design of research, preparation of reports
- Revamp the economy for shared growth
- Resuscitate social service
- Recast democracy to include daily interactions of citizens with citizens, citizens with officeholders and institutions

**Policy Analysis & Advocacy**
- Identify ways that civic capacities can enhance democratic practices
- Improve knowledge of the purpose and role of emerging civic capacities

**Communities & Associations**
- Improve practices and innovations of philanthropy through training/seminars, networking
- Ensure adequate policy framework to support the growth of philanthropy: assessment of policy gaps, policy advocacy
- Level the political playing field—democratic consolidation
- Improve understanding through mapping studies, design of research, preparation of reports
- Revamp the economy for shared growth
- Resuscitate social service
- Recast democracy to include daily interactions of citizens with citizens, citizens with officeholders and institutions

**Philanthropy & Financial Inclusion**
- Identify ways that civic capacities can enhance democratic practices
- Improve knowledge of the purpose and role of emerging civic capacities
- Resuscitate social service
in-depth knowledge of the different trends within these spaces.

These associations provide clues of how citizens engage with one another, mobilizing members into community formations to organize for their own production and their own security. They are leveraging community assets, pulling together productive assets for agricultural production, and mobilizing support during times of bereavement. They are also working to organize support during other important social events, such as births and marriages.

After the family, the second most important framework or platform of social organization is these associations, especially the small ones whose membership ranges from 10 to 12 people. There are many communities like these, and they do a lot. Many Africans were investing more to resolve their problems than formal philanthropy was doing, particularly in agriculture and community projects. The common story, though, is that Africa is dependent on foreign aid, but when you go into communities, you find communities that are highly engaged in resolving their own problems.

**AN EXPERIMENT**

Tensions exist between formal processes of philanthropy working alongside NGOs and communities. In every instance where philanthropy and NGOs are at work, they are creating new structures, new processes, new accountability protocols, and even new organizations. They change the existing loosely formed associations into something different. Organizations that were voluntary and associational are encouraged to become more formal and to focus on reporting new processes, which begins to affect even the manner in which they are responsive in a society.

As we set out to establish a learning center, we want to explore how we can work as an experiment in how to align a formal organization’s work with citizen-based processes. How can an organization work without causing harm to existing capacity? How can we promote growth based

“The common story is that Africa is dependent on foreign aid, but when you go into communities, you find communities that are highly engaged in resolving their own problems.”
on learning and recognition of assets within communities and also deepen democratic practices? At the same time, we are keen to contribute to the emergence of other people and organizations through networks that align their work to the interests of citizens, and in the process, promote an emphasis on citizenship in a democracy.

Some issues that we have to grapple with:

- Ambition of the proposed center is highly exploratory
- Very few successful examples or models of this kind of work
- Limited understanding of how community-based agency (civic capacity) is engaged in resolving problems like poverty (lack of jobs/economic opportunities) and the collapse in public infrastructure
- Narrow framing of democracy to make it synonymous with elections has limited the ways that citizens are actually engaged in the public space
- Inadequate knowledge of how citizens actually organize themselves and work together to address issues that affect them
- Limited academic and policy interest in the role of civic capacity
- Limited understanding of the internal processes within associational forms and the networks they establish

We are hopeful that, in spite of these challenges, our experiment with an organization that places citizens at the core will make a contribution toward recasting democracy as the work of citizens in Zimbabwe and hopefully provide lessons for others across the continent.

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