A Note from the Editor

As regular readers of Connections know, the Kettering Foundation organizes its work into research on citizens, communities, and institutions. Each year, the foundation reviews and evaluates possibilities for new lines of research through the “lens” of one of the areas. The current focus is through the lens of community, a term which refers to the places where people develop networks of civic relationships to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. In communities, people educate future generations in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and create the conditions that allow them to prosper economically. The interactions among the people of a place—joined in ever-changing alliances of civic associations and formal institutions—are what determine the capacity of a community to address those goals. Maintaining and building the community is a matter of maintaining and building these relationships.

Early in the current review, it became clear that behind many of the concerns about the role of citizens in politics is a critical and largely unrecognized problem: the idea of communities as arenas of collective acting is increasingly unrecognized. And it is not only that that frame of reference is missing in the formal institutions and agencies charged with serving the public interest; as recent reports by Richard Harwood show, the insight is lacking even in the community-based organizations that have historically been the entryways for citizens into public life. (See the review by Connie Crockett on p. 29.)

One symptom of the problem can be seen in the widely documented reports of people’s sense of their collective political impotence. People feel there is little chance that they, or “people like them,” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. What is the problem? Our review recognized one well-researched part of the challenge: citizen-directed civic initiatives are often blocked by formal organizations and government agencies. But there appears to be an even more fundamental underlying problem. The thin notion of the role of public life in community leaves many such initiatives unimagined and thus untired. With that problem in mind, we identified the logical follow-up question as the overarching theme of the year’s review: how can the concept of communities as arenas for collective acting be recognized and illuminated? The question is motivated, of course, by the foundation’s primary interest in how people can more effectively marshal their civic resources in order to shape their collective future.

The following essays provide a partial record of what we are finding. They highlight the challenges faced by citizens, civic associations, and formal institutions in identifying and making practical use of the concept of communities as places of public work. They also provide a sense of the various networks of exchange through which the foundation works. The foundation conducts its research with community groups, government agencies, research organizations, and scholars through joint-learning agreements. Throughout the year, workshops bring together people working in related areas to exchange findings and make sense of what they mean. In what follows, readers will find what we hope are illuminating references to the various ways the foundation goes about its work.

Based on an understanding of research through networks of exchange, we want to encourage readers to share with us their own experiences and suggestions for others who might collaborate in the research. Authors of the essays that follow were encouraged to write with that sort of reader in mind, which suggests posing questions rather than answering them. You are encouraged to join the conversation, through the Readers’ Forum found at www.kettering.org.

—Randall Nielsen
Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities
David Mathews

A Need for Human Logic in Education
Bob Cornett

Taking a Look at Organic Community-Level Politics
Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle

Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities
Teddy Nemeroff

Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension
Alice Diebel

What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?
Patricia Moore Harbour

Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop
Connie Crockett

Self-Organizing and Community Politics
Phil Stewart

Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?
Bob McKenzie

Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
Connie Crockett

Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe
Paloma Dallas

Books Worth Reading
Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy
By Diana C. Mutz, reviewed by Matthew Johnson

Innovation: The Missing Dimension
By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore, reviewed by Randall Nielsen
Looking Back/
Looking Ahead
at
Communities

By David Mathews

As is the custom, this issue of Connections reports on our review of past research and solicits help with new studies. The focus of this year’s review is democracy as seen from the perspective of communities. In these reviews, we always ask people not directly involved in our research to participate, and we benefited greatly from hearing about communities along the Gulf Coast that had been devastated, first by Hurricane Katrina and later by its aftereffects.

On the Gulf, the value of community isn’t abstract or subject to debate; it is palpable. A community there—and in our research—is a place characterized by the work citizens do with other citizens to create a valued and prosperous way of life for themselves and future generations. People care about places like Mobile, Biloxi, and New Orleans, as well as the smaller towns around them: Bayou La Batre (home of the fictional Bubba Gump Shrimp Company), Pass Christian, and Grand Isle. The people who live there want to have a hand in shaping the future of their communities, and after Katrina, they tried to come together as communities to do that. If they didn’t act, they knew that their future would be determined by others—outside planners or developers—or by their own inertia.

We chose these communities as a point of reference in order to challenge ourselves with the question of what the totality of our research on democracy has to offer them. Kettering isn’t a grantmaker and isn’t organized to provide technical assistance, so the answer to the challenge couldn’t be providing funds or services. Our research isn’t of the how-to sort either; we study experiments in strengthening self-rule. Insights from the research have to be adapted to local conditions by those who know the places best, and needless to say, these people aren’t at the foundation. So the challenge we gave ourselves was demanding. To respond, we had to revisit all that we have found in past studies of communities to identify what was missing or incomplete.

Our Research to Date

In saying that the foundation needs to say more to communities, we aren’t repudiating what we have said before. The foundation has done a great deal of research on communities and has
Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities

made its findings widely available. Our 2002 report on what we have learned, For Communities to Work, is probably our most-read publication. And we continue to draw on our earlier studies and have recalled them in this year’s review.

Rediscovering Community: When Kettering started its research on communities, they were out of favor in national politics. From Birmingham to Boston, they had developed an unsavory reputation for bigotry and corruption, primarily because of resistance to school integration. So, as George Frederickson, a leading public administration scholar observed, the emphasis turned to building large systems, and we forgot much of what we knew about maintaining communities. Kettering began to move into this vacuum because understanding how democracy works in the United States requires understanding the role that communities play. Our most enduring finding is that communities are never perfect, but they count. They and their citizenry are key to improving everything from education and economic development to health care and race relations. Citizens on the Gulf understood that when they came together as communities to restore their communities.

Leadership: Given the foundation’s focus on citizens in democracy, the role they should play in their communities was an unavoidable issue in our research. Little was written about the rank-and-file citizenry, however; the emphasis was on a select group of leaders. So the foundation studied the community leadership programs that were becoming popular and, in the process, became aware of the difference between positional leaders (those with legal and fiscal authority) and the people others turn to when a problem has to be solved. We didn’t have a name for these problem solvers; they come from all walks of life and all sections of their communities. They are only distinguished by their knack for getting people to work together, and studies showed that communities that are reasonably effective in overcoming their difficulties are full of them. These communities are “leaderful,” we reported.

Civil Society: The importance of these uncredentialed problem solvers who come from the rank-and-file citizenry became clearer when we began to see that communities had more than individual leaders of whatever type; they had societies made up of all kinds of citizens interacting with other citizens (civil societies). These societies formed as people related to one another in various community activities from celebations to collective problem solving. Our recognition of this concept of the citizenry dates back to a 1987 board meeting with scholars and community activists in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Later, Robert Putnam’s research on the importance of the social capital that is generated by citizens engaging citizens was a big boost for us. We looked for the sources of social capital that were political in that they had a direct impact on collective action. Because the foundation’s research is on democracy, we naturally concentrated on the role of civil societies in self-government.

Engagement: Citizens working together is obviously a plus for communities, but what prompts people to invest their time, energy, and resources in collective or joint efforts? Trying to answer that question has led to one of our most counterintuitive hypotheses, which is that people don’t necessarily move from personal to shared concerns. They become active citizens if they are able to see connections between their individual concerns and those of others. (That is, they have to engage one another.) Citizens make these connections, we believe, when they are able to name problems in terms of the things they consider vital to their well-being, such as being safe from danger, having freedom of action, and being treated fairly. Although recognizing these shared concerns doesn’t end disagreements, people are able to see that they have similar hopes and fears. And that recognition facilitates working together.

As we surveyed the growing literature on civic engagement, we also discovered that the term had a particular meaning for many community organizations and local institutions. They are interested in engaging individual citizens in support of their institutions’ work as distinct from engaging a collective citizenry active in its own work. Both types of engagement can be useful but for different purposes.

Wicked Problems and Public Work: The importance of what citizens do with other citizens took on greater significance in our research when we looked at communities encountering the intractable problems that never seem to go away, problems like deep-seated poverty and racial conflict. In cities and towns along the Gulf Coast, the hurricane exposed problems of this sort. These problems are embedded in the social and economic structure, and the only chance of making

Our most enduring finding is that communities are never perfect, but they count. They and their citizenry are key to improving everything from education and economic development to health care and race relations.
Democratic Practices: Although we knew that the names given to problems—and who got to name them—is key to engaging citizens in community life, acting together on wicked problems requires much more than citizens naming problems in their own terms. Options for what should be done have to be framed in a way that prompts the deliberations needed to produce sound decisions. And the resources required to respond to these problems have to be identified and committed. Then, collective actions have to be organized so that they are mutually reinforcing. And since no action is ever completely successful, people have to constantly learn from their efforts, hopefully becoming more innovative and effective as they do. These are all critical practices in community politics because they open doors for citizens to act, so we have called them “democratic practices.” All of these practices are called on in doing public work.

As we studied democratic practices, we had to ask whether there are sufficient opportunities for citizens to practice them. Historically, communities have been the seedbeds of democratic politics, allowing citizens to experience self-rule directly through means like civic organizations, local boards, and juries; but do they still provide these opportunities? Troubling evidence discussed in the last Connections suggests they may not. Studies report serious erosion in the civic infrastructure of our communities. Added to that, citizen boards for local organizations seem well aware of their legal and financial obligations, yet much less conscious of their democratic responsibilities, a finding that has been corroborated by recent Kettering studies done by Richard Harwood and his associates, Squaring Realities and The Organization-First Approach.

What We Are Trying to Learn More About

Of the six democratic practices identified so far, research has progressed fastest on how citizens name problems, how options for action are framed to prompt deliberation, and how sound judgment can emerge from collective decision making. Our greatest task now is to get a better understanding of how decisions are implemented; that is, how resources are recognized and committed, how actions are organized, and how a community learns from its efforts. We especially need to offer more detailed explanations of how citizens organize their actions so they are mutually reinforcing without central control. And we need better explanations of how communities get into a learning mode so they keep up the momentum when they encounter obstacles.

Here is a brief account of where we are so far in our current research and what we are trying to learn.

Making Commitments: In the past, we have recognized that deliberative decisions aren’t self-implementing. As noted earlier, citizens have to volunteer their own time and resources to carry out what has been decided; they aren’t compelled by law or contracts. We have reason to believe that when people see they share the same basic concerns, they are more likely to join forces, even if they give different weights to those concerns. And the feeling that they all have something at stake may well spur people to commit their time and resources. But we wonder whether this sense of having a stake is all that’s involved. Most everyone has heard the argument that citizens are more likely to hold back their resources and depend on others to make sacrifices. And we have heard counterarguments about the attraction of being free riders. The only conclusion we have come to so far is that we need to go deeper into the subject of commitments.

Organizing Public Acting: Kettering case studies show that when citizens do act, they tend to act on multiple fronts in separate, independent initiatives. Because there is seldom a coordinating agency, how can these separate initiatives become complementary and mutually supportive? One assumption is that if these initiatives move in a common direction decided upon in collective deliberation, the independent efforts should reinforce one another without having to be bureaucratically coordinated. When that happens, the whole of the enterprise could be greater than the sum of its parts, and the cost of organizing the effort less than if a coordinating agency had to be used. That is one of the benefits of collective civic action.

Recently we went a bit further in this line of research by looking at the claim that human societies have a capacity for self-organizing, perhaps similar to what we see in flocks of birds or herds of animals. There is now a literature on concepts like “autonomous development” in rural sociology and other disciplines, and scholarly inquiries into this in countries ranging from China to Russia. Here again, we need to know more in order to complete the story we share with communities on the Gulf and elsewhere.

Learning as a Community: The civic learning we identified earlier as a democratic practice has taken on greater significance in our work. The degree to which communities are able to shape their future may depend, most of all, on how effective communities are in learning from their initiatives. Communities where citizens can make a difference seem to be communities where people are constantly experimenting with new approaches to problems and learning from the way they interrogate these experiments. Rather than measuring success against fixed goals, they not only assess the effects of their actions but also reassess the value of what they set out to achieve. In other words, they reevaluate their goals. And they evaluate themselves as a community along with the results of various initiatives.

Despite the contributions civic learning can make, we have found that communities keep running into problems...
they aren’t sure how to solve. In high-achieving communities, learning seems to be a norm that says, in effect, we’ll try this, and if it doesn’t work, we will learn enough from the experience to try again. The dominant evaluative practices, however, can dampen this spirit of experimentation and learning. Outside, “objective” evaluators may come in to assess impact using largely quantitative measures. Success is the goal, and the community as a whole doesn’t become a learning community. It would be wrong not to evaluate results, and quantitative measures have value; still, we haven’t found a means of assessment that could counter the negative effects of traditional evaluations and put communities into a learning mode.

We do believe, however, that the politics associated with public deliberation has the potential to foster civic learning. It occurs throughout all the democratic practices and is a component of each of them. Collective learning occurs when citizens name problems to capture their deepest concerns, when they frame issues to identify unintended consequences that would be costly, and when they deliberate (which the Greeks called “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act”). People continue to learn when they identify unrecognized resources they can use to solve problems, when they find ways to make a variety of initiatives mutually reinforcing, as well as when they evaluate what they have accomplished.

As we study communities and citizens who want a stronger hand in determining their future, we have started to wonder whether there isn’t a less obvious but more fundamental obstacle standing in the way. We had a glimpse of what it was when we heard that the restoration of New Orleans depended primarily on a government agency rebuilding the levees, which is something citizens don’t do anymore. The problem behind the problem may be the perception that there isn’t really much that citizens can do in a global, expert, professional-dependent age. In other words, the idea that there can be a public created by its own democratic practices may not be persuasive because it runs counter to the conventional wisdom about how politics “really” works, and that is with little participation by citizens other than as voters and contributors to interest groups.

Given the power of the conventional wisdom, we have been impressed when there is evidence of what citizens can do through various forms of public work. For instance, communities are our first line of defense against natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. The federal agencies responsible for protecting the country’s health are now working with communities on preventing a pandemic if avian flu changes into a form that can spread from human to human. Vaccines might not be available for months, so what families, schools, and local businesses do is crucial. In a recent report published in the journal *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism*, professionals acknowledge that “large numbers of people, not just those who serve in an official capacity” have to act if there is a health emergency. Neighborhoods with the civic capacity to work together are evidently more important than well-stocked pantries. We have found in our studies of public education similar testimony about what citizens can do and are eager to know whether there are other situations where public work is proving essential.

**How You Can Help**

We haven’t met the challenge we gave ourselves this year because there are questions we haven’t answered as completely as we should. Many of them have been acknowledged in this piece. We don’t expect the answers to come quickly, but we do appreciate the help we’ve received from Connections’ readers. Not everyone shares our particular focus or our assumptions. And findings from research are always debatable, as they certainly are within our foundation. Kettering is far from alone in trying to better understand how communities can work more democratically. Perhaps that is because the question of what citizens should and can do in their communities is caught up in the larger question of what democracy should and can be.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at dmathews@kettering.org.

---

A Need for Human Logic in Education

By Bob Cornett

The Situation

Hardly anyone is fully satisfied with the condition of public education in America. Dropout rates are too high, the “equity gap” is unacceptable, many excellent schoolteachers feel that they are being treated as robots on an assembly line, and there are still more deficiencies. The real problem, however—the underlying barrier to effective learning—is that we’re expecting government institutions to do a job that such institutions can’t do by themselves.

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently used some terminology that I find helpful: he contrasted bureaucratic logic with human logic. Bureaucratic logic tells us that the way to improve education is to anoint bigger bosses, send more compartmentalizing mandates down through the hierarchy, require more tests that put more fear in the teachers and students, and otherwise try harder to make people do things.

Human logic, conversely, takes us in exactly the opposite direction. Effective learning, according to human logic (and according to objective scholarship), requires integrating information from many sources, requires the active and enthusiastic energies of the learners, and requires imagination, not mere information. Effective learners, above all, learn to learn. In order to do so, they must be full partners in the learning enterprise.

Illusions

The poet W. H. Auden identifies our problem:

We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

Auden prompts me to acknowledge two illusions of my own. First, I long took for granted that the way to improve learning was to improve schooling. I would have known better if I had stopped to think: we adults have spent only a small portion of our lives in school, and only a small part of what we’ve learned could possibly have come from school. But I did not know better; and, therefore, when I thought about ways to improve young people’s learning, I kept coming back to my own image of schooling. I had been fortunate—I had the benefit of many teachers who were not only competent and dedicated but also were good role models—but the system itself, which gave little or no recognition to the learning that took place outside the classroom, was the product of bureaucratic logic. That system, as I now realize, had provided me with my frame of reference and, as a consequence, I was trying to use bureaucratic logic to do a human logic job.

The second illusion I acknowledge is that I had a high opinion of myself and of people like me. I have spent a big part of my career in and around governments at all levels. We were well motivated and competent (we believed); when we reached a conclusion, we were almost certainly right (according to my logic at the time). That was an illusion, of course, but it took a long time for me to get beyond this and other ego-based illusions.

I cite my own illusions, not because they are special but because they are quite ordinary. I’ve learned, partly from the writings of great thinkers and partly just by looking around, that my illusions are shared to at least some degree by most adults. And because the illusions are shared by so many people, they infect the body politic, and, from inside the body politic the illusions provide fuel that further entrenches bureaucratic logic. Pogo had it right: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Our illusions, I now realize, are the basic source of our problems in public education.

Solutions

Our nation’s strength has, from the very start, been in our communities. But, having said that, I know of many of people who would, and do, put their illusions (and their bureaucratic logic) ahead of children’s learning. Right now, as an important case in point, the debate in Washington over No Child Left Behind is being dominated by the illusion that better bureaucratic techniques will give us better education. While I’m in favor of jiggling the bureaucratic apparatus—it needs it—we will make real and permanent progress only when human logic and human values outweigh bureaucratic logic and bureaucratic values.

The application of human logic can be found everywhere in community-based endeavors that connect the generations. I recently witnessed a beautiful example in a small community park in Lexington, Kentucky, where several hundred people gather each Tuesday evening during the summer to participate in a bluegrass music “jamboree.” All ages were there, from those in their 90s to small babies. The evening I was there, the band on the stage consisted of 10 young people from a rural Kentucky school; they were excellent. Those youngsters then helped start a jam session to encourage other youngsters to learn to play bluegrass music. I noticed one granddaddy showing his three-year-old grandson how to pick up trash and take it to the garbage can. There was
no compartmentalizing, no hierarchies, no coercion—just people sharing their humanity.

I fully concede that where we are is nowhere close to where we need to go. In the case of that little neighborhood jamboree, as a typical example, there is no connection with the schools in the area but, even if some of the teachers and students were to have some involvement with the project, the school hierarchy would likely see the project as only marginally relevant to the school’s mission. (Test scores would likely be the main concern of the school hierarchy.) Further, even in those situations where the school and the community have managed to develop an effective partnership, that partnership would almost certainly be invisible at levels where public policies are set—the big bosses in capital cities would be unlikely to know about such local projects.

Furthermore, as perhaps the most complicating factor of all, some degree of bureaucratic logic will always be needed: we will continue to need school buildings, buses, classrooms, assessments, and the like, and bureaucratic procedures therefore will continue to be needed to manage such things, including managing the money that will always be needed. And, aside from management issues, some public policies need to be set at high levels of government; as a reminder of this need, we had legally segregated schools until the national government ended that demeaning practice. Our objective, thus, cannot be merely to get rid of bureaucratic logic and procedures, we must create arrangements that effectively mesh the bureaucratic and the human.

**Temptations**

I warn that we will be tempted to get off course—I’ve learned that the hard way.

The most pervasive temptation is to make deals with bureaucratic logic; and money is most often the initial cause of that temptation. Some money is needed for just about any project, and the bureaucratic hierarchy has control of money. It is therefore entirely natural that citizens who want to start community-based projects tend to approach the hierarchy for money, and it is also natural that the hierarchy tends to say “no,” unless the project serves a purpose based upon bureaucratic logic.

Inasmuch as having the political support of influential citizens is bureaucratically good, the hierarchy is likely to say “yes” to projects that are supported by influential people. Such quid pro quo arrangements, which are the regular order of business at higher levels of government, may be tolerable for most programs but, in the case of children’s learning, they can do serious harm.

Another temptation is to pretend that what goes on in school can substitute for what goes on in real life. Effective learning, according to human logic, requires integrating information from many sources, requires the active and enthusiastic energies of the learners, and requires imagination, not mere information. Effective learners, above all, learn to learn. In order to do so, they must be full partners in the learning enterprise.
pretense gives us citizens an excuse to avoid responsibility—we can sit on our hands without needing to feel guilty. And we don’t even have to blame ourselves when the job doesn’t get done—we can blame the “experts.”

We have no ethical choice. We are required by our deepest instincts to connect ourselves and our communities with the young people and their learning. This requirement extends to all children, rich and poor, city and country, black and white, brown and red.

When we citizens absolve ourselves of responsibility, we open the door to another temptation—the temptation to tolerate intimidation. The bureaucratic hierarchy has power over public school educators—the hierarchy, after all, controls the paychecks (and the top-down mandates). When we citizens neutralize ourselves, this leaves nobody to speak for the children and their communities except the teachers and their bosses. This, consequently, leaves the bureaucratic hierarchy free to intimidate as it will, which, in turn, means that connections between school and community must serve bureaucratic values.

Still another temptation is to be insensitive to the vulnerabilities of other people. I’ve experienced this temptation myself. I know, from my own experience, much of which has been inside the world of power, is fundamentally different from the experience of people who have been the victims of power. I don’t believe I’m atypical; all of us find it hard to see the world from the vantage point of other people. Any time we’re tempted to discount the culture in children’s communities (especially low-income communities), we need to remind ourselves of the Indian schools that our government sponsored not too many years ago. Student learning must relate to the local culture because that local community—and not the global village—is the context in which the student lives, relates, learns, grows, and matures.

The Crux of the Matter

We have no ethical choice. We are required by our deepest instincts to connect ourselves and our communities with the young people and their learning. This requirement extends to all children, rich and poor, city and country, black and white, brown and red.

We need community-based “public work” projects everywhere. And we need, as a matter of crucial importance, for dedicated adults in the communities to work as active partners with not only young people but with the best of the professional educators. By best I mean those educators, active and retired, whose commitment to children’s learning is so deep and firm that their human logic and values protect them from yielding to bureaucratic logic. Such partnerships can combine the wisdom of years, the professional knowledge of educators, the grassroots strength of democracy, the energy and creative skills of young people—and, above all, deep respect for the children.

I don’t know just how to create the kinds of partnerships we need. And I don’t know just what public policies will look like when our partnerships, with their human logic, assert themselves in the world of bureaucratic logic. I do know, however, that bureaucratic logic by itself will take us down a trail that nobody wants: Not even the corporate organizations that sometimes lead cheers for bureaucratic testing and other top-down controls really want passive workers who don’t know how to learn—and whose creativity has been diminished through coercion. Further, nobody wants good teachers to leave the profession because they’re forced to be robots on a monolithic assembly line.

I know something else: There are no grandparents, or people who think the way grandparents think, who would knowingly accept the notion that they have nothing to contribute to children’s learning. Policies that separate us older citizens from the younger generation, as our present bureaucratic policies do, are educationally wasteful—obviously and foolishly wasteful. And I know one more thing: there are no politicians who would knowingly and openly suggest that grandparents have no useful role in children’s education.

Community-based partnerships do something that nothing else can do as well. They produce knowledgeable citizens, the kind of citizens that know what’s going on. It is these knowledgeable citizens—plus the politicians who want to work with knowledgeable citizens—who will see to it that human logic and human values are respected. And once human logic and human values are respected, everything else falls into place.

The Case for Human Logic in Education

I asked one of my friends to sum up the case for human logic. Here’s his response: Every life is—and must be—lived in a community; adults and children alike. When hierarchies supersede or ignore those communities and their cultures (the major sources of the nutrients for living), they have diminished the preeminent life context which properly envelopes each student’s life and fosters his individual reality.

I rest my case for human logic.

Bob Cornett is a retired bureaucrat and can be reached at onechildatatime@hotmail.com.
Kettering’s research has increasingly been concerned with democratic practices in the everyday life of communities. Researchers on staff and in our network have been observing the ebb and flow of ongoing decision-making and problem-solving routines in their communities. They hope to find stories of organic politics, driven by the interests, norms, and resources of the community rather than those of experts, outside organizations, and bureaucratic institutions. Our research attempts to answer the question, what kind of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating engagement in politics occurs in communities? We also hope to learn more about how this kind of politics either stops or moves forward at particular key moments. We suspect that Kettering’s findings on democracy will be more powerful if we can find examples of democratic practices moving forward in the informal networks of communities.

We are searching for examples of organic public politics that can be distinguished from formal politics in at least three ways. First, organic political engagement is spontaneous. It emerges out of everyday concerns of citizens in communities and occurs in places that are not explicitly named as “political,” such as churches and barber shops. As we have seen in the cases of ancient cultures around the world, organic politics is incorporated into the fabric of the community. Second, it is self-organizing. It is driven by the energy, initiative, and civic skills that exist throughout a community, rather than by the techniques of expert organizations or the resources of powerful bureaucracies. Third, it is self-regulating.
Organic politics is regulated by norms that are implicitly stated and broadly understood. This is in contrast to formal politics, which is regulated by strict rules of order imposed by trained moderators or officials. We hope to find examples that meet these criteria, in contrast to the artificiality of well-intentioned interventions of experts and elites against the natural tendencies of communities.

Organic politics may not follow a linear, or step-by-step, plan, and it may overlap with irreconcilable conflicts or feelings of powerlessness. Researchers in our workshops have struggled to identify overlap with irreconcilable conflicts or feelings of powerlessness. Researchers in our workshops have struggled to identify

### I have been studying the everyday political talk of people in my community.

This kind of talk is organic, or natural.

There are no techniques used to guide the conversations. The conversations are prompted by shared concerns amongst a group of people who gather in a range of everyday community spaces.

It because it is so much messier and chaotic than formal politics. However, we suspect that over the long run, organic politics may be more sustainable than formal politics, because it relies only upon the skills, capacities, and established norms of communities.

Two of our researchers offer preliminary reports on their observations of politics in their communities. From Yellow Springs, Ohio, Gina Paget writes:

I have participated in and observed politics as it is practiced in my southwest Ohio village for 20 years. In 2005, villagers were again concerned about development—if, how, and where the village should grow. I joined a small group of villagers, who held different and even conflicting ideas about growth and development.

The original small group's participants changed over time in numbers, sometimes attracting over 60 and at others fewer than 10. Individuals with differing points of view came in and out of the conversations. However, the purpose remained consistent, i.e., to bring about a publicly accepted approach to the problems of development. We believed that it was critical to have an endorsement from the Village Council and other formal organizations if we were to engage broad participation in the process.

During the last two years, the focus in the village has changed from future development to an immediate crisis created by the annexation of a small farm outside the village boundaries and to a decision about investing in a new coal-fired plant for the village’s base-load energy.

Deliberative conversations about these issues have occurred at every step of the way—on the street, over the phone, on the Internet, and in self-appointed task forces, but in public meetings the discussion has rarely progressed to thoughtful consideration of our options. Commitment to work together on a problem seen as affecting everyone has developed slowly. As one person put it in an e-mail message after several community meetings, “I am concerned . . . the types of meetings we have had so far do not allow for the rigorous discussion that needs to happen to make good decisions. I think there are several key issues that need to be addressed: affordable housing and housing diversity, green-belt protection, energy implications, commercial development in new developments. How can we deal with this situation in a way that doesn’t continue to fractionalize the community?”

A more recent effort is a hopeful sign that we are beginning to learn from all our efforts. A group of villagers, many of whom had participated in one or all of these conversations (albeit with different concerns, loyalties, and problem-solving approaches) has organized to support a process that addresses the problems as an interconnected whole rather than as separate crises. This is understood as requiring creativity and imagination by the entire village if it is to succeed.

These experiences have left me with several questions with the primary one being the following: How does the organic, spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating work of disparate groups come together in a public discourse to make a difference in the life of a community?

Dorothy Battle reports on her experiences in Cincinnati, Ohio:

I have been studying the everyday political talk of people in my community. This kind of talk is organic, or natural. There are no techniques used to guide the conversations. The conversations are prompted by shared concerns amongst a group of people who gather in a range of everyday community spaces.

A recent experience manifesting organic talk was when people in my community became concerned about matters relating to education and schooling. An individual in my community contacted me, along with several other persons, concerning a newly formed education initiative. We talked amongst ourselves, and named the issue as the lack of broad community participation in setting an agenda for education and schooling. The idea was that people in our community would be invited to determine expected outcomes for the school district and hold the school board accountable for addressing those outcomes. We contacted one of the leaders of the initiative, pointed out that without broad community participation the initiative would likely not have the systemic change the initiative claimed as its mission. We had a series of meetings with the leader and his staff to figure out ways to broaden the participation. Commit-
ment and action regarding broadening the participation are reflected in the planning of what has come to be called community engagement.

The community engagement planning has become an issue in itself as well, in regards to whether the plan in its current form, if adopted by the initiative, will actually engage the community. This situation contributes to ongoing conversations in which the issues related to broad community participation in education and schooling are talked about in informal community settings.

The virtue of my embedded participation is that I am able to listen to, as well as create meaning with, people talking in real time in community settings about politics. My role as an embedded participant in organic community politics can serve to illustrate that people in their ordinary everyday lives engage in political talk, and at the same time, my work generates more questions. Some of the questions that arise from my work: How do people in their ordinary, everyday political talk discuss the choices to be made and address the tensions and trade-offs involved? What are the political narratives created by the everyday political talk of people in their communities? How does organic political talk contribute to substantive community change? When people talk politics in an organic manner, under what conditions does the talk turn to commitment and complementary action?

We continue to seek stories of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating political engagement in communities. Please share your experiences and help improve our understanding of communities and their role in making democracy work as it should.

Derek Barker is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at barker@kettering.org.

Gina Paget is a Kettering Foundation senior associate. She can be reached at paget@kettering.org.

Dorothy Battle is a Kettering Foundation associate. She can be reached at debat818@aol.com.

How does one maintain public engagement in solving common problems after a popularly driven transition to democracy succeeds? This is the challenge facing democracy in South Africa in the postapartheid era. Whereas before the first democratic election in 1994, the public was broadly mobilized and focused on changing the government, now that the transition has taken place, many ask what the proper roles of government and citizens should be in addressing the many developmental and human rights challenges facing the country. Despite early enthusiasm for government to directly solve these problems through newly created institutions, many South Africans are once again asking what role citizens must play in these matters.

The Dialogue Unit at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) has been working with communities since 2003 to identify that role and to develop the civic practices needed to fill it. The challenges are twofold. First, in areas of...
Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities

Also, the government took responsibility for developing these facilities, regulating trader activity, and providing training so that traders could develop their activities into fully matured businesses. In the facilities where IDASA has worked, these changes have broken down the existing means of regulating trader activities and created distinct interest groups that frequently clash, sometimes violently. Along one dimension, there are those well-established traders who think the number of people trading in the facility should be limited, clashing with the more recent arrivals who advocate for their right to make a living. Along another dimension, there are those who favor maintaining the traditional, community-driven, system of self-regulation because it particularly favors their interests and who resist those traders and other stakeholders that favor the more egalitarian regulation, which can be provided by government. Along a third dimension, there are trader groups that have been better able to capture government and NGO-sponsored development assistance, who in turn have attempted to monopolize it to the expense of those groups that were less successful or failed to take the initiative to benefit from it.

In the places where IDASA has been asked to help, it has consistently found a stalemate; none of the interest groups prevail and development efforts consequently stagnate. IDASA’s response has been to create dialogue spaces where people from all sides can learn to collectively name and frame their concerns, thereby moving in a direction where stakeholders can generate more cooperative local governance. One example of a reframing took place in a meeting where participants agreed that the problem was not so much conflict among cohesive interest groups, but rather lack of accountability and self-dealing among the leaders that represent the groups. The response was to organize new elections for informal trader association leaders. Another example was a meeting where trader groups complained to government officials about poor facility maintenance. By the end of the discussion, however, it was agreed that ensuring cleanliness, for example, was a collective responsibility. The group reached an agreement that government would supply cleaning supplies and the traders would organize to clean up for themselves.

IDASA has also been asked to provide support in rural parts of the country that are seriously underdeveloped. A feature of many of these areas is not just competition over external resources, but also underuse of resources that the communities have at their disposal. This has partially been the result of overavailability of government grants, which are easier to spend on consumption than to invest, but it has also been caused by missing links in the economy that prevent people from being able to sell the goods or services they produce.

In these settings, IDASA has trained community leaders to facilitate their own deliberative processes, aimed at resolving conflicts over past misuses of resources and generating interest in launching new income-generating activities. A key element of this has been developing the skills and patience, not only to start new projects, but also to collectively assess and resolve challenges to those projects as they arise, rather than simply giving up on them. One example of this was a community-generated project to raise poultry for commercial sale. After setting up the

IDASA has experimented with deliberative dialogues as a means of restoring a sense of local agency, generating new ideas for development initiatives, and helping citizens break out of the zero-sum mind-set that so often leads to conflict within communities over resources.
required infrastructure to raise chickens, the group realized that they had not fully figured out how they would get the chickens to market. Rather than abandoning the enterprise at that point, which had in the past often been the response in such situations, the group turned its focus to generating a marketing plan and identifying potential outside partners who could help them gain access to distribution networks.

Another interesting result in successful rural area projects that IDASA has run has been a subtle change in attitude towards government development assistance. In most places where IDASA starts an initiative, community groups look to government as the primary driver of development efforts in their areas. At the end of a successful project, project participants still believe that government assistance is required for development, but only to address specific infrastructural or other gaps that prevent their own initiatives from succeeding. Thus government comes to be seen as a strategic partner in development, rather than as its agent.

The accomplishments in all of these projects are made possible by a focus on creating spaces where people can learn to talk about problems without the pressure to produce solutions. Generally a dialogue is needed in communities when the solutions proposed by stakeholders fail to take account of the entire public’s interest in a problem. Thus, clearing the space of the need for solutions enables people to listen more carefully and take a fresh perspective. Yet convincing people of the need to talk about problems without immediately trying to solve them is often the most difficult step in any deliberative project. Indeed IDASA has found that this is not only an approach it must advocate, but a skill that its projects must teach. The core message of its work is that development is not signified by material goods, but rather in a community’s improved capacity to respond to increasingly difficult public and private challenges. Material progress is simply a result of that deeper development of civic capacity.

Teddy Nemeroff is with IDASA Kutlwanong Democracy Centre. He can be reached at tednemeroff@hotmail.com.

When I went to Michigan State University (MSU), a land-grant institution, I was told its history: In 1855, farmers in Michigan went to the state legislature and demanded they be given access to the resources of higher education that were available to elites through the University of Michigan (UofM). They wanted a focus on agriculture and wanted to learn what they needed to develop and run their own communities. The legislature told the farmers if they could find the land within 10 miles of the capital, they could have their university. A farmer donated the land—mostly swamp—and Michigan State was born with a four-year curriculum and a degree program to rival that of UofM. (Of course some say it was the largest wetland devastation in the

---

Community Change and Action Research:

The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension

By Alice Diebel
state's history, but I digress.) Agriculture colleges such as Michigan's became prototypes for the land-grant university system, which began during Abraham Lincoln's administration with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862.

The land-grant system led to the creation of the cooperative extension program—the university's outreach to communities, sharing knowledge, research, and expertise to address local needs. It is easy to romanticize any historical account, but there is ample evidence to suggest that the land-grant system and its cooperative extension programs were developed not just to improve agricultural productivity, but also to improve community life by encouraging local networks and creating viable, cooperative communities. This kind of relationship between academic institutions and communities truly reflects a democratic purpose for higher education. (Scott Peters has written extensively on the democratic and civic history of cooperative extension for the foundation.)

One of the key links communities had to universities in rural areas of the United States was through the services of cooperative extension. Since 1914, the federal government has contributed significant funding for this program so that it can operate in over 3,100 counties across the country. Cooperative extension focused on rural communities, providing knowledge for problem solving and research to improve agriculture. While "extending knowledge and research" is still needed for some technical issues, the problems communities face in today's world need a different approach. Passing information down is insufficient.

Despite its important roots, cooperative extension has changed over time, mirroring the trends of most contemporary institutions—a trend that has moved away from this democratic purpose. This trend has also made it much more difficult for citizens to be active participants in shaping the outreach and cooperative extension work of universities. Like businesses, academic institutions recognize they have a customer to serve and thus work to create products they think customers need. However, this "service," or "expert," approach puts citizens on the receiving end, with not only a limited voice over what they receive, but with fewer opportunities to shape their own futures the way those Michigan farmers did. The customer-service stance actually inhibits the local expression of needs and leads institutional actors to perceive citizens as apathetic, as "blocking progress," or as "complaining." The way customers gain control over their lives and futures is by using their feet—by not participating.

Kettering has long recognized this problem of institutions standing in the way of citizen capacity for self-rule rather than finding ways to build capacity. In particular, the academy tends to provide its expertise without recognizing the expertise that citizens can bring to solving real problems. Thus, when the academic, land-grant institutions try to solve problems through research and the extension of that research to the public, the results are often not what citizens need or want.

In response to this situation, Kettering seeks experiments where institutions are more aligned with democratic practices, or self-rule, just as cooperative extension was originally designed to do. In a new expression of this effort, Kettering sees great potential in revitalizing the democratic mission of cooperative extension as a recovery of its roots, and because of its wide reach.

In today's world, communities can find a wealth of good, scientific information on the Internet, but they find less help on how to deal with public disagreements about land use, economic downturns, immigration challenges, and the like. These problems have implications for the kind of extension resources communities need and the receptiveness of extension to citizen input to the issues. To address them, communities require a public that is able to act collectively to name its problems and commit its resources to addressing them together, as public problems.

Kettering's research asks, how can cooperative extension be an effective resource for solving the problems communities face in today's world? What will it take for institutions, such as those in the land-grant system, to return to their democratic roots?

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation shares Kettering's concern about the direction of land-grant universities. In the late 1990s, Kellogg published a significant report, Returning to Our Roots, on the future of the land-grant universities. Kellogg felt there was a need for public universities to renew their partnerships with the public. They especially saw the need for land-grant universities to engage in communities through cooperative extension.

In response to this shared concern, Kellogg and Kettering are creating a new research-oriented partnership, which

Kellogg and Kettering are creating a new research-oriented partnership, which will focus on rebuilding the democratic roots of cooperative extension through the land-grant system.

Community Change and Action Research
We have learned that significant, meaningful change can occur when practitioners reflect on their work both with the communities they work in and with practitioners who do similar work. Institutional change occurs when the work is viewed in the coin of the realm: in the case of the academy, research; and in the case of this initiative, action research intended to create change.

A first step in this research initiative has been work recently conducted by Michigan State University under the leadership of Frank Fear, Senior Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR).

ANR has decided that rather than take unsolicited research to the community, it would make its resources available at the community’s request “to work on complex and controversial ANR issues—at the local, regional, and statewide levels.” ANR recognizes that simply extending its own self-initiated research and information is not useful for citizens who face community challenges or public problems. And now the issues are coming. These are issues that require a blend of community judgment about what should be done and ANR research in response about what could be done.

When dealing with should, controversy can erupt and communities need a different kind of approach by extension to help the community work through its differences and identify the partners and resources to get there. MSU is one partner among many, as reflected in the following story.

Grand Haven, Michigan, is a community on the coast of Lake Michigan. It is rich with natural resources: relatively low population, lots of fresh water, wildlife, and undeveloped land. It also has a large deer population. Like the public, the deer appreciate Grand Haven’s resources, and their numbers have grown to the extent that many consider the deer a nuisance. These people want to see all the deer killed, while others in the community moved to Grand Haven because of the wildlife and actually feed the deer.

The city council had considered creating deer management plans, which were developed and presented by experts at great expense to the community. But the council, at the urging of the assistant city manager, decided to try a deliberative approach. They created an advisory council involving citizens, government and community agencies, and university wildlife experts.

A long-time National Issues Forums leader from cooperative extension, Jan Hartough, and MSU’s Frank Fear worked in Grand Haven to build a deliberative approach to this community conflict. The deliberation was difficult and took many meetings, but the advisory council was able to name the problem and frame approaches to deal with it. As we see in so many deliberative approaches, the citizens came to realize that the issue was less about deer management and more about carving out a course of action that reflected the shared sense of the kind of community Grand Haven wanted to be. They essentially renamed the problem. The committee’s final plan was accepted by the entire city council.

The assistant city manager knew she was taking a risk by advocating for a citizen-focused approach, but in the end, she was glad she stood with the citizens. A plan by experts would not have resolved the differences in the public’s judgment about the kind of community the citizens want to have. She asked cooperative extension for help on a specific problem, and the response by extension was tailored to the situation.

Kellogg and Kettering are embarking on this initiative, which will involve many land-grant institutions and their cooperative extension programs, to explore the possibilities of renewing the approach that was so successful in the early days of the land-grant universities. The approach being used in this collaboration has real promise by building practitioner and community capacity for collective problem solving, by building a learning environment for future experiments, and by building a body of knowledge that is recognized by the university as scholarship. In the end, it is democracy that wins.

Alice Diebel is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at diebel@kettering.org.
What’s Changed?

Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?

“*I believe that the community’s duty to education is, therefore, its paramount moral duty.*”

—John Dewey

Twenty-five years ago, U.S. citizens lamented over the findings of the President’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Education, “A rising tide of mediocrity” was eroding our educational system. The title of this report, *A Nation at Risk*, sounded the alarm. Change in education was a matter of urgency. This 1983 report was the impetus for a variety of education reform strategies and a stream of federal legislation. The most current legislation is No Child Left Behind.

Greg Toppo, in a recent *USA Today* article, “Nation at Risk: Best Thing or Worst
What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?

Thing for Schools,” listed five key recommendations. Only one recommendation mentioned citizens. In the recommendation for leadership/fiscal support, Toppo pointed out, “Citizens should hold educators and elected officials responsible for leadership and fiscal support to drive reform.” Certainly unintentional, this recommendation may have relegated citizens to a backseat in the drive for education reform. I wonder if this Nation at Risk recommendation undergirded a shift in thinking about the public’s role and responsibility for education. Further, does this report imply that democracy, as well, is at risk?

Citizen teachers emerge who do not think of themselves as teachers or educators but who care about youth and community.

Many citizens felt frustrated with schools and they no longer believed they could make a difference or change education. As the report recommended, they pressured political leaders and educators to “do something” to improve education. Schools pushed back, and adversarial relationships deepened between schools and the public. Education became a political battlefield of blame and shame.

For three decades, I worked and observed ups and downs, successes and missteps in public education. Most of my time in education was spent on the firing line working inside urban and suburban school systems. I was a teacher, facilitated staff development and educational reform workshops for teachers and administrators, developed curriculum and instructional strategies, and became a school principal. In every position it was my responsibility to consult and involve parents, as well as, “answer to them.” I believed these were their schools and their children.

Later, as assistant superintendent, I provided leadership for all elementary schools in an urban district. Here citizens spoke with their feet and with their vote. Flight from public schools and failed bond levies increased. Partisan politics, rhetoric, harsh media stories and territorial battles prevailed. Public education, in crisis, was caught between the demands of a powerful mayor, a “stand her ground” superintendent, intervening city council members, outspoken angry parents, a hard-nosed judge monitoring court-ordered desegregation, and frustrated business and influential community leaders. School board members, who were perceived as concerned more with their personal political agendas, failed to achieve a policy level necessary to meet educational goals crucial for students’ achievement and community aspirations. Therefore the district was defensive and constantly reacting. The “colorful twists and spins” portrayed in the media may have been the most challenging and damaging. The public felt betrayed and its trust in the schools vanished. The media’s focus on the “sensational” news rarely reflected a balanced perspective. Nationally, this media practice and disconcerting actions by schools further aggravated the public’s loss of trust. This was true in district after district, just as, state and mayoral school takeovers became commonplace.

Was the public’s voice silenced as elected officials became the decision makers for school districts? Community and parental ownership for public education is ancient, not new. Public ownership and responsibility of education is at the heart of our democracy.

Nationally, charter schools, home schooling, and other alternatives grew in opposition to public schools. At the same time, even in the face of disappointment with the performance of schools and educators, communities created Public Education Funds to provide finance programs that weren’t funded by school budgets. Businesses, often in response to tax abatement requirements formed separate school and business partnership organizations to fund local school and teacher projects. Although parents, citizens, and the public were engaged in these efforts, providing funding, resources and in-kind services, they still felt isolated from the education process and that they could not make a difference.

Has something changed? Is there a new venue in which parents and community can “educate” young people and make a difference? Is there a viable strategy whereby community can restore, public ownership and responsibility for education, a core principle of democracy? Is democracy at risk?

In our research we found, in many communities, leaders and advocates for youth education had grown tired of the hassle with the bureaucracy in schools and found youth development to be the vehicle they could use to make a difference. With this, education working in communities moved beyond the limitations of being “just” a funding source and offering alternatives to poorly performing schools to broadening their position and building youth-development programs. This seems to expand the landscape for community education. Citizen teachers emerge who do not think of themselves as teachers or educators but who care about youth and community.
Numerous pioneering youth-development efforts across the United States led by individuals, organizations, communities, and institutions are breaking new ground in educating youth. We notice the focus on youth development, rather than an emphasis on “schooling,” schools, or even education, has many benefits. The concern for youth seems to be a unifying theme while talk about school evokes an emotional response that can lead to solution wars and polarization.

Does an emphasis on youth development bring communities together? When “educating” in the community do citizens feel less burdened by bureaucracy and more able to contribute and make a difference? Does the public feel a greater sense of urgency and ownership beyond the boundaries of school? Does a focus on youth development result in powerful community building and the development of new relationships across racial and economic barriers? Who are the others we can engage to explore these and other questions?

We are attempting to identify “the Village” of citizen teachers, individuals, institutions, organizations, and communities focused on the growth, development, education, and well-being of youth in their communities. We want to know to what extent there is a relationship between community development and youth development. Can we map the landscape of “education in the community” through listening to citizen educators’ stories and experiences to better understand who they are, what they do, why they do it, and what they are learning?

Readers are invited to share comments, recommendations, names of individuals, organizations, communities, and institutions with experiences and stories relevant to this research. Please feel free to distribute this commentary to others with similar interests and programs and contact us.

Patricia Moore Harbour is a Kettering Foundation associate-in-residence. She can be reached at patharbour@harbourgroup.org.
For citizens, communities are purposeful civic relationships. They are formed to achieve basic goals: protection from threats to security, economic prosperity, and the education of future generations in the norms and skills essential to their survival. These relationships are and have always been what constitutes a “community.” Maintaining these relationships maintains the community. If people aren’t associated or assembled for these purposes, there is no community.

What follows from this basic idea is that a community is an educator. Schools are institutions created to support the community in that endeavor. However, the prevailing way of thinking treats a community as merely a source of support for schools, which is why Kettering has had difficulty over the years in trying to move the topic of conversation from schools to education. Last November, we convened a small workshop that was different in that schools did not become the magnet to which all thoughts were drawn. They were acknowledged, but merely so. Our guests were community organizers whose interests lay elsewhere. These were people and places harnessing locally available resources for educational purposes.

Our guests spoke to us about how those who don’t work in the schools can take responsibility for education. We were pleased to host community members from Albion, Michigan, Georgetown, Kentucky, and St. Louis Park, Minnesota, along with a group of scholars and retired superintendents. What distinguished this group was the democratic nature of their efforts, apparently diffuse leadership, and the work conducted as a way of life, rather than as a project.

We asked our guests how their communities came to emphasize education over schools; what made people move from concern to complementary, broad-range public acting; and how concerned citizens learn from their work together. We also wanted to better understand the ways school-to-public engagement can be aligned to relate to the work of citizen-to-citizen engagement. We found something worth studying in their stories of educational work as shared community endeavor.
Kettering looks to uncover the critical moments in stories of community action from thick descriptions of how large groups develop a consciousness about goals and plans to act. We have learned that there are moments or phases in a process when democratic practice either builds, or is halted, as when local institutions take over at the implementation phase. The danger at such moments is that if there is nothing for citizens to do, the work that builds community ends. Each group at our meeting noted experiencing these moments, but pressed on to enlarge their work, always seeking to make it more democratic. One of our visitors told us that they “put their resources on the table and back away” to allow shared decision making. These groups continue to work through the tensions between civic missions, egos, and scarce resources by reminding themselves of their shared concerns, their larger purposes.

The insight that all of the community needs to be involved as educators led St. Louis Park to adopt a community covenant to put children first. For residents like Bridget Gothberg, that meant every decision would be filtered through the question, what is best for the young members of the community? Once the community decided to make itself the best place to raise a child, it moved away from a project mentality to a prevailing way of life. It’s a cultural shift that became the learned lesson of “How we do things here.” Leaders have come and gone without the work ending. New people accept the premise and add to it. Outcomes are generalized; solution wars are averted. St. Louis Park is a place that is working not to do something different, but rather to do the usual things differently.

When a school cook of 30 years accepted that lens, she began to see a role for herself beyond that of feeding many children in a short time frame. The “Children First” premise changed how she reacted when she noticed a harried young girl who had missed lunch. “Slow down, honey, I’ll fix you something to eat,” she told the youngster. Her kind attitude prompted tears and a hug from the child, who confided that she had never before been called “honey.” The cook’s caring attitude may have made a significant difference in that child’s academic life.

Our Kentucky educators told us that connecting young people with the real life of community is key to helping them find their place in the world. For them, scientific inquiry emerges in response to the need to solve problems born of a sense of place. So we were told that the restoration of the American chestnut tree, the blossoms of which once made the local mountains appear snow covered, motivates a grandparent group called “Kids, Codgers and Crones” in shared educational work. The old folk will not see the trees thrive in their lifetime, but the young people will carry the passion for the chestnut forward along with the recognition of a context for what they learn in classrooms.

When citizens educate, it is rooted in what they know and the problems they confront. Georgetown, Kentucky, has retired racehorses needing attention and care that have inspired responsibility from formerly withdrawn kids. Another local resource for educating is the bluegrass music found everywhere. Having learned to fiddle by being surrounded by fiddlers, 18-year-old Chloe Roberts organized a bluegrass camp for kids in a distant corner of the state. She says “The elders teach us that there is life beyond school, that there is a community to belong to. Now it is my job to pass what I’ve learned along to others.”
Like the backward-looking Sankofa bird, Bruce Mundy believes kids need to know where they come from to find where they’re going. Housing projects in north Lexington, his organization got young people hacking away at the 10-foot weeds around an old cemetery. They found the gravesites of native African poets and Kentucky Derby winners, researched those names, and got the (now pristine) site on the National Register of Historic Places. “Scuse me while I teach history!” he joked. Like the backward-looking Sankofa bird, Mundy believes kids need to know where they come from to find where they’re going. Painted trashcans share the history learned with the larger community; sculptures are formed from junk bicycles. Whatever they have, they use. “We do a lot of stuff. We love our kids; we have to.”

The third community group, “Albion’s Promise” in Albion, Michigan, was described as a “great experiment” in the politics of cultural change. “It’s not rocket science,” said Kevin Brown, “it’s harder.” Relationship building takes time, commitment, a willingness to allow others to take credit, allowing multiple pathways, drawing from the deepest well of community, and recognizing the unrecognized. When the initiative asked young people with whom they would want to share news of an accomplishment, they heard the same convenience store clerk listed by many. The result may have come as a revelation, but the clerk is a caring and consistent presence in those young lives. Once

job to pass what I’ve learned along to others.” The job of educating that connects kids to community can span generations.

Resources of urban communities differ, but the challenge of motivating kids does not. Bruce Mundy of the health department in Lexington, Kentucky, said, “I’ve got kids who can’t read. To me, that is a crisis.” There being a lot of trash around resources, urban communities differ, but the challenge of motivating kids does not. Bruce Mundy of the health department in Lexington, Kentucky, said, “I’ve got kids who can’t read. To me, that is a crisis.” There being a lot of trash around housing projects in north Lexington, his organization got young people hacking away at the 10-foot weeds around an old cemetery. They found the gravesites of native African poets and Kentucky Derby winners, researched those names, and got the (now pristine) site on the National Register of Historic Places. “Scuse me while I teach history!” he joked. Like the backward-looking Sankofa bird, Mundy believes kids need to know where they come from to find where they’re going. Painted trashcans share the history learned with the larger community; sculptures are formed from junk bicycles. Whatever they have, they use. “We do a lot of stuff. We love our kids; we have to.”

The third community group, “Albion’s Promise” in Albion, Michigan, was described as a “great experiment” in the politics of cultural change. “It’s not rocket science,” said Kevin Brown, “it’s harder.” Relationship building takes time, commitment, a willingness to allow others to take credit, allowing multiple pathways, drawing from the deepest well of community, and recognizing the unrecognized. When the initiative asked young people with whom they would want to share news of an accomplishment, they heard the same convenience store clerk listed by many. The result may have come as a revelation, but the clerk is a caring and consistent presence in those young lives. Once
Self-Organizing and Community Politics

By Phil Stewart

Over the past 25 years, the Kettering Foundation has identified six practices that enable citizens to gain a significant measure of control over their lives. Because they have this benefit, they are called six democratic practices. In shorthand, these practices include "framing" approaches and alternatives in ways that enable citizens to recognize the tensions among things held valuable that must be resolved to enable community action, and making choices through "public deliberation," which enables citizens, through listening to diverse perspectives, to work through the inherent tensions in serious issues and come to some form of public judgment. Once a community comes to judgment regarding a course of action, citizens make "covenants" with each other, most often informal and tacit, but sometimes formal and explicit, regarding actions to be taken, singly or collectively. These covenants lead to "mutually complementary public acting" on the collectively agreed change or course of action. In the final step of this "citizens political process," citizens "learn" from their experience, and the cycle begins again.

All well and good as a model, but when citizens go into their own communities trying either to observe or to implement these citizen-based democratic practices they often encounter two fundamental problems. When they seek to observe real communities in action, only bits and pieces of this process as described often are visible, and most often only the formal, institutional components. Or, one may observe some elements of the process, such as some efforts at public deliberation, but little action or learning. Even more fundamentally, when citizens seek to re-create a citizens democratic process in their own communities they often find that while they know well the "elements" of this process, both they and Kettering lack a deep understanding of the conditions under which democratic practices arise and flourish. Why is this so, and what directions might new research take to address these concerns?

Recent studies of highly complex systems provide a fruitful way to think about the conditions needed for citizens to do the work that only citizens can do. Physicists, mathematicians, and economists have found that some complex systems tend to be highly self-organizing, an unexpected yet highly significant characteristic. The concept of self-organizing systems of interactions may open the way for deeper understanding of the conditions that make citizens democratic practices possible. Indeed, these insights may inform research into why some communities on the Gulf Coast, when abandoned by all levels of government following Katrina, nevertheless, organized themselves to bring about their own recovery.

Similarly, our Russian colleagues, led by professors Ekaterina Lukianova and Svetlana Chernikova of St. Petersburg University, are using insights on self-organizing to understand how remote villages in the far north of Russia, following the collapse of Soviet power in the early 1990s, apparently without any central direction or oversight, self-organized themselves along traditional, pre-Soviet and old Russian social and political lines. While our collaborators and we are at the very early stages of research, we hope to stimulate discourse and dialogue that may enrich this effort. We do this by laying out what scientists are beginning to identify as the core characteristics of self-organizing systems and by suggesting some implications these could have for democratic politics.

At the heart of self-organizing systems are networks of interaction. Networks are informal, nonstructured, and nonhierarchical. An example might be a small group of citizens in the barbershop discussing what to do about the pollutants showing up in their well water. Across town, a totally separate group deliberates over coffee on other aspects of the same issue. No one has called them together.

What pushes citizens to engage in these conversations and in other aspects of citizens politics? It is almost never extrinsic rewards, such as money, nor is it the threat of coercion. Rather, the motivation for the formation and participation in networks is intrinsic, based on self-interest and the need for social contact all humans share. Organic politics takes shape, probably everywhere, because that is the most basic way human beings address collective needs.

There is no leader, no global controller, yet there often are multiple, overlapping connections among the multitude of informal networks that make up the community. Connections are formed among and across networks as a result of the forces of competition and collaboration, resulting in the constant negotiation of relationships. And, as various networks of citizens continue their conversations, a shared sense of purpose may arise, though there would almost never be a formal statement of goals or mission. Rather, common perspectives take shape, though they are continuously subject to change. So, then, how does one find...
the "community leaders" through whom to "organize" the community? The theory of self-organizing suggests the notion of what Kettering long ago called "leaderful"

they are vital agents in enabling organic politics.

At the intersection between organic and institutional politics, organizations, *hierarchical organizations*, may tend to form. But, these often tend to be *crosscutting*, with many levels and sorts of weblike interactions and channels of communication. The most influential organizations in citizens politics often will not be formal, nor will they be highly visible. Rather, they tend to be those informal networks, with changing and overlapping "membership." Indeed, when citizen-based networks turn themselves into formal entities, they often tend to lose their roots among citizens in the heat of internal organizational demands for fundraising and the need to demonstrate "accountability" more to sources of funds than to the citizens in whose name and interest they formed in the first place.

Self-organizing systems, on the other hand, retain their vitality through "continual adaptation." The lack of formal structures, missions, and obligations means that behaviors, actions, strategies, and processes can be revised continuously as a result of ongoing citizen interaction. The self-organizing system of politics continuously adapts to changing stimuli, needs, and opportunities.

Citizens in self-organizing systems are not, however, so changing and formless as to be unable to act. Rather, through continual, multilayered, weblike interactions, focused around issues of common concern, citizens appear to develop an implicit obligation to assist others, which can be called a covenantal reciprocity. This, in turn, may be related to the desire to assure oneself the benefits of getting assistance. Mutual reciprocity, mutual implicit undertakings appear to be a key to action in organic politics.

One may be tempted to say, democratic citizens politics, organic politics is too complex to understand, let alone attempt to create. Give me the "simplicity" of institutional politics. At least then I know who the actors are, as well as the rules of the game! Yet, there is hope that these suggestive insights about the nature of self-organizing communities, drawn from the hard sciences, may enable us to better understand how some communities react when abandoned by all official institutions following, for example, Hurricane Katrina, or as in the case of many small communities in the north of Russia left totally to fend for themselves after the fall of communism. Because in some communities self-organizing did arise and did bring to bear complex underlying networks of relationships and ways of acting and thus created a new capacity for restoration of not only the physical community but also the soul of the community. Such is the challenge as we set out on this new research path.

*Phil Stewart is a Kettering Foundation associate. He can be reached at philstewart16@hotmail.com.*
Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?

By Bob McKenzie

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life (formerly the Alabama Center for Civic Life) began work in 2007 to connect a number of community research initiatives in regard to educational resources and economic development issues. This report concerns the way in which these research efforts were combined. Community forums have been integral to these efforts. A first lesson about this sort of work is that it takes time.

One base for the effort was preexisting work with the Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB). In 1999, SGPB officers met with Kettering Foundation staff to explore application of deliberative forums to their work. The pilot project was framing an issue book, Pathways for Prosperity. Following that first effort, each year SGPB has framed a regional issue, focusing on a theme. That annual theme is selected by the state governor serving as that year’s chair. Each year more and more communities have conducted forums and results have been the basis of SGPB’s annual reports at its yearly meetings.

In 2005, Governor Bob Riley of Alabama was SGPB chair, and he selected Rural Prosperity as the annual emphasis. The Alabama Center for Civic Life (ACCL) had just been formed as a 501(c)(3) for the purpose of developing infrastructure and habits of deliberative decision making in the state. ACCL representatives met with the governor’s chief of staff to offer aid in developing as many community forums as possible in the host state. They then met with the head of the Alabama Economic and Community Development Agency to arrange for a state report (in addition to forwarding forum results to SGPB for inclusion in its report).

ACCL turned to former partners to develop the forums. The Economic Development Institute (EDI) at Auburn University was already engaged in Kettering Foundation research in a rural Black Belt community on that community’s awareness of its capacities to develop economically. EDI director, Joe Sumners, helped organize and moderate forums. Both EDI and ACCL worked with the several councils of government regional Planning and development agencies and with the Auburn Center for Arts and Humanities (CAH) to arrange forum sites. In early 2005, fifteen forums were conducted, involving approximately 430 citizens all across the state. The state report of findings was distributed at the SGPB annual meeting in June.

In the meantime, ACCL was working with CAH on two projects. One involved a core of public librarians and community partners to field test distance-learning support modules to enhance understanding of deliberative practices. These modules were being developed by Ed Florey, Chip Cooper, and Rick Dowling. The networking of public libraries as sites for community decision making was a sought-for byproduct. The other involved intensive work in Anniston to test whether developing community histories of schools would enhance contemporary community support of its educational resources.

As these projects were developing, ACCL was also briefing the directors, staff, and chairs of the governor’s Black Belt Action Commission about the application of community forums to its work. ACCL staff met with several of the committees of the commission. In May 2005, the ACCL president conducted a forum in Selma for the committees on education and health with citizens from all across the Black Belt. This forum was organized by the Black Belt Community Foundation.

The ACCL experiences with these projects led to an ACCL proposal to the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) to develop an issue book for community use. ACCL wanted to develop “a national issue of local application.” In other words, the issue book would not be one that asked for citizen “input” on a national policy issue. It would be directed at decisions each local community must make in regard to its educational resources for economic and workforce development, not just its schools.

Developing an NIF issue book involved several meetings at the Kettering Foundation with other entities, framing issues of local concern. The effort was supported by focus group research conducted by Doble and Associates in Birmingham, Pittsburgh, and Silicon
Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs

Valley. In addition, ACCL also contracted with an independent researcher to conduct supporting research in Alabama. Lawrence B. Durham interviewed 27 business persons and economic and workforce development professionals in Alabama. The object of this supporting research was to help construct an Alabama version of the NIF issue book for use with the emerging networks of public librarians and councils of government.

ACCL hired a researcher/writer for the issue book. Elizabeth Renicks conducted personal research and worked closely with Doble and Associates and Durham to develop data and illustrations for the issue book. She also solicited pertinent community illustrations from the NIF network.

An interesting part of the story is the way in which the focus of the issue book evolved. The original target of this effort was the subject of workforce development. That focus evolved as the research proceeded.

Coincidentally, SGPB’s annual issue for 2007 was on workforce development. The SGPB framing was the starting point for research. The SGPB issue map sketched three possible approaches.

1. Focus on educational achievement.
2. Focus on serving industry.
3. Focus on workforce traits.

As the ACCL research proceeded, the focus shifted from workforce development (more a professional expression) to preparing today’s kids for tomorrow’s jobs (a more public expression). The ACCL research and framing sought to break potential discussion out of a concentration on schools alone. Initially, ACCL developed four possible approaches. They were:

1. Focus on a firm foundation.
2. Focus on academic competition.
3. Focus on community first.
4. Focus on creativity.

In developing the issue book for NIF, the fourth possible approach was folded into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the other three approaches. This method of handling a valid fourth perspective is often used in issue book design. Three-approach issue books can be more easily conducted in the time most commonly available for a single forum.

The issue book is titled Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do? and is now available through NIF.

Test forums were conducted in Alabama in the fall of 2007, using an adapted Alabama version that included the original four approaches. These forums were conducted in Anniston, Collinsville, and Chatom. Each used as convenors the public librarians recruited by CAH as a pilot group for testing of the distance-learning support modules. Each forum sparked additional interest in community forums as a means of engaging citizens on local education and other community issues.

A second lesson for this sort of work is that it takes networking. Now that the NIF issue book is available with a starter video and a moderator’s guide, ACCL (now the Mathews Center (MC) and CAH (now the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for Arts and Humanities (CMD CAH)) will cooperatively develop a series of forums next fall and spring in five pilot communities. These communities will use the issue book and closely related NIF issue books on What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools? and Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? These issue books all relate to how a community applies its total educational resources to developing its economic potential. These communities will also use the SGPB issue for 2009, the focus of which is yet to be announced.

The umbrella for this pilot project will be an MC program entitled Alabama Issues Forums (AIF). AIF will be built community by community; that is, each community will be encouraged to develop its own issues forums identity. For example, AIF can include Anniston Community Forums, Chatom Community Forums, Collinsville Community Forums, Elba Community Forums, and Prattville Community Forums.

Each pilot community will have a convenor/organizer already committed. These convenor/organizers include public librarians, a community foundation executive, a pastor, and a cooperative extension agent. Each will recruit a shadow moderator for initial forums. MC and CMD CAH staff will serve initially as moderators supported by graduate assistants affiliated with CMD CAH.

The shadow moderators will move into moderator roles as they gain understanding, skill, and confidence. MC and CMD CAH will equip graduate assistants, student interns (from both Auburn University and the University of Alabama), and other interested citizens from the participating communities to serve as recorders and reporters for community forums.

MC and CMD CAH will jointly conduct at American Village in Montevallo a workshop of convenor/organizers, shadow moderators, recorders, and reporters. This workshop will be conducted under the concept and title of Coaching Community Innovation (CCI). It will stress understanding and skill in interrelated democratic practices, not just moderating. Attendees may include persons from other than the pilot communities. The on-site CCI work will be augmented with distance-learning support modules developed by MC. MC and CMD CAH will work together to produce a public report of the...
How can people organize themselves to deal with public challenges? Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and violence are the kinds of wicked problems we all recognize, but often feel helpless to act upon. “Intermediary” community-based organizations—organizations that span the gap between formal institutions and the citizens they serve—have historically been a vehicle through which citizens can begin to address the types of challenges that can’t be solved by institutions alone. Do these boundary-spanning organizations recognize the roles they play in allowing the public to do its work? How do they understand the roles of citizens in public life? How do they practice meaningful public engagement?

The Organization-First Approach: How Intermediary Organizations Approach Civic Engagement and Communities (John A. Creighton and Richard C. Harwood); The Contagion of Inwardness (Richard C. Harwood)

By Connie Crockett

1 The Alabama Center for Civic Life was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 2005. The center was renamed the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in January 2008.
2 The EDI research has resulted in a series of reports, summarized in “Building Community in Smalltown” (2007).
3 In 2007, this center was renamed the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for Arts and Humanities. It is the outreach division for the Auburn University College of Liberal Arts.
4 Public issues related to education and schools are difficult to frame. A dominant tendency is to look only at schools, not overall community educational resources. Over the years, the NIF network has made use of several issue books: Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We Up to the Job? (1990), Education: How Do We Get the Results We Want? (1992), Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard (1994), Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade? (1999), What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools? (2007), and Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? (2007).
5 For further information on American Village, consult www.americanvillage.org.
Kettering contracted research with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to learn the answers. A 2-year period of conversation with and observance of 10 intermediary public and civic-spirited organizations of varying scope allowed our associates time to know that world and find out how people within it describe their relationship with the public. The time invested in the observation/discussion phase of our research together gave Kettering and Harwood staff the opportunity to interrogate what was being learned and to reframe our questions as might be necessary in light of that knowledge. Follow-up interviews with organizations enabled us to understand their thoughts and to reframe our questions as might be necessary in light of that knowledge. Follow-up interviews with organizations

We learned that engaging the public is a secondary mission even among organizations whose committed mission is to public service. Does that come as a surprise? Consider the competitive arena of philanthropic service work. Scarce resources and overlap among thousands of intermediary organizations means that while the work may be noble, organizational survivability must take priority. Funders demand accountability in short-term funding cycles. Evaluations often favor the quantitative over the qualitative. One is reminded of the profession of nursing—still motivated by caring, too often reduced to harried list checking. The organizations interviewed for this research find themselves facing similarly tough demands. Engaging the public takes time and energy, thus organizational focus narrows inward.

Kettering wondered what would happen if these organizations looked at their relationship with the public as a dynamic rather than a static system. Could learning with the public become more than a static system.

Harwood and Creighton note that despite having higher aspirations, organizational leaders feel caught in counterproductive cycles that rarely help build the capacity of the local community to organize and act. Program implementation, service delivery, and representing constituencies must always come first.

We learned that engaging the public is a secondary mission even among organizations whose committed mission is to public service. Does that come as a surprise? Consider the competitive arena of philanthropic service work. Scarce resources and overlap among thousands of intermediary organizations means that while the work may be noble, organizational survivability must take priority. Funders demand accountability in short-term funding cycles. Evaluations often favor the quantitative over the qualitative. One is reminded of the profession of nursing—still motivated by caring, too often reduced to harried list checking. The organizations interviewed for this research find themselves facing similarly tough demands. Engaging the public takes time and energy, thus organizational focus narrows inward.

Kettering wondered what would happen if these organizations looked at their relationship with the public as a dynamic rather than a static system. Could learning with the public become more than a static system.

Harwood and Creighton note that despite having higher aspirations, organizational leaders feel caught in counterproductive cycles that rarely help build the capacity of the local community to organize and act. Program implementation, service delivery, and representing constituencies must always come first.

The public is not served when intermediary organizations lose relevance and intention when they shorten or bypass public engagement. It’s akin to newspapers that constantly redesign the front page in an effort to connect with or please “consumers” but miss understanding why many people no longer buy their product. Strengthening the civic life of communities requires hard, painstaking work done with patience in long-term practice, but many organizations, such as the Southern Growth Policies Board and the Foundation for the Mid-South have found it to be profoundly worth the effort. The Harwood research points to a trend in the other direction.

The public is not served when intermediary organizations lose relevance and intention when they shorten or bypass public engagement. It’s akin to newspapers that constantly redesign the front page in an effort to connect with or please “consumers” but miss understanding why many people no longer buy their product. Strengthening the civic life of communities requires hard, painstaking work done with patience in long-term practice, but many organizations, such as the Southern Growth Policies Board and the Foundation for the Mid-South have found it to be profoundly worth the effort. The Harwood research points to a trend in the other direction.

To obtain a copy of either of these reports, please contact Connie Crockett via crockett@kettering.org.
Over the last eight years, the United States has been buffeted by a series of high-profile attacks and natural disasters: the September 11, 2001, attacks, the subsequent Anthrax scare, and the devastation of many Gulf Coast communities by Hurricane Katrina. There has also been the threat of a global pandemic, such as an avian flu or SARS outbreak, and the prediction that global warming will increase the incidence—and severity—of future natural disasters, both in the United States and around the world.

These threats, both realized and hypothetical, have prompted governmental and institutional responses. We have developed a Department of Homeland Security, and air travel will probably never be the same again. Research on vaccines and vaccine production has been ramped up. There have been investigations into both national and international public health protocols, and numerous congressional inquiries. Yet many Americans have faced these threats with little sense of what they can do in anticipation, besides stockpiling canned goods, bottled water, flashlights, and perhaps duct tape. And they have had even less of a sense of what they might do in collaboration with others.

From the perspective of the Kettering Foundation’s work, this poses a threat to an understanding of democracy in which people see themselves as actors who,
A March 2007 article in the journal *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism* argued that “Disasters and epidemics are immense and shocking disturbances that necessitate the moral courage, judicious action, and practical innovations of large numbers of people, not just those who serve in an official capacity.” The authors, the Working Group on Community Engagement in Health Emergency Planning, number more than two dozen and include scholars and professionals in disasters and inform redevelopment.

In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, Stephen E. Flynn, a senior fellow for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that “when it comes to managing the hazards of the twenty-first century, it is reckless to relegate the American public to the sidelines.” The most likely targets of a terrorist attack will be civilians, he writes, and “most city and state public health and emergency-management departments are not funded adequately enough for them to carry out even their routine work.”

The federal government is also recognizing a role for communities in preparedness. The Department of Homeland Security is offering workshops for faith-based, community, and other non-governmental organizations in a “strategic partnership to develop a national culture of preparedness.”

While all of these identify a role for communities or the public to play, it is not at all clear whether everyone is on the same page as to what that role is. From the institutional side, there are questions about what it means to engage communities. Are people involved in creating plans and identifying problems, or are they simply being asked to help implement plans developed by government agencies or service organizations? And from the community side, how widespread are these initiatives? How well received are they within communities? And from both perspectives, how are disagreements about what to do dealt with?

Monica Schoch-Spana, senior associate with the Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, is the chair of the Working Group on Community Engagement in Health Emergency Planning. I contacted her with some of these questions because I was struck by the way the working group described the relationship between professionals and the public in their March 2007 article:

The prevailing assumption is that a panic-stricken public, blinded by self-preservation, will constitute a secondary disaster for authorities to manage. Some emergency authorities also have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions in past and present disasters as evidence of failure on the part of responders. In reality, government leaders, public health and safety professionals, and communities at-large have complementary and mutually supporting roles to play in mass emergencies.
Schoch-Spana went on to further clarify in our interview, “Our working group wanted to articulate a different vision of the citizen role in preparedness, so it was less about individuals hunkering down with their stockpiles in the middle of a crisis and more about the active contributions they could make in advance of a crisis.” There is a “collective wisdom” in the community, she said, and while “it’s wonderful that we value volunteers’ physical contributions during the crisis . . . their mental and moral problem-solving skills remain untapped in the planning period long before and after the crisis.”

Not only will communities often be on their own in the initial aftermath of a crisis, she continued, but there are decisions that governmental and other institutional responders will have to make that will have profound impacts on a community. For instance, there are many decisions that require the input of the community to ensure policies are “feasible, socially acceptable, and fairly applied across the population.”

In the case of a pandemic flu, vaccines are often not immediately available. So there are choices to be made as to who should receive the first vaccines or who should have priority in receiving antiviral drugs. And in fact, the Centers for Disease Control have already held some public forums around the country asking people to weigh in on precisely these kinds of questions.

Another example Schoch-Spana gave concerns the suggestion that schools shut down for a significant period of time in the event of a pandemic. Because children are known for transmitting diseases, shutting down the schools is thought to make containing an outbreak easier. Yet closing schools would have economic and social consequences and put a heavier burden on some—particularly those whose work hours are inflexible and who wouldn’t be able to find alternative child care. Only the people of the community can determine what would be in their best interest by weighing the benefits of closing the schools against the challenges that this would create. And, she pointed out, different communities would probably reach different conclusions about what is best for them.

If communities have no role in the development of a plan or strategy, they may be more resistant to its implementation. Policies and plans developed by agencies and organizations unfamiliar with a community may also fail to take into account the community’s particular assets or challenges. A 2006 paper titled “Community Wildfire Events as a Source of Social Conflict” finds that the greatest conflicts often occur between community “insiders” and “outsiders” in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Community insiders are often frustrated by everything from the “evacuation process and experience” to the failure to adequately take advantage of local capabilities.

But the question of how community outsiders and insiders collaborate, or perhaps more specifically, how those charged with responding to a disaster collaborate with the people in the community affected by the disaster, can be challenging. Part of the difficulty is because our health-care system is a constellation of government agencies and private and public hospitals that don’t always collaborate with each other, much less with the public. “Right now, our health-care system is not set up to solve community-wide problems,” said Schoch-Spana. She explained:

In a local community, your hospitals are pretty much competitive economic units. They don’t really have incentives to work together to address population health problems. But in the context of something like pandemic flu, how they behave as a group is going to have a profound impact on the mental and physical well-being of the community. So there are some large-scale issues, such as if hospitals can only take in a certain amount of people . . . how are those large-scale triage decisions going to be made? And that is not just a medical decision. That really is about how one uses a community’s entire set of health-care resources to protect the health of people and the confidence of the population. We don’t have the infrastructure it takes to have those kinds of collective decisions right now because health care is considered to be the purview of technical experts. And because health care is also in the private sector, there is little way in which a city’s residents can engage with and have a conversation with the leadership of hospitals.
Many hospital administrators are recognizing that they will not have the capacity to respond to these threats alone. So some have begun to try to build coalitions with public agencies and even with community organizations. When I asked how the group’s recommendations had been met by professionals in the field, she said that by and large, health-care and emergency response professionals recognized that they need to interact differently in the public sphere. They are daunted, however, by the resources—both in financial and personnel terms—that they think would be needed to adopt the joint problem-solving approach suggested by the working group.

The idea of focusing on the health of the community or the strength of the body politic as a strategy for preparedness has a lot of resonance with other lines of the Kettering Foundation’s work.

Right now, the most common approach to engaging the community is through mass marketing. Marketing a series of policy recommendations to people raises all of the previously discussed concerns about the failure to engage them in the decision-making process. Marketing threat messages raises the more basic challenge of getting people to respond, especially given that many Americans are suffering from what Schoch-Spana called “threat-fatigue.” Some communities that regularly face natural disasters, such as the Nicasio community, which regularly confronts wild fires, may see a reason for organizing. But for many others, the threat of an emergency is either too distant or too abstract to prompt action. So some community groups have found a different way to engage communities.

Ana-Marie Jones, a member of the working group and executive director of CARD (Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters) has been working with vulnerable populations in California since the late 1980s. “They don’t respond to scare stories about how their lives are going to be torn asunder by epidemics or disasters; what she has found is there’s been more of an affinity to what she calls a prepare-to-prosper approach, which is more of a positive community development/economic development model to preparedness,” said Schoch-Spana.

The approach draws on the literature of “community resilience,” such as that by Fran Norris and colleagues. These researchers identify four factors common to communities that are best able to weather disasters and bounce back. The factors—economic robustness, a sense of collective efficacy and shared decision making, strong social ties among people, and a strong communication system within a community—would probably be included in almost any measurement of a generally “strong” or “good” community. And they suggest any number of ways that the people of a community might become engaged in not only preparing for a disaster but also improving their community’s overall health. The appeal is similar to an argument for exercise: although being fit may help you fend off an attacker, it has all sorts of other general health and social benefits as well.

The notion of community resilience also speaks to the argument that Schoch-Spana and others have made that those most devastated by a catastrophe will usually be the most socially and economically vulnerable populations. “People are more [vulnerable] or less vulnerable to the effects of disasters; social class, ethnicity and race, gender, and social connectedness are factors that often determine the extent of harm,” wrote Schoch-Spana in a 2005 piece, “Public Responses to Extreme Events: Top Five Disaster Myths.”

The idea of focusing on the health of the community or the strength of the body politic as a strategy for preparedness has a lot of resonance with other lines of the Kettering Foundation’s work. We think it holds promise for revealing more about the conditions in communities that allow people to take charge of their future. Since it is an area the foundation is just now beginning to explore, we encourage readers of this Connections to share with us what they know about other agencies and community organizations that seem to be experimenting along these lines.

To read more about the referenced research see:

- For more information on the Disaster Relief, Recovery & Redevelopment project at the Institute for Community-Based Research at Delta State University, see http://ntweb.deltastate.edu/vp_academic/green/New_ICBR_WebPages/Disaster%20Relief%20and%20Recovery.htm.
- For more information on the Nicasio Disaster Council, see http://www.nicasio.net.

Paloma Dallas is a Kettering Foundation editor. She can be reached at dallas@kettering.org.
**Books Worth Reading**

**Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy**

By Diana C. Mutz
Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006

Fostering discussion across political divisions is of great concern to those interested in promoting democracy. So, too, is stimulating political participation. In *Hearing the Other Side*, Mutz seeks to understand how these two ideas interact. In short, her research suggests that an extremely activist political culture cannot also be a heavily deliberative one.

Mutz’s work shows that there are fundamental incompatibilities between theories of participatory democracy and theories of deliberative democracy. She depicts the participatory model of democracy as promoting political action, party membership, and social movements, all of which depend on like-minded citizens finding common cause together and taking up arms against societal issues. The deliberative model, by contrast, seeks to bring people with different values, aspirations, and viewpoints together to decide what should be done about a problem and build consensus toward action.

Like-minded people can spur one another on to collective action and promote the kind of passion and enthusiasm that are central to motivating political participation. Although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they discourage political participation, particularly among those who are averse to conflict. Those with diverse networks refrain from public participation in part because of the social discomfort that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or colleagues may oppose.

Instead of suggesting that what we really need are closer, more tight-knit communities, with denser networks of mutual obligation, her findings suggest American society would benefit from a larger number of weak ties, that is, relationships that permit looser connections to be maintained on an ongoing basis. Differences of political opinion are indeed more easily maintained and more beneficially aired with one’s dentist than with a close friend or family member.

Mutz lauds the American workplace, despite the tremendous negative publicity that currently plagues it, because she believes the American workplace is actually performing an important public service simply by establishing a social context in which diverse groups of people are forced into daily interactions with one another. That interaction often involves discussions of political matters with coworkers who are not of like mind. In fact, Mutz says, “the workplace appears to be the social context in which political conversation across lines of difference most often takes place” (55).

It is important to note that Mutz’s research focuses on organic deliberation that happens naturally in the workplace or the grocery store, not the formal deliberation that occurs in organized forums, such as citizen juries or deliberative polls. Nonetheless, Mutz brings forth concerning empirical research on the ever-important topic of political action in a democracy and the increasing tension between active citizenship and diversity.

— Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson is a research assistant with the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at mjohnson@kettering.org.
Innovation: The Missing Dimension
By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore
Harvard University Press, 2006

The authors of this book are professors of economics (Lester) and management (Piore) at MIT. *Innovation* reviews their research into the practices that they see as "the real wellsprings of creativity in the U.S. economy—the capacity to integrate across organizational, intellectual, and cultural boundaries, the capacity to experiment, and the habits of thought that allow us to make sense of radically ambiguous situations and move forward in the face of uncertainty." Readers will find that while the focus is on the ways that new products and processes are developed in business environments, the insights are relevant to understanding innovation in any group environment.

The authors argue that innovation is a function of two different but interrelated processes, which they call analysis and interpretation. Analysis is based on clearly defined projects with measurable goals and clear points of closure. Interpretation is a process akin to conversation, based on conditions of ambiguity rather than focused problem solving. Open-ended and ongoing, interpretive processes identify possibilities and opportunities that can then become the subjects of analysis. While both are critical to innovation, the authors emphasize the tension between the creative emphasis on ambiguity and the rational approach to problem solving.

Our respondents clearly had trouble describing the nonanalytical dimension of the process in which they were engaged. But when they actually did characterize it in a way that seemed to fit, that activity sounded an awful lot like a conversation. And what the respondents seemed to be doing was managing that conversation. The way that new designs came to be initiated, the way that new styles emerged or trends in style were "recognized," the way that problems came to be identified and clarified to the point where a solution could be discussed was through conversations among people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives.

Communication during this conversational phase is often punctuated by misunderstandings or ambiguities; indeed, an accepted vocabulary to describe the new product may not even exist. Yet this ambiguity in the conversation is the resource out of which new ideas emerge. And something is lost if that conversation is closed off too soon.

This book is worth reading, both for the insights it provides about innovation in business environments and for what it suggests about a central interest of Kettering Foundation research: the conditions that encourage—or stifle—innovation in political practice.

—Randall Nielsen

Randall Nielsen is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at nielsen@kettering.org.
HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas explored in Connections

in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey

From the editors of the Higher Education Exchange, David W. Brown and Deborah Witte

Ten thoughtful theorists and practitioners address how higher education prepares citizens for public life, how (and why) universities engage in the larger community, and how we can rediscover the civic roots of higher education. This book of essays is a contribution to a resurgent movement bent on strengthening higher education's democratic mission and fostering a more democratic culture throughout American society.
Read excerpts and learn more about these books and other publications at www.kettering.org.

Findings from the Classroom

**Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue**

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Harriger and McMillan’s “experiment is significant because it was informed by an acute sense of the troubles facing modern democracy. . . . Students in the experiment discovered another dimension to democracy and a new role for themselves as citizens.”

—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

$15.95 Each or All Three for $40

To order these and other Kettering Foundation Press publications
Phone: 1-800-600-4060
Fax: 1-937-388-0494
E-mail: ecruffolo@ec-ruffolo.com
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

Editor
Randall Nielsen

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Design and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.