



## Can Philanthropy Strengthen Democracy? The Case of the Civil Investing Initiative

---

Presented by David Mathews

President and CEO  
The Kettering Foundation

February 1, 2002

*Waldemar A. Nielsen Issues in Philanthropy Seminar Series*  
Georgetown University

Center for Public & Nonprofit Leadership  
3240 Prospect Street, NW, Lower Level  
Washington, DC 20007  
P: (202) 687-0500 / F: (202) 687-0580  
<http://cpnl.georgetown.edu>

September 11 is significant for many reasons. One of them is that the war on terrorism, like all wars, challenges democracy. Crises put enormous pressure on representative government to make sound decisions and carry them out effectively. They test the values of democracy, as seen in the tension between security and the protection of civil liberties. And they can divert resources from domestic to international problems. Discussing the connection between philanthropy and democracy is, to say the least, appropriate at times like these.

The relationship between philanthropy and democracy goes deeper, however, than September 11. Our philanthropic institutions are a product of a particular brand of democracy that has prized benevolence, which is not charity but rather a self-interest in the well-being of others. It is no coincidence that the period in our history when self-rule was quite strong — the first half of the nineteenth century — was also an era of benevolent reforms that led to better treatment of the mentally ill, a more humane penal system, and a host of collective actions that root out the ills of society. These same concerns are now on the agendas of many of our grantmakers.

Surely foundations have an obligation to the democracy that nourishes them. Our laws make it clear that we expect them and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to act on that obligation; legislative bodies have chartered small groups of citizens to act in the larger public interest throughout history. These organizations are routinely asked to perform tasks in the interest of all. We have seen this in the recent devolution of responsibility for domestic problems from the federal to the state and community levels. Of course, some local foundations worry that too much is expected of them, but that is another issue.

### **Democracy as Self-Rule Expressed in Collective Action**

I have been asked to tell you about how some foundations are trying to meet their responsibilities more effectively by strengthening the underpinnings of democracy. Before I can do that, however, I have to

say more about how I understand democracy. After all, there are many valid meanings of such an important word. It can refer to a system of government, to a way of life and a set of political values, or to self-rule carried out through the collective action of citizens. I think of self-rule as democracy at its most basic — rule by a sovereign people. I also believe that the public, like any sovereign, has to do more than consent to the actions of its agents (its representatives in government). The public has to be able to act itself; it has to have the capacity for common work.

In my own research, I've found any number of historical illustrations of this sovereign citizenry doing what Harry Boyte and Nan Kari call "public work."<sup>1</sup> The first half of the nineteenth century is filled with examples of people joining forces to build forts, maintain roads, and organize militias. It was a time, Robert Wiebe wrote, when thousands spurred other thousands to action.<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting that the early 1800s were the good old days of democracy. Yet citizens appear to have had a sense of what they could accomplish together. They created a muscular, sweaty public through common work. Nineteenth-century Americans weren't civic saints; most probably weren't motivated by noble ideals like sacrifice for the common good. Yet, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, they had a practical appreciation for the interrelatedness of their separate concerns. Tocqueville explained this interdependence as self-interest rightly or well understood. Americans, he observed, "almost always know how to combine their own well-being" with the well-being of others. Knowing how to "combine" doesn't require people to make the

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on public work, see Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

The results of my search for the historical public will appear in a book, *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? Stories from Early Alabama*, to be published in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 71.

interests of others their own or to contribute unselfishly for the benefit of all. It just means that citizens have to see the relationship between their concerns and those of others. That was possible in early America, even though people sometimes abandoned themselves, Tocqueville notes, “to the disinterested and unreflective sparks that are natural to man.”<sup>3</sup>

Public work was typically done for and through communities. Turning frontier settlements into civilized space where a valued way of life could take hold was a major industry in these formative years. That is why, as John Dewey reminds us, “American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life.” People can experience democracy directly and personally there. Dewey goes on to argue that “unless local community life can be restored, the public cannot resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.”<sup>4</sup>

Dewey identified a central problem in modern democracy that should concern foundations: the “eclipse of the public.”<sup>5</sup> After September 11, we were all inspired by the citizens of New York, who showed us that common work is still possible — and still necessary. But that crisis response has to be seen against the backdrop of people’s uncertainty about the role of a supposedly sovereign public. After the attacks, Americans are still asking, “What can we do?” We aren’t sure about our capacity for collective action or how effective it will be apart from a crisis. This uncertainty is particularly evident among our young people. As Bill Galston writes, they are willing to volunteer for personal acts of charity (perhaps because they can see immediate results), but lack confidence in common action.<sup>6</sup> A recent survey by Robert Putnam shows we are more trusting of government and our neighbors since

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 359, 501-2.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), pp. 111, 216.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Galston, “Can Patriotism Be Turned into Civic Engagement?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48 (16 November 2001): B16.

September 11. Yet impulses like greater charitable giving played out in a matter of weeks. It remains to be seen whether or not shifts in attitudes just after the attacks will last and translate into more civic activism.<sup>7</sup>

Today’s lack of confidence in the power of citizens is curious, given that self-rule has had such a rich history. After all, a community-based public gave us much of what we have today: the country itself (through Revolutionary War militias), our public schools (through township and district school boards), and even some of our businesses (such as the first railroad companies that were organized through town meetings). Perhaps part of the problem is that citizens believe the institutions they created to help them in civic action no longer know how to work *with* them — only *for* them. Public schools, for instance, are often seen as difficult to reach and too bureaucratized to be effective partners. I know there are exceptions; nonetheless, this is a widespread perception.

Another reason Americans may be less confident in themselves is a feeling that citizens don’t have what it takes to affect a now-global world. Since the shock of World War I and the recognition that conflict can spread around the planet like a fire out of control, Walter Lippmann and others (including John Dewey) have argued that we are subject to forces so vast, so far-reaching in scope, so complex, so indirect in consequences that average citizens can’t possibly understand what is happening.<sup>8</sup> The modern world is all of those things, but that doesn’t mean citizens are irrelevant amateurs. I would cite, in rebuttal, international movements with local roots, like those for the protection of the environment and the defense of human rights.

### **The Civil Investing Initiative**

The concept of American democracy as community-based but not community-limited, as well as the idea that democracy is rooted in self-responsibility, self-rule, and collective action, informs the work of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert Putnam, “Bowling Together,” *American Prospect* 13 (11 February 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925).

foundations I have been asked to describe. The president of one of these foundations, Bruce Sievers, has already illustrated a sensitivity to this understanding of democracy in his critique of venture philanthropy, which he spelled out in a paper presented in the Nielsen seminars.<sup>9</sup>

Bruce and other philanthropists, who question some of the sacred assumptions in their field, began to share their concerns around 1994. Anna Faith Jones (then at the Boston Foundation and later chair of the Council on Foundations) set the tone of the conversations with her candid admission that some of her organization's grantmaking had not always been effective, even after 75 years of investing. (This comment had added significance because the Boston Foundation is one of the best in the country.) Her point was that it was time to rethink not only grants but also the role of philanthropy. Those who felt this same unease, to one degree or another, began to ask what the alternatives might be. Some in this discussion with Sievers and Jones were from community foundations, some were from smaller national foundations started by businesses, and some (though not as many) were from large grantmakers. The Kettering Foundation kept a record of the meetings and provided relevant research. (Copies of the working papers are available.)<sup>10</sup>

The objective of these meetings has been to get at the “problems behind the problems,” that is, to address structural or systemic barriers to self-determination and effective civic action. Called “civil investing” or “civic philanthropy,” the focus has been on what must be in place in communities *before* program grants can be successful. After a few years, enough experiments were under way for this initiative to be covered by both *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *Foundation News & Commentary*. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Sievers, “If Pigs Had Wings: The Appeals and Limits of Venture Philanthropy,” (speech given at the Waldemar A. Nielsen Issues in Philanthropy Lecture Series, Georgetown University, 16 November 2001).

<sup>10</sup> “Learning about Civil Society: A Graphic Record of the Civil Investing Seminars,” rev. ed. (Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, October 1999, photocopy).

most recent meeting was held last year in Chicago. A small subgroup wants to see if funds can be raised for a weeklong workshop or, more modestly, for periodic conferences.

### **Wicked Problems and Political Will**

My own interpretation of what has stimulated the civil investing initiative is that it has been pressure from “wicked” problems, problems that won't go away because they are deeply embedded in society. Racial discrimination and poverty are examples. Combatting them requires large amounts of ongoing political will — commodities, one foundation officer admitted, philanthropies can't buy or rent, even with all of their money. Furthermore, wicked problems have characteristics that require a response from a community as a whole. One institution or one segment of the population isn't likely to be effective. These problems also need the attention of an “engaged public,” as opposed to a persuaded population. When people have been persuaded by leaders or sold on some master plan (whatever its merits), they don't usually have enough ownership to generate sufficient amounts of political will.

Ronald Heifetz, a professor of government at Harvard who was trained as a physician, has a deep appreciation of the distinctive characteristics of wicked problems. It is not surprising that he bases his argument for an engaged public on his experience with medical conditions that are also wicked. In Heifetz's typology, health problems range from “mechanical” difficulties, which can be remedied by a physician (such as a broken arm), to the more serious ones, for which there are no technical fixes (diabetes, for example). For those, the patient and physician have to combine forces. The same is true of our most serious political problems — those that governments and professionals, with all their competence, can't handle by themselves.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Riley Sinder make this analogy in “Political Leadership: Managing the Public's Problem Solving,” in *The Power of Public Ideas*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing, 1988), pp. 185-191.

Two scholars, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, call problems wicked when 1) the diagnosis or definition is unclear, 2) the location or cause is uncertain, and 3) any effective action to deal with them requires narrowing “the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be” — in the face of disagreement about the latter.<sup>12</sup>

Conventional ways of responding to problems are ill-suited to those that are wicked. Most problem-solving strategies are based on our national experience in dealing with the problems of post-Great Depression America. These were discrete and definable; they could be addressed by setting concrete goals and eradicated through the application of professional expertise. Though by no means easy to solve, these problems did have solutions. In this sense, they were “tame.” After the depression, professionals designed programs to build affordable housing, clean the water supply, construct schools and hospitals, and stabilize financial institutions. They went on to create a national highway system and to treat what had been untreatable diseases. Their programs were successful, so their methods of analyzing, planning, and evaluating were adopted by governments and nongovernmental institutions alike.

Wicked problems, however, are neither discrete nor easily defined. They are as tricky as they are aggressive and vicious. Each is a symptom of another, in a never-ending chain. While bridges can be built and diseases held at bay, wicked problems persist. Success can’t be determined in the same way as the reliability of an engineered structure or the curative power of a laboratory-developed drug. A shared understanding of the approximate nature of what people are facing is crucial. Dealing effectively with a wicked problem may depend on *not* reaching a fixed decision about a solution early on. A community’s ability to explore several options and experiment is more important.

---

<sup>12</sup> Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin J. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

Take the persistence of poverty in the face of rising prosperity. Why should we have seen per capita income increase significantly at the end of the century and still have an increase in the homeless population? What is the problem, really? And what causes it? Is poverty an absence of resources, of education, of personal motivation? The debate goes on endlessly. Where is the source of poverty located? Is it in the economic system or in a social subculture? Is there an end, or will the poor always be with us? And if so, could we ever agree on an acceptable level of poverty?

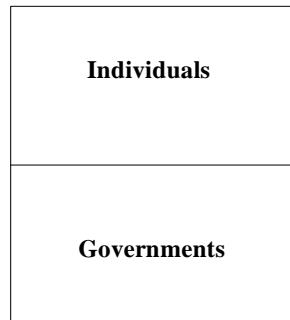
To the extent that foundation operating procedures are based on the conventional means of addressing so-called tame problems, they are subject to challenge. This questioning of old assumptions has been going on in the civil investing discussions.

### **The Mystery of the Space In-Between: Remapping Political Society**

My interpretation of what motivated the civil investing group is only that — my interpretation. Actually, few in the discussions based their conclusions on scholarly literature. Most decided that they were facing intractable problems and needed a more engaged citizenry by reflecting on their own experiences.

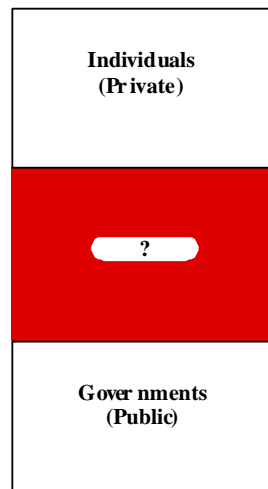
Foundation folk are practical problem solvers. Those in the civil investing discussions have wanted to focus on what can be done about dilemmas that frustrate everyone. Fresh insights have come from identifying structures and practices that have not been fully utilized in addressing persistent, systemic problems. These insights were captured in a series of charts made during the meetings. The first one is a picture of society divided into a private world of individuals and a public world of governments.

**Chart One**



Immediately, people in the discussions said the chart was misleading. Something was missing. There was a space in-between individuals and governments even though not everyone could agree on its name. Some referred to it as “public space,” others said “public life,” and still others thought of it as “community.” They also used a term that was being revived just as they began meeting: several called what was in-between a “civil society,” or the society that citizens create with other citizens.

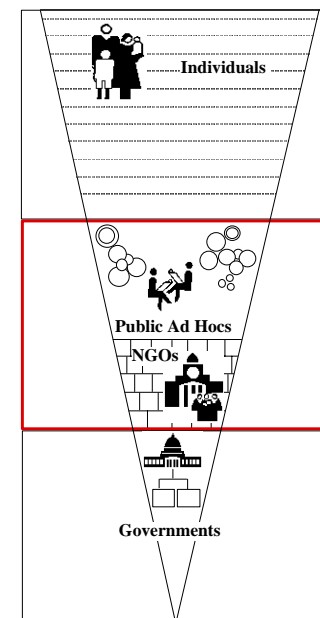
**Chart Two**



That wasn't all that was wrong with the first charts. The squares representing the private and public worlds shouldn't have been of equal proportions. There are many more individuals than governments. So the chart became an inverted triangle, with people at the top and governments at the bottom.

Foundation officers went on to identify two types of organizations they found in the space in the middle. One was nongovernmental institutions. These were the civil society. Others in the conversation insisted that there were also informal, ad hoc associations and that they were just as important. So in the third chart, all NGOs were drawn as squares, and the less formal, ad hoc groups were depicted first as circles and later as mushy clouds, reflecting their often temporary and unstructured character.

**Chart Three**



This chart prompted a discussion of whether foundations could deal only indirectly with the informal sector — through other nongovernmental organizations — or whether they had to work more directly with the loosely organized, ad hoc groups, which might be more effective in dealing with wicked problems.

The fourth chart captured a sobering insight. Foundations, along with other nongovernmental organizations, like to think of themselves as allied with the citizenry and as decidedly *not* governmental. Citizens, on the other hand, often see many NGOs as more like government agencies. And when attitudes toward government are negative, civic organizations are sometimes tarred with the same brush. The realization that there is a “disconnect” was represented by a dark jagged line and placed, not between the public sector and the government, but between the informal and formal institutions of public life.

Foundations that wanted to cross the divide ran into barriers. How could they fund citizens associations, even those that had demonstrated that they could drive drug dealers out of neighborhoods, if they didn't have 501(c)(3) status?

#### **Chart 4** *Unavailable*

Despite such obstacles, the civil investing foundations saw the space in-between as the area where they had to be more active. That conclusion led them to look even more closely at what was in this space. Participants sometimes focused on structures, “connective tissue,” or networks and norms. (Robert Putnam's findings about “bowling alone” had just been published and doubtless influenced this view.<sup>13</sup>) At other times, foundations looked at the space in-between as a dynamic arena of action and interaction. They saw group behaviors, “processes,” as

---

<sup>13</sup> See Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65-78. Putnam later wrote a book on this subject entitled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

ways of doing civic business, or what the Kettering Foundation calls “practices.” This wasn't an either-or discussion; no one thought that practices exist apart from norms and structures or that structures and norms exist apart from practices.

About this same time in the meetings, another conversation developed around the question of whether or not everything that happens in the space in-between is positive. Some said that if the space were a “civil society,” it wasn't necessarily civil. Increasingly, citizens were organizing around identities and convictions that could not be mediated. Conflict was inevitable. New organizations were emerging that critics called NOPEs (Not on Planet Earth) and CAVEs (Citizens against Virtually Everything). An issue of the *Kettering Review* with articles on whether or not a civil society is necessarily democratic became background reading for this discussion.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Democratic Practices that Address Wicked Problems**

While appreciating the importance of networks and norms (which others were studying), Kettering research set out to identify practices that could generate “public capital,” the foundation's term for a more explicitly political form of “social capital.”

Recall that problems are considered wicked when there is no shared sense of their names or of what causes them. And people will disagree morally over what should be done. Wicked problems require the exercise of sound judgment about the nature of the difficulty and the most appropriate response. That, in turn, requires deliberation — the form of speech and reason used to guide action when people differ on both means and ends. And if the problem requires the force of public will and action, then the deliberation has to be public.

Deliberation isn't casual discussion or partisan debate. At Kettering, we have been studying this form of public talk for more than 20 years. Simply put, it is weighing the costs and consequences of various

---

<sup>14</sup> *Kettering Review* (winter 1997).

options for action against all that is most valuable to us.<sup>15</sup> We usually deliberate privately, alone or with our friends, as when we decide on a career move. In public, deliberations typically begin in a coffee shop or at dinner and may continue in a town meeting. The result is seldom a clear-cut decision or consensus as in private life, when only a few are involved. In observing deliberative forums, the Kettering Foundation has found that people are more likely to identify a broad direction for action or decide what they will and won't do in order to solve a problem. As they struggle with the options, they often come to a new understanding of the problem, a definition that incorporates various dimensions of an issue as various people experience it.

In the last few years, others have written about deliberation as indispensable to democracy. Political theorists like Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, and James Fishkin treat deliberation as synonymous with democracy because it recognizes that most political decisions are, in fact, normative.<sup>16</sup> Political problems often involve questions that the ancient Greeks said had more than one answer.

Deliberation appears to be able to generate the political will required to combat wicked problems and to energize, if not an entire community, more than one political actor. Public will is arguably strongest when citizens meet face-to-face to redefine their problems in their own terms, exchange opinions, and fashion a workable arrangement to act. A citizenry that makes up its own mind should be able to sustain commitments over a long period of time, as opposed to short bursts of enthusiasm. As I noted, a persuaded populace might not have that kind of staying power. To say much the same thing in another way,

---

<sup>15</sup> For a more extensive account of what Kettering has learned from deliberative forums, see chapter 12, "The Power of Choice," which is in a book I wrote, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) and James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

deliberation can generate political energy if it promotes ownership. It is just common sense: we tend to take more responsibility for what we participate in deciding, than what others decide for us.

Redefining problems through deliberation can also prompt people to see ways of responding that weren't apparent before. These insights should allow a diverse array of actors to contribute. And the shared sense of direction that can result from deliberation promotes complementary initiatives, making the whole of a civic enterprise greater than the sum of its parts.

As Kettering research has progressed, the foundation has identified two other democratic practices that precede decision making. One is as simple as the way problems are named. The other is how the terms of the public conversation are determined, or the way issues are framed.<sup>17</sup>

Naming an issue is critical because the public often has a different take on it than professionals and institutions. For example, citizens are inclined to see stopping drug abuse as a personal and family concern, rather than simply a matter of law enforcement or of preventing drugs from coming into the country. The name we give a problem determines who will be available to deal with it and what kind of response will emerge. Finding out how the public sees an issue is, therefore, key to finding out how citizens can get their hands on elusive difficulties that defy the best grant programs. For instance, in the case of drugs, when people see things they can do personally through their families or through common action, they are energized by a sense of possibility.

Once a problem is given a name that captures the different ways people experience it, it has to be framed for discussion. Issues are sometimes presented as a contest between opposing camps polarized around conflicting ideologies — there are only two options. In other situations, a community might consider three or even four options, each presented as fairly as possible and with information on the pros *and* cons. (This, by the way, is how the National Issues Forums briefing books are

---

<sup>17</sup> A Kettering working paper "For Communities to Work" describes democratic practices in some detail.

framed.<sup>18</sup>) Different framings play out in the way communities go about solving their problems. When issues are polarized from the beginning, the chances of success are obviously minimal.

### **Unfinished Business: Challenges to Civil Investing**

This report on the civil investing initiative wouldn't be complete without saying more about the obstacles. A good deal of work remains to be done. Whether foundations want to strengthen networks or encourage democratic practices, they face a practical challenge. What do they give grants for and to whom? If barbecues and choral groups are characteristic of a strong civil society, do funds go for pigs and sheet music? Or do you pay people to deliberate, as was done in one impoverished country, only to find that the citizens are less willing to talk publicly without a stipend?

The civil investing group has been struggling with these challenges long enough that it may be time to analyze what the participants have learned. Some, like the Foundation for the Mid South, have already begun analyzing their experiments.

### **Evaluation and Civic Learning**

A challenge that foundations have found even more daunting is evaluating civil investments. We insist on knowing results because we want to be successful — and well we should. If we didn't, efforts to strengthen public life would degenerate into the worst kind of therapy: warm but illusory feelings of momentary comfort. Results must be known and evident to more than those directly involved. But conventional (some might say tame problem) evaluation may not only prevent us from understanding the subtleties and intangibles that play a

---

<sup>18</sup> For an account of the National Issues Forums, see Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

role in civic renewal, but also be counterproductive. For instance, a study done for Kettering by the Harwood Group suggests that some evaluations legitimize only those actions that lead to easily quantifiable results.<sup>19</sup> Even more serious, conventional ways of assessing outcomes can undermine the very thing that makes for long-term success — civic learning.

The practice of civic learning is closely associated with democracy and is a corollary of collective action. It prompts people to keep on acting. This form of collective learning allows us to know those things about our communities that we can know only by learning together — and never by learning alone. That includes what is truly valuable to us as a community, what our interrelated or self-interests rightly understood are, whether we have compatible purposes, and what we think we *ought* to do in responding to common problems. People don't discover these things as much as they create them; they don't preexist their talking together in the kind of talk that people use to teach themselves before they act.

Civic learning can be stymied when measuring success is reduced to setting goals or establishing benchmarks and measuring outcomes, particularly if the assessment is external to the community.<sup>20</sup> In order to *evaluate* the worth of actions, people have to look both at what happened and, simultaneously, at the effects on what they consider valuable. Two determinations have to be made in judging progress. Asking only one question, "What outcomes can we identify?" isn't enough. We have to revisit — continuously revisit — a prior question: "What outcomes did we want?" The answer to this question usually changes as we act.

I believe we need a more democratically compatible form of evaluation. This will necessitate looking at *who* needs to know the results and *how*

---

<sup>19</sup> Harwood Group, "Squaring Realities: Governing Boards and Community-Building" (Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, August 2000), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> H. George Frederickson, "Best Practice, Benchmarking and Cheating Innovation" (Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, May 2000).

they know. But democracy-friendly evaluation will probably only come from changing the politics surrounding evaluation, not just the procedures. Strengthening democracy, or developing a greater capacity for self-rule, as a goal is a political, not a technical, decision.

This challenge is particularly difficult because there probably aren't any models of excellence or best practices to use as standards for civic learning. It is experimental and innovative rather than imitative. ("Imitation is limitation," some communities have told us.<sup>21</sup>) This kind of learning is essential in a democracy because we don't have (and won't accept) any authority to give us answers. We have to figure things out for ourselves, which we do largely by trial and error. So we depend on constant experimentation and learning together. Foundations have a self-interest in fostering this self-education in the communities they serve.

### **Civil Investing Needs an "Inventorium"**

Foundations also have a self-interest in their own internal capacity for a similar kind of experimentation and innovation. This capacity is critically important in the intensity of crises. Even in normal circumstances, governments tend to lock in on one-size-fits-all solutions to complex social problems. Partisan politics take over. Proposed solutions are cloaked in moral certainty even when no one can be sure the remedies will be effective. Just to suggest that it would be useful to look for alternatives is to invite the bitterest attacks.

I've been reluctant to accept the argument that grantmakers pave the way for government programs with their models of success — even though there are some examples. I am more inclined to think that foundations can play a useful role by standing up for experimentation when the political environment fights it.

---

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed portrait of community learning, see Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999).

With this role in mind, I think the willingness to experiment with other forms of grantmaking and other roles for foundations may be the most important contribution of the civil investing initiative. To keep that spirit alive, I propose the creation of an "inventorium," which, like an auditorium, is a place, but not a place to hear. An inventorium is a place to invent, which is usually collective (forget the myth of the lone inventor). Civic inventors need occasions to talk about what they are struggling with and to provoke one another. (Perhaps there is a role here for the university centers for the study of philanthropy, which Virginia Hodgkinson and Independent Sector helped establish.) I definitely do not recommend a "clearatorium," or simply a clearing-house, even though I have suggested sharing information. An inventorium creates a certain tension that sparks creativity.

I learned this from watching the civil investing group. I saw foundation officers take their standard operating procedures in one hand and their understanding of how democracy works in the other, and then imagine what they could do to make the two fit more closely. At a meeting in Miami, someone asked, "What do we think democracy requires?" The response was, "Community self-determination." (These aren't exact quotations but my recollections.) Then, with that definition in mind, someone else suggested looking at how foundations decide on grant programs, select criteria for proposals, and assess results. After the group had done that and talked about how much expert definitions of problems can influence criteria and evaluations, the participants weren't altogether sure their procedures encouraged what they thought democracy requires. Yet no one believed they could just put their funds on a table for communities to use as they see fit. Such tensions, where there aren't readily available answers, are openings for experimentation. Foundations see themselves as innovative. They have a long history of stimulating change. But they must continue to have what inventories could provide, an environment where they "learn to fail intelligently." That, Charles Kettering said, is the secret of invention.