

NONPROFITS:

The DNA of Democracy

by Cynthia M. Gibson

RECENTLY, A PROMINENT CONSULTING FIRM asked several nonprofit leaders for feedback on the advocacy strategy that the company had developed for a large foundation. The meeting opened with one consultant asking, “Is it really necessary to involve the public in advocacy, and if so when? Wouldn’t it just be easier to get the one guy working for the legislator to move the bill in the way we want?”

The assumptions behind these questions are mind-boggling, among them the notion that public participation in community problem solving is optional rather than necessary; that “one guy” is enough to move policies into law; and that lobbying is the only form of advocacy. Compounding the surreal nature of the meeting was a set of decision-making trees the firm had designed to help foundations assess when in the process public participation would be most productive.

Funders, however, are not the only ones who believe that public participation in problem solving is optional. At a gathering of nonprofit leaders from some of the country’s major nonprofits, an executive director declared that while the organization’s affiliates would be willing to host public forums on

community issues, ultimately they would be “pro forma” because “our experts know best what to do and how to do it.”

Public Weigh-in and Buy-in Are the Keys to Success

All this might be humorous if it didn’t involve the allocation of millions of dollars to initiatives that, without public participation and buy-in, will most likely fail. History has demonstrated the danger of decoupling nonprofits in their role as democratic actors from the process of getting the results that investors and the public demand. During the past decade, several well-intentioned efforts to tackle difficult issues—from school reform to international development—imploded despite jaw-dropping investments because constituents weren’t involved in planning and executing those efforts. Research indicates that had such participation been encouraged, it might have helped to achieve

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longer-term results and could have saved millions of dollars.

Civic engagement also tends to be seen as tangential to larger (and seemingly unending) discussions about nonprofit effectiveness, capacity, and impact. And amid growing calls for more collaboration among the three sectors—public, private, and nonprofit—to solve complex problems, there's little awareness of the value added by the nonprofit sector: its ability to encourage and enhance democracy and civic participation.

Nonprofits have long understood that without political will, policies, and public weigh-in and buy-in, the most well-intentioned initiatives open themselves up to criticism and disregard the political support needed to ensure that what's proposed is feasible and successful beyond the pilot phase.

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So why don't investors bite? Some see civic engagement as too nuanced and prefer to focus on specific issues and problems. Others are uncomfortable with institutions working with "real people" as partners rather than as beneficiaries of services. Still others view community-based problem solving as a thinly veiled political agenda they're uneasy about supporting.

Social Efficacy As an Outcome

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for many investors is that the outcomes associated with civic engagement are amorphous and process oriented, making them difficult to measure. Their skepticism is understandable. What's the incentive to invest in these kinds of things, especially in a sector that has been somewhat laissez-faire in assessing even its most basic activities?

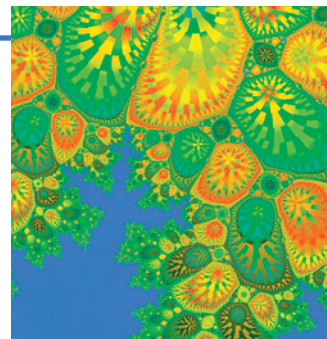
Nonprofits, therefore, need to move beyond the argument that civic engagement is part of their mission, which may sway some but not many, espe-

cially in the age of benchmarks and outcomes. Instead, they need to show how an expanded definition of outcomes—including communities' ability to address issues beyond predetermined time frames and program foci—leads to longer-term results. In addition to using as a measure the number of homes that have been built for homeless families, for example, nonprofits could also assess whether and to what extent the larger community has the capacity to prevent homelessness and whether that fuels collective problem solving on other issues.

In short, social efficacy becomes an important outcome—one that has the potential to leverage funders' investments (and perhaps codify the elusive notion of impact) but is admittedly more difficult to evaluate. That shouldn't preclude nonprofits from trying—and, most important, funders from providing—the resources to do so more rigorously.

Given the growing number of nonprofit-led efforts to embed a sense of social efficacy into communities nationwide, this task may become easier. Today, these groups convene people with wildly divergent views on everything from politics to religion and who are tired of the culture wars and political polarization. During these gatherings, people consider a range of views and policy options (rather than promoting a single cause) to find common ground on the issues that concern them most. They then take action on those issues at a range of levels: policy changes, organizational changes, small-group efforts, individual volunteerism, or all of the above. These actions, in turn, build local civic cultures that can lay the groundwork for a deeper ethic of civic engagement. Civic participation becomes part of everyday life rather than an episodic activity such as volunteering that is squeezed between the "higher priorities" of work, school, and family.

Groups like the National League of Cities, the National School Boards Association, the National Civic League, the Environmental Protection



Agency, and others are exploring and advocating these kinds of approaches to public problems. At the local level, this form of democratic governance and public problem solving has taken hold in numerous cities such as Decatur, Georgia; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Kansas City, Kansas; Palo Alto, California; and Hampton, Virginia. These kinds of initiatives have involved hundreds or thousands of people who are addressing issues such as education, land-use planning, crime prevention, human relations, environmental protection, housing, economic development, public finance, and public health.

The organizations that lead these efforts aren't doing so because it's a nice thing to do; they're doing it because powerful institutions—including schools, businesses, and legislatures—have asked them to. Increasingly, leaders of these institutions recognize that they won't be successful if they continue to ignore citizens' desire to help solve problems that need fresh ideas. And who better to provide these ideas than the real people who face these issues every day? In short, those who've traditionally controlled decision-making processes now recognize that to have real impact, they need not only public buy-in but also public weigh-in. And nonprofits now serve as the go-to players in helping to make that happen.

Auspiciously, a small group of philanthropic institutions has also dipped its toes into these waters by soliciting public involvement in priority setting and information gathering about issues that communities—not just experts—have defined as most important. An even smaller group has gone so far as to ask “real people” to be involved in *every* step of the grantmaking process, from developing guidelines to selecting grantees.

While the jury is still out on whether these efforts lead to better investments, they merit our attention. By bringing experts and the public to the same table to see whether new ideas emerge, philanthropists have opened the black box of philanthropy, which traditionally has preferred to

operate behind closed doors. Moreover, they have experimented with a process that may ultimately prove more effective in achieving the longer-term results so many say they want. At the same time, they have honored the civic mission on which philanthropic institutions were established and have responded more profoundly to a public from which they derive significant tax benefits.

The Guardians of Democracy

Nonprofits' role in promoting democracy, however, goes beyond individual communities. As it has been for the past century, the nonprofit sector is the doorway through which millions of Americans pursue a diverse array of cultural, social, political, and religious beliefs through civic opportunities that are the hallmark of a healthy democracy.

That's a mouthful, but nonprofits are well positioned to show through their work how democracy is more than a lofty construct; it's the stream from which every attempt to solve public problems and make the world a better place flows. It's nonprofits, after all, that spurred some of the most significant and sweeping changes in modern history, from the Voting Rights Act to welfare to campaign finance reform. Those changes were the direct result of nonprofits' exercise of the fundamental freedoms in a democracy, such as the rights of assembly, free speech and expression, and equal protection before the law. And these rights have often benefited the most disadvantaged and underrepresented groups whose participation has historically been thwarted or uninvited.

Nonprofits are also frequently the sole voices in contesting governments and other institutions when they threaten to overtake public will. For evidence of why this nonprofit role is important, one has only to look at several other countries in which non-governmental organizations have led the way in successfully challenging totalitarian regimes.

By using new technologies that help people to self-organize and advocate for causes they care

about, nonprofits have also led the way in breaking down the walls of institutions that haven't always welcomed citizen participation. Ultimately, these nonprofits have shown how technology can turn the entire power structure on its head, empowering grassroots citizens who previously felt voiceless.

But let's not fool ourselves into thinking that all nonprofits care about serving as guardians of democracy. Studies continue to show that an abysmally small number of nonprofits engage in advocacy. If nonprofits want more investment in their efforts to promote civic engagement, they're going to have to embrace, rather than shy away from, their right to advocate. They need to be more willing to open their own doors to the public and invite it to participate in organizations' activities and agenda setting. And they need to be wary of how nonprofits' increasing professionalization creates an insular, expert-focused culture that discourages democratic participation.

Most of all, nonprofits need to make civic engagement a top priority in discussions about impact and effectiveness. And given the recent presidential election—which demonstrated that, when engaged, ordinary citizens can bring about precedent-setting change—what better time is there to do so? Both presidential candidates noted the importance of public service and that the world's problems won't be solved unless there's more, not less, civic participation.

Clearly, these politicians get it. Let's hope that consulting firms, investors, and, yes, even nonprofits that assume that civic engagement is secondary rather than integral to the ability to achieve results will eventually get it too.

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