

TOGETHER

BUILDING BETTER, STRONGER COMMUNITIES



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AN INTRODUCTION

This is the introduction for a forthcoming book about our communities and how much we need them to work at their best in today's political environment. That environment is extremely challenging, to say the least, and could remain so for some time. In meeting these challenges, communities that work democratically work best and become stronger. A democracy engages the energies of everyone, and everyone is needed to combat today's problems.¹

Everyone has seen accounts of the country's problems on the news as well as in books and articles. The citizenry is described as deeply divided. Some feel that they have long been denied the rights promised to all Americans. They are aggrieved and resent the way they have been treated. Others feel that the America that is their birthright is being destroyed from within as they watch in frustrating dismay. They grieve for their country and resent what has happened to it. Polls show that many Americans, for different reasons, blame our governing institutions for allowing what has happened to occur. These institutions include the government and the media, along with large nongovernmental organizations. People have lost confidence in these governing institutions and don't trust what they say are "facts." We have seen that distrust, for example, in the unwillingness of some to take vaccinations for the Covid virus.²

Making matters worse, these same governing institutions have lost confidence in the citizenry, making the mistrust mutual. Even institutional efforts to engage the public have not stopped an avalanche of public criticism.

These problems have largely been attributed to politics at the national level, but local institutions haven't been entirely immune. Stories about local churches, for example, have reported serious polarization dividing congregations.³ That recognized, people have turned more to their communities to solve problems, and the spotlight is now on them. That is what led the Kettering Foundation to consolidate its studies on communities into the forthcoming book, *Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities*.

WHO WANTS ME TO KNOW THIS?

Kettering is a nonpartisan research institute that, for decades, has been studying how democracy can work as it should. The foundation does not make grants, nor does it offer models and best practices to adopt. Rather, Kettering draws its research from joint learning agreements with organizations that are launching projects to combat problems they struggle with and are hoping to learn ways for their efforts to be more effective. If what they are doing might shed light on the problems of democracy that the foundation is trying to understand, then Kettering enters into a joint learning agreement with that organization. At that point, Kettering exchanges what it has been learning about what it takes for democracy to work better and the other organization shares what they are learning about how to deal with their problems.

WHY COMMUNITIES?

The good news is that Americans do agree on one thing: there is far too much divisiveness.⁴ And people are joining forces across dividing lines to help one another in times of crisis or disaster. That is what humans have always done instinctively, when faced with danger. Our early ancestors learned that the key to survival is banding together. Joining forces or working together effectively requires deciding together what work should be done. And good decisions require serious deliberations to turn first impressions and hasty reactions into more shared and reflective judgment.

Communities had been getting more favorable attention even before the crises of 2020 hit. We were finally addressing an imbalance that public administration scholar George Frederickson pointed out years ago. In the 20th century, he noted, we were occupied with building larger institutions and systems while neglecting communities. Now, fortunately, there has been a greater recognition of the essential role communities play in protecting our health, educating our children, caring for those in need, and developing economic resilience. Communities are where people can participate directly in self-government through civic associations, as well as through citizen boards and councils. Communities have properly been seen as the first homes of democracy.

In spite of the rediscovery of the importance of communities, the challenges they face are daunting, and citizens have an especially critical role to play in meeting them. (By “citizens,” I mean anyone who works with others to make the place they call home better.) The big question about citizens is whether they have the ability, resources, and political will to shoulder the responsibility of citizenship. Based on our research, we think they do, although we are quite aware of the many arguments to the contrary.

WICKED PROBLEMS

Citizens have an important role to play in combating those problems that institutions can’t address by themselves. The problems communities face aren’t all the same. Some are easy to see and can be easily remedied: Fix the potholes, for example. Others lie below the surface and don’t have obvious solutions. Such problems have “wicked” characteristics. Strategies for countering these problems have to engage citizens from every sector of the community because they have multiple sources located in different parts of town.

To better understand the problem-solving strategies of communities, my colleagues and I looked more closely into areas like civic leadership and public engagement. The usual ways that communities solve problems are fine for the usual problems, but not for combating those with wicked characteristics. This book discusses what an effective community strategy would have to do in order to counter this “wickedness” and be effective over the long term.

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THE LEADERS AND THE APATHETIC

The need for ongoing, communitywide citizen engagement is usually a special concern for those leading problem-solving initiatives. When the needs of disaster victims fade away, the community members who helped go back home. Community leaders continue to organize meetings but only a handful of folks attend. Leaders ask for volunteers for projects, and the same thing happens. Many people appear to be apathetic about the well-being of their community. And this lack of engagement frustrates those in leadership roles.

In our research, we took an especially careful look at the apparently apathetic. We wondered if “apathy” is really the right diagnosis for the people who don’t participate in civic projects. Do they have different perceptions of the community or different concerns from those in leadership roles? And if that is the case, what could be done to engage enough people from across a community to get at the sources of wicked problems?

Problems of any kind are seldom dealt with effectively without new insights into what the problems really are. Such insights rarely drop out of the clouds or appear as flashes of lightning. Often, they are stimulated by what we see other people doing as they approach a familiar problem from a different perspective. How might these insights occur more often in our communities?

I don’t know of any exact science of communities. I’m not sure there is one. There are materials on group processes that community organizations can use, which might be helpful in organizing a meeting. Problems with wicked characteristics, however, are unlikely to be solved by any single meeting or intervention.

They reoccur, particularly when they are about relationships, which have to be constantly restructured to meet everchanging circumstances. So communities have to develop long-term strategies. After all, democracy itself is a journey, not a destination.

THE CASE FOR INVENTIVENESS

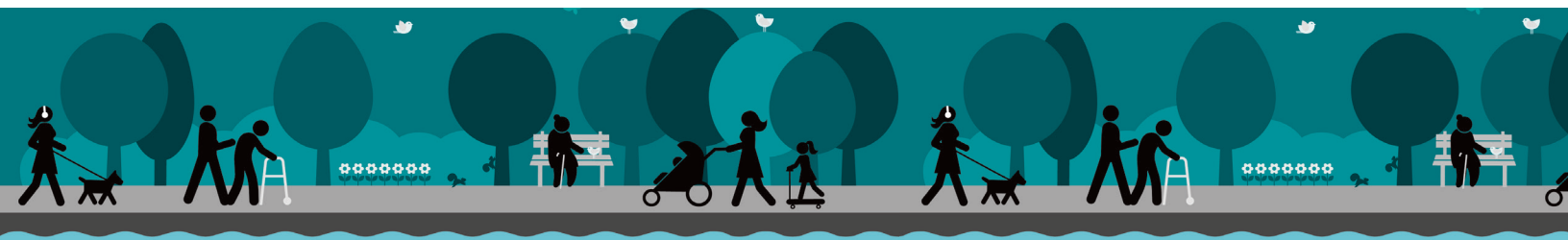
Because democracy is a journey, there is no detailed road map, just a few guideposts. Those who make the journey have to call on their inventiveness because much of the road has to be made by walking it. The forthcoming book calls for civic inventiveness. This inventiveness comes from people with different experiences learning from one another.

LEARNING TOGETHER TO WORK TOGETHER

Communities where people learn together are better at adapting to changes in circumstances that they can’t control. They are more likely to keep the things they want to preserve and change the things that need to change.

Deliberating together to make good decisions is one way of learning together. It can lead to fresh, more complete insights into ways of dealing with persistent problems. Deliberating can encourage inventiveness.

To help with this process, *Together* offers some diagnostic questions for a community checkup for learning together that might produce surprising discoveries. For example, people may not have to agree on a solution to a problem in order to work together to combat it.



A BOOK CLUB

Many books are meant to be read in the comfort of an easy chair or at a desk. *Together* isn't. It was written to be read one chapter at a time and then discussed by any group of people who want to come together to better understand how they can contribute to making their community a better place to live, raise a family, and work. The book is designed to be read TOGETHER. That can be the first step to creating a learning community.

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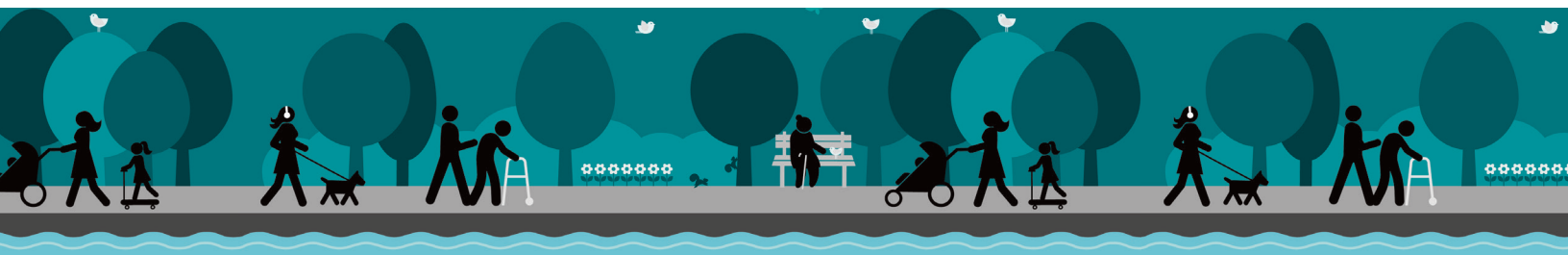
ENDNOTES

1 The research and writing for this book began almost a decade ago in a different political climate. We live now in a much more contentious, divisive time. One of the characteristics of this climate is disagreement about the meaning and use of many of the terms found on these pages. Words like “citizen,” “community,” even “democracy,” are now contested. And there doesn't appear to be any language that will not offend someone, for what they consider valid reasons. So those who helped me with the research and I acknowledge that some of the words in this report have contested meanings. With that in mind, we have tried to be as clear as we can about what we mean by the words we use and why we use them.

2 This analysis is based on reports going back to 1976, including Robert Teeter, “The Present National Political Attitude as Determined by Pre-Election Polls,” November 1976, Box 62, Folder “Post-Election Analysis—Speeches and Reports (2),” Robert Teeter Papers, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI. Other studies we have found useful include Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); and Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government* (Pew Research Center, November 2015). Also, Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016); and Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

3 Janet Adamy, “Abortion, Guns and Trump: A Church Group Tries to Navigate America's Divisions,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/abortion-guns-and-trump-a-church-group-tries-to-navigate-americas-divisions-11608298552> (accessed March 11, 2021).

4 People agree more than is recognized. See the results of USA TODAY's Hidden Common Ground initiative, which was a collaborative project involving Public Agenda, IPSOS, the America Amplified public radio network, the National Issues Forums, the Kettering Foundation, and others, <https://www.usatoday.com/hidden-commonground/>; <https://www.publicagenda.org/programs-reports/the-hidden-common-ground-initiative>; and <https://www.nifi.org/en/hidden-common-ground> (accessed November 9, 2020).





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