

Differentiating the Functions of Institutions and Associations: A Geometry Lesson

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In the community-building world, a significant number of local initiatives fail because the participants are not clear about the difference between the functions of associations and institutions. This failure most often occurs when institutions attempt to take on functions that are actually better performed by associations.

Associations are defined as smaller, often face-to-face groups where the members do the work and they are not paid. Their geometric form is symbolized by a circle. Typical examples include block clubs, veteran’s organizations, gardening clubs, advocacy groups etc.

Institutions are defined as groups of paid people in formal, hierarchical organizations. Their form is symbolized by a triangle. They come in three organizational forms: for profit, not for profit and governmental.

Just as a hammer and a saw each perform distinctive functions, circular associations and triangular institutions have forms appropriate to their functions. In order to clarify these distinctive functions, it is useful to outline the unique nature and capacity of institutional and associational forms of organized people. The chart below is a summary illustration of the distinctive capacities of each form.



CONTROL	CHOICE
PRODUCTION GOODS SERVICES	CARE
CLIENTS CONSUMER	CITIZEN
NEEDS	CAPACITY

Institutions are triangular constructions because their essential purpose is to provide a means by which a few can control many. This is why most institutional organization charts have one person at the top and many people at the bottom. This control function is valuable whenever we need uniformity and standardization as in mass production. The “glue” that holds the people in institution together is money.

Associations are flat and circular because their function is to synthesize the unique interests of each participant and their continuity depends upon the choice to voluntarily participate. The glue that holds them together is trust.

The purpose of institutional control is to produce “lots of the same things” – goods or services.

While some associations may produce goods, they are rarely mass-produced. Instead, they are handmade and homemade. Therefore, they are the product of what people care about.

While care is sometimes described as being provided by service institutions, this is a misuse of the meaning of the word care. Care is the freely given commitment, from the heart, of one person to another. For example, “He cares about his spouse and his neighborhood more than anything else.” No institution can produce care in this traditional meaning. On the other hand, care is the essential necessity of an association’s continuity. It will not survive unless it provides an opportunity for its participants to care for each other and/or care about the same thing.

In recent times, institutions have laid claim to care because it is one of the deepest of human motives. Nonetheless, institutions cannot care. For example, Medicare doesn’t care. It is a group of people organized in a triangle to regularly send out checks to doctors and patients.

Whenever institutions purport to care, they are actually performing a function accurately called service. When they attempt to become the “providers of care,” they are actually manifesting counterfeit care that can reduce genuine associational care in communities.

Institutions require many clients or consumers in order that the “lots of the same things” they produce will be purchased. Associations neither produce nor need clients or consumers. Instead they need citizens

Institutions are designed to meet what they call needs. Actually, they need needs because without them their system of control is useless.

Associations do not need needs. Instead, they need the capacities of citizens who may also have deficits. Institutions need those deficits in order to have clients or consumers. Associations ignore deficits in order to mobilize the capacities of citizens.

The most common reason for failure of neighborhood based initiatives is triangles attempting to provide choice, care, citizenship, and capacity. In this confused effort, they not only fail to perform essential associational functions, but they can also promote the decline of associations by claiming that they can do what only associations can do.

It is important to recognize that institutional triangles have appropriate and necessary functions. If we want to fly an airplane we cannot do it in an associational form. We cannot have a pilot who says, "Well folks, we are all here. Where should we go?" At the same time, if we want to have citizens creating and implementing a vision for their neighborhood's future, we cannot get an institution to do it for them. Instead they must fulfill a role called citizenship and use their principal tool – associations.

There are seven distinctively associational functions in local places. These are functions that, if unperformed, will create a widespread decline in the well-being of neighbors and increase their dependence on inadequate institutional substitutions.

First, our neighborhoods and associational relationships are the primary source of our health. How long we live and how often we are sick is determined by our personal behavior, our social relationships, our physical environment, and our income. As neighbors, we are the people who can change these things through our associated activity. Medical systems and doctors cannot. This is why epidemiologists agree that medical care counts for less than 15% of what will allow us to be healthy. Indeed, most informed medical leaders advocate for community health initiatives because they recognize their systems have reached the limits of their health-giving power.

Second, whether we are safe and secure in our neighborhood is largely within our local domain. One landmark study shows that there are two basic determinants of our local safety. One is how many neighbors we know by name. The second is how often we are present and associate in the public outside our houses. Police activity is a minor protection compared to these two community actions. This is why most informed police leaders advocate for block watch and community policing. They know their limits and call out to the neighborhood residents for associational solutions.

Third, the future of our earth - the environment - is a major neighborhood responsibility. The "energy problem" is a local domain because how we transport ourselves, how we heat and light our homes, and how much waste we create are major factors in saving our environment. That is why the associational movement is a major force in calling us and our neighbors to be citizens of the earth and not just consumers of the natural wealth.

Fourth, in our villages and neighborhoods, we have the power to build a resilient economy - less dependent on the mega-systems of finance and production that have proven to be so unreliable. Most enterprises begin locally - in garages, basements, kitchens, and dining rooms. As neighbors, we have the local power to nurture and support these enterprises so

that they have a viable market. And we have the local power to create credit unions that capture our own savings so that we are not captives of large financial institutions. We also are the most reliable sources of jobs. Word-of-mouth among neighbors is still the most important access to employment. The future of our economic security is now clearly a responsibility, possibility, and necessity for the associational neighborhood.

Fifth, we are quickly learning that part of our domain is the production of the food we eat. We are allied with the local food movement, supporting local producers and markets. In this way, we will be doing our part to solve the energy problem caused by transportation of food from continents away. We will be doing our part to solve our economic problems by circulating our dollars locally. And we will be improving our health by eating food free of poisons and petroleum.

Sixth, we are local people who must collectively raise our children. We all say that “it takes a village to raise a child”. And yet, in modernized societies, this is rarely true in neighborhoods. Instead, we pay systems to raise our children - teachers, counselors, coaches, youth workers, nutritionists, doctors, McDonalds, and iPhones. We are often reduced as families to being responsible for paying others to raise our children and transporting them to their paid child-raisers. Our villages have often become useless; our neighbors responsible for neither their children nor ours. As a result, we all talk about the local “youth problem”.

There is no “youth problem”. There is a “village problem” of adults who have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbors in raising the young. There is a remarkable recovery movement that joins neighbors in sharing the wealth of children. It is our greatest challenge and our most hopeful possibility.

Seventh, locally we are the site of care. Our institutions can only offer service - not care. We cannot purchase care. Care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another. As neighbors, we can care for each other. We can care for our children. We can care for our elders. And it is this care that is the basic power of a community of associated citizens.

Health, safety, economy, environment, food, children, and care are the seven special capacities of local associations. They are the unique functions of local associations. When local associations fail to fulfill these functions, institutions and governments cannot provide a substitute. Their “triangular” capacities mainly create counterfeits, palliatives, and dependency.

Tocqueville said that “in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science: the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made.” The progress he commends depends on our ability to understand the unique and critical functions of associations and our ability to create and multiply their ability to perform their unique functions.