

Associations and Their Democratic Functions

John McKnight
Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation
Co-founder, ABCD Institute

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kellogg Foundation convened a meeting of health activists from all the new nations that had once been part of the Soviet Nation. I was asked to speak to the group about the role of associations in a democratic society. After speaking for a half hour, I could tell that no one understood what I was talking about. Nonetheless, in desperation I tried a different approach and suddenly one of the members from Poland raised his hand and said, “Mr. McKnight, our problem is that you don’t use the word we use for associations. For us, an association is a conspiracy, punishable in many ways. He reminded me that the collapse of the Soviet Union began when workers in shipyards formed a union and it spread across the country. It was this associational movement led by Lech Walesa that began the opening of democratic possibilities throughout the largest country in the world.

As you consider the work ahead focused on democracy, I think special consideration need be given to the role of associations in maintaining and reviving democratic practices.

In an effective democracy associations play multiple roles that provide the infrastructure for citizen manifestations of their power to solve problems, create new approaches to old issues and give voice to people who often feel that they are unheard.

These multiple functions include:

First, associations are groups of citizens pulled together by common consent. This consent is based upon a mutual concern or interest. In this consenting mutuality is the

genesis of care — the personal commitment of one to another. The members care about a goal; and each other. It is this care that manifests itself as the mutual support described as community. It is especially vivid in the mutual care within self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Historically, it was the network of local associations that provided the daily personal care and support for youth, elderly and the vulnerable. This citizen care is not a service. A service is the commodified product of an institution. This kind of service is of a different order than the care of friend, neighbor, club, group or association at the local level.

Institutions provide service as a scarce commodity for a price. Associational communities can provide abundant care without money. It is this distinction that is critical to understanding the value of citizen care. We will never have enough money to pay for service substitutes for care. But if we did, we would find that service can never substitute for care. We are already recognizing this fact in the lives of youth. Most neighborhood people now understand that we can never hire enough youth workers to "correct" our young people. We see more clearly that there is no substitute for caring citizens and their associations. Indeed, it is growing common knowledge that we cannot create a community where people care for each other if our approach is to surround the citizens with social service institutions that push citizens and their associations aside. The result of this strategy has been to create dependent individuals rather than interdependent associations of care.

Second, local associations cannot only provide daily caring support, they also have unique capacities to respond in times of great stress and crisis. Whether, flood, fire or family crisis, associations are known for their quick response in mobilizing the caring capacities of local citizens. They are not burdened with the institutional weight of

planning committees, administrative staffs, case worker schedules, etc. And at their best they are able to mobilize many more people than paid systems can achieve.

Third, in a mass society we recognize the critical need for individual responses to individual dilemmas. Our not-for-profit service institutions have great difficulty developing programs that recognize the unique characteristics and needs of each person. Indeed, their strength is in their ability to mass produce because they are modeled after commercial systems of mass production. They can create minimum or uniform standards. But unique individuals are not their natural constituents.

Associations, on the other hand, are groups of people with names and unique characteristics known to their members. Individualization is necessary for their successful functioning. They must recognize the unique talents of each member and respond to their unique needs, often with the talents of other members. Because associations are so practical in individualization, they can provide critical personalized responses to members and non-members.

Fourth, associations provide a collective form of problem solving. They usually recognize and synthesize the unique ideas of each member. If they do not, they will atrophy or die because their association is voluntary and unrecognized members will leave. Through this synthesis, the ideas of individuals become the basis for transforming citizens into producers rather than consumers or clients.

The inverse is the institutional problem solving process based upon the work of managed professionals who see citizens as consumers, clients and sometimes advisers. At its base, the association is the place where citizens work and their problem definitions and solutions prevail. No institution can serve this function nor "produce" these solutions.

The fifth attribute flows from the fourth. We are clearly members of a technological society — the realm of experts, technicians and professionals. Each has a trained, specific, proprietary knowledge base. This knowledge is based upon a set of assumptions that necessarily lead to what Jacques Ellul would call a "technological solution." Essentially, this is a solution that is produced by an institution. If it can't be institutionally produced, the expert has no other way. His/her only tool is a hammer.

Associations of citizens provide the other way, filling the vast space where institutional solutions cannot reach or fail. The critical difference is that the knowledge base of citizens is personal experience and common sense. This knowledge usually leads to distinctive problem definitions and solutions. And it is these solutions that provide a valuable counter balance or alternative to the narrow world of technical answers. The American revolution was the result of citizens called to action based upon Common Sense.

Sixth, associations provide citizens one of the two means by which they can use their political power in a democracy. Tocqueville recognized the fact that the citizen's power to vote was a necessary but limited power. It is, after all, the power to give your power away — if you are in the majority.

In "discovering" American associations he recognized that he had identified a second powerful citizen role in a democracy, the power of association. In association he saw Americans making power. In voting he saw them delegating power. "Democracy In America," he understood, was a new form because it was not just voting, as in Europe. Rather it was a much more potent democracy because citizens had power to act through association. This action also manifested their sense of responsibility.

We hear a great deal today of the feeling of frustration and powerlessness of many citizens. Our unique form for their empowerment is associations. Our not-for-profit

institutions cannot fulfill this function and in many cases they are the institutions toward which people feel powerless.

Seventh, community associations proliferate to incorporate people of all conditions, capacities and interests. In their diversity they can create places for all, fulfilling the democratic ideal of universal participation. In this proliferation, they are reminiscent of another democratic bulwark, freedom of speech. Just as the answer to bad speech is more speech, so negative or exclusive associations are met by the creation of positive and inclusive ones.

In their diversity they empower the greatest number of people to be productive. Our three institutions, however, each ration power for the few at the top of the hierarchy and generally claim that their rewards go to those of greatest excellence. In this sense, most institutional participants in hierarchies are necessarily losers in the reach for power.

In associations, however, strength is in their ability to maximize the power of every member.

The eighth unique associational attribute flows from the seventh. As associations proliferate, the space for leadership multiplies. And as leadership of each association rotates, the experience proliferates. In this way, America's great space for leadership development is in associational life.

The contrasting leadership opportunities in institutional hierarchies are limited by their very pyramidal structure. Here, the common experience is competition to be a leader. In associational space, the common experience is an offering to be a leader.

Ninth, associations provide a vital mediating function in societies dominated by institutions. As mega systems grow in power, individuals are increasingly overwhelmed and overpowered in pursuit of their purposes. However, as members of associations they gain power as their associations negotiate a citizen's place for their members. This advocacy role of associations greatly magnifies the capacity of citizens to influence the policies and practices of institutions in ways that can never be replaced by institutional creations such as citizen advisory boards or consumer representatives.

Tenth, recent research suggests that a rich network of local associations is the nest from which enterprises grow. These studies indicate that rather than institutional enterprise programs, we may be better advised to support the growth and connectedness of associations if we are to enhance our local economies. This support would include policies leading not-for-profit institutions to reduce those activities and programs that replace or repress associational functions and connections.

Eleventh, associations provide the basic context for the formation and expression of citizen opinions and values. This is true whether the association is intentionally focused on issues, i.e. League of Women Voters, or is a gathering of people whose affinity is gardening or bowling. It is in these consenting affinity groups that the shift of opinion and value is most common.

Associations are the forum for democracy that is based upon the debate and dialogue of citizens. A democracy of isolated citizens whose only vote is a weak form that is an assembly of opinion rather than the collective wisdom generated by a citizen marketplace.

Twelfth, associations are historically the seed bed from which the more formalized systems grow. They have nurtured enterprises, educational institutions, medical

initiatives, charities, cultural and religious institutions. This is an ongoing function that is vital to our national renewal.

Today we are facing the limits of many of our aging traditional institutions. Large city schools seem unable to educate effectively. Criminal justice systems fail to reform. Welfare systems fail to support people who become productive citizens. Medical systems contribute very little to the public health.

In the face of these limits we are investing incredible technical and financial resources in institutional reform that has had quite limited effect.

At the same time, our associations are hard at work inventing alternative and effective forms that still "elude the observations" of policymakers. We see a multitude of local community initiatives to create new educational forms or appropriate new schools. Associational efforts to provide alternatives for youth have proliferated across the nation. Church and other associational initiatives are creating new approaches to introducing and supporting marginalized people as productive citizens. Local "healthy community" initiatives are creating effective new means of actually improving health status.

What has most clearly "eluded" many institutional reformers is the fact that the old systems may now be inappropriate. In many cases, the ability to "observe" the associational inventions may suggest the form of new institutions rather than the reform of outdated structures.