



THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGE OF COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY

Based on interviews with Garland Yates by journalist Tim Saasta, with contributions from Peter Pennekamp and the Community Democracy Workshop family

Prepared by the

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INTRODUCTION

Peter Pennekamp and Garland Yates

During long careers of trying in numerous ways to facilitate change in mostly low-income communities, we've learned a lot about what works and what doesn't. Here, we've captured *what* we've learned in the phrase "community democracy" and how we want to communicate it in the word "workshop."

More than 25 years ago, the Ford Foundation launched the Neighborhood and Family Initiative, one of the sector's first "comprehensive" and "place-based" community-change initiatives intended to transform low-income communities. Since then, dozens of other foundations and some governments have launched ambitious community-change initiatives. With many low-income communities still mired in deep and multi-generational poverty, and with economic inequality still growing nationally, it is easy to dismiss these initiatives as well-meaning disappointments. Many foundations that invested heavily in place-based change have shifted approaches, focusing now on new initiatives with easily measured results over relatively short lifespans.

The Aspen Institute's 2010 report, *Voices from the Field III*, reviewed 48 funder-sponsored community-change initiatives and concluded that, while they could show "accomplishments at the programmatic, community and system levels," most had "not produced the degree of community transformation envisioned by their designers."

And yet, the concept of community change has continued to capture the imagination of foundations and others who are frustrated by the documented limitations of single-issue initiatives, such as programs focused on improving low-income neighborhood public schools or on decreasing the rate of preventable diseases, which in lacking community context, have not delivered positive results.

We have seen success and impact in efforts led by individuals and communities across the country, and across different cultures and demographics. At their core, their successes share one key attribute; they are led by, and realized in collaboration with, the people directly involved and affected. In these efforts, community members—working together and with others—build their own capacity, as well as the capacity of institutions whose decisions affect them. By understanding and learning to employ their communities' many assets, they demonstrate their power to improve their own communities.

Such is our key learning from work on community democracy, and at the heart of what we explore in this report. In the end, the answers are practical and not at all romantic. Communities are romanticized or exoticized to their detriment. We use our own experience, the work of the Community Democracy Workshop, and what we've learned from others to deliver context and perspective. We also hope that what we've learned will reinforce and contribute to the work of people already walking the community democracy path, and help inspire others to reflect on their current practices.

¹ Kubisch, Anne C., Patricia Auspos, Prudence Brown, and Tom Dewar. 2010. *Voices from the Field III: Lessons and Challenges from Two Decades of Community Change Efforts*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute.3

WHY “COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY”?

Democracy isn't just about voting. It is also about people coming together to define their community's needs, tap their community's assets (labor, knowledge, relationships, wisdom) and realize their capacity to meet these needs. This is why “community democracy” rings true with us. Other common terms—“civic capacity or engagement,” “resident engagement,” “deliberative democracy”—don't capture the essence or complexity of what is needed to actually solve problems and change a community over time.

Community democracy involves finding common ground.

“Community democracy” involves compromising and finding common ground in spite of, and often because of, our differences. It also means holding on to what matters—those things we should not bargain away. There are always tensions in the communities we've worked in—there is always a history, there are always differences—and these are heightened when people in these communities work with people and institutions that exist outside the community. We've observed many times that tension from these differences can be a powerful force for innovation and adaptation, both in communities and in institutions. But we've also learned that, when you keep these differences bottled up, they can be a powerful force against change.

Democracy means more than voting.

Many of us have struggled for years to increase turnout, mainly by removing barriers to voter participation by low income and minority people we work with. But perhaps the main reason so many people don't vote is that they don't believe it makes a difference in their lives and communities. This is a more fundamental problem within and for democracy than any specific barrier. Issues on the ballot are generally chosen by other people living elsewhere and under other economic circumstances, leaving low income and minority communities wondering, “How does voting impact my life in ways that matter? What concrete changes will I see in my community and my kids' schools, in the way we're policed and how much we're paid?”

Until community members make the connection between voting and actual, on-the-ground change and until electoral politics begin to reflect what people care about in their communities, many people won't care to get involved. Voting is essential, but by itself it's not enough.

“Community capacity” is broadly understood in an upside-down way.

Communities have a *latent capacity* to solve problems that in some regards both far exceeds and in other ways complements the capacity of the nonprofit, public, and foundation sectors. These institutional sectors operate within social and legal frameworks that are systemically limited and that do not and cannot meet the complex on-the-ground dynamics in ways that are required for change. Most “community building” by institutions is actually an effort to make the community act more in accord with the institution's own limitations and expectations. This, in turn, actually lessens the essential, if latent, capacity that communities possess.

When institutions are more aware of the limitations of their own capacity and understand the potential of a community's capacity in its own right, the doorway to improved outcomes opens

dramatically, allowing for outcomes that both community members and institutions savor. In this way, community democracy turns the relationships upside down, that is, it completely restructures the relationship that institutions have with communities and reflects a new understanding of who needs to do what and who gets to decide how to approach the problem solving.

One of the great potentials of the community work that foundations and other institutions are trying to do is that, if done adequately, people in communities will start to see that their own actions can lead to concrete changes in their lives and in that of their community. They might then be able to stop living the lie that some outside expert can make a better choice.

In addition, it must be noted that foundations and other institutions also typically look to content experts from outside the community to guide work inside a community. This only replicates the failure of the electoral system to make community leadership and responsibility meaningful.

LEARN BY DOING

As much as we've read about this work and about poverty, we've learned the most from our experiences working with communities and with a variety of institutions that aim to serve communities, including funders. It is relatively easy to write or talk about how to do the work of community democracy: "You need to engage many residents and local groups." "You need to help people find common interests and begin to work together." "You need to engage and build connections between communities and the people and institutions with resources." What is hard is how to *do* all these things, how to *do* the work. It requires examining the following and other questions:

- How do people come to grasp that it is not only their right but their responsibility to insist on community leadership and governance?
- How do community members select their own most deeply held priorities and then lead in the effort to respond to those priorities?
- How do people select their own peer leaders?
- What can help people look beyond their narrow self-interest to identify and commit themselves to a common self-interest?
- How is a sense of common purpose built among people who have often competed with each other for power and resources?
- What will help build connections and communication among individuals with very different perspectives and life experiences?
- What roles can philanthropy and other institutions best play in this work?
- How do philanthropy and other institutions wean themselves of elevating content experts over the experts whose experience has been gained living in place and learning from that life?

Well-explored answers to these questions and others exist, but they are not concentrated in any one place and they certainly are not systematized. Not only are these resources hard to find, but they differ enormously in their relevance as the context varies from community to community. This is why it is critical to learn how to do this work through an experiential, hands-on approach. This is what we mean by workshop—mentoring, coaching, and small group training.

WHY HAVE SO MANY PHILANTHROPIC, PLACE-BASED, COMMUNITY-CHANGE INITIATIVES STRUGGLED?

In addition to the reasons already suggested, philanthropy's struggle to get this right often reflects the tensions within funding programs that simultaneously support efforts to build a community's capacity while also trying to measure the impact based on narrowly and externally-defined outcomes or populations. Struggle can also arise when funders change the goals of an initiative mid-way through. More than once, we've seen a shift from the goal of stimulating a community-led process for change to a goal that expects tightly-defined outcomes (e.g. an increase in reading scores or a decrease in joblessness).

Both communities and organizations need to insist that limited or incompatible funding objectives be reconciled before an initiative is launched. A particularly common and vexing dysfunction of foundations occurs when they gloss over their own internal disagreements in decision making. As a direct outcome of the resulting mixed messages and confused implementation, great damage can be done to the supposed beneficiaries.

The tension between funding programs oriented toward narrow outcomes and those dedicated to community building is real. Why?

- Place matters in complex ways in people's lives, and no one lives in the silos that have been invented to measure narrow outcomes. Children need to grow up in a nurturing environment that is safe and healthy, yet they and their parents live in communities that are not easily or accurately simplified for the sake of measuring change. This place, their complex environment, is where many of their social connections are, where the kids go to school. And place is where poverty is highly concentrated. Across the country, 14% of children (approx. 10 million) are now living in high-poverty communities (a poverty rate above 30%), according to the KIDS COUNT Data Center of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.²
- Comprehensive community-change initiatives have struggled due to a lack of understanding that communities and families face interrelated barriers. There isn't just one cause, and thus there isn't just one solution. For example, not having affordable housing or decent jobs forces many families to move, disrupting their children's community schooling and reliable friendships. An environmental problem like high levels of lead in the soil or water can lead to other problems in the community, such as children dropping out of school, spikes in crime, and poor health. A queer woman of color living in urban poverty will experience challenges different from a white man living in rural poverty.
- Comprehensive community-change initiatives usually start with an emphasis on a community process to help define outcomes, and then move to a more funder-defined and funder-controlled process to ensure that the money being invested produces some measurable results. This pattern can end up doing more harm than good. It builds up community expectations only to ultimately reinforce the sense of powerlessness and isolation that these communities already experience.

² The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>.

WHAT TO DO?

Perhaps the core lesson we've learned is that institutions that want to be effective working *in* low income communities must get much better working *with* these communities. We believe that the lack of heartfelt and purposeful, long-term engagement based on trust is the biggest undermining factor preventing sustainable change over time.

Building relationships between funder and community seems like a simple principle to embrace. Indeed, most if not all funder-supported, place-based initiatives over the years have included a "resident-engagement" component. With some notable exceptions however, most of these efforts to engage a community have not been calibrated for success from a community's perspective or experience, and hence do not result in the ownership required for change. The usual oppressive excuse that foundations use for this is that the community, not the foundation lacked capacity.

Whenever CDW goes into a new community we look at the history of change initiatives in that community. Often there is a history of disappointments, and any new attempt to bring about change has to address this history and the lack of trust that now permeates the community as a result.

Through decades of observation, we've come to believe that a significant snag in efforts to foster community problem-solving power is that most institutions—foundations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations—don't know how to work in low-income communities or how to be part of a community's *indigenous process* for making these communities better places to live. They have neither the patience nor commitments to community-led success, nor are held accountable for the frequent failures of imposed problem solving efforts and the damage caused. The reasons to change this are obvious.

THE REAL WORK: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY-LED, DEMOCRACY-BUILDING PROCESS

Many of us have learned through experience that we don't have a deep enough understanding of how an *indigenous* community-change *process* works. Nor have we gained an effective understanding or appreciation for the skills necessary to facilitate this process and help build a strategy around it. We also aren't adequately conscious of the dynamics and inner-workings (historic, economic, cultural, social, and psychological) of the communities we want to help. If we do this work, we have to recognize that it will always be in development. We will always be able to improve.

We have learned that community-change initiatives have to begin with a period of time devoted almost exclusively to bringing community members and other "stakeholders" together. This often requires several trust-building steps before people are ready to experience the discomfort of their differences in background and power, to build relationships across lines of difference, and to

develop common priorities and a plan and strategy for change. This plan must both include honest differences and develop ways to negotiate them overtime. We have come to expect an absolute minimum of six months and up to a year or more for this process.

The most meaningful results usually emerge from this process of bringing people together. Unfortunately, ready or not, there is usually a distracting rush to get to what is often considered the “real work” of implementation by the initiative managers, who are driven to meet internal expectations of the organizations they work for. Perhaps paradoxically, we find that no one wants real results as much as the people living in the community and in the circumstance for which change is desired. We’ve learned that the organizational drive for results will produce failure unless the community has realized the capacity to identify, design, and lead the development of specific strategies to produce and sustain the results.

This problem is much deeper than simply a dichotomy between process and results. What institutions often miss is that the “real work”—the work that will actually make a difference over time—is the community-led, democracy-building process. The process of building and strengthening a community is inseparable from the process of changing that community. It is the process of residents finding better ways to solve community problems, developing their own capacities, connecting with the resources their community needs, and, through this work, building the power to lead and sustain change. It is when these capacities and connections are developed that you begin to see “real results.”

COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Building capacity is at the heart of the work of community democracy. It involves much more than simply teaching some of the community residents how to run a meeting or put together a community plan. Community democracy is both the means to and the result of effective community problem solving. It is realized when:

- People from very different realities build relationships, work together, learn from each other, and know each other as individuals, not simply as representatives of neighborhoods, institutions, and organizations.
- Community members learn how to collect, hold, and wield the power they need for change and learn how to practice wielding that power to identify and solve problems.
- Community members with knowledge and experience gain enough confidence and knowledge to talk about their ideas and the realities of their lives with people who they identify as having money and power.
- Building relationships and sharing power involves not only “stakeholder” organizations but also having individual and organized community members at the table. It is especially about building honest relationships between people in institutions and people in communities.
- Space is created where the tensions in the meeting room are addressed not avoided. In particular, it allows addressing the tensions that exist when institutions that seem, from a community perspective, to be powerful and wealthy try to work with people who have little experience of power or wealth and who are often different racially and culturally.

- People—both community people and “professionals”—understand what brings about long-term, fundamental change. For CDW, “helping” has involved learning and teaching about the critical role that organizing and movement building have always played in changing the conditions that affect the viability of communities.
- Small, short-term success is a springboard to much larger, longer-term, shared success.

A key objective for what we do and for the work of the Community Democracy Workshop is to help many more people understand the importance of this process and what it takes to make this ongoing process of change successful.

WHY DO MANY INSTITUTIONS STRUGGLE WITH THE PROCESS OF ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE FROM LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES?

In its review of community-change initiatives, the Aspen Institute’s *Voices from the Field III* report found several reasons why the best of the initiatives it studied worked. The reasons included clarity about the mission and “the capacity of a community to set agendas, gain access to resources, and respond to community needs.” The report concluded that a core assumption of successful initiatives was that community-building efforts would “generate the necessary alignment among stakeholders.”

The report elaborated on this point by saying:

As it has turned out, alignment has been harder to achieve than was anticipated. It does not automatically result from a one-time community planning process or a foundation-sponsored initiative. The alignment that is needed is about fundamental ways of working, and it addresses goals, activities, capacities, relationships, and learning priorities.

The Aspen report’s concluding paragraph calls for “new ways of being strategic...new ways of managing the work... new forms of accountability... new ways of defining success ...new ways of learning.” Learning and teaching about new ways to do each of these tasks in community-change initiatives is exactly what Community Democracy Workshop does. We believe a reluctance to fundamentally rethink how funders and others work with low-income communities is why so many community-change initiatives have struggled.

As we look back on the initiatives we’ve worked on or learned about, we see three core reasons for why this work has been very hard for many funders and why they’ve often been reluctant to find “new ways” to do this work.

1. There is unavoidable discomfort on the path to real change.

But when traveled skillfully, the uncomfortable path also delivers some extraordinary human learning and connection. It can be transforming for individual human beings as well as for communities and institutions.

To be successful, this work requires funders and institutional staff to work in communities that are quite different from the communities they understand—culturally, socially, and economically. To get anything done, relationships have to be built with people who have different backgrounds, expectations, and realities. Getting “it” wrong is at first far easier and more common than getting it right. This is very hard for high achievers, whether they are field staff or those they report to.

Working in and *with* low-income and often segregated communities is not a comfortable environment for many people, on *both* sides of the relationship. Community people are even more uncomfortable than people from outside. For good reason, they are distrustful of being in an environment with institutional staff. Miscommunication is inevitable and aligning expectations is far more difficult than anyone expects. The work of building relationships and partnerships across differences takes time, openness, and a variety of skills.

An accomplished evaluator of community change characterized the work as “the messy human stuff.” The process provokes fundamental change in people with radically different lives, races, histories, cultures, and much more. A process like this which is about authentic no-bull change must be immersed in and about the “messy human stuff” to succeed.

2. It is usual to under-appreciate and simply not understand both how hard and how necessary “process work” is.

Often institutions ask their existing staff to organize and lead a process to bring a broad range of people and organizations together around the institution’s core ideas. Inclusivity, that widely over-used and misunderstood concept, is usually demanded. To us, it’s a little like asking program officers with little or no appropriate training to pull teeth or fix engines. Leading “process work” like this demands a very different and demanding set of focused training and skills. For example, a maxim of CDW is that community organizing is essential but not enough.

The work takes more than “people skills.” Certainly the ability to work effectively with a broad range of people is critical in the work. But just as critical is the ability to analyze a community, its institutions and organizations, its history, its politics, its existing ways of getting things done from a community perspective. All this and more is going to come into play when you are trying to bring people and institutions together.

The ability to think strategically about the process is also critical. Who needs to be at the table? Who decides and who invites them? What are their self-interests? What can they learn from the process and from the others around the table? How do you lift up the community’s needs and capabilities while retaining the involvement of key institutions and others? What are the unspoken tensions? How hard do you push to get those tensions addressed and when in the process?

The work is ongoing. As we’ve noted, people in many institutions think that, after a short process of bringing people together, you get on with the “real work.” They believe that a new skill-set is needed at this point to manage the work, someone who has programmatic and/or organizational skills more than process skills. But thinking that the process of building the capacity for an initiative is time-limited might be the biggest mistake many funders make. If anything, it is the

process you want to make sure is sustained after your institution and its money have left the community. You want to leave behind strong relationships across communities and sectors, strong organizations and strong individuals who are committed to long-term change and know how to achieve it.

3. The race to results often produces failure.

We have said this elsewhere but it needs repeating. Communities that, due to oppression, have deteriorated for generations or sometimes centuries don't get stronger overnight. This is true no matter how large the outside investment or how good the "theory of change." A community also doesn't get stronger without an investment in strengthening its "infrastructure"—its people, its organizations, the relationships inside and outside itself, and the knowledge and confidence of its individual residents. This would be like expecting an underdeveloped country to suddenly improve its economy without any improvement in its infrastructure. The capacity-building process must be matched by the development of an infrastructure to support the capacity. When you take the time to do this, to really engage a community in the process of change, the results are inevitably stronger.

We understand why organizations want to see results from a big investment in a community. In fact, the community wants to see results more than anyone. They are the people who live there. They are the primary stakeholders. But who gets to decide what those results should be?

Many initiatives start with a community process, but then institutions try to measure *programmatic* results like improvements in reading scores. They *don't* measure the strength of the capacity-building process. But if that process doesn't succeed, our experience indicates that the initiative will fall apart shortly after the money stops. We need to get much better at measuring the process of building a community's capacity and when it starts leading to change. We also need to get better at educating foundation boards of trustees and staff about the way measurable change in a community's capacity will lead to measurable change in that community over time.

One reason to build a community's capacity is so it can continue to push for results long after the initiative ends. To really engage a community's capacity and assets, the desired results need to be owned by the community. Unfortunately, it's often the funder's "theory of change" that determines which results are "important." We aren't suggesting that only the community should decide; the decision making needs to be shared. But the community needs to be at the heart of the decision making and the action that follows. One goal of this community-building process is to develop a shared agenda that reflects the community's ideas and needs as well as those of the institutions that are engaged. The institutions, however, need to know that without deep, authentic, and tested ownership by the community, no enduring results will be realized.

4. Culture and class is usually a barrier in developing a shared agenda.

Most people we've known who work for funders are smart and committed. They may have gone to excellent schools and think deeply about poverty and other societal issues they care about. Even so, the experience of constantly being in an intellectual and competitive environment influences the way they work with low-income people and communities.

As Peter Pennekamp and Anne Focke wrote in *Philanthropy and the Regeneration of Community Democracy*, many people assume, consciously or unconsciously, that “possession of greater material wealth or professional expertise is necessarily accompanied by superior skills to make things better no matter what the circumstance.”³

It’s simply assumed that people with these assets know more. This top-down cultural presumption extends to narrow beliefs about the identification, measurement, and evaluation of effective philanthropic practice.

A community will only be deeply engaged if an initiative’s work resonates with its residents. To truly engage a community, the issue to be addressed has to rise to the surface *within* that community in the absence of outside agendas or funding priorities. Outside support might well affect a community’s short-term strategies and tactics, but for sustainable change the overriding goal has to come from that community.

CONCLUSION: POWER AND INFLUENCE

A conclusion that we draw from our work with Community Democracy Workshop is that institutions have to be prepared to change when choosing to engage in this work. To put a fine point on it, all of us want change, but we generally want to stay in control while someone else does the changing. This process must be about changing power relationships, which means loosening the reins of control that institutions now have. For we who are staff and leaders of institutions, a big part of this work is facilitating a process for change within *our* institutions. In many cases, when an institution has actually helped change a community, it too has gone through a profound change.

When community democracy is alive and active, it changes not just underserved communities and their residents but also every individual and institution sitting at the table. To have an impact beyond a single, specific change, a community-change process has to stimulate change on many levels—the personal as well as the organizational, in communities and in institutions. We’ve witnessed changes like this. We’ve seen foundations completely change their priorities. We’ve seen long-time opponents change how they perceive each other in ways that lead to an agreement that previously had been inconceivable.

The barriers to community democracy are enormous, systematic, and dispersed. Yet it will not be the next app, theory of change, or cool idea that makes this country suddenly more democratic, inclusive, or effective. It will be through hard work by smart, everyday people from many walks of life that realistic trust will be built and hope as a nation will be rekindled. This may seem like a slow process in a rush-rush society, but the alternatives consistently disappoint. We at the Community Democracy Workshop have been fortunate to see many instances of real change, led by community-rooted peer leaders and institutions willing to stand apart from the crowd. It is them we salute and to them we are committed.

³ Pennekamp, Peter H., with Anne Focke, *Philanthropy and the Regeneration of Community Democracy*, Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, 2013.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Garland Yates, Managing Director of the Community Democracy Workshop, has dedicated his 30-year professional career to championing equal rights and justice, working with people to build capacity, power and cross-sector partnerships to drive positive change in their communities. Throughout, Garland has contributed to numerous boards, commissions and frontline efforts to expand grassroots impact. In addition, he has held staff positions with the Center for Community Change, the Annie E. Casey Foundation through the foundations' Rebuilding Communities and Making Connections Comprehensive Community Change Initiatives, and the Neighborhood Funders Group. Following Hurricane Katrina, Garland also designed a grassroots funding strategy for the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation that centered residents' engagement in the Post Katrina reconstruction of New Orleans.



Peter H Pennekamp, a senior fellow with the Community Democracy Workshop, has worked to advance and elevate an inclusive American experience—expanding notions of who we are, the histories we tell and how we tell them—throughout his career in the arts, radio and philanthropy. He has held leadership positions with the National Endowment for the Arts, National Public Radio, and the Humboldt Area Foundation. Additionally, in collaboration with host and director Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Peter helped develop *Wade in the Water*, a 26-hour radio series on Music of the African American Tradition, a Peabody Award-winning production created in partnership with National Public Radio and the Smithsonian Institute. Peter also co-authored *Philanthropy and the Regeneration of Community Democracy*, published by the Kettering Foundation, and guest-edited a special issue of the *National Civic Review on Philanthropy and Resident Engagement*.

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COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY WORKSHOP PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The purpose of the Community Democracy Workshop is to help people and institutions understand why the transformative work of community building must be done by community members themselves, and to understand how this hard work happens.

We follow three strategies to do this:

- 1** We work directly with community people who are working for changes they want to see.
- 2** We help build knowledge and develop tools that communities and institutions can use to bring about these changes.
- 3** We develop practitioners who can support and learn from each other and who can make the case for this approach to community change.

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