



Civil Society, the Public Sector, and Poor Communities

G. Thomas Kingsley and James O. Gibson

The current devolution debate has focused on shifting responsibilities from the federal level to the states. A byproduct of this shift has been renewed attention to an often neglected element of the policy mix—the costs and benefits of different *local* institutional arrangements—and to the potential roles of civil society and community-based initiatives in that mix. The local tableau has recently been rediscovered as a vital leg on which the performance of the public sector is dependent.

Students of government are only beginning to understand this play between civil society and the public sector. Here we focus especially on the dynamics within poor communities, where simple assistance is no longer considered adequate to solve problems without the necessary institutional infrastructure that is sometimes included under the label “civil society.”

Civil society itself is hard to define: here we take it to comprise the broad range of institutions outside of government—including civic associations, nonprofits, churches, and neighborhood clubs—that contribute to the public good. The strength and character of local civil society, the effectiveness of local government, and the way the two interrelate are sure to affect the outcomes of devolution. These factors will also help shape our views of how we want the public sector to perform in the 21st century.

Cautious Attitudes about Civil Society

Civil society is big news in the press and in large parts of the foundation community.

Because its definition is so ephemeral, however, a number of analysts are skeptical about using it as a tool of public policy. Moreover, the term is sometimes used by different people to justify larger or smaller government. Thus, some fear that civil society is simply a ploy to replace government, while others view it as a mere smoke-screen for increasing government spending through nongovernmental intermediaries. But strengthening civil society is a means of improving governance more broadly

rather than simply expanding or diminishing it. Experience has shown that when nongovernmental institutions become partners with public agencies, they can sometimes accomplish things that have proved difficult for government to do alone.

Another reason why civil society is being rediscovered is that, although policy analysts for a long time gave more attention to national-level action, personal interactions with and through civic institutions take place predominantly at the local level. It is there that Americans more directly encounter private service provision and most often participate in governance, community input, and advocacy activities. Moreover, evidence is increasing that differences in local circumstances (such as variations in neighborhood conditions and administrative effectiveness) can have marked impacts on the outcomes effected by federal or state policies.

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understanding fully the dynamics of this interaction between the public sector and civil society. Nonetheless, a closer examination of this relationship is required, if for no other reason than we have turned to devolution as a mechanism to improve lives, particularly those of the poor.

Civil Society and Its Potential Role in Poor Communities

A few decades ago, many of the debates over the state versus the individual role in fostering the public good tended to overlook the importance of mediating structures such as civil society institutions. Not so today. Strong networks of such institutions and active public participation in them provide what, in 1988, James Coleman termed “social capital.” Social capital, he argued, was as vital to effective societal functioning as physical and human capital. More recently, Robert Putnam’s concept of “bowling alone” has lent the idea more prominence. He posits that a drop in civic engagement has eroded the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions.

The concept of civil society as a partner to, rather than replacement for, the public sector was advanced by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in their popular 1992 book, *Reinventing Government*. They called for government officials to “steer” rather than “row” by mobilizing partnerships and nongovernmental initiatives in support of public goals rather than trying to do it all through public bureaucracies. Peter Drucker echoed this in 1994, when he proposed creating a “separate and new social sector”—that is, charitable and community organizations and other nonprofits providing social services long considered the province of public agencies. One can debate how much “new” each of these authors really discovered, even whether civic engagement has declined or increased in the aggregate. Their writings reveal, nonetheless, the abandonment of a type of thinking

that considered government as acting in isolation on groups of citizens.

When it comes to inner-city neighborhoods, the idea of empowering poor people and communities to address their problems is not new. Recently, however, there has been a change in thinking: a wider consensus that money alone is inadequate without strong civic institutions within poor communities. This has led to approaches like that of McKnight and Kretzmann of Northwestern University, who argue for reinvigorating poor neighborhoods by relying on the strengths of local social and civic networks and organizations. A key element of this strategy is that it is driven from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The idea is premised on the belief that a community can build on its civil society assets. The community, under this

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vision, creates partnerships across existing neighborhood institutions and between institutions and residents. Residents then take the lead role in designing and implementing strategies for community improvement.

Local Civil Society Expansion

Despite the “bowling alone” hypothesis raised in 1993 by Robert Putnam, who argues that Americans are no longer civic-minded, there is also evidence that participation in some civic institutions and in public-civic partnerships is gaining ground. The examples below are not exhaustive. They are chosen to illustrate emerging efforts that are reshaping residents’ ideas and expectations about the role of the public sector versus their own role in improving their communities.

Neighborhood-Level Action

A survey by the Citizens Committee for New York City, which trains and advises neighborhood civic associations, indicates that the number of such groups in that city increased by 129 percent from 1977 to 1995. Last year the *New York Times* reported that, fueled by shrinking government budgets, these groups were moving beyond their adversarial relationship with government agencies and forming partnerships with them instead. In some cases they were removing their own graffiti, hiring their own security guards, refurbishing their own parks, and patrolling their own schoolyards.

Growth of Community Nonprofits

More impressive may be the expansion of community development corporations and other community-based nonprofits that have focused on housing rehabilitation and development in poor neighborhoods. Of the little information that exists, one survey indicates that about 2,000 such institutions were active in 1993—up from less than 200 in the mid-1970s. These groups have been strengthened by the financial support, technical assistance, and networking opportunities provided by national intermediaries. By far the largest of these intermediaries are the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Enterprise Foundation. Since its inception in 1979, LISC has raised \$880 million from private sources to support 875 community development corporations in 30 cities and regions. Founded in 1982, to date the Enterprise Foundation has raised \$2 billion in private capital to support the development of over 61,000 housing units and other community development activities.

Private Support for Comprehensive Community-Building Strategies

In addition, national foundations and local supporters are funding more comprehensive community-building initiatives—that cut across and set priorities among traditionally separate functional areas such as crime prevention, education, job creation, and

housing. A review of 50 of these initiatives suggests that the more holistic approach is spreading rapidly. LISC is now encouraging its local affiliates to move beyond housing production to address neighborhood problems and opportunities more broadly. In 1993, local groups in 22 cities supporting similar principles formed the National Community Building Network, which promotes successful strategies among members and advocates for members in national policy forums.

Local Government–Grassroots Collaborations

A number of local governments are involving grassroots organizations more directly in decisionmaking. Minneapolis's Neighborhood Revitalization Program, for instance, uses a mix of city and neighborhood funds to leverage external private financing for service delivery and revitalization projects. Residents and city/county agencies develop program plans collaboratively. Efforts to encourage community-based initiatives have also been documented in Richmond, Virginia; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Charlotte, North Carolina. Also, nongovernmental leadership coalitions are playing broader roles in local governance at the city and metropolitan levels. City leaders appear to be more willing than in the past to hook up with the private and nonprofit sectors to set goals, resolve conflicts, and develop consensus on regional interests.

Increased Local Foundation Involvement

Other important participants in these local coalitions are local philanthropic community foundations. Many have moved beyond traditional forms of giving, to the arts, for instance, and are now playing an active role in a range of new social service and urban improvement efforts. Local foundations are attracting a growing share of the nation's wealth through bequests. In 1994 they received more than \$1 billion in donations—50 percent more than in 1993—bringing their total national assets to \$10.4 billion.

Citywide Mechanisms to Support Neighborhoods

Finally, in cities such as Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, and Oakland, new city-level nongovernmental intermediaries have been established explicitly to back neighborhood groups in their community-building efforts. These mechanisms also act as a bridge between neighborhoods and outside

agency" in a given neighborhood, such as a church or community association, for handling the care and monitoring of troubled families.

Taking Advantage of Local Civil Society

Strengthening civil society institutions and the mechanisms for forming public-private partnerships is no panacea for eradicating the nation's social and economic ills. Bolstering civic engagement in and of itself will not produce the incentives needed to promote interregional equity. Nor do private, nonprofit, and church groups have anywhere near the resources necessary to create a viable national social safety net. These are functions that government must continue to serve. Indeed, local participation by citizens in their own governance—like the concept of devolution itself—is no substitute for a sensible framework of policies set by higher levels of government. Relying upon, even strengthening, one leg of a stool does not mean that the other legs can be sawed off.

However, shoring up civic institutions at the community level, particularly in some poor areas where they may be weak, might well influence the effectiveness with which national policies are implemented locally and the way in which local actors respond to the problems and opportunities that

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public agencies and private leadership associations. A notable example is Oakland's Urban Strategies Council. It operates a sophisticated computerized information system to monitor neighborhood conditions and has used its data to motivate changes in perceptions and policies.

Contracting with Civic Organizations for Social Services

In the face of rapidly growing rates of child abuse and neglect, Los Angeles County has substantially reformed its approach to child welfare. It now contracts with a nongovernmental "lead

Related Reading

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confront them. If successful, active public participation in governance should make local governments more accountable, and encourage them to allocate resources more efficiently and equitably. It is important to remember that civil society's role vis-à-vis government potentially goes well beyond that of service provider. Participation in civil society organizations that monitor and advocate change within government can increase citizens' impact on the political process. Finally, the institutions of a strong civil society may be important bridges that move public dialogue away from what we demand of each other and toward what we need to do for each other.

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For a look at how some urban communities around the country are successfully using strategies to tap local assets for self-improvement, see Community Building: Coming of Age, by G. Thomas Kingsley, Joseph B.

McNeely, and James O. Gibson (Washington, D.C.: The Development Training Institute, Inc. and the Urban Institute, May 1997). In addition, the Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy is collecting and analyzing data on the formal and informal organizations that constitute civil society in the District of Columbia, using processes that will serve as a model for replicating the analysis in other communities.

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