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OPINION

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## Philanthropy Can't Solve the Toughest Problems Unless It Breaks Out of Silos

By Louise Lief

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The nonprofit I See Change began as a public-media project, helping farmers in western Colorado observe and record yearly changes on their land due to weather and climate by creating a communal digital Farmers' Almanac.

Then it started doing science. It joined forces with local media organizations, university-based scientists, and community groups in Harlem to investigate summer indoor-heat indexes for residents without air conditioning. Their findings raised important public-health issues, suggesting local governments should change the way they do heat advisories and organize cooling centers.

Next, the project went to New Orleans and worked with local residents to investigate and map flooding hot spots not recorded by the city's inadequate rain gauges and outdated flood maps. It collaborated with the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. The information it has generated will help pinpoint local flooding risks and assist the city in making better engineering choices and investment decisions in green infrastructure and storm-water management.

I See Change is versatile, collaborative, and multidisciplinary. But those very qualities present many foundation program officers with a dilemma. Is it a media program? A science program? A public-health program? A civics program? If the answer is yes to all of the above, which program track takes the lead? Which outcomes matter most?

It's much easier to fund projects that fit neatly into different program silos and pass on ones that don't. But that approach misses the benefits of powerful new forces that have led to the emergence of organizations like I See Change. Such projects defy easy categorization but can tap into diverse streams of knowledge for many purposes, packing a bigger punch and resulting in greater impact.

### **'New Power'**

Two books published this past year, *New Power*, by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, and *The New Localism*, by Bruce Katz and Jeremy Nowak, make it clear why the nonprofit world needs a lot more organizations operating in new ways.

Heimans and Timms call the top-down, command-and-control systems that characterize many organizations and government agencies "old power."

The phenomenon they consider "new power" is more horizontal than hierarchical and often involves business, government, nonprofits, and other organizations working together on an array of issues. It leans toward collaborative problem-solving and community participation. Their definition of power — "the ability to produce an intended effect" — emphasizes creating processes and feedback loops that tap into the public's collective intelligence and its hunger to get directly involved to solve problems and get things done.

Katz and Nowak focus on the role of different institutions at times when we need more cross-cutting ways to solve problems. They believe narrow approaches alone will not solve "wicked" problems — complex challenges that involve difficult trade-offs no matter which course of action is taken. They call for more collaboration between diverse players in and out of government at the local level, especially in the absence of meaningful action by states and the federal government.

### **Brokering Relationships**

In this picture, philanthropy is instrumental in brokering relationships between organizations in disparate spheres. Katz and Nowak describe at length the pivotal role foundations played in Pittsburgh and Indianapolis to help bring about those cities' economic resurgence after years of decline.

In Pittsburgh, local philanthropy joined forces with Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, industry, and local government to transform the aging Steel City into a thriving science and technology research hub.

In Indianapolis, philanthropists, business leaders, and universities created the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership to help build a range of innovative, high-value industries in the life sciences, medical and energy technologies, advanced manufacturing, and other fields to stimulate economic renewal.

### **Local Information**

The new power dynamics these authors describe can help foundations tackle emerging issues more nimbly and effectively. But to realize this great potential, philanthropy may have to rethink grant-making approaches.

Foundations in New Jersey and Kentucky offer hints of what this might look like. Strategies they have crafted to close gaps in the availability of critical local information are collaborative and multidisciplinary. They bear some of the hallmarks of new-power approaches and focus on problem-solving.

In New Jersey, the local Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and Community Foundation of New Jersey joined forces with the Democracy Fund and Carnegie Corporation to encourage new approaches to producing and distributing local news and other information. Since 2002, the news industry has lost around 27,000 newsroom jobs nationwide — almost a quarter of its work force — largely because of the loss of advertising revenue to online platforms like Google and Facebook. (In comparison, the coal industry lost 24,000 jobs during the same time period.)

In New Jersey one estimate showed that a third of news jobs have been eliminated since 2001. As a result, entire communities, particularly low-income ones, are often unable to find information they need about local civic matters and policies. In addition, the quality of news coverage at thinly staffed surviving news organizations has declined. Cutbacks, layoffs, and downsizing continue and have created a crisis in the quantity and quality of information on nearly every topic.

To turn the situation around, the foundations funded a number of local nonprofits that experimented with new approaches, surveyed communities, and conducted research to both get a better handle on the problem and envision possible solutions. They also began pushing for a public-private partnership to focus on and respond to community information needs.

This past summer, New Jersey's legislature allocated \$5 million to create a Civic Information Consortium to do just that. Anchored at five New Jersey universities, it is geared toward seeking community input and involves a range of nonprofits. The consortium can seek foundation grants. It will have a bipartisan board and safeguards against political interference.

## **Universities Are Key**

Note the key role of universities. They are local institutions that almost always play a critical role in the revival and renewal of places that have suffered economic reversals. The consortium gives them a central part to play in producing information about, for, and with their communities. It requires information-focused projects to work with a university but not necessarily with a media outlet.

Its definition of civic information is broad and flexible enough so that it opens the door to creative new expression. That might mean building apps that alert residents to local hazards or congestion or deploying portable, battery-powered local Wi-Fi network kits that give communities emergency communications capabilities during disasters like fires, floods, and hurricanes.

New Jersey lawmakers have introduced a new bill to ensure funding for the consortium in the governor's budget.

The Community Foundation of Louisville, in Kentucky, tackled a gap in government information that was hampering efforts to address local issues. As *The New Localism* notes and *I See Change* discovered, states and the federal government often do not collect the kind of granular data communities and institutions need to understand local problems and shape solutions.

To address this need, the Community Foundation of Louisville helped found the Greater Louisville Project with support from a consortium of mostly local grant makers. The project, which gives the University of Louisville a significant role, provides detailed research and analysis of key community indicators like jobs, education, health, and quality of place. It makes it easy to see how that data compares to 16 similar cities.

The effort helps create a shared knowledge base that nonprofits and others can use to inform and inspire civic action and to forge a common agenda that transcends political divisions.

Both the New Jersey and Kentucky projects will generate information that could be transformative. "When multiple disciplines collide, magic happens," write Katz and Nowak.

## **Neighborhood Residents Know Best**

Such collisions have spurred *I See Change*'s growth and natural evolution, which have developed in response to community needs rather than in to fit into foundation grant-making program silos. First it described, then diagnosed civic problems. Now it is trying to solve them. Community input and inclusive and participatory approaches are central to the enterprise. "No one knows their neighborhood better than the residents," says Julia Kumari Drapkin, chief executive of *I See Change*. Answers, she adds, can come from anywhere.

Currently, I See Change is brainstorming with communities about possible responses to the problems its staff and partners have uncovered, prompting a civic dialogue that will help local residents feel they can play a role in pushing for change.

And the organization is still evolving. Now the staff wants to know not only how the data it's generated is being used but also what decisions are being made because of it.

"Decisions," says Drapkin, "are where the rubber meets the road." Other nonprofits are also starting similar projects involving many causes that don't fit neatly into any program bucket, propelled by the same forceful dynamics as those that created I See Change.

How will foundations respond? They have legitimate concerns about spreading themselves too thin and trying to be all things to all people. They shouldn't do that. But incorporating various disciplines into blended approaches is not a sign of mission creep. As New Jersey, Louisville, and New Orleans have shown, when done strategically, it's a force multiplier.

There are signs philanthropy's millennials and postmillennials want more of these 21st-century methods. A recent report by Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy found that while young foundation staff members overwhelmingly support their organizations' missions, by and large they are dissatisfied. Only 40 percent feel their institutions are in touch with the needs of communities they support. Only 24 percent say communities they serve have a voice in decision-making, and only a quarter believe their organizations respond quickly to pressing community issues. Barely over half believe philanthropy is an effective player in social change.

They want fewer top-down approaches, more risk-taking, more impact, and more direct engagement with and accountability to communities. It sounds as if they're itching to try some new power approaches. Punching through a few program silos is a small price to pay for the substantial potential returns.

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