

## Equitable Participatory Civics in “Millennial” Times Why Knowledge Matters to Structural Change

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*Knowledge Designs to Change LLC believes that every nonprofit organization, every funder, every initiative, no matter what size or monetary value, operates within a potential network of change. Each effort can help build a more equitable, participatory civics and contribute to structural change. Figuring out how to change, and how to activate change, is what we call knowledge work.*

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Fast-paced; Information and technology rich; Institutional lite; High stakes; Quick mobilization; Decentralized voice and action; Multi-tasked to the max. Whether we are millennials by generation or not, this is our contemporary context. This is where civic sector leaders live. This is also where equity and change approaches often die amidst what feels like strategy overload – the constant flow of “new” ideas, packaged models, and ready-made techniques.

**What has happened?** Despite decades of investment into the civic sector, our social and political challenges -- institutionalized racism, poverty, gender inequity, and educational disparity -- are more entrenched than expected or hoped. We continue to see buzz words come and go and hear about increasing wealth and philanthropy as well as collective impact. Many organizations are doing good things and they are often doing good things together. Yet, these efforts are not adding up to what we want which is to change the trends of inequity.

**What do we do?** Some people are calling for *greater* change. Some folks say *deeper* change. I like to say *exponential* change. Regardless of terminology, we need to activate change that happens in leaps and bounds and beyond a single location, not sporadically or incrementally. When faced with structural inequity, positive change must outpace disparity and despair. One way toward exponential change is to integrate knowledge development that ties strategy design, implementation, and participation to intentional and focused impact. Today’s community, nonprofit, and philanthropic focus on collective impact and social movements requires a framework to bring together what we know about change approaches and what we experience as the structures of the civic sector itself. I believe a knowledge integration approach provides this framework.

**Why engage in knowledge work?** The conversations about learning in the civic sector are not new and have often paralleled corporate approaches to evaluation, data-based decision making, and even storytelling. These tools are useful, but they do not *necessarily* lead to structural change. Focusing on knowledge development, on the other hand, is essential to getting us to lasting structural change.

Here’s the difference:

**Learning** is a process that we do naturally as human beings that enables us to adapt, adjust, evolve, and survive amidst complexity. We can learn implicitly or reflect on learning explicitly. Learning is about pondering and coming to a deeper understanding. It can be formal or informal, designed or serendipitous, individual or collective.

**Knowledge**, however, is socially constructed and located specifically in place and time. It is about actively making meaning in interaction within a social context. Whether knowledge is spoken or not, it is public – it is voiced or expressed outwardly in some way. Knowledge is a deep embodiment of learning that ties together adaptation, shared meaning making, and human action. Although we can identify learning from the individual’s perspective, knowledge development is not personal alone. It is revealed in, and through, a shared public space.

Talking about knowledge in this way may sound esoteric or philosophical -- the thing we do when times are good and we have extra resources. This shouldn’t be the case. Knowledge work is what we *must* do if we truly want to affect structural inequity. Why? Because when knowledge work is done consistently and well, it means we apply a laser-like focus to issues of information and resource access, voice, and power. It also means that active and shared meaning-making informs, influences, and becomes public action itself. Unfortunately, knowledge development is rarely explicitly and effectively integrated into civic strategy.

Many colleagues over the years have commented on the seeming disconnect between knowledge work and action on-the-ground. They have taught me that it is critical to be explicit about how knowledge work directly connects to change strategy. I believe that I can do this with a framework that is based on **two realities, one story, and three focal points** that relate to you whether you are a grassroots organization, a nonprofit, a civic or professional association, public agency, or place-focused foundation -- any entity that operates in and through civil society issue networks.

**Reality One: Civil society is essential to representative democracy.** Civil society is made up of interactions and relationships that are necessary for information flow, problem solving, working out diversity of opinions, and negotiating power and resources. Civil space exists outside of the pressures and norms of formal government or business. It can therefore be a space where social and political (“little p”) innovation can happen – where people come together to figure out how to be together, and how to enact values and shared goals for how we want the world to become. Years of community and nonprofit investment into social innovation have taught us, however, that creativity alone does not equate to change, and, even when successful, change efforts don’t always go deep enough to address structural inequity.

**Reality Two: Equity in representative democracy is not a given nor an automatic outcome.** To be achieved, equity needs to be made intentional. Over the past decade, formalized civic society efforts have carried names such as “place-based development,” “comprehensive community initiatives,” and more recently, “network building,” “systems change,” and “collective impact.” Each has incorporated some form of capacity building and usually an inquiry approach (e.g. theory-of-change evaluation, network analysis, and results-based accountability) for tracking, documenting, and demonstrating.

Change efforts seem to be embracing more and more complex social and policy change approaches and understandings of system dynamics. However, since inequity itself is built into these systems, it is critical to address the ingrained structures that underlay and perpetuate those inequities. Current investments may seek to prompt systems change but may still miss the boat when it comes to altering actual structures.

**Story:** I have spent more than twenty years stepping around, treading through, splashing in, what I call knowledge work. I love exploring how people and groups make meaning out of experiences and I lament how we often create mechanisms for stability and comfort while espousing learning and change. Four specific experiences have led me to a knowledge framework that keeps me focused on structural change despite the resistance that can exist in nonprofit efforts themselves.

- I worked “inside the Beltway” for ten years on leadership development, neighborhood investment and community building;
- I conducted doctoral research examining a ten-year foundation funded community change initiative aimed at decentralizing learning and evaluation;
- I spent eight years with a progressive family foundation focusing on community engagement in education change; and
- I am creating an equity -driven knowledge practice for deepening socio-political change.

Some of my take-aways have been that:

- Policy advocacy is the most glamorous of change strategies but is only one component of structural change. It is easy to get caught up in, and enamored by, policy efforts (“little p” or “big P”) but this is a mistake.
- When civic initiatives exist in the nonprofit sector and are philanthropically funded, they operate in an institutionalized structure all their own. The nonprofit structure can be harnessed or can deter or deplete the energy and resources of social change.
- Despite good intentions, efforts to “decentralize data” often recentralize knowledge within existing power structures.
- The focus only on learning, within even the most progressive initiatives, has often served to make passive the action-oriented realities of knowledge work.

Effective stories include mechanisms to change within their interpretation. My experiences and have led my story to a focus on three knowledge targets for activating change strategy for sustained impact.

**These three knowledge targets are:**



**Organizational Engagement:** Focus on organizational trajectories toward engagement in processes of change networks. <sup>1</sup>



**Knowledge Capacity:** Focus on key knowledge skills and processes within issue network dynamics. <sup>2</sup>



**Situated Leadership:** Focus on paths and places where leadership energy is needed to achieve structural change goals. <sup>3</sup>

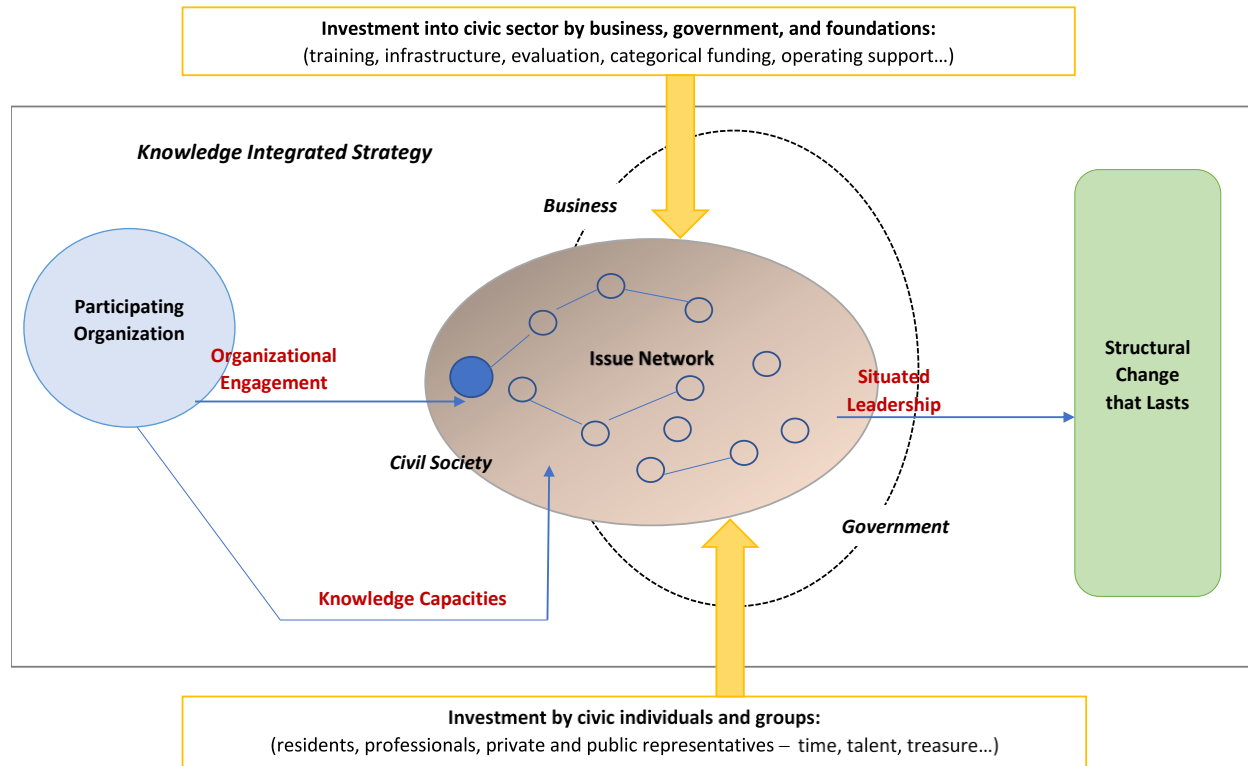
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<sup>1</sup> Frusciante, A. (2015). *Shifting from “evaluation” to “knowledge development:” A six-year example of philanthropic practice change and field-building. The Foundation Review, 6(2), 114-134.*

<sup>2</sup> Frusciante, A. (2004). *An analytic case study of the evaluation reports of a comprehensive community initiative. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park.*

<sup>3</sup> Frusciante, A. K. (2007). *Participatory democratic leadership. Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications*

The targets direct our attention alternatively inside organizations, on action together as a network, and on developing leadership throughout and across institutions and systems. One way to visualize these targets is to see them in the context of civic investments.



The thinking behind a **Knowledge Integrated Strategy** can be summarized as follows: Change efforts to achieve equity go beyond any one organization and must focus on socio-political dynamics and related structures. Socio-political structures are made up of practices – that are sometimes institutional or cultural, and are often codified in regulations, laws, and policies. Socio-political structures thus shape behavior, thinking, and unconscious beliefs.

Civil society issue networks can lead to structural change because they provide space for engagement across the boundaries of groups, sectors, institutions, and systems. As individuals, we are never independent from social, political, and institutional forces. However, engagement in civic space requires us to be both independent from those forces and affiliated within them, to be most effective. This is what makes civic networks seem so magical and yet so complex. Knowledge integration can help us navigate and harness this complexity.

For example, knowledge integration can reveal and address socio-political structures in areas such as: political will, popular opinion, institutional behavior, media representation, professional practice, private investment, governmental regulations, legal process, mainstream culture and public engagement. We start by developing organizational ability to engage in public space, a network's

knowledge capacities, and leadership within and across institutions and systems. Being specific about these strategic paths is crucial for achieving the structural change as sustainable impact that is the goal of knowledge work.

The critical understanding is that **knowledge work is the public action** that turns network activity into structural change. It is in public space, however, where the very socio-political forces that we seek to change exert the most control over access, voice, and power. And, so it goes. If we truly want to affect the trends of inequity, we need to do more, and do it more deeply, than we ever have before. Embracing knowledge development is essential to exponential change and is a necessity at this stage of our equity investments.

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*Knowledge Designs to Change, LLC is a mission focused practice that builds the capacity of nonprofit and community organizations, philanthropic investors, collaboratives, and initiatives to engage as change networks for structural change and sustained equity impact.*

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