

The Base of Powerful Movements: Understanding the Role of Local Associations

John McKnight

Co-Founder, Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

At this time when the American crisis has become nationally visible, a movement has emerged. Its manifestation is visible on streets across the country. Suddenly, the discussion is about the future. What are the right demands? How should they be implemented?

Some of the experience that can guide us today is embedded in the civil rights movement of the sixties. That movement is remembered today by its leaders whose voices endure. Voices like those of Rosa Parks, Dr. King, Ella Baker, Medgar Evers and John Lewis. One attribute of each of these people is that they were heard because they came from associations in their community and spoke for their members and allies. They grew out of churches, local chapters of civil rights groups, neighborhood organizations, choirs, some unions, supportive extended families, etc. When these leaders spoke it was not for themselves. But they were the voice of committed groups and local citizens. This constituency had three powerful effects.

First, it kept leaders anchored, relative and responsive. They were not free agents.

Second, it gave leaders they “people power” so their voice was not merely listened to. It was a voice respected because of the associational power behind their voice.

Third, their leaders’ voice did not quickly fade away after the marches stopped. They had staying power because of the continuity of the concern of the associations for which they spoke.

Their continuing associational focus resulted in major civil rights legislation and significant institutional policy change. The change these associated people achieved changed lives and opportunities. Their struggle was not in vain.

Today’s marchers stand on the shoulders of thousands of small groups whose members have now grown old and many have passed on. Today’s marches reignite the voices that have now grown hoarse or silent. And America’s possibility is that this time the movement will finally achieve those changes that will allow us to breathe free.

This is written by a voice from the past. My hope is high even though there are powerful diversions and delusions created by the world of the media and internet. Nonetheless, my

hopes are high because if the movement is anchored in the small world of community and its local associations it will have the power to finally overcome.

And finally, to all the white sisters and brothers, it is vital to add your voices. But the real ask is to identify all the associations, groups, clubs and organizations to which you belong and to bring them into the movement. There, they will feel the joy and security that comes from living in a just society.