

The Power of Civic Engagement

A review of



The New Humanitarians: Inspiration, Innovations, and Blueprints for Visionaries

by Chris E. Stout (Ed.)

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Volume 1. Changing Global Health Inequities

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Volume 2. Changing Education and Relief

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There is a widespread assumption, as well as growing evidence, that social environments play a key role in individuals' willingness to accept the responsibilities of democratic citizenship and participate in civic life (Perrin, 2005; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). This message is made with compelling force throughout the three volumes of *The New Humanitarians: Inspiration, Innovations, and Blueprints for Visionaries*, a collection of organizational profiles reflecting a diverse range of civic commitments.

The New Humanitarians chronicles the birth and development of 41 different civic organizations that collectively address causes in most parts of the world. Some initiatives have flourished, and others seem to be struggling, but there is much to be learned as chapter authors speculate on why their organizations have evolved into these current forms. After commenting on the breadth of ideas conveyed across the various chapters and describing the structures used to bring continuity to this diversity, I will end this review by describing some of my favorite lessons.

Room for Everyone

Whereas many books published by psychologists are written by and designed for academics, *The New Humanitarians* includes the voices of people from many walks of life who collaborate in the service of specific causes. The ambitious subtitle, *Inspiration, Innovations, and Blueprints for Visionaries*, illustrates the editor's intent to offer advice to like-minded individuals who hope to start a new organization or join an existing one. Volume titles emphasize the fact that all the contributors share a commitment to change: *Changing Global Health Inequities*, *Changing Education and Relief*, and *Changing Sustainable Development and Social Justice*. Looking beyond the covers, one can see that each chapter focuses on a specific cause, and the authors describe an organization for addressing the corresponding issues that arise.

Despite structural commonalities, the chapters place differing emphasis on various aspects of an organization and its history. Many chapters offer a balanced account of how the various organizations got started, who was and is involved, how the resulting structures emerged, and some of the organizational goals and future plans; yet others lack such balance.

Chapters such as those by Arole and Arole, Phalen and Bartrum, Scott, and the students of Loyola University of Chicago focus on the individuals who started or currently lead the organization, highlighting specific leadership characteristics or the personal identity changes that have emerged from their civic engagement. These narratives often convey some of the personal sacrifices that individuals experience as they take seriously the cause they are struggling to address.

A second group of chapters, which includes as those by Bartrum, Fisher, Saul, and Stout, outline the structural features of organization in great detail and help readers see how and why a strong civic organization functions like a business. A third group of chapters focuses most heavily on justifying the authors' civic commitments. Chapter titles such as "Unite for Sight" and "Room to Read" seem to entice readers to join these civic enterprises.

Similarly, the civic organizers who represent the various causes report diverse reasons for doing so. Some report being invigorated by interdisciplinary activities or were ready to

change careers. Others endeavored to test their identities by meeting people whose lives and experiences could challenge their personal assumptions. These organizers were a mixture of volunteers and paid employees, and worked independently or as part of an existing civic organization.

Chapters by members of award-winning organizations such as Amnesty International, Search for Common Ground, and Southern Poverty Law Center are situated alongside those representing organizations that are less known. This variability, coupled with the fact that some chapters are written by active members of the civic organization they represent and others are written by a narrator, can keep readers attentive to the lessons that might be learned across chapters. Quotes from people who are being served as well as those who are doing service strengthen the message that multiple voices learn from one another in multiple ways.

Uniqueness in a Common Structure

It is difficult to determine exactly who might benefit from reading these chapters, largely because they vary in how much detail is captured. Writers were clearly asked to think about a common structure but took full advantage of the freedom to emphasize each section according to their interests. Chapters differ in how well authors introduce the cause around which each civic organization was initiated, but the fact that most chapters start with such a description helps readers see why each organization exists.

The considerable variability across chapters begins after causes are introduced. Some chapters are heavily grounded in the history of the organization, whereas others offer a brief time line alerting readers only to how particular structures evolved. The most compelling chapters offer details on the qualities of the various partnerships that were formed as well as case studies of who has benefitted as a result of organizational activities, but, again, some chapters seem to stop at this point. Chapters that offer lessons for readers who are interested in putting their own visions into practice are those that also include elaborate descriptions of an organizational mission, activities, and funding experiences along with the overall lessons learned and future plans.

Two chapters, one by Fisher and another by Hayward, focus heavily on funding dilemmas, but most chapters have something to say about this issue. After reading all three volumes, I came away chanting the salient message “no mission without a margin” and am ready to accept all 13 of the principles of social entrepreneurship reported by Marks and Collin Marks (Vol. 3, pp. 208–209). Nevertheless, it is probably the cumulative effect of reading all the chapters that adds clarity to the funding metaphor and to such principles that maximize civic engagement across social networks.

High Points in a Dynamic Experience

Like the authors, I assume that civic engagement is inherently dialogical and dynamic. I can empathize with the frustration in trying to capture what is essentially an ongoing process into a text that might have meaning even if, as they must, the organizational details change before a chapter is published. During the time I was reading these three volumes, I had the privilege of meeting or listening to mayors of 30 different cities located outside the United States, including Antanas Mockus, former Mayor of Bogotá, long enough to hear other views on how well the civic organizations represented in the chapters were received by community members.

Through a series of documentaries such as *Beyond Belief* (Murphy, 2006) or books such as *Three Cups of Tea* (Mortenson & Relin, 2006) it is possible to understand some of these innovations in greater depth or to discover new innovations that are not represented in the organizational chapters of *The New Humanitarians*. The editor anticipated this dynamism to some degree by asking chapter authors to create an organizational snapshot that names the organization, its mission, founders, and directors as well as the electronic and physical addresses where interested readers might learn more.

These details do not eliminate the problem but at least allow readers to solicit new information as quickly as organizational leaders are able to document and disseminate it. Left without such a solution, readers should view my assessments of the books' high points with the same limitations in mind. My experience with these organizations, three of which I have supported or will continue to support in some very small way (Amnesty International, Invisible Conflicts, and Southern Poverty Law Center), changes often as I become more aware of their mission or am enticed into specific activities.

Although I agree with the editor's point that more conversations between distinct civic organizations are needed, I found the three books filled with outstanding examples of what researchers sometimes call intergroup dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). By merely situating chapters with similar themes alongside one another, the editor has helped readers see different agendas and responses to common causes. Such reading is inherently dialogical, even if the authors themselves have not actually spoken to one another or followed the work of like-minded organizations.

I have been currently fascinated with how individuals assert their agendas and whether they respect the interests of people who may not share their beliefs. For this reason, I was most solidly gripped by the chapters focusing on various forms of political action and conflict resolution. Despite some of the authors' claims to the contrary, it seems as though all the civic organizations included in this collection have some sort of political agenda, even if that agenda is to remain as unbiased or uninvolved in government activities as possible.

Nevertheless, Caldwell, Fitzduff, Lubetzky, and Wien, in four different chapters, illustrate how individuals in very different parts of the world have been able to put aside

very real and painful differences long enough to create positive change in their respective communities. The students of Loyola University of Chicago add youthful vigor as they report jumping into a freezing lake to earn enough money for a schoolroom in another part of the world and to send classmates to Uganda to meet the families they supported. For anyone in doubt of the violent realities that are faced by people in some parts of the world, Duncan, Zissman, and Savaiano open with a compelling narrative that makes the heart jump, and Fabri, Joyce, Black, and González include powerful poetry alongside the formal credentials of their civic organizers. Phillips highlights a compelling need to offer such warring parties time to talk with one another and to genuinely listen until at least some commonalities emerge. These and the many details of lives in progress that pepper the chapters take readers well beyond the idea that civic engagement inevitably involves extraordinary acts by a few enterprising people.

I did find myself wondering why so many of the authors implicitly or explicitly endorse the propositions that bigger is better or that for some organizations to win, others must lose. Nevertheless, I found comfort in the idea that civic discourse is sustained by win-win messages rather than by win-lose messages (Marks and Collin Marks, Vol. 3, p. 191). I liked the reminder that change agents need precontact experiences and guided reflection to ensure that they are joining a particular group for mutually beneficial reasons and that such reflection is essential before any sort of cross-community dialogue can foster effective resolutions to conflict (Vol. 2, p. 26). Similarly, I enjoyed being reminded of Buckminster Fuller's idea that change will not happen by fighting existing reality but by building a new model to render unjust realities obsolete.



Many of the chapters highlight various ways in which people and organizations can be resistant to change; these are met by some organizers with bitterness and others with the kind of energy that is needed to move people and institutions beyond the fear that power will be lost or identities trampled upon. I also saw much support for the proposition that we should understand differences, but act on commonalities (Vol. 3, p. 198). Many of the chapters ended with descriptions of future plans for the organization. I might simply add that each organization might be strengthened if organizers would find at least one similar organization with overlapping interests and goals from which to learn at least one lesson.

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