



The 2050 City:

What Civic Innovation Looks Like Today – and Tomorrow

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Abstract

“Civic innovation” aims to transform our nation’s cities by strengthening the relationship between citizens and their local governments in order to improve lives. But there is little common understanding of this field or its potential. Based on nearly twenty interviews with government leaders, researchers, technologists, community organizers, foundation professionals and others, this white paper explores the current landscape and future potential of the civic innovation field as a first step toward bringing together disparate communities to identify needs, develop solutions and deepen democracy. It finds that while technology can empower civic innovation, technology does not drive it. Furthermore, concentrating on technology can alienate many in the civic innovation ecosystem. This ecosystem consists of diverse actors, each of which may assume centrality for different projects or processes, according to the skills and strengths of each. But civic innovation is far more than a compilation of projects; it can be a process that inspires institutional change, and it requires a culture shift that reframes current processes and results in meaningful structural change.

Introduction

The term “civic innovation” -- and related concepts like civic engagement, smart cities, best practices in the civic space, and public-private partnerships, to name a few -- are bandied about by different groups for different purposes to appeal to different audiences. They are sometimes used interchangeably without consideration of the alienating effects of one or the other, or the imprecision of a large concept in categorizing a particular practice, process, or approach. Like so much in the amorphous innovation space, civic innovation is often presented as a positive, without critical inquiry into the limitations of the term, or the ways that different communities engage and act upon the term.

At first glance, the technologist who creates public transit apps based on open datasets may not have much to say to the community organizer leading protests of hiring practices at City Hall, the city manager focused on reducing costs through consolidation of garbage removal services with a neighboring town, the community foundation professional interested in developing legal aid infrastructure for immigrant populations, or the local business leader lobbying for a waiver from existing zoning rules for a planned expansion. But the inclusion of such varied voices in raising questions and developing solutions is essential if our nation’s cities are to flourish as service providers, centers of debate, interconnected communities, and sites of robust co-governance between residents and governments.

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cities. This requires a nuanced discussion of the varied understandings of the concept of civic innovation, the ways in which it operates, the limitations of the term, and the future of the field as a space inclusive of a wide ecosystem of actors and approaches. It also requires a platform upon which these communities can build relationships and engage one another. By putting these different voices into a virtual conversation, this field scan -- based on interviews with nearly twenty leading thinkers from different sectors and perspectives -- is an effort to break down the silos that currently exist, in the interest of transforming residents’ relationship with their local governments, and the ways that those governments operate in order to improve lives (Appendix). We hope that this report will be the beginning of the process, ultimately leading to a more inclusive understanding of the civic innovation community and suggesting new ways to move forward in this space.

Usage of the Term “Civic Innovation”

“Civic innovation” is a term that is frequently used by researchers, technologists, non-profit leaders, foundation professionals, and the business community. But at present, in general, it is not a term that has been widely adopted by two groups critical to the success of the varied processes and programs that might be considered civic innovation -- ordinary residents and the local government staffers that serve them. This isn’t universally true, of course. Large cities with innovation offices boast leaders who have thought extensively about the civic innovation concept and the role of government in promoting it. But this model isn’t accessible to most American cities, which are smaller and not as well resourced. As Leon Churchill of the City of Tracy, California and Pete Peterson of the Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University commented, there are few cities that are thinking explicitly about civic innovation, even if they are pursuing projects that might be considered innovative.

In the California Civic Innovation Project’s (CCIP) recent survey and interviews of city managers, county

administrators and their deputies, we found that the vast majority of respondents viewed the most important new approaches implemented by local government in their communities to be those that were internal changes to processes and organizations, rather than public-facing deployments.¹ Many of the cited innovations involved service delivery, especially measures to reduce costs while providing the same levels of service through consolidation and regional collaboration.

These projects may involve civic engagement components, but this is not the focus. According to sociologist Carmen Sirianni, whereas civic engagement projects are measured, civic innovation is more structural and institutional, making it a more challenging concept for those who work in local government. In addition, CCIP's data show that local government staffers did not perceive the cited new approaches as civic innovations, per se, because they associated the term with new technologies, information technology department-driven projects, and seemingly difficult and large projects like the opening of datasets.

This is also a definition that many technologists share, though there are many in the technology community that think beyond specific apps or open government projects to a conception of technology as an enabler -- and not always an essential element -- of change. Stephen Goldsmith, the former Mayor of Indianapolis and now of the Harvard Kennedy School, explained that technology can be used to empower residents, but must be used in combination with outreach efforts and community organizing if it is to be considered a civic innovation. Nigel Jacob of Boston's Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics argued that technology must be used in pursuit of a larger end-game. "It's important to identify the change that needs to happen and then propose solutions, including technological ones. There needs to be a recognition that tech may not be the best

solution, though." And Andrew McFarland of the University of Illinois-Chicago stressed that technology-driven civic innovation need not just be the domain of government, but can also be used by community groups as a way of engaging government or agitating for change.

There needs to be a recognition that tech may not be the best solution.

The fact that many within the civic technology community use the term civic innovation to explain processes of which technology is only a part bodes well for unifying various groups -- including governmental actors -- around a common understanding of the term. City and county managers and elected officials often see "innovation" and "technology" as the same thing, and perceive innovation -- technological or not -- as out of reach financially. Brian Moura of the City of San Carlos, California said that for many "cities, innovation is taking a back seat right now due to budgetary challenges. These cities often feel that they need to focus on funding and delivering their baseline or core services first." Jerod Kansanback of the County of Marin made a similar point, saying that the technology association could be alienating to many who work in local government. As a result, the vast majority of local government staffers don't use the term civic innovation at all. Instead, they tend to speak about best practices, out-of-the-box thinking, and new ways of doing things, positioning government at the center of such changes.

Approaches need not be new; indeed, for risk adverse staffers responsible to a demanding taxpaying public, there is a benefit in not using terms or implementing programs without a proven track record. As Karen Thoreson of the Alliance of Innovation reports, "most local governments are not early adopters." This fact was also borne out in survey data collected by CCIP.² This risk aversion and tendency to see government as the driver also alienates those in government from

¹ Rachel Burstein, "The Case for Strengthening Personal Networks in California Local Government: Understanding Local Government Innovation and How It Spreads," California Civic Innovation Project, New America Foundation, April 2, 2013: http://ccip.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_case_for_strengthening_personal_networks_in_california_local_government.

² Ibid.

embracing the term civic innovation, which they view firstly as something new, not as a set of solutions that improve things.

Other groups are also reluctant to embrace the term. Despite its historical connection with community control experiments, grassroots activism, democratic governance, and consumer advocacy, civic innovation is not widely used as a concept in the community organizing world, either. Vincent Villano of Community Voices Heard explained that civic innovation implies a strong government role, which is potentially alienating to marginalized groups which may have had unfavorable interactions with the police and other government actors, and which may be distrustful of authorities with the ability to deport undocumented immigrants, remove children from homes deemed unsafe, and which may not be seen as responsive to input from people of color and low-income people. Still, as the sociologists Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland have explored in their work, the concept of civic innovation can be enormously empowering to such groups if it is understood not as a government-driven process, but one in which governments and the community work hand-in-hand to better neighborhoods.

The problem is that civic innovation can mean anything and everything.

As several interviewees explained, the problem is that civic innovation can mean anything and everything -- rendering it effectively meaningless -- at the same time that its reference to "innovation" connects it to the technology and business communities in ways that may be uncomfortable or alienating for certain groups, including community organizers and government workers. While many interviewees who identified themselves as working within the civic innovation space did not feel a need to define the term at all, most recognized that it was important to consider audience,

context and examples if the term was to be used effectively.

As Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium explained, "There is no magic term for this space. Whether and how you use a term like social entrepreneurship, civic engagement, or public engagement depends on audience." Leighninger described the usefulness of the terms "social entrepreneurship" in the technology space and "public participation" when speaking with international audiences. Similarly, Stacy Donohue of the Omidyar Network found understanding and a positive reception for "civic innovation" in speaking with entrepreneurs who were uncomfortable or unfamiliar with references to either "government" or "transparency", two areas on which Donohue's work hinges.

Thus, at present, the usage of the term "civic innovation" is tied to other concepts, that are used to appeal to different audiences in different contexts. The problem is not with the term, but rather with the varied understandings that different communities bring to the term, making it difficult for groups to work with one another. Coming to a useful -- if not cohesive -- understanding of the field means recognizing that there is a wide "culture of community innovation," not just a set of tools or constituencies, in the words of Karen Thoreson of the Alliance for Innovation.

Civic innovation has the advantage of encompassing institutional change, not just a set of disparate programs, and includes a wide variety of communities, according to sociologists Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland. If we can think of civic innovation in these terms, as a vibrant "ecosystem" of actors, concepts, approaches, and change models, rather than just a catch-all, descriptive phrase, we have an opportunity to establish channels for dialogue among groups that do not normally speak to one another, advancing government's responsiveness, and the inclusion of all residents in the process of improving their communities.

How Civic Innovation Operates on the Ground

Within its vastness, the civic innovation ecosystem includes defined actors, projects, and programs. The roles of the various players change, overlap, compete, and complement one another, and the absence of one can cause an imbalance or inefficiency in the system.

Enablers and Builders of Civic Innovation

Among the various actors there are two primary roles -- enabler and builder. The foundation professionals we interviewed see themselves as enablers of civic innovation because they provide financial support to the builders in the ecosystem. Similarly, community organizing or base-building groups are enablers because they support future builders by preparing them to be leaders in their communities.

In many cases, government is also an enabler of civic innovation. Government has an important role, particularly in creating more fertile environments for civic innovators to prosper. For example, governments can offer technological infrastructure -- say, access to computers and internet -- that can promote more involved citizenry or the creation of civic innovation tools by residents. According to Samidh Chakrabarti of Google.org, access is the oxygen civic innovation needs to breathe and can only be done well with sage attention from government. This idea of government providing infrastructure, or acting as a platform for innovation is prevalent in the open government movement.

In some cases, local governments can behave as both enablers and builders. Lewis Friedland of the University of Wisconsin-Madison explains that in Seattle, the City provided computers and digital literacy training, along with matching grants to community groups, in a way acting as both an enabler and builder of civic innovation projects. Nigel Jacob of Boston's Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics also believes that government can be both enabler and builder. Jacob's group acts in an

incubator capacity for new ideas and projects, and also as a research and development group that creates its own civic tools.

The spread of civic innovation throughout communities and government will require a culture shift that reframes current processes.

Civic Innovation Projects and Processes

Civic innovation is more than just a compilation of projects; it can be a process as well, inspiring institutional change. This is an important point to consider because the spread of civic innovation throughout communities and government will require a culture shift that reframes current processes. For example, leadership that encourages experimentation, informed risk-taking, and space for ideas to germinate is extremely important for a culture of innovation to take root within a large organization, like government. For example, the County of Marin, California's commitment to sending employees to leadership training demonstrates that it understands the value of leadership and its role in spurring innovation throughout the county.

Karen Thoreson of the Alliance for Innovation believes that creating diverse teams within government to develop solutions is one of the best ways to promote innovation. Through the Alliance's Innovation Academy city leaders are encouraged to use diverse teams as a method for solving community problems. In Navajo County, Arizona the city staff that participated in the Alliance's Innovation Academy now instruct other employees on approaches to government innovation and solving community problems through leadership training and adoption of new processes, as opposed to specific projects.

Pete Peterson of the Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University reminds us that we need to consider

collaborative government and other non-tech projects when considering the scope of civic innovation and the roles of the various actors within the ecosystem. Not all builders create tech tools; some develop new programs, like participatory budgeting, or simply find creative ways to continue to provide services to residents through shared services. While these solutions or projects might not be new ideas, some cities are approaching them in very innovative ways.

While governments don't always think of citizen engagement as part of civic innovation, cities often launch projects that are about active engagement of citizens, where government itself is the civic innovator. The City of Boston's Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics spends time and money on researching and developing tools that will ultimately change the relationship between government and residents. While some civic tech tools -- like Citizen Connect, an app that allows residents to submit service requests to the city -- begin as transaction-based applications, the goal is to shift how the public engages with government and eventually improve the relationship between government and citizens.

This approach resonates for Leon Churchill of the City of Tracy, California, who believes that civic innovation is not just about technology, but needs to be about changing the relationship between citizens and government, working to improve residents' quality of life. The active engagement of citizens is a fundamental role of government in building livable communities. Some governments are able to become active civic innovation builders, and others are better equipped at enabling civic innovation.

For some, particularly those within the tech field, civic innovation conjures up the use of technology to make government more efficient, to better connect government with residents, and to provide access that is not available via traditional models of participation. Within the civic tech community, hackers are builders and the development of technology is seen as a civic innovation. For example, Code for America is a non-profit dedicated to changing the way government

approaches civic innovation through technology. Code for America fellows build applications for use by government employees, but mostly for the public to interact better with government. Tools like Adopt-A-Hydrant that allow residents to become stewards of government assets, or programs like Honolulu's engagement of residents to develop easy-to-understand content for a new website, bring government on to the technology curve that private industry has been on for almost a decade. These civic tech tools are innovative, and in a lot of cases provide powerful solutions to challenges facing our cities.

"You can make all the tools you want but if people within government don't incorporate them into the way they govern, then the tools won't go very far."

- Stacy Donohue, Omidyar Network

But there are two sides to the civic tech coin. While technologists and others we interviewed view software developers, or hackers, as civic innovators because they are directly building tools to improve people's lives, others view technology simply as an enabler of civic innovation, not a driver. Stacy Donohue of the Omidyar Network believes that civic hackers are civic innovators but that the tools are not enough. The innovation is reliant on the implementation of the tools or technology. Donohue commented that "you can make all the tools you want but if people within government don't incorporate them into the way they govern, then the tools won't go very far."

Community groups are also a driving force behind civic innovation in our cities. Base-building organizations like Community Voices Heard are enablers that develop leaders among low-income people of color so that they can lead campaigns that build power for their communities through policy reform fights and engagement with projects that develop a participatory democratic system. For example, in Vallejo, California,

community groups and the Participatory Budgeting Project lobbied City Council members to approve participatory budgeting, and they also mobilized residents to take part in the process, through education and outreach. Involving the community is essential to civic innovation.

Unifying Actors and Areas of Innovation

Civic innovation projects based on technology sound very different from the process-related innovations that governments and community groups often pursue. And they are. But the goals and the outcomes are often the same, developing solutions that provide better government services, changing the relationship between residents and government, and providing more engagement opportunities for the public's voice to be heard in the public decision-making process. In addition, civic innovation can aim to enlist the public as hands-on co-producers of public goods, such as safer neighborhoods and restored rivers. Governments can engage the community in doing, not just talking. Most importantly, if successful, these varied approaches are designed to hasten institutional and structural changes.

Identifying the necessary forces within the ecosystem and the roles that different constituencies can play leads us one step closer to achieving broad institutional change.

The City of San Jose's partnership with NextDoor, a private social network for neighborhoods, illustrates the civic innovation ecosystem that involves government, technologists and residents working toward a long-term structural change in how residents and government co-govern. The City of San Jose partnered with NextDoor, a private social network for neighborhoods, to awaken neighborhood capacity across the city to take action, share resources and gifts, and address their own problems. The collection of micro-networks that make

up NextDoor responds to a problem of scale, and invites both community cohesiveness and a new approach to policy-making. The longer-term goal is for the City of San Jose to shift from treating residents like customers where city services are the answers to all their problems, to respecting them as citizens, who have the responsibility to be a part of the solution.

The civic innovation field is broad, which allows for inclusion and different flavors of innovation to emerge based on unique circumstances in communities and cities. However, identifying the necessary forces within the ecosystem and the roles that different constituencies can play leads us one step closer to achieving broad institutional change.

The Need for Civic Innovation

On their own merits, the programs, practices and processes explored in the previous section constitute a compelling case for unifying the broad ecosystem comprising the civic innovation space. But as important and successful as many of these examples are, they neither explain why civic innovation is important as a conceptual framework at this particular moment in time nor suggest linkages and disconnects that could guide policy-making. The goal should not be to develop a single, coherent and consistent definition of civic innovation so much as it should be to understand different models, how they might engage one another, and the types of investment that are needed to promote institutional change. Such a landscape map has the potential to transform communities by suggesting a new path forward for a variety of stakeholders with hands in this important work.

As with its current definitions and usages, the need for civic innovation varies by community. But actors in all sectors recognize the end goal as the improvement of residents' lives, even if the processes through which that end goal is achieved and the actors that pursue those processes vary significantly. A few of our interviewees expressed skepticism about government's intentions, the ability of government to implement meaningful changes to improve residents' lives, and the

efficiency or effectiveness of governmental structures as drivers of change in diverse communities. But all acknowledged that the “civic” piece of civic innovation demanded some governmental involvement, even if it was not offered in the traditional mode of service delivery or policy, or measured through the traditional means of numbers served or voting behaviors.

Government can be a change agent, but only if it is trusted by the public.

If civic innovation is embraced by city and county governments, this can go a long way toward countering the idea that government is fundamentally broken. Government can be a change agent, but only if it is trusted by the public. This impression of brokenness is often cultivated by accounts of partisan gridlock in Washington and exposés of federal and state mismanagement of funds and expenditures on pork barrel projects. Examples of fraud, lack of oversight and questionable decisions at the local level -- as exemplified by a rash of municipal bankruptcies -- do not help matters, though the public consistently cites greater trust in local government as compared with state or national government.

Because civic innovation fundamentally rethinks the relationship between residents and government and actively works to improve individuals’ lives, it has the potential to change overwhelming perceptions of government brokenness. This, in turn, can help create more engaged and active citizens, thereby reducing the resources that government has to spend on continued civic innovation after initial investments. Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium explained the promise of civic innovation as a way of thinking about “politics in a broader sense than elections, volunteerism or voting.” In Leighninger’s view, civic innovation is premised on the idea of fundamentally transforming democracy. Lewis Friedland of the University of Wisconsin-Madison made a similar point, stressing that civic innovation implied an

institutional shift, rather than simply the creation of programs. Friedland emphasized the importance of resources -- many of them emanating from government -- to propel this fundamental and large-scale shift.

This kind of institutional change -- involving, but not necessarily driven by government -- is particularly needed at this moment in history. In recent years cities have seen declining tax revenue, and in many cases, states have issued unfunded mandates to local government, reducing city and county coffers still further. And the federal government’s funding for local government is also on the decline. 2010 saw a much needed rise in state and local government revenue as the economy began to recover, but local government expenditures also increased as service needs increased. Employees saw less furloughing and projects that were put on hold during the height of the recession resumed.³ A commitment to and investment in civic innovation by cities and counties could address this difficult funding situation at a time of increasing need, if local government nurtures relationships with residents and allocates some of its scarce resources to developing the infrastructure to create new models for co-governance and service delivery.

A commitment to robust institutional change through civic innovation can also help to address the acute and changing needs of a growing and increasingly diverse populace. The growing population and diversity of our cities presents many opportunities, but it also creates challenges for local governments trying to serve different constituencies. Overcoming resistance to vaccinations or mental health initiatives requires an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences, and the ability to communicate in languages that different populations understand. Many cities have seen well-intentioned ordinances prohibiting the raising of livestock produce tensions in communities across ethnic lines. These are just a few examples of how diversity

³ “Census Bureau Reports State and Local Government Revenue Increased More Than 51 Percent in 2010,” press release, U.S. Census Bureau, September 26, 2012: <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/governments/cb12-178.html>

complicates policy-making and produces new needs, even as it enriches communities.

Addressing these needs requires a commitment of resources by local government.

Addressing these needs requires a commitment of resources by local government. In some cases, this governmental support may be supplemented by contributions through matching grants from residents, foundations, businesses, and others, thereby leveraging the effect of such governmental expenditures. A Spanish-speaking caseworker or a community policing effort doesn't come cheap, but such measures may be essential if local governments are to make themselves relevant and useful to the public.

And, on the flip side, embracing an agenda of civic innovation can also help to build the infrastructure needed to institutionalize the practices and commitments associated with it. Pete Peterson of the Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University explained how local governments can attract the next generation of civic leaders through a fundamental rethinking of local government's responsibility to, engagement with, and understanding of the public. Peterson explains that in his experience, whereas baby boomers -- particularly those close to retirement who have been working in the system for the entirety of their careers -- are "less receptive" to change, younger people may be attracted to this adaptability and responsiveness. Those beginning their careers may consider service in local government because of the commitment to civic innovation they see displayed there, and may prove valuable resources in continuing this trajectory.

Ultimately, civic innovation is needed because it has the potential to transform the relationship between the public and government -- a fundamentally needed shift if government is to fulfill its mission of responding to community need effectively. As Nigel Jacob of Boston's Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics explained, in

order to address issues in their communities -- as varied as schools, transportation, and public safety -- the public needs an advocate, convener, critical questioner, resource provider, and implementer. Government can fill that role as an enabler, but only if it is trusted, and only if it sees itself as filling that role. Coming to a common understanding of the varied actors within and definitions of civic innovation can help to facilitate this shift from government-as-service-provider to government-as-partner.

Defining Civic Innovation

The need for a civic innovation agenda at the local level is compelling, but in order for civic innovation to be useful, it is necessary to chart the parameters of a working definition in consultation with the various actors who play roles in the civic innovation space. As we have seen, both government and residents are essential to the field, as the term "civic" itself implies. But their presence alone does not automatically produce civic innovation, and they need not be the drivers of activity in order for change to occur.

Different pieces of the civic innovation ecosystem -- government, citizens, non-profits, community groups, funders, technologists and others -- may assume responsibility for spearheading different types of initiatives and approaches at different times, assuming prominence when their skill sets, constituencies and sensitivities are best aligned to promote a project. What unites such efforts is a goal of fundamentally reshaping and deepening citizens' relationship with their government in order to improve lives.

Engagement Not the End-Game

Civic innovation involves systemic change and institutional development, not simply the development of projects, programs or approaches. In order to reach the end goal of a more responsive and adaptive government, government and other actors need to understand the attitudes and perspectives of ordinary citizens. There is a persistent problem of how to glean this information. Interviewees often expressed concern that community groups or residents who voiced their

views at forums were not representative of the entirety of the population. Brian Moura of the City of San Carlos, California explained, “We see more and more cities conducting scientifically accurate surveys to gauge resident opinion about city services and proposals in addition to community meetings to ensure that the views of all residents are obtained.” When the City of San Carlos surveyed its residents, it found a much higher satisfaction level with the quality of services in the city and on key policy issues when compared with the impressions that it received through community programs.

Engagement shouldn't be understood as a synonym for civic innovation.

Better methods for engagement are clearly essential if civic innovation is to take root, and there are a number of programs that are doing important work in this area. But engagement shouldn't be understood as a synonym for civic innovation. Civic innovation may also take place internally within government through the achievement of greater efficiencies or the more effective use of resources. This is what Ben Hecht of Living Cities terms “municipal social innovation” -- local government innovating rather than third parties. It may involve engagement as a primary or secondary aim, or it may only involve efficiencies, but the primary innovator involved is the municipality.

Even those managing projects that are designed to deepen engagement -- like budget town halls -- do not submit that engagement is the goal. Rather, such projects are designed to establish greater trust in government as a means of promoting decision-making about resources that more accurately reflects the needs and desires of the public. The ultimate goal is to improve quality of life through a deepened democracy.

Government as Central to, but Not Center of Civic Innovation

Government is essential to this process, but it is not the only actor that is involved in the ecosystem of civic innovation. Indeed, it may not always be the center of civic innovation. As Ben Hecht of Living Cities explained, “We need to look critically at the particular places where government can make a difference and only have government work on those things.” In the case of crowdsourcing projects like Street Bump, government is freed from the responsibility of monitoring potholes and other road maintenance problems, instead concentrating its efforts and resources on making repairs to reports it receives from citizen activists. And Tidepools, a project to provide wi-fi service in underserved areas of Brooklyn, is anchored by community organizations, not the government.

On their own, such projects are just that; they do not always realize a radical structural change in how government and residents work with one another, and their immediate impact is limited. But in the long-term, Tidepools has the potential to empower citizens to think beyond the traditional internet provider relationship in order to take control of their own community resources. A positive experience using Street Bump may be the first step in a more positive and trusting relationship between residents and government than in the past. As such, these projects suggest a path forward in which government considers its ability to take on a particular project and works with better positioned actors to build trust and collaboratively develop new approaches.

Not Just Gov 2.0

In general use, civic innovation is often presented as a synonym for Gov 2.0, a set of technologies with the potential to reach and engage more people. Yet as Lewis Friedland of the University of Wisconsin-Madison reminds us, “The technology piece of this often clouds over what we have to do at a deeper level.” Friedland's research shows that relationship-building is key to structural and institutional change, and that that cannot be achieved through the mere release of technology. Use of the term “open government” may allow for a

more expansive definition, according to John Bracken of the Knight Foundation. This term implies an understanding of how residents and government can relate to one another in a new networked environment and its impact on government.

“The technology piece of this often clouds over what we have to do at a deeper level.”

- Lewis Friedland , University of Wisconsin-Madison

In addition, Ben Hecht of Living Cities believes that a focus on technology alone has also excluded key groups that need to be part of the process of civic innovation. “Often hackathons are where upper middle class people and their friends come, and you don’t get representation from diverse communities and don’t have a sense of the challenges there,” Hecht says. “Low income people need to be involved in the creation of solutions, and to be focused on as service recipients.”

Rather than thinking about civic innovation as synonymous with civic technology, we need to consider civic technology as a toolbox that can be used, under certain circumstances, to achieve the larger goal of civic innovation. In some cases, civic technologies may be considered examples of civic innovations, but they are not the entirety of the field, just small steps toward a larger goal.

Responsive to Context

Just as technology must be adapted for different groups, and may not always be appropriate as ways of enabling institutional change, civic innovation as a whole must be responsive to context. Sociologists Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland remind us that “place matters”. Government structure, community history, population and leadership all make a difference. Where there has been a history of racial tension and police brutality, it will be much more difficult to develop a community policing program in collaboration with the public than where such tensions have been relatively muted. At the same time, it also can lead to carving out

a robust and productive role for grassroots leadership in minority communities. Where municipal bankruptcy or corruption among elected officials has produced distrust in local government, it will be much harder for government to engage community groups and residents than in cases where transparency and strong fiscal management predominate. Thus, the types of relationships that are built and the types of resources that are required to build them look very different in different places.

Resources matter too. Where community foundations can support pilot projects, local governments may find it easier to take risks and pursue institutional changes than would be possible if they had to allocate taxpayer money to an initiative. Where the skills of community organizations, technologists, government or others complement one another, and where such groups are willing to work with one another, it may be easier to build relationships and make steadier progress toward institutional change than where skills are not aligned or where there is not the same willingness to cooperate.

Civic innovation is not just one strategy, approach, program or project, but instead is the larger movement toward deepened democracy that improves quality of life. The process of civic innovation varies according to context. It is more than technology, government, or engagement alone, but these concepts may be tied to civic innovation. The field of civic innovation has great potential to create systemic change, but only if we recognize that it is more than the sum of its parts.

Charting the Future

The factors mentioned above are crucial to coming to a compelling, common understanding of civic innovation with the potential to redefine the way that local governments operate vis-à-vis their residents. But what are the steps that are necessary to achieve this vision? While there is no consensus on how the field should proceed, several themes are important in advancing the civic innovation space.

The field of civic innovation has great potential to create systemic change, but only if we recognize that it is more than the sum of its parts.

Reforming Institutions, Outlooks and Processes, Not Programs

When scholars and practitioners assess impact or dissect trends, they often examine individual programs or concentrate on individual engagement, rather than evaluating system-wide changes that have the potential to produce the desired outcome. This is partly a reaction to philanthropic evaluation requirements and the need that many organizations have to promote their work to additional funders. As John Bracken of the Knight Foundation explains, funders are often concerned about working with governments where “frustration points can be very high” and where change cannot be observed immediately. But it also stems from an internalization of the work on social capital, pioneered by thinkers like Robert Putnam. This work submits that the public is increasingly atomized, disengaged and disconnected because the institutions that once held communities together are no longer viable in our modern world.

This individual assessment of engagement may not necessarily hold true when we consider the power that community groups, local governments and other newer institutions can have in mobilizing the public and changing the way that the public participates in civic life. As sociologists Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland have explored in their work, the outlook is not so pessimistic when we consider the potential for these types of anchor institutions to capitalize on the diversity of the public in decision-making.

In order for this type of institutional change to occur, we must concentrate on addressing “root causes, not just symptoms,” as Vincent Villano of Community

Voices Heard described it. While Villano is optimistic about the potential for a program like participatory budgeting to impact the way that citizens relate to their government, he stresses that such projects treat only one element of the problem -- in this case the lack of community participation in decision-making about how tax dollars are spent and a lack of transparency about how governmental leaders make decisions. Villano believes that participatory budgeting ought to be just one piece of a larger set of governmental reforms that could enable a participatory democratic system to develop.

The elements of such system-wide changes will look different depending on the local context, but all will involve some re-examination of the legal framework that regulates participation, consideration of the actors that need to be involved and the ways of putting these actors in conversation and collaboration with one another, and the sustainability of the proposed approach. Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium explained that the current legal framework for public participation in local contexts often defaults to public meeting requirements and public-initiated requests for information, infrastructure that needs to be adapted for the twenty-first century if institutional changes are to occur.

Institutional change also requires the development of relationships between a wide variety of actors in the civic innovation sector. This means that local governments must find better ways of understanding the community and establishing relationships with the public. Karen Thoreson of the Alliance for Innovation explained that one approach is to tap organizations like the League of Women Voters that have the larger interest of the community at heart, rather than a small sub-section of it. But government also needs to be more proactive in engaging citizens directly, and not only through outside groups or through the small subset of residents who attend forums. One way of doing this is to make the language of civic innovation more accessible to the layperson in government and outside of it. Carmen Sirianni of Brandeis University also submits that government can also do a better job of

engaging citizens' skills, especially those of young people.

Other groups need to be invited into the civic innovation ecosystem as well. Both Abhi Nemani of Code for America and Stephen Goldsmith of the Harvard Kennedy School mentioned the need for for-profit businesses to contribute to solutions in the civic innovation space. While this may not always be desirable, institutional change cannot occur if government, technologists or community groups pursue ad-hoc solutions on their own, without involving others in the conversation. A landscape map of who is working on what projects and how these projects fit into the larger scope of civic innovation can go a long way toward advancing the field.

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Without the involvement of many different types of groups and individuals and an understanding of how these groups fit together, sustainability of solutions becomes much more difficult. As Lewis Friedland pointed out, funders can also play a tremendous role in encouraging sustainability. Rather than sponsoring hackathons, encouraging small tech solutions or funding specific organizations, philanthropic organizations have an opportunity to look at system-wide projects and help funded initiatives develop funding mechanisms for the long-term.

Recognition of Resources Needed

This requires a fundamental rethinking of how resources should be deployed. Civic innovation is not a strategy that can be overlaid on existing programs, or something that bears fruit immediately. Rather, it

requires long-term investment by all parties, including government. This means not just an expenditure of money -- though that is essential -- but also the development of skills and infrastructure to make substantive and long-lasting change. For example, before they can implement specific programs, local governments must first invest the time and energy in developing relationships with community groups and involving the public in developing an agenda for participation and governance. This kind of planning and relationship-building stage is rarely accounted for in project budgets, but it is essential.

Skill development and adequate staffing are also essential. Stephen Goldsmith of the Harvard Kennedy School and Pete Peterson of the Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University both cited the need to teach those in local government how to use the various emerging technological and community organizing tools to facilitate civic innovation. Goldsmith also argued that local government staffers needed to be educated on the value of investment in technological resources, especially when early investment is high. This need for greater literacy in civic innovation tools is equally important for residents. As Andrew McFarland of the University of Illinois-Chicago explained, "We need to think more about how to teach skills like how local people should lobby governmental officials."

Skill training must be accompanied by adequate capacity within government and partner organizations. This is a point that Nigel Jacob of Boston's Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics made, citing the enormous responsibilities that local governmental staffers already face. Programs addressing this capacity issue are beginning to emerge. For example, the Alliance for Innovation's talent pool matches skilled employees from one locale with other local governments that require a particular expertise but do not currently have it on-staff. This is a promising start to addressing the capacity problem.

Strong and effective leadership is key to promoting civic innovation, especially in government, where staffers responsible to the taxpayer may be less inclined to take

risks by committing resources whose immediate payoff is unclear. And that leadership needs to be extended beyond government into other sectors. Cities and counties can be powerful connectors that ultimately save resources, but this requires an initial resource allocation to making those connections. For example, the City of Boston has facilitated relationships between civic innovators in the community and anchor institutions like MIT in order to advance its civic innovation agenda.

These are examples of the kind of investment in resources that can make an enormous difference in the sustainability of institutional change, and that can ultimately save money, time and energy in the long-term. But it is rarely the kind of work that is rewarded or funded at the outset. If the civic innovation space is to flourish, the community as a whole must recognize the importance of committing resources early in order to achieve a set of flexible outcomes.

Framing the Issue as Less Abstract, While Measuring More Abstract Outcomes

One way to create support for the allocation of resources to institution building is to present civic innovation not as an abstract strategy, approach or culture, but instead to stress specific problems that can be solved through these means, and the impact that civic innovation can have. And the community needs to be involved in developing this set of issues over the long-term, even if an initial focus of civic innovation is often around service delivery in order to establish community trust and develop relationships.

“In the last couple of years there’s been a feeling that we need to move forward on actual ideas, not just talk about the field.”

- Hilary Hoeber, IDEO

Hilary Hoeber of IDEO sees this shift already occurring. “In the last couple of years there’s been a feeling that

we need to move forward on actual ideas, not just talk about the field.” Abhi Nemani of Code for America explains that the public is more receptive when it sees tangible goals like crime reduction, or better utilization of health and human services addressed through civic innovation. This logic can be used to advance civic innovation internally, too. Stacy Donohue of the Omidyar Network sees the potential of civic innovation to impact human resources practices and performance measurements for governmental staffers, and that other innovations are more likely to be successful if an effective performance culture within government is established.

We also need better ways of talking about outcomes in these particular problem areas. Measures shouldn’t just include the typical values required in reports to philanthropic foundations, but should instead include ways of evaluating larger goals as well. Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium explains that concepts like social connectedness need to be considered in more concrete ways. We need alternate ways of measuring impact that include infrastructural and cultural changes, along with numbers served or dollars spent.

Acting Locally while Broadening the Reach

These outcomes need to be specific to time and place, developed with recognition of the particularities of the locale’s demographics, resources and needs in mind. Lewis Friedland of the University of Wisconsin-Madison explained how historically, Chicago’s deeply entrenched power structure was much more difficult for community groups to penetrate than in Minneapolis, where local government was typically more responsive to public input. At the same time, a strong mayor in Chicago at times may have permitted bigger changes than were possible in Minneapolis. Such differences have implications for the kind of changes needed in order to propel a civic innovation agenda forward.

At the same time, if the civic innovation community is to be cohesive and effective, we need also to consider how to scale projects from one locale to another, and draw on resources and approaches developed by civic

innovators in other states and countries. For many in this space, understandable risk aversion keeps solutions from penetrating. Publicizing successes and failures and developing personal relationships that allow for candid assessment of tradeoffs can help reduce risk. But we need to expand the conversation beyond the value of specific programs or tools to an honest discussion about how to encourage institutional change.

CCIP's Role in the Civic Innovation Community

The California Civic Innovation Project can play an important role in this exciting, but complex future landscape of civic innovation. Just as there is a need to define civic innovation in ways that are accessible and approachable by different and diverse communities, there is a need to demonstrate the value of adopting a civic innovation agenda for those who aren't currently pursuing it, or who focus on isolated events, projects and approaches instead of connecting such initiatives to a larger program of institutional change. By demonstrating the value of civic innovation and developing ways of measuring impact, CCIP can make a real contribution.

For example, consider the philanthropic foundation that sponsors a day-long hackathon to develop technologies to create greater awareness about public health services. The event attracts a large number of engaged, civic-minded, talented technologists. But the target of the campaign -- low-income, pregnant women of color, or African-Americans who suffer from sickle cell anemia, for example -- are noticeably absent. As a result, the technologists in the room develop interesting tools that are potentially inaccessible or alienating for the groups that the philanthropic foundation hopes to target.

Or perhaps the foundation has not consulted government officials about what the most compelling needs are. It convenes a gathering to discuss open data without first learning that there is significant opposition to open data among City Hall employees concerned that the new project will result in even more work for an

already overburdened workforce. In such cases, by contributing to a curriculum for city leaders that encourages them to adopt practices that promote innovation within government, CCIP can play a role in showing how a more institutional and structural approach inclusive of various communities can make a real difference in people's lives. CCIP can suggest ways of including this relationship-building potential in existing models. The value of civic innovation in these examples is not the creation of shiny new technologies or generating a buzz, but rather, the efficient use of resources to develop new ways of leveraging the power of government, citizens and others to work toward a better quality of life for all.

CCIP can also play an essential facilitative role, bringing these sometimes siloed communities together in the interest of relationship-building to achieve institutional change. CCIP's work sits at the intersection of a variety of actors -- city and county employees at all levels, elected officials, researchers, technologists, community leaders, non-profits, foundations, businesses and others. Yet rarely do these various actors have an opportunity to connect in order to discuss community needs and possible approaches. In particular, government -- especially those who serve in administrative capacities in smaller towns and who are not leaders in the tech space -- is often excluded as an actor.

Community organizations may be distrustful of governmental leaders who have failed them in the past, and residents may presume that they do not have a voice in how their government operates or the types of initiatives it supports. CCIP is not a membership organization, but it has a wide network of city and county employees and officials from a wide variety of settings. By connecting these governmental voices to others in the civic innovation community, and by forging other connections between isolated groups, CCIP can play an important role in deepening and enlarging the civic innovation ecosystem.

CCIP can do more than serve as a connector, though. It can also sponsor convenings, develop research and

prototype models that can help inform the ways in which civic innovation can evolve as a field. For example, perhaps CCIP's research determines that the most acute needs of city administrators involve ways of continuing to deliver existing services at a fraction of the cost. Or maybe CCIP finds that governmental officials think that they understand community needs and want to address them, but don't actually have a good handle on what those needs are. Or perhaps, there is a fundamental problem of a lack of capacity to pursue innovation in local government. CCIP can draw attention to the problem, convene those who might be well-positioned to develop solutions and help facilitate the creation of a prototype solution in coordination with those actors. The result may be a product, process or program that can be deployed elsewhere. For example, to address the capacity problem, CCIP might develop leadership trainings for government staffers. But the more important contribution is the recognition of real needs within the government and community and the forging of relationships to address those needs. Even if the exact prototype doesn't work or doesn't scale, the process of connecting and partnering will allow a civic innovation agenda to flourish in the future.

This has the added benefit of challenging the silos that currently exist. It should be possible to be more than a technologist or a governmental employee, a community organizer or an elected official. All of these groups are unified by the fact that they are also residents. While differences in their experiences, skills and perspectives are important, CCIP and others have an opportunity to help these different groups recognize the views of others, and perhaps even move from one area of the ecosystem to another. We need more community organizers involved in government, and more elected officials with an understanding of the potential of technology. By putting diverse communities in touch with one another, CCIP can help to encourage this break-down of existing distinctions between actors in the civic innovation space.

Conclusion

This white paper exploring the current landscape and future potential of the civic innovation field is a first step in achieving this objective of bringing disparate communities together to identify needs, develop solutions and deepen democracy. By putting leading thinkers from different fields in virtual conversation, this paper seeks to expose the fault lines in the current debate, as well as the places where lack of communication across sectors, lack of understanding of what needs are or what roles others can play, or lack of connections hinders the development of civic innovation.

We need to think more strategically about how to commit resources, involve residents and other actors, and build institutional capacity within government and among its partners to move the civic innovation field forward.

There are certainly notable differences in the language employed by different groups -- including the very use of the term "civic innovation" itself -- and the sensitivities and alienations attached to that language. But the stakes are much higher than a mere semantic debate would imply. We need to think more strategically about how to commit resources, involve residents and other actors, and build institutional capacity within government and among its partners to move the civic innovation field forward.

Appendix: Interviewees

- **John S. Bracken**, Director, Media Innovation, Knight Foundation
- **Samidh Chakrabarti**, Principal, Google.org
- **Leon Churchill**, City Manager, City of Tracy, California
- **Stacy Donohue**, Director, Investments, Omidyar Network
- **Lewis A. Friedland**, Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- **Stephen Goldsmith**, Daniel Paul Professor of the Practice of Government, Harvard Kennedy School
- **Ben Hecht**, President and CEO, Living Cities
- **Hilary Hoeber**, Portfolio Lead, IDEO
- **Nigel Jacob**, Co-Chair, Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, City of Boston, Massachusetts
- **Jerod Kansanback**, Sheriff's Deputy, County of Marin, California
- **Matt Leighninger**, Executive Director, Deliberative Democracy Consortium
- **Andrew McFarland**, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Illinois-Chicago
- **Brian Moura**, Assistant City Manager, City of San Carlos, California
- **Abhi Nemani**, Co-Executive Director, Code for America
- **Pete Peterson**, Executive Director, Davenport Institute, Pepperdine University
- **Carmen Sirianni**, Morris Hillquit Professor, Sociology and Public Policy, Brandeis University
- **Karen Thoreson**, President and Chief Operating Officer, Alliance for Innovation
- **Vincent Villano**, Participatory Budgeting & Policy Research Coordinator, Community Voices Heard

New America Foundation

The New America Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States. New America emphasizes work that is responsive to the changing conditions and problems of our 21st Century information-age economy -- an era shaped by transforming innovation and wealth creation, but also by shortened job tenures, longer life spans, mobile capital, financial imbalances and rising inequality.

California Civic Innovation Project

The California Civic Innovation Project (CCIP) aims to diffuse innovation in California local governments through researching and recommending organizational and emerging practices that enable the creation and adoption of innovative policies, technology, and programs that deepen community engagement and accelerate civic innovation. Our research and practical exploration aims to break down barriers to innovation within municipalities allowing for deeper relationships between residents and government. CCIP was launched in the Spring of 2012 with support from the James Irvine Foundation.

Authors

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