

3-21-2010

## Concluding Synthesis: Lessons Learned. A Complex Web: A Collective Process to Advance Social Justice

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### Recommended Citation

Friedman, Donna Haig; Cohen, Jennifer; Reichman, Amnon; and Morgan, James (2010) "Concluding Synthesis: Lessons Learned. A Complex Web: A Collective Process to Advance Social Justice," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 27.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol23/iss1/27>

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## CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS: LESSONS LEARNED

### A Complex Web

### A Collective Process to Advance Social Justice

*Donna Haig Friedman, Jennifer Cohen,  
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There is a fierceness at work here. There is no other explanation for the raw courage and heart displayed over and over again in the people who march, speak, create, resist, and build. It is the fierceness of knowing we are human and intend to survive. . . . What can help preserve [humankind and the planet] is the gift of self-perception, the gift of seeing who we truly are.

—Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*

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#### Act Here and Now, Think Far Ahead — In Relationship

In *Blessed Unrest*, referenced by the opening quotation and several essay authors, Paul Hawken uses the metaphor of the immune system to describe the connectivity of organizations and activists across the world fiercely working to realize local and global social, economic, political, and environmental justice. Just as the invisible but interconnected parts of the body's immune system jump into concerted action to restore health to an ill body, this social-change movement is organizing from the bottom up and emerging as an extraordinary and creative expression of people's unstoppable need to reimagine their relationships to the environment and to one another.<sup>1</sup> The leaders and organizations participating in the Boston–Haifa transnational learning exchange are actors in this powerful movement with “no name, no leader.” The transformational interplay between personal, collective, and social-change processes, nourished by our relationships with each other across and within national borders, is apparent throughout the journal essays and the Learning Exchange overall. We have collectively built knowledge to feed and inform our future actions and directions while simultaneously acting in our present worlds. Our reflection processes focus on matters of importance. Transformational change happens as we see ourselves and each others' worlds through the others' eyes. We privilege and grow from the interplay of many ways of knowing. In the process, transformation happens — changes of self, our organizations,

and our communities. A connective web of relationships grows across borders, advancing social justice.

### **Building Knowledge in Action and in Community**

This network of leaders has been engaged in a vigorous reflective learning process, while simultaneously acting in the world to create just communities, institutions, and political systems in Haifa and Boston. Michal Dagan's mother's sage advice — act here and now, think far ahead<sup>2</sup> — characterizes very well the interplay of action, reflection, and visionary planning that is a foundational principle of building knowledge. A distinguishing dimension of the Learning Exchange Network (LEN) is its evolving process of building knowledge collectively, a process in which participants have demonstrated a commitment to ask significant questions of themselves and each other, to listen deeply and compassionately, and to expect and tolerate differences, ambiguity, and uncertainty. As is evident throughout the essays, participant leaders have shared their power and vulnerabilities with each other in the face of mainstream forces to compete rather than cooperate. In addition, many authors described ways in which they strive to develop cultural environments and practices that enable a sharing of power at organizational and community levels. In many instances, these social justice leaders view the youth, men, women, and families they work with as coleaders and partners for making the desired change — making change WITH rather than FOR others. They see their organizations as capacity builders, in which community members are not passive, deficient service recipients, but rather strong and active agents of change. They see their service and social-change work as inextricably intertwined.

### **Intersections of Many Ways of Knowing**

As is evident in this journal issue's multivocal collection of essays, the LEN involves a dynamic interplay of perspectives and life experiences. Participants are creative and flexible in their roles and application of planning, programming, facilitating, and academic capacities.<sup>3</sup> For example, consultants and planners bring capacity building tools to this collective endeavor. Visionary frontline leaders bring deep leadership, managerial, and practitioner insights to the table. Academic partners bring significant theoretical perspectives to this circle of learning. Each perspective, privileged as equally important, is essential in building knowledge that has significance for meaningful social change locally and globally. Knowledge in this sense is understood not as know-how or bottom-up knowledge, but as a collective process of developing concepts — grounded in know-how, bottom-up, and theoretical understandings — with which to understand the world around us, in particular the efficacy of our approaches to make the world a more just place for all.

Each of us who has been engaged in the LEN has drawn from this experience ways of expanding our knowledge-based community (i.e., the community from which our experiences matter). This knowledge building endeavor contains inherent

tensions. Knowledge is by definition specific, leading to fragmentation and incomplete understandings. As Mary Coonan illustrates from her own LEN experience, for maximum impact, we are called to “lift our gaze” in recognition of the limits of our understandings and the need to broaden our gazes to be open to inputs — seeing ourselves through the other’s eyes — which may have unsettling effects. As uncomfortable as this journey may be at times, shaking up our fixed mental models is precisely the condition necessary for transformational learning, especially in multi-cultural contexts. A second tension has to do with the political dimension of knowledge sharing, since knowledge often serves to create a relative advantage of one organization over another. Trust-building, therefore, is a precondition and an essential part of the ongoing work of networks, such as the LEN, if they are to be effective and to have staying power. Given these inherent tensions in collective knowledge building endeavors, the benefits of committed participation need to outweigh the risks and efforts required.

### **Transformational Impacts on People, Their Organizations and Their Environments**

Transformational learning triggers change for committed participants in fundamental ways; once changed, going back to the former state is not possible. Many essay authors tell stories of internal and external processes of change — within themselves, within their organizations, and across organizations, and across oceans — which they have become aware of as part of their LEN and other transnational learning processes. They have highlighted the importance of seeing the work of social justice/social change in a broad and, at times, global perspective. The opportunity to connect with colleagues beyond national borders, stepping back from day-to-day pressures, to learn from them, and to discover new approaches to the challenges at home have fortified these leaders to act courageously back home. In particular, the LEN’s profound cross-cultural experiences have nourished leaders’ imaginations and intentions to push back against barriers that keep people apart and to engage in bridge building across ideological, cultural, sectoral, and other dividing lines in their local community work.

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### **Leadership in the Face of Complex Challenges**

In their introductory essays, Reichman and Cohen elaborated on the changing roles of nonprofits vis-à-vis government in the United States and Israel over the past several decades. As reflected in many of the essays, these realities present nonprofit leaders and their communities with challenging questions to address: What is the proper role of government relative to ensuring basic services for its residents? Should government step in more resoundingly and provide human and other services itself? What would this mean for the work and survival of nonprofit organizations? How can nonprofits partner with government and also push back against government policies that sustain injustice?

Likewise, navigating relationships between nonprofits and for-profit organizations is a complex enterprise. Questions, rather than clear answers, are evident from their reflective writings: What are the trade-offs that emerge in partnerships with businesses that, by definition, have a profit motive that is, at times, at odds with the well-being of the very communities nonprofits are engaged with? What strategies can nonprofit leaders use to tap business expertise and generosity in ways that align with their social justice missions? What would a colearning process look like that builds bridges among nonprofit constituents, communities, and business people and leads to internal and external change for all participants?

Nonprofit leaders also have to deal with power dynamics associated with mobilization for social change. They have to decide how to deal with dilemmas such as the extent and ways in which they might (or might not) engage in political movements (ideological movements, party politics) or other such political processes to advance their social change missions. Politics at the organizational level is no less complex, as was made crystal clear by many of the authors. There are no easy answers on any of these fronts; one choice leads to other hard choices.

As for coalition building among nonprofits, the complexities and questions are endless. When coalition members develop joint ventures, what is actually included in their coalition agreements? What is outside the joint venture? What are the agreed-upon or legitimate areas of disagreement among and between coalition members? And, how do these partnerships actually work? How shall nonprofits deal with the possible pitfalls of spending time and energy on coalition building relative to fund-raising? When does coalition work benefit the missions of the nonprofit members? When are the missions harmed? For example, do such coalitions in effect mute the pluralism of members within the coalition to the detriment of the individual organizational members and communities?

The essays in this volume also tell us something about what it means to govern in the twenty-first century. This is a different way of thinking about social policy, since the word “policy” implies a certain type of formal process for formulation and also alludes to there being some type of public accountability, in the form of election or formal appointment, which generates legitimacy to the “policy” adopted. Yet, governance as reflected in this set of essays involves unelected bodies, namely nonprofits, which have a special kind of accountability and different kind of legitimacy than elected or appointed officials, stemming from their actual commitment and close community relationships, and from their knowledge of the field and organizational connectivity beyond the nation-state.

The issue of language has come to the surface in a significant way through this collection of essays. The labels for civil society organizations — nongovernmental, not for profit, nonprofit — all characterize these organizations by what they are NOT. Not surprisingly, the forceful leaders of organizations involved with the LEN are calling

for a definition that is grounded in what they ARE. The organizations they lead are sometimes WITH government and sometimes WITH profit. These organizations represent a voice FOR creativity, cooperation, resourcefulness, and bridging divides. These leaders define themselves, their organizations, and their work in positive and proactive, rather than negative or reactive ways.

The LEN story is a shared quest. These are stories of moral courage. Leaders, from diverse pathways, have joined together to realize their commitment toward creating a more “just” society where economic, social, and political gaps lessen and meaningful opportunities increase for all. In the face of the complexities and hurdles inherent in their work, we hear in their essays stories of activists and organizations who are joining forces to not only take advantage of existing power sources but to create new sources of power, internally, within their organizations and in their communities. This group of nonprofit leaders is a community of commitment, which can tolerate and hold uncertainty and not knowing, as several authors highlight. We have learned that allowing ourselves not to know is crucial in this work, in the sense of humility, in the sense of allowing programs to evolve as new and fuller information emerges, and in the sense of being open to learning from others.

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## **The Future**

Current developments of the Learning Exchange speak to its success. Specifically, the LEN has led to the creation of Lead Haifa, a cross-sector leadership development program, housed within the Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO) in partnership with Shatil. A new partnership is budding among Lead Haifa and its well-established counterpart, Lead Boston, a program of the Boston Center for Community and Justice, and the Jewish Community Relations Council. Lead Haifa’s academic partner continues to be the University of Massachusetts Boston’s Center for Social Policy.

The next stage of the Learning Exchange will be a deepening of relationships between Boston and Haifa organizations, specifically among youth development organizations: Boston’s Sociedad Latina and Hyde Square Task Force and Haifa’s Neve Yosef Matnas, and Leo Baeck. The current priority is youth work, so plans are underway to bring the staff of the four organizations together for additional mutual learning via virtual and face-to-face youth exchanges.

With its goal of surfacing and creating different kinds of knowledge, the Learning Exchange has inspired additional research projects, building upon the initial Participatory Action Research designed and implemented by Donna Haig Friedman in 2006. Among other offshoot projects, Jennifer Cohen’s dissertation research, carried out within the McCormack Graduate School’s Public Policy doctoral program and the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, explores how community-based organizations contribute to social change,

especially through public policy-related activities. This case study and action research project engages four of the original NGOs (two from Boston and two from Haifa), all of which have been recognized by the wider policy community as successful and high-impact organizations.

These current connections and future plans are clear evidence of “change ripples,” which many authors refer to in their essays. We have collectively come to know that the LEN has inspired small and big shifts on the individual, organizational, and wider levels where we live and work. Some of the changes and impacts are external and already apparent; others are internal and have yet to be revealed — today, tomorrow, or years down the road. We have no doubt that seeds planted over the past five years will bear fruit in the coming years.

A closing story: In a transnational learning exchange gathering, the facilitators gave the group a ball of string, telling them to toss it to one another — while holding on — as they identified and described the connections they had made with one another. Their stories were rich, numerous, and inspiring and resulted in the creation of a complex web, grounded in each having changed the other in some concrete and fundamental way. This activity has been used numerous times with numerous groups throughout the years. Traditions, such as this one, have been passed along, grounded in the LEN’s core values. Local and international networks thusly expand through the actions of committed leaders who hold the ball of string, pass it along, and share it with others.

We will either come together as one, globalized people, or we will disappear as a civilization. To come together we must know our place in a biological and cultural sense, and reclaim our role as engaged agents of our continued existence... the defense of the world can truly be accomplished only by cooperation and compassion.

— *Paul Hawken*, *Blessed Unrest*

## Notes

1. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 3.
2. See her article in this publication.
3. Peter M. Senge and C. O. Scharmer, “Community Action Research: Learning as a Community of Practitioners, Consultants and Researchers, in P. Reason and H. Bradbury, eds., *Handbook of Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (2006), 197.