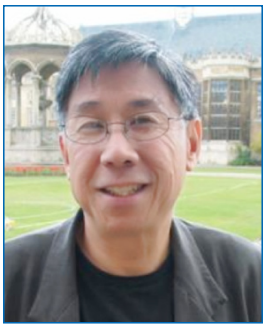
COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

Strategies for impacting vulnerable populations

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
Clinton School of Public Service

Hanmin Liu
CEO, Wildflowers Institute



Hanmin Liu is cofounder and president of Wildflowers Institute, a social innovation lab whose mission is to understand how communities work and to help them be self-sustaining. Hanmin was elected to the Board of Trustees of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1996 and continues to serve on the Board today. From 2003 to 2005, he was the Foundation's chairman. He is currently the vice chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Union Institute and University. He is a 2009 Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Clinton School of Public Service's Center on Community Philanthropy; a 2006 Purpose Prize Fellow; and a Gerbode Fellow since 2000. The U.S. Patent Office awarded Hanmin a patent for a breakthrough technology invention. Hanmin is the author of the monograph *Making Visible the Invisible Power of Community,* published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2009. He is currently writing an essay, "The Organic Formation of Communities: People, Places, and Unanticipated Magic," for the Fetzer Institute Global series. Jossey-Bass will publish the essay in its forthcoming volume, *Deepen the American Dream: Extending the Conversation.*

Strengthening Local Leaders and the Self-Organizing Structures in Vulnerable Communities

This essay is about enhancing the basic self-organized structure in communities.[1] Wildflowers Institute has been working in communities for over thirty years, and we have come to see the essential role of a self-organized infrastructure for community life and its sustainability. This infrastructure is composed of informal leaders, places, and activities. It shapes the culture of community. The infrastructure builds social connectedness and social safety, helps the wounded and the most vulnerable, and guides the commons in its growth. Improving the operations and functions of this infrastructure is vital to community-building efforts.

I have been interested in understanding how communities work and in helping them succeed throughout my career. But it was my association with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that offered me the most extensive understanding of communities locally and globally. I have the privilege of serving as a trustee of the Kellogg Foundation, whose mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable children. Over the last thirteen years, I have learned a great deal from people who serve at Kellogg as program directors, executive leaders, administrative staff, and trustees. I was introduced early on to the practice of holding listening sessions as a way to begin grantmaking in communities. I learned about strategies that reinforced the self-determination of communities in Central America, Mexico, and Southern Africa.

In 2005, Kellogg's Board of Trustees decided that one of its four core values is the belief that all people have the inherent capacity to effect change in their lives, their organizations, and their communities. The Foundation aspires to make a big difference in communities and societies and has taken some bold steps to do so. I am particularly kindled by the Foundation's approach to encouraging racial equity and to developing a respectful way of learning about and engaging in communities. My experience at Kellogg has broadened my knowledge, prompting me to think deeply about vulnerable populations in innovative ways.

A small village in northeast Spain, Ibieca, illustrates the premise of this paper—the importance of strengthening the inherent infrastructure of community. From 1950 to 1975, Professor Susan Friend Harding conducted a study of this village in which she showed that "the villagers of Ibieca unwittingly refashioned themselves and their world as

1 I define community as a group of people who share a sense of belonging to one another or who reside in a geographical place.

they carried on what they experienced as life as usual . . . they participated willingly in social processes that dispossess them of their pre-industrial cultures simply because they are unaware of what is at stake."[2] One of many examples of the unwitting changes was how the women went about their daily work. Women in the village played a vital role in circulating information in such a way that they held the community together, within and among families. This sharing of information happened around the village washbasin, where the women would routinely gather to wash clothes. Such conversations would also happen in bread-baking, sewing, and knitting circles. But when the women purchased washing machines and also when a bakery and a general store opened in Ibieca, the frequency of collective action and engagement reduced significantly.

We believe that culture, the manifesting of human intellectual achievements regarded collectively, is one of the community's richest assets. We also believe that culture need not be dismissed because it may be seemingly irrelevant to the economy of the times.

The point that I want to make here is the need to surface and make explicit the cultural assumptions and behaviors that reinforce social connectedness and improve social health and safety in communities. Anthropologist Hsiao-Tung Fei made this observation: "Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. . . . It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture."[3]

A good portion of our work at Wildflowers is to help community members see their shared purposes and the underlying cultural assumptions so that they can be more explicit and intentional about adapting and building their community. Had the villagers of Ibieca been more conscious of the women's role in weaving the social fabric of their community, they might have continued the circles of engagement and collective action while also adopting the washing machine. We believe that culture, the manifesting of human intellectual achievements regarded collectively, is one of the community's richest assets. We also believe that culture need not be dismissed because it may be seemingly irrelevant to the economy of the times. We help by analyzing the infrastructure of communities and mirroring back their approaches to nourish, protect, and bring people together. We assist communities in being conscious of and rooted in their identity and the collective practices that hold them together. We provide a small amount of funds to support generative activities that weave the social fabric of communities.

Philanthropy plays a unique role introducing innovative models and practices into the community to address pressing issues of poverty and the like. Yet there are many examples of philanthropic initiatives that did not achieve their intended outcomes. At the heart of many of these issues is philanthropy's dependency on the willingness of the existing leadership structure in communities to accept innovation. To reach this leadership structure, foundations work through nonprofit organizations and intermediaries. These channels have access to individuals and other community organizations,

2 Harding, Susan Friend. *Remaking Ibieca: Rural Life in Aragon under Franco.* University of North Carolina Press, 1984, p. xiii.

3 Fei, Hsiao-Tung. *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan.* University of Chicago Press, 1945, pp. 81–82.

but they generally do not have relationships with the community's informal leaders It is the informal leaders who hold the power of the commons and are responsible for the sustainability of the community.

In this paper, I describe an approach that Wildflowers has developed to recognize and work with the self-organized infrastructure of communities. Four short video clips posted on our website reveal examples of this approach. At the end of this paper, I raise issues about working with this infrastructure and more generally with communities.

The Wildflowers Approach to Community Building

Ten years ago, Wildflowers Institute started to work directly in vulnerable populations. It began relationships with seven communities[4] to learn from them about their approach to community building. It takes time for us to build trust in communities. We need to learn about local history and appreciate community culture and to relate effectively with community members. What is most important to us is that communities are comfortable with our intent and convinced that we have their best interests in mind. Building confidence and trust is a process of reaffirming what we have in common and overcoming misunderstandings, suspicions, and conflicts. We continue to learn from the communities in which we work. Over time, we deepen our shared learning and relationships, which enable us to further develop and refine our processes and tools. An improved methodology deepens our understanding of self-sustaining community change. Our understanding and our methods have evolved and will continue to evolve in an interactive way. We have distilled our current methods into the following four approaches, but we do not always apply them in a linear sequence.

First, Wildflowers gets grounded in a community. We meet people; we visit places where they live, work, and socialize; and we participate in their activities. This first important step is what program directors, community organizers, and some social scientists do when they begin their work in a community.

Second, Wildflowers seeks to understand the different social realities facing informal and formal stakeholders in the community. We are mindful of the limitations of our own mental and cultural filters in seeing and understanding a community different from our own. We have developed and patented a tool, Wildflowers Model-building, both to uncover implicit assumptions that hold the community together and to construct a common universe among different stakeholders in the community. Using this tool, stakeholders can design multiple strategies that strengthen the sustainability of the community.

We hold Wildflowers Model-building sessions to enable people within different sectors of the community to tell their stories and to identify resources to address community challenges and aspirations. In effect, Model-building is a tool that people use to construct a lens of their social reality.

The video clip at www.wildflowers.org/bird.html describes a young man's daily life in South Central Los Angeles. He talks about the social injustices that he faces and some of their underlying causes. And in all of his struggles, he cites progress and hope.

4 We are working in the African American community, East Palo Alto; Chinatown community, San Francisco; Frank's Landing Indian Community, Olympia, Washington; Lao Iu Mien community, San Francisco Bay Area; Latino community, East Palo Alto; Filipino community, San Francisco; and Red Wolf Band, Albuquerque



Third, the institute discovers the power of individuals to hold the community together. Let me give you an example of how I discovered the power of Kao Chiem Chao. The Lao Iu Mien community in the San Francisco Bay Area is composed of five thousand refugees who have established a community center in East Oakland. On April 27, 2008, they held a premiere of a 30-minute video documentary—directed by one of the Iu Mien leaders—on the development and formation of their community over the past thirty years.

This premiere was held at the center and attended by about 40 residents, some of whom were spiritual leaders and representatives of the eight Iu Mien districts and central council in Oakland. One of the attendees was Kao Chiem Chao, with whom we have been acquainted for almost a decade (he's the smiling man seen holding the water bottle in the photo above). Our documentation of the many community events that we have covered over the past ten years shows that Kao Chiem Chao has attended every one of the events, but he generally does not give speeches, nor does he speak in public to his community. Over time, we learned that his father was the chief of the Orange Tree Village in the highlands of Laos. On many occasions, we have heard different community leaders say that they revered his father and hold Kao Chiem Chao in very high esteem. Every time we interviewed him, he came across as so soft-spoken and kind that his power could seem cloaked to an outsider.

While his role was initially difficult to document, two years ago we observed that Kao Chiem Chao has a favorite place to hang out, under a tree outside the community center in Oakland. So a half-hour before the showing of the video, we went out to take a look. There he was, standing with other district and central council members under the tree.

Just to be sure that what we captured in the morning and what we observed earlier in the year were not coincidences, we went back three hours later to see if a group of leaders was clustered around Kao Chiem Chao. Sure enough, there he was, with a different group of council members and spiritual leaders. We have come to recognize the important role that he plays in providing overarching guidance for community leaders.

Fourth, Wildflowers helps communities articulate their functions, organic structures, and culture, highlighting the underlying cultural assumptions that govern behavior and hold the community together. The following illustration comes from our work in a migrant community in Ningbo, China—a port city two hours south by train from Shanghai. In the video clip at www.wildflowers.org/china-anhui-street.html, you will see migrant workers describing their self-organization and their approach to dealing with significant tensions between the old residents of the community and themselves.

Observations and Learning

We have learned that communities work because of a basic infrastructure that is composed of informal leaders who organize generative activities in social spaces. These leaders are guided by the beliefs and values of the community. This infrastructure has surfaced in every racially mixed and ethnically homogeneous community in which we are working. We believe that seeing the infrastructure that the community conceived of and developed over time and leveraging this innate system is the surest way to build self-sustaining communities.

Informal leaders are the weavers of the community's social fabric. They work almost entirely in the informal sector. They are concerned elders, spiritual and cultural leaders, and other highly regarded community members who have taken it upon themselves to bring families and friends together. The elders provide guidance and direction. The spiritual and cultural leaders organize ceremonies and rituals. And the respected community members offer their help and support. Informal leaders hold six characteristics in common:

- They have a long track record of dealing successfully with all kinds of pressing issues.
- They are recognized for their good deeds and are trusted and well-known by most community members.
- They are invisible to outsiders.
- They are modest and do not seek personal media attention or political positions.
- Their role and authority are created by the community without external mandates.
- They are motivated to help others—not by monetary gain.

Activities with Unrelated Generative Effect (AWUG Effect)

We have discovered generative activities initiated by informal leaders, and we use the term "AWUG effect" to describe them. By this we mean activities that bring about positive personal change that is unrelated to the primary purpose of these events. What is important about the AWUG effect is that there is an intentional effort by one or more people to guide someone and to strengthen or heal relationships. Dallas Price, an informal leader of his community, is one of the most popular barbers among youth in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park. In the video clip at www.wildflowers.org/dallas-price.html, you will hear Price speaking about how he counsels young people.

During our first visit to Chichicaxtepec, Mixe, in Oaxaca, we were mindful that we would very likely introduce some different points of view and values to community members in the course of working with them. We shared this concern with the indigenous leaders and asked them how they deal with their differences. We learned from them that their fiestas are not only occasions for cultural renewal, but also a time for their leaders to resolve differences. One Mixe leader said, "Fiestas offer moments of reflection when you ask for forgiveness." A second Mixe leader said, "Fiestas are a space for healing of social wounds." Yet a third leader made the following comment, "Fiestas prevent an angry relationship from turning into a dysfunction between your heart and stomach." We came to see that the indigenous leaders of Mixe strategically use the fiestas to hold candid discussions that lead to social healing and conflict resolution—another example of the AWUG effect.

Social Spaces

Informal leaders, social spaces, and activities with generative effect constitute the organic architecture of community. This infrastructure is the foundation from which positive social health emerges. The elegance of this infrastructure is its simplicity.

There are social spaces in a community that are defined by groups of people and hold special meaning for them. Spiritual leaders, elders, cultural artists, organizers, women's and men's groups, and others hold rituals, ceremonies, gatherings, and events in various social spaces. Many of these activities happen inside homes, in backyards, on street corners, in parks, on porches, in schoolyards, in restaurants, and in other community spaces, bringing people closer together. What is important is that in many of these spaces, something generative and special emerges. These activities serve as a centripetal force to bring others in. The collective action around shared values and beliefs is reaffirming and powerful. Some activities in social spaces serve to heal people while other activities strengthen intergenerational relationships and social connectedness. Still other social spaces transmit cultural knowledge and practices, and thereby nourish and energize members of the community.

The Filipino youth in South of Market, San Francisco, claimed Sixth Street as their space. The video clip at www.wildflowers.org/filipino.html shows a Wildflowers session that we held with a group of Filipino youth describing their community. This model was built from a consensus among the young people and does not reflect the opinion of just one or two individuals. We see how they define who they are, what people and institutions are important to them, and the social spaces that are invisible to others, but that they claim as their own. Making visible these invisible spaces leads to recognition of the importance of these spaces in the neighborhood. This recognition, in turn, helps everyone see the young people's point of view.

In the backyard of a home in South Valley, Albuquerque, an indigenous Indian family holds Inipi ceremonies every Friday evening for a group of women and a group of men. One of the main purposes of these sweat lodge ceremonies is to support indigenous Indians in their sobriety. The ceremony is spiritually moving, and inside the sweat lodge we have witnessed the expression of pain and sorrow and deeply candid conversations. After the ceremony, the family hosts a potluck meal that reinforces social bonds and connectedness among those attending the session.

Concluding Thoughts

Informal leaders, social spaces, and activities with generative effect constitute the organic architecture of community. This infrastructure is the foundation from which positive social health emerges. The elegance of this infrastructure is its simplicity. Its power and authority come exclusively from its capacity to instill social safety and to adapt and build community.

When this infrastructure is strong and vibrant, we see the self-sustaining power and growth of communities. But when this infrastructure is weak and diminished, a culture of violence and destruction prevails. In a weak community culture, people are overwhelmed by negativity and unable to come together and defend their beliefs and values. The way to correct this toxic tide is to help communities return to cultural basics.

In the process of revealing the functions of an infrastructure, communities uncover a set of assumptions that hold them together. Making explicit these implicit assumptions provides communities the opportunity to assess and discuss them. Ensuring that these assumptions are both deeply rooted in history and collective experiences and relevant to contemporary times is absolutely essential for social adaptation and ongoing self-sustaining change.

I believe that development work in rural villages and in marginalized communities globally must start not from a program perspective, such as health, education, or water management, but from seeing the community as a living ecosystem with an infrastructure. This perspective would significantly improve the efforts of foundations and governments to make an impact on the lives of vulnerable people. Having this perspective would also reduce the disruption and damage to the basic fabric of communities.

The growth of the infrastructure is the missing aspect of development work. This infrastructure incubates the values and capacity to protect, nourish, and heal the community. It provides the underpinning for young people and adults to be a productive force in society. It draws on the accumulative experiences of generations of people and takes that wisdom to a higher level. At Wildflowers Institute, we have a unique process that helps those inside and outside the community develop a shared framework for collective action toward greater self-sustainability. We invite others to join us in learning about organic infrastructures and, more broadly, about community as a phenomenon and from a multidisciplinary perspective. We are confident that the application of our knowledge is making a difference in development in societies.

Ongoing Challenges

In this essay, I postulate the importance of having informal leaders and other stakeholders articulate the functions, structures, and culture of their community. But there are some key challenges in engaging and working with this infrastructure to create sustainable community change.

One challenge is to learn how to strengthen informal leaders without undermining their power. Their influence and standing in their community come from being reliable and dependable and having established a degree of social trust with others. Singling out informal leaders and raising their profile through access to training or project funding risks disrupting their embedded status. Elevating informal leaders may raise a question within the community of whether their motivation has become personal, rather than collective, and may undermine the trust that is central to their positions and their effectiveness.

A second challenge is to understand how to create and maintain some dynamic balance between the informal and formal sectors of community. In communities with robust institutions and an active informal sector, we have observed that over time the balance tips toward the formal sector and a diminishing of the values, principles, and beliefs of the core. We have also observed that the social realities of people working in the formal institutional sector—government agencies, service providers, and businesses—are vastly different from those of informal leaders. Informal leaders are building social safety and trust and laying the foundation for people to be open and generous with their time and energy.

Informal leaders' rewards are essentially personal and social and come from building the community of which they are a part. The reward system for the formal sector has its intrinsic elements as well, but it relies heavily on recognizing individual achievements

through personal promotion, often coupled with monetary gain. While the informal sector—the leaders and their structures and relationships—creates the foundation of the community's cohesion, the formal, institutional sector provides human capital resources, social services, and employment opportunities. Both the informal and formal sectors are assets that can contribute to the community's long-term viability. So it is important to develop mechanisms through which these sectors can interact, without undermining their respective significance and contributions.

> The social realities of people working in the formal institutional sector—government agencies, service providers, and businesses—are vastly different from those of informal leaders. Informal leaders are building social safety and trust and laying the foundation for people to be open and generous with their time and energy.

A third challenge is to develop strategies that enable government, funders, and others to identify and effectively interact with informal leaders and other aspects of the community's architecture. Funding sources have tried a series of different strategies for interacting with local communities, but most of these strategies have fallen short. Too often, funders holding their own definitions of success seek out and rely on an existing or newly created community-based organization or a community foundation to reflect their interests and to serve as a link to the community's infrastructure. But as we mentioned earlier, without the full endorsement of the infrastructure, it is very unlikely that new programs and projects will be sustainable after external funding ends. Finally, funders have tried to recruit informal leaders to join boards of directors of community-based organizations. While informal leaders may agree to serve in this capacity, their authority sometimes becomes diminished in a boardroom.

A fourth challenge is to develop approaches to bringing different cultures together on a level playing field. Most individuals and groups are at their best in their own cultural environment, and only a small percentage of the population has the capacity to traverse different cultures and languages seamlessly. It seems inappropriate and unwise to take people out of their natural milieu, especially when the goal is to nurture, heal, and replenish community members. On the other hand, we recognize that some of the most significant divides come from major cultural and religious differences. We suspect that effectively bridging these differences involves identifying commonality among different cultural approaches to social connectedness, healing, and growing. So we are focused on designing processes and tools to help diverse groups appreciate their differences and identify their commonalities. We are also designing learning environments that build capacity for understanding two or more social realities, while discovering the core elements of what they have in common.

These four challenges are on our agenda. We are deepening our understanding of these challenges and are interested in partnering with others to develop processes and tools to address them. Throughout all our work, we have learned that only by listening, watching, and engaging with many different community members and their informal leaders can we understand what is central to the community and its culture, what the community sees as its problems and priorities for change, and how to stimulate development that will take root and be sustained by the community over time.