Health as a Universal Right (5)

The crisis in health care worldwide has reached catastrophic proportions. Each day 9,000 people die from AIDS and 11,000 children die from malnutrition. Over one billion people have no access to clean water, and half the people in the world live on less than $2 (US) per day. The worsening conditions of the world’s impoverished people provide almost ideal conditions for the cultivation of disease, including those that could reach epidemic or pandemic proportions. In addition, a somewhat invisible epidemic of depression and other mental illnesses are taking a heavy toll on people throughout the developing world. To be successful humankind will need to redirect its resources from activities that exacerbate the crisis to ones that overcome it. Ideologies and ingrained habits and pursuit of short-term “self-interest” are likely to delay or defeat the establishment of health as a universal right. Regardless of whether that suspicion reflects cynicism or just realism is irrelevant: we must persevere.

Written by Douglas Schuler; Image from Wikimedia Commons; idea from David Seaton

Global Citizenship (6)

Citizenship is generally described as the formal relationship between a person (the citizen) and a country and often is described in terms of rights and responsibilities. Its site has shifted from the Greek city-state where the idea first took hold to the modern nation-state. Citizenship often determines access to health care, education, and other rights — rights that arguably should be universal. A narrow interpretation of citizenship implicitly cedes power to national governments whose defense of “national interest” can sometimes be used against its own citizens who have no legal access to a “higher authority,” and can restrict the participation of citizens in global affairs and problem-solving.

The journey towards global citizenship will be incremental, perennial, lurching, and will be met by setbacks as well as successes. There are tasks for many people with a wide variety of roles and responsibilities and there are hosts of organizations and projects in which people can engage. Communication with people in other countries is especially important to build bridges of understanding. Martha Nussbaum points out that each of us dwells, in effect, in two communities — the local community of our birth, and the global community of human argument and aspiration.

Written by Douglas Schuler and Lori Blewett

Political Settings (7)

Political action venues are changing dramatically with the proliferation of new kinds of nongovernmental organizations, the broadening coverage of the Internet, and the actions of governments to redefine and often reduce the scope of their direct interventions. We need concepts to describe these changes and assess their implications, both negative and positive, for democratic participation. Political settings are the basic physical units of collective political action. Meetings and demonstrations are common types of political setting but the diversity of possible settings is extremely wide-ranging. What political settings — as gatherings to inform, discuss, assert, dispute, debate, and decide important public matters — are available and which ones can we develop? What are their biases about who can participate, how matters are discussed, and what issues can be raised? Where do particular settings fit in the hierarchy of power? How do economic and cultural forces influence the process? Will a new action create a new setting or alter an existing one? By asking questions like these, activists will better grasp the changes they are asking people to make, and researchers can analyze the changing shape and structure of political space over long or short spans of time. The idea of political setting opens the door to exploration of an evolving civic intelligence exemplified by political actions from below.

Written by Jonathan Barker

Social Responsibility (8)

Things don’t get better by themselves. Without purposeful intervention, organizations of all kinds lose sight of their social responsibilities. Having social benefits as part of an organization’s purpose, does not guarantee positive achievements. Any organization with a shared vision of Social Responsibility, whether a for-profit corporation or a not-for-profit group working for the public good, needs to deliver what it promises. A passion for principles drives the efforts of individuals and citizen groups to make corporations, professions, and governments more responsive; the more open and accountable they are, the more responsive they are likely to be.

Activism on behalf of principles other than self-interest or convenience is necessary to remind businesses of their social responsibility, and to prevent other organizations from losing touch with theirs. This activism can take place outside the organization, in citizen groups and political platforms, or within the organization as the individual actions of the tempered radical and in the form of changes to policy and governance. In these efforts, the struggle of advocacy is at least as important as the specific principles being advocated. Social Responsibility does not depend upon any one principle of conduct.

Written by Stew Dutfield, Burl Humana and Kenneth Gillgren; Image: FDR Memorial. Wikicommons