

Neighborhood Necessities Seven Functions that Only Effectively Organized Neighborhoods Can Provide

BY JOHN MCKNIGHT

Ours is an era of “pulling back.” Our institutions—not-for-profit organizations, government, and businesses—are downsizing, retracting, and sequestering. These are all names for the process by which systems are occupying less space in society. They are beginning to abandon functions they had previously claimed to perform. Whether they are schools, medical systems, police departments, human service systems, or businesses, they are receding. The functional space they no longer occupy creates either a crisis or an opportunity.

The opportunity is there if we recognize that during recent generations, institutions have often taken over functions once performed by local communities, neighbors, and their collective groups and associations. Medicine has claimed our health. Police have claimed our safety. Schools have claimed the raising of our children. Social services have claimed the provision of care. And corporations have claimed that everything we need can be bought.

The claims have had two unforeseen consequences. First, as these systems have taken over functions, the power of local communities to be producers of well-being has been replaced. Once mutually responsible neighbors have become isolated local residents. In the process, the village has become impotent and unable to perform many of its responsibilities.

Second, many of the functions claimed by large systems and institutions were false claims in the first place. They purported to provide, for money, what only powerfully connected neighbors could achieve.

To achieve our well-being, it is necessary to have effectively organized neighborhoods. These well-being functions were often lost as institutions took over community functions. However, the institu-

tions were never able to create a substitute for the abandoned community capacities. Instead, they provided a counterfeit commodity rather than well-being, and many of our social and economic problems grew worse. Therefore, institutions “pulling back” is less a problem than a new opportunity to solve problems that have not been resolved by counterfeit institutional solutions.

In this sense, the seven unique neighborhood functions are necessities. There are at least seven neighborhood functions that are beyond the reach of institutional powers.

The first of these functions is our health. Our neighborhoods are the primary source of our health. How long we live and how often we are sick is largely determined by our personal behavior, our social relationships, our physical environment, and our incomes. As neighbors, we are the people who can change these things. Medical systems and doctors cannot. This is why epidemiologists estimate that medical care counts for less than 15 percent of our health determinants. Indeed, most informed medical leaders advocate enhanced community health initiatives because they recognize their systems have reached the limits of their health-giving power.

Second, whether we are safe and secure in our neighborhood is largely within our local domain. Important studies show that there are two major determinants of our local safety. One is how many neighbors we know by name. The second is how often we are present and associate in the public space outside our houses. Police activity is a secondary protection compared to these two community actions. This is why most informed police leaders advocate for block watch and community policing. They understand their limits and the necessity for connected neighbors.

Third, the future of our earth—the environment—is a major local responsibility. The “energy problem” is our local domain because how we transport ourselves, how we heat and light our homes, and how much waste we create is a major factor in saving our earth. That is why it is local neighborhood organizations that can call us and our neighbors to be citizens of the earth and not just consumers of the natural wealth.

Fourth, in our villages and neighborhoods, we have the power to build a resilient economy—less dependent on the megasystems of finance and production that have proven to be so unreliable. Most enterprises begin locally—in garages, basements, and storefronts. Neighbors have a vital role in supporting these businesses so that they have a viable market. And neighbors have the local power to capture their own savings through credit unions so that they are not captives of our notorious large financial institutions. Neighbors are also the most reliable sources of jobs. Word of mouth among neighbors is still the most important access to employment. The future of our economic security is now clearly a responsibility, possibility, and necessity for local people and their neighborhood groups.

Fifth, we are coming to see that a part of our local domain is the production of the food we eat. We can be allied with the local food movement, supporting local producers and markets. In this way, we will be doing our part to solve the energy problem caused by transportation of food from continents away. We will be doing our part to solve our economic problems by circulating our dollars locally. And we will be improving our health by eating food free of poisons and petroleum.

Sixth, we all say that “it takes a village to raise a child.” And yet, in most communities, this is rarely true. Instead, we pay systems to raise our children—teachers, counselors, coaches, youth workers, nutritionists, doctors, McDonald’s, and MTV. As families, we are often reduced to being responsible for paying others to raise our children and transporting them to their paid child raisers. Our villages have often become useless places where residents are responsible for neither their children nor their neighbors. As a result, we decry the local “youth problem.” There is no youth problem. There is a village

problem of adults who have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbors in raising the young. We can see that a remarkable recovery is possible when neighbors join in sharing the raising of the village children. It is our greatest challenge and our most hopeful possibility.

Seventh, locally we are the site of care. Our institutions can offer only service, not care. We cannot purchase care. Care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another. As neighbors, we care for each other. We care for our children. We care for our elders. And it is this care that is the basic power of a community of citizens. Care cannot be provided, managed, or purchased from systems. It is the new connections and relationships we create locally that build the community power to care for each other.

The critical issue for our time is how to reconnect ourselves so that we can begin again to act as powerful villages.

The historic institutional invasion of community functions has had a devastating effect on our capacity to fulfill our neighborhood functions. Today, many neighborhoods are not the sites of powerfully connected neighbors. Often they are sites where people live in relative isolation from each other.

The critical issue for our time is how to reconnect ourselves so that we can begin again to act as powerful villages, carrying out the seven functions that only neighbors can provide.

Certainly a part of community renewal is the process of community organizing. However, the common tradition of community organizing is to create groups of neighbors who will advocate with institutions to do more and do it justly. This process does not, however, build the capacity of neighbors to be producers of well-being. It usually addresses neighbors as consumers rather than as producers.

The community organizing that needs support today is focused on enabling local relationships that result in production of well-being rather than

consumption of system commodities. This requires us to understand what we can produce as neighbors and when we need institutional support.

Three basic questions help neighbors distinguish when they have the key productive role from when they need useful institutional support.

1. What functions can we perform with the power of our neighbors, associations, and very local institutions?
2. What can we do if we have the assistance of outside institutions?
3. What can only outside institutions do?

It is critical that these questions be asked in this order. The process that disabled so many neighborhoods began by first asking, “What can outside institutions do for us?” This is called a needs survey. This process has incrementally claimed more and more institutional power until the functions of local people are neutralized.

The reality is that most community organizing that is supported by funders today is for institutional

advocacy or institutional outreach into communities. However, neither of these approaches creates a community organization designed to enable local citizens to be producers of well-being in the seven domains of neighborhood necessities.

The relevant funders of our time are beginning to support local, productive citizen organizations where the first question is “What can we produce that will increase our well-being?” (One example of a neighborhood where this first question has been implemented can be found at www.abcdinstitute.org. Under Publications—Downloadable Resources, see “Exemplary Materials for Designing a Community Building Initiative in a Neighborhood.”) This approach results in neighborhoods where community organizing is building community with the collective power to create their own vision and to be the principal producers of that vision. That is the heart of democracy.

John McKnight is codirector of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and professor emeritus of communications studies and education and social policy at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL.
