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Global Local Nonprofit Organizations



by Sarah Berke

The dominant story about international nonprofit organizations is of large, transnational NGOs, and of organizations working from richer countries to improve poorer countries. Less widely known is the story of how so-called domestic nonprofit organizations, including relatively small organizations focused on serving their local communities, are becoming global actors. I am particularly interested in the opportunities for comparative learning that can come from peer connections between these local organizations across borders.



This summer I had the opportunity to travel to Japan (under the auspices of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership and the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs), where I met with the leader of the Yokohama Community Bank for Women

and Citizens, Eiko Mukaida. Her organization's work lending to women-run social enterprises, cooperatives, and nonprofits, is the Japanese equivalent of what some community development finance institutions (CDFIs) do in the U.S. I worked for four years at one such opportunity finance organization, the Chicago Community Loan Fund, and volunteered at another, the North Side Community Federal Credit Union, in Chicago before beginning grad school, so it was fascinating to hear about this work in the Japanese context.

Ms. Mukaida and I discussed her organization's mission and programs. She was interested in learning more about the U.S. Community Reinvestment Act--an important 1977 law requiring financial institutions to meet the credit needs of their whole communities, including low- and moderate-income neighborhoods--and the CDFI Fund--a federal program that gives grants and loans to support community development financial institutions, neither of which have Japanese counterparts. We also talked about Japan's recent experience with implementing strict consumer lending regulations, and I gained a new perspective on unintended consequences that is relevant for us in the U.S. as we look ahead to the inception of a new Consumer Financial Protection Agency.

In reflecting on my visit to Yokohama, I believe that local nonprofit organizations can learn a lot from their global peers about:

- How much we ultimately have in common
- How local contexts shape different approaches to similar problems
- How regulations, laws, and public policies affect the nonprofit sector differently in different countries

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International connections at the grassroots level can have the added benefit of supporting diplomatic efforts. My former boss, Calvin L. Holmes, the executive director of the Chicago Community Loan Fund, visited Russia for a Civil Society Summit in July organized by the Eurasia Foundation, New Eurasia Foundation and Center for Strategic & International Studies. At the summit, he met with his counterparts in the housing and community development sector in Russia. They learned about each others' common challenges, shared their successes, and developed plans for further cooperation between U.S. and Russian organizations. Calvin is pictured here sharing some of his experiences with President Obama, who participated in the summit as part of his visit to meet with the Russian president and other leaders. The president put it well in his comments at the summit, emphasizing that the U.S. and Russia need "more dialogue, more listening, more cooperation in confronting common challenges." The report from the summit is available [here](#).

Connections across borders can cross sector boundaries as well. Another organization I've worked with, the nonprofit [Center for Financial Services Innovation](#) (an affiliate of ShoreBank Corporation), brought a delegation of U.S. financial services leaders to South Africa in 2008. Their trip focused on learning from South African institutions about innovative financial products and services that could inspire better ways to serve the underbanked in the U.S.--an area in which nonprofits, for-profit companies, and financial institutions of various kinds all have important roles to play. More information is available [here](#).

All too often, discourse about international development is conducted separately from the discourse of local community development. Yet the trend of local organizations forging global connections across geopolitical and sector borders alike is encouraging. There is much we all have to learn from each other!

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