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COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH IN THE UNITED STATES

**An Introductory Reconnaissance,
Including Twelve Organizational Case Studies
and Comparison with the Dutch Science Shops
and the Mainstream American Research System**

Executive Summary

by Richard E. Sclove, Madeleine L. Scammell, and Breena Holland

with the assistance of
Faranaz Alimohamed, Jeff Hobson, Tim Johnston, Danny Murphy,
Dug North, Ken Rapoza, Marcie A. Sclove, Tina Swift, and Scott Waltz

The Loka Institute
Amherst, Massachusetts USA

The Loka Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making research, science and technology more responsive to democratically decided social and environmental concerns.

The Loka Institute
P.O. Box 355
Amherst, MA 01004-0355 USA
Tel. +(413) 559-5860
Fax +(413) 559-5811
E-mail: Loka@amherst.edu
World Wide Web: www.loka.org

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Thank you!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is blessed with abundant resources, wealth and dynamism, and yet burdened with profound social and environmental ills. “We can put a man on the moon,” goes the old saw, but why can’t we empower distressed communities and groups to help understand and address their own problems? The answer, it turns out, is *not* that no one knows how to facilitate such empowerment; the organizations examined in this study do it every day. The answer is that we aren’t properly investing the resources readily available for building the social infrastructure--a nationwide community research system--that would make empowerment-through-mutual-learning universally accessible.

“Community-based research” is research that is conducted by, with, or for communities (e.g., with civic, grassroots, or worker groups throughout civil society). This research differs from the bulk of the research and development (R&D) conducted in the United States, most of which--at a total cost of about \$170 billion per year--is performed on behalf of business, the military, the federal government, or in pursuit of the scientific and academic communities’ intellectual interests.

This report uses case studies of centers that conduct community-based research to develop the most comprehensive overview that exists to date of the U.S. community research system, comparing it with the institutionally more mature community research system that exists in the Netherlands, as well as with the mainstream U.S. research system.

Case Studies of Community-Based Research

The 12 organizations profiled in Chapter 2 illustrate a diversity of concerns, operating modes, institutional settings (both universities and independent nonprofit organizations), geographic locations, and demographic characteristics of their constituencies. The organizations include:

- Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (Jacksonville, Florida)
- Policy Research Action Group (Chicago)
- Childhood Cancer Research Institute (Worcester, Massachusetts)
- Applied Research Center (Oakland, California)
- Project South (Atlanta)
- Alaska Boreal Forest Council (Fairbanks)
- JSI Center for Environmental Health Studies (Boston)
- Center for Neighborhood Technology (Chicago)
- Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (Minneapolis)
- Highlander Research and Education Center (New Market, Tennessee)
- The Good Neighbor Project (Cambridge, Massachusetts)
- Urban University & Neighborhood Network (Ohio) and a successor organization, the Coalition to Access Technology & Networking in Toledo

Examples of Social Results

Concrete changes that have occurred as a result of community-based research projects conducted by these organizations include:

- Energy conservation retrofits of over 10,000 low-income housing units in Chicago
- A moratorium on forest logging pending the conclusion of negotiations between Alaskan legislators and activists
- One of the most thoroughly prepared legal cases in the history of toxic waste litigation, two companies sued for wrongful death associated with water pollution, and an \$8 million out-of-court settlement with Woburn, Massachusetts plaintiffs
- A requirement that scientists seek permission from a Native American community before including them as research subjects
- Regular dialog between two trade unions, a multiracial coalition of community groups, and the management of the Sun Oil refinery in Philadelphia
- Replacement of poisoned drinking water with a safe water line into a rural Kentucky community, and a legal judgment requiring establishment of an \$11 million community health fund
- Implementation of a new system for providing police service more equitably in the Jacksonville, Florida area
- Creation of a new health program in Chicago for refugee women
- Integration of neighborhood-based projects into university course syllabi

Analysis and Findings

Chapter 3 analyses the case studies to develop a set of findings concerning community-based research in the United States, among them:

1. Social Consequences of Community-Based Research

Community-based research processes differ fundamentally from mainstream research in being coupled relatively tightly with community groups that are eager to know the research results and to use them in practical efforts to achieve constructive social change. Community-based research is not only usable, it is generally used and, more than that, used to good effect.

- Community-based research often produces unanticipated and far reaching ancillary results, including new social relationships and trust, as well as heightened social efficacy. It may thus provide one constructive response to the growing concern that American civil society is in crisis and unraveling.

- Conventional research and development--along with its many social benefits and periodic spectacular successes--also bears some responsibility for environmental pollution, occasional ethical breaches (such as dangerous medical or military experiments performed on uninformed human subjects), degraded work processes and industrial accidents, weapons of mass

destruction, tears in the fabric of civil society, harm to the basic structure of democratic institutions, and so on. Not only does community-based research tend not to produce such negative consequences, it often contributes directly to preventing, mitigating, or remedying them.

- Community research projects frequently involve local groups reacting to urgent problems on the local level. But the majority of the community-based organizations in our study have also formulated a macrosocial analysis that informs their programmatic activities, ensuring that their projects include a proactive component or a translocal outlook. Most community-based research projects have practical implications beyond the local level.

2. Demand for Community-Based Research

There is significant demand for community-based research, and much of it is not being met. Every organization we studied attests to the need for more community-based research. Community research centers are forced to deny many requests for research assistance, either because they don't fall within a center's mission area or due to resource constraints. For instance, Chicago's robust Policy Research Action Group turns down 30-35 of the approximately 50 community-based research proposals that it receives annually. In most cases a community group that a center turns down has no recourse; the needed research is not performed.

- Community-based research is a component of some grants awarded under the Community Outreach Partnership Centers Program of the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development; however, funding limitations permit this Program to support only 16 of more than 100 proposals that it receives annually. During the two-year period 1995-1996, funding limitations permitted the Environmental Justice Community/University Grants Program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to support only 16 of 156 proposals submitted.

- The Loka Institute has so far been able to identify about 50 U.S. community research centers, estimating crudely that the total number of community research projects conducted annually in the United States is somewhere between 400 and 1,200. For there to be as many community research centers per capita in the United States as already exist in the Netherlands, the U.S. would need 645 centers conducting about 17,000 studies annually (Figures 1 and 2).

3. Financial Dimensions of Community-Based Research

Most U.S. community research centers find their work chronically constrained or even jeopardized by an inadequate funding base. Although some feel it more acutely than others, more than half the centers in our study worry that lack of funding could force them to shut down. On the other hand, the United States not only needs more community-based research, but can also easily afford it:

- Traditional research projects in academia, industry, and government often cost from \$50,000 up to \$1 million, and occasionally much more. In comparison, community-based

Figure 1. Number of Community Research Studies Conducted Annually in the U.S.

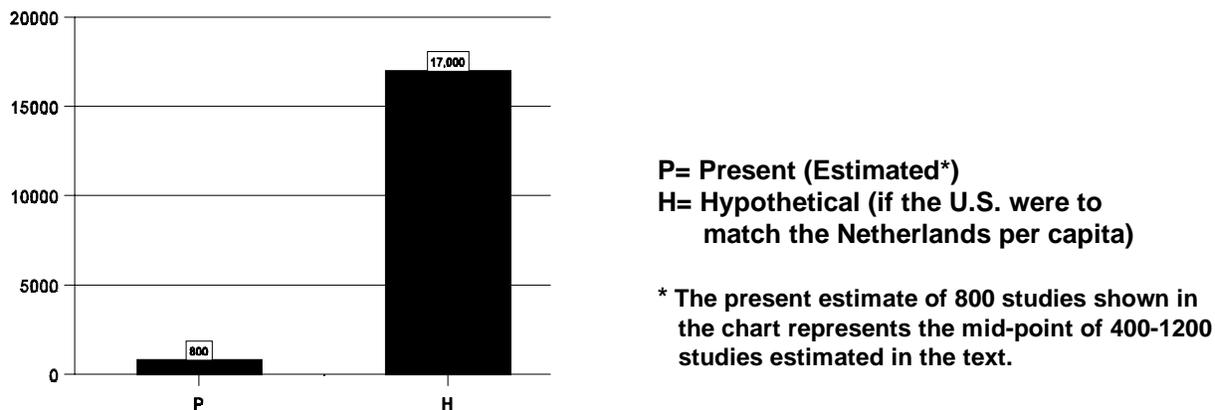
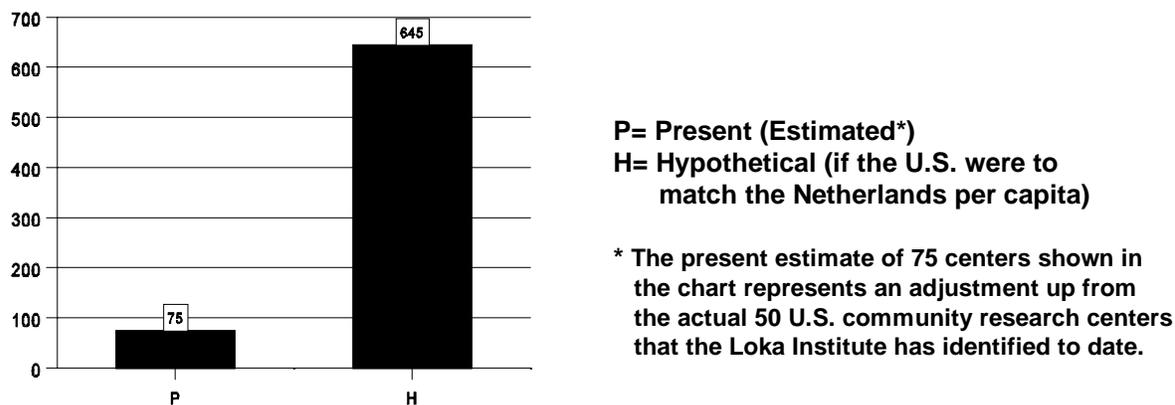


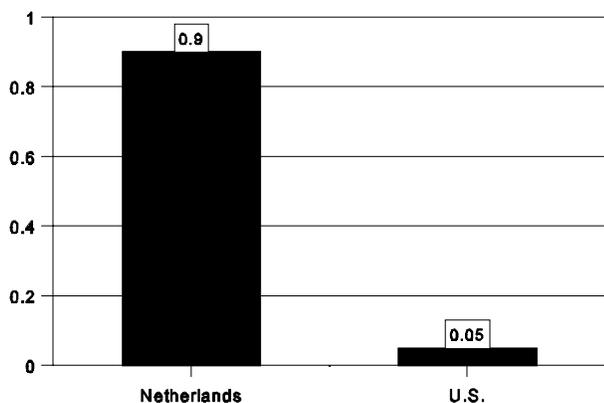
Figure 2. Number of Community Research Centers in the U.S.



research is cost-effective. A typical community research project costs on the order of \$10,000, constructively addresses an important social problem, empowers and provides other tangible benefits to groups that are often among society’s least advantaged, produces secondary social benefits (such as enhancing participating students’ education-for-citizenship), and produces little or no unintended social or environmental harm.

- This study’s rough estimate is that the United States and the Netherlands each spend on the order of US\$10 million annually on community-based research. That means that on a per capita basis the Dutch are investing in community-based research at 15 times the U.S. rate. As a fraction of each nation’s respective total R&D expenditure, the Dutch are investing in community-based research at 37 times the U.S. rate. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. University Expenditure on Community Research Expressed as a Percentage of Total University R&D Expenditure



that Doritos maintain market dominance in the face of competition from the new “restaurant style” corn chips. (News coverage of this story neglected to mention that the leading “restaurant style” chip, Tostitos®-brand, happens to be a Pepsico product.) The expenditure of more than \$50 million to ensure that Pepsico’s Doritos remain America’s top-selling snack food, ahead of Pepsico’s own competing Tostitos, represents approximately five times the total annual U.S. investment in community-based research.

- In 1998 the United States is scheduled to spend \$41 billion on military R&D. Security threats justifying expenditures of this magnitude remain elusive. In the words of a 1996 *New York Times* editorial: “American military spending is equal to that of the next 10 biggest military powers *combined*--and most of those countries are allies.” Meanwhile the budget for U.S. military R&D is more than 4,000 times larger than what we will spend on community-based research. (For a sense of relative social priorities: the budget for Dutch military R&D is only about 4½ times larger than estimated Dutch expenditure on community-based research.) See Figure 4.

- For the cost of one B-2 bomber, the U.S. could increase expenditure on community-based research 100-fold (i.e., 10,000 percent) for one year and still have \$500 million or more left over to contribute to other worthy social programs or to shrinking the national debt.

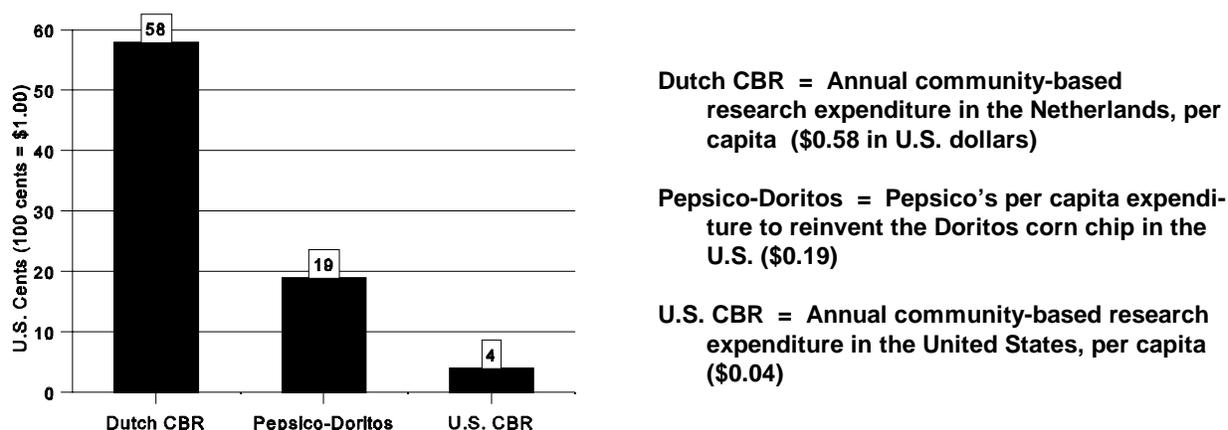
4. Creating a Nationwide Community Research Network

While there are community research centers in the United States, compared with the Netherlands they are few and far between, and they are relatively inaccessible to the groups that could most benefit from them. The Dutch have evolved a *comprehensive community research system* that can address questions on virtually *any* topic for *any* group or organization throughout Dutch civil society located *anywhere* in the nation.

- The \$300 million that the Monsanto company spent developing bovine growth hormone (a product that many small farmers and consumers have actively opposed on economic, social, ethical, or health grounds), would pay for all U.S. community-based research for 30 years at the current level that that we estimate it is being conducted.

- In 1994 Pepsico announced that, following two years of market research conducted among 5,000 people, it would spend a further \$50 million to reinvent its Doritos®-brand tortilla chip--intensifying the flavor on the surface, rounding the chip’s corners, and redesigning the package.

Pepsico’s principal concern was to ensure

Figure 4. Estimated Per Capita Expenditure in U.S. Cents (ca. 1995)

For further comparison: In 1995 annual per capita expenditure on R&D by U.S. universities was \$77. U.S. federal per capita expenditure on government laboratory R&D was \$86 and on military R&D it was \$152. The latter three numbers are all too large to fit on this chart. (For the Netherlands, annual per capita expenditure on military R&D is about US\$2.50—only 4½ times Dutch expenditure on community-based research).

- Since 1995 the Loka Institute's Community Research Network (CRN) initiative has sought to establish similar capabilities in the United States by organizing a national planning conference, creating a national and international Internet discussion forum for community-based research, publishing a reader, designing a searchable Internet database of community research centers worldwide, and other related activities. Loka's CRN initiative has also inspired efforts to establish community research centers in Canada, Israel, and South Korea. We are hopeful that with time the CRN can, in addition, facilitate greater grassroots engagement in regional, national and international political forums, as well as transnational collaboration among community research centers worldwide.

- To create a U.S. community research system that would provide service as comprehensively and accessibly as does the Dutch system would cost on the order of \$450 million annually. That is about 45 times current U.S. investment in community-based research, but it would still represent less than 0.3 percent of total U.S. R&D expenditure (from all sources, public and private).

- \$450 million for a nationwide Community Research Network would, moreover, represent only about 2 percent of annual federal expenditure at all U.S. government laboratories. The government laboratory system is substantially a byproduct of World War II and the Cold War, and a number of its component labs have now outlived their missions. On the other hand, the underlying rationale for wanting some type of national laboratory system remains sound: to conduct research that is in the social interest but that the conventional research system will not fund or is ill-prepared to conduct. In the context of a post-Cold War world, that sounds much more like a prescription for a Community Research Network than a justification for perpetuating the national laboratory system in its current form.

5. Characteristics of U.S. Community Research Centers and Programs

Collaboration with grassroots and other non-expert groups is one of the defining characteristics of community-based research. The mutually respectful relationship that needs to exist between experts and other community members takes time to build. For example, tensions constantly arise in trying to reconcile university timetables and pacing with the sense of urgency pervasive among community organizations. Community research center staff create environments supporting successful collaboration by developing sensitivity to the areas where tension arises and skills in nurturing and mediating partnerships.

- U.S. community research centers conduct more participatory research than do their Dutch counterparts. (“Participatory research” aspires to involve community members in all stages of the research process.) In the Netherlands, the community group that poses a question is typically involved in the research process only as a member of an ad hoc research oversight committee. The research itself is usually conducted by a university student.

- Student interns are crucial to the operation of at least 10 of the 12 U.S. community research centers that we studied. From a societal or community research center’s point of view, there is a significant economic benefit in enrolling students: they can be rewarded partially or entirely with academic credit rather than monetarily. Students also reap the satisfaction that comes with making a constructive contribution to social improvement, while honing their budding research skills in a practical setting. Society benefits further because the participating students receive a boost in their education-for-citizenship; several of the organizations in our study report that their student interns have been profoundly affected and altered their life outlooks or career paths as a result of their involvement in community-based research. Faculty-supervised student participation can also help universities maintain a more balanced social outlook during a period of deepening university research ties to industry.

- There are differing strengths and drawbacks to community research centers that are based in universities versus those that are independent nonprofit organizations. For example, some centers report that a university affiliation has enhanced their stature in the eyes of potential funders, provided overhead support, or eased recruitment of student interns. Potential drawbacks, however, include the possible requirement to pay high university overhead charges on research grants or becoming subject to inhibiting laws or regulations (e.g., Human Subjects Review Committee procedures that were never designed with participatory, community-based research in mind). While university administrators vary in their attitudes towards community-based research, indifference, skepticism or even resistance appear to be fairly common.

- The success of a community research center depends largely on its being rooted socially and ideologically in the communities it is serving. Nearly all of the organizations we studied, both university-based and not, consider it important that a community research center’s governance or oversight structure include strong constituent community representation. For example, Oakland’s Applied Research Center, which focuses on issues of race and social justice, has a board composed of key activists from communities of color, gay and lesbian organizations, workers, and other grassroots groups; other board members have backgrounds in the media or in academia and research.

6. The Need for Improved Understanding of Community-Based Research

As far as we know, at this time the Loka Institute knows as much about the overall state of community research in the United States as any other organization, and that is worrisome, because we have a good sense of how incomplete our own knowledge is. Community-based research in the United States has not been studied systematically.

- Few of the organizations we examined have systematic procedures for evaluating the quality and impact of their research, and nobody knows with precision the extent of community-based research in the United States.

- The massive biennial compilation *Science & Engineering Indicators*, prepared under the auspices of the U.S. government's National Science Board, includes exhaustive statistical documentation of the mainstream U.S. research system. However, one also searches in vain throughout the table of contents, chapters, tables, many appendices, and index of *Science & Engineering Indicators* for a single mention of community-based research, participatory research, or any related topic. Inasmuch as producing *Science & Engineering Indicators* represents a significant, ongoing government investment in understanding the U.S. research system--an investment that is, moreover, paid for entirely with tax dollars--it is hard to imagine the justification for omitting this broad range of data that would seem highly germane to the public interest in R&D.

- For the purposes of understanding the state of community-based research in the United States, to be able to intelligently debate and craft policies for community research, and for community researchers to be able to gauge and improve the quality of their projects, it is vital to develop better systems for documenting and evaluating community-based research centers, programs, and projects.

Conclusion

Our analysis of community-based research reveals a striking mismatch between the United States' generously endowed, mainstream R&D agenda and the urgent needs of countless communities across the country. By expanding the social infrastructure for conducting community-based research, thereby making empowerment-through-mutual-learning universally accessible, we can better direct our nation's prodigious capabilities toward our most urgent social and environmental needs. We can help alleviate suffering, revitalize democracy and community life, and bequeath future generations a world better than we found it.

APPENDIX

Mini-Case Studies of Community-Based Research

A selection of abridged case studies, drawn from the body of the report, illustrating community-base research projects and their social impacts:

Jacksonville Community Council Inc. (JCCI), Jacksonville, FL: Assessing the fairness of public service distribution: JCCI is a broad-based civic organization that performs research intended to improve the quality of life in Northeast Florida. In 1994, JCCI examined Jacksonville's public services--including streets and drainage, parks and recreation, and police and fire services--to determine their geographic distribution, and to evaluate whether needs were being met throughout city. Their research led to the creation of an annual "Equity Index" that assesses the distribution of public services in the Jacksonville area. One early result was that the Sheriff's Office implemented a new sector system for more equitable patrol services.

Harvard School of Public Health, Boston: Helping citizens link leukemia to industrially contaminated wells: During the 1970's parents in Woburn, Massachusetts noticed an alarming pattern of leukemia, urinary tract, respiratory disease, and miscarriages in their town, and wondered if the water supply was contaminated. State officials told them the water was safe. With the help of scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health, they initiated their own epidemiological research and identified industrial carcinogens in the town's well water. Their civil suit resulted in an \$8 million out-of-court settlement (detailed in the best-selling book and forthcoming Hollywood movie, *A Civil Action*) and provided major impetus for Congressional action to reauthorize federal Superfund legislation.

Policy Research Action Group (PRAG), Chicago: Determining health care needs of refugee women: PRAG, a collection of Chicago-based academics and community activists, has built a sophisticated network that connects research with grassroots activism. For example, PRAG found an intern from Northeastern Illinois University to work with a community-based organization (the Mutual Aid Associations of Chicago Collaborative) that sought data on the health care needs of refugee women in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. In cooperation with Mutual Aid, the intern designed and administered a questionnaire that was given to 85 refugee women. As a result of the research, The Mutual Aid Associations started a women's health program that offers refugee women greater access to the health services they need.

Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization: Minneapolis: Planning to revitalize an industrial area: Residents and business owners in the South East Industrial Area (SEIA), just outside Minneapolis, were concerned that their area's viability was threatened by increasing pollution, over-strict zoning, crime, and the lack of sidewalks, bike paths, and park space. In addition, various groups affected by the SEIA had a contentious history and had not worked together for years. The SEIA community appealed to Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) for assistance. NPCR facilitates collaborative research between universities and local community-based organizations. Researchers working jointly through NPCR and the SEIA community members conducted a research project which established that an urban area can compete with the suburbs and still retain industrial and heavy commercial business. As a result, the city, county, and state agencies formed the Southeast Economic

Development Steering Committee, charging it to prepare a master development plan for the area. This project was funded by NPCR and involved 960 hours of time committed by graduate student researchers.

Center for Neighborhood Technology, Chicago: Maintaining jobs and environmental standards in the metalworking industry: In Chicago, metal finishing provides many jobs in low income neighborhoods. During the 1970's and 1980's, two waves of environmental regulation caused the immediate loss of 2,500 metal finishing jobs when noncomplying plants were forced to shut down. It became clear that environmental regulations threatened this key industry and thousands of related jobs. The nonprofit Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) collaborated with industrial development organizations to conduct an in-depth study of options for bringing Chicago's remaining metal finishers into regulatory compliance. CNT helped the groups identify the problems facing metal finishers, access free environmental audits of their plants, investigate alternative technologies for compliance, determine criteria for a centralized approach that would offer economies of scale, and secure financing for implementation. This effort represented a remarkable collaboration between manufacturers and environmentalists.

Project South, Atlanta: Following the money in Georgia politics: Project South is a grassroots education and action-research organization concerned with social and racial justice in the southeastern U.S. In 1995, with support from the Center for Responsive Politics--a nonprofit research group in Washington, DC--Project South launched an investigation into how money affects Georgia politics. Three 2-person teams studied the campaign contributions received by members of the Georgia State General Assembly and the Lieutenant Governor. Each team included a grassroots community member and a scholar-activist with more formal research training. The teams tracked and classified all reported contributions from individuals, corporations, and Political Action Committees. The study showed that campaign contributions are buying access to legislators and that the political system primarily serves the interests of people in power (e.g., global corporations and wealthy individuals). Overwhelmingly, the legislators studied come from the professional class that owns and manages businesses and real estate throughout the state. In Georgia, Project South is a member of a coalition that is confronting the state legislature on these issues. The study results are also being used in the national movement for campaign finance reform.

Highlander Center, New Market, TN: Investigating illegal disposal of toxic wastes: Beginning in 1980, the Highlander Research & Education Center began collaborating with Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens of Kentucky (YCCC), who opposed Middlesboro Tanning Co.'s management of hazardous chemicals. Tannery sludge overran the municipal sewage treatment plant, polluting drinking water. But company officials and owners denied there was a problem. With Highlander's help, YCCC conducted health surveys, videotaped waste dumping, and worked with university researchers to determine the extent of poisoning. As a result, YCCC was able to get a safe water line to the community and file a law suit. Ten years later a jury found the tannery owners guilty of gross negligence and, together with the city of Middlesboro, ordered them to provide \$11 million for a community health fund.

ABOUT THE LOKA INSTITUTE

Founded in 1987, the mission of the Loka Institute is to make research, science, and technology more responsive to democratically decided social and environmental concerns. We do this by conducting research and public education, animating and providing technical assistance to social change efforts, and testing and establishing new institutions. The Loka Institute is recognized by the I.R.S as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization.

The Loka Institute's efforts are based on the belief that: (1) In the contemporary world broad historical trends, political and community structures, and the texture of daily life are all shaped by research, science, and technology in more profound and subtle ways than most people realize. (2) The effects of science and technology extend from relatively obvious environmental repercussions, such as pollution, to critical social and political consequences, such as job insecurity, community atrophy and, ultimately, a dysfunctional democracy. (3) In order to anticipate and avert such negative effects, it is essential to interject community perspectives into science and technology decisions. (4) What is desirable is also practicable; recent but little-publicized procedural innovations (often emanating from Europe) demonstrate that there are practical ways to enable people from all walks of life to contribute to science and technology decisions, thereby improving people's well-being and the well-being of their communities:

- In the Netherlands, most universities each have between one and ten "science shops" that conduct research in response to questions posed by grassroots and public-interest groups, trade unions, and local government agencies. *The Loka Institute is bringing this idea to the U.S. and other countries by organizing a worldwide Community Research Network.*

- A growing number of European governments have begun to assemble panels of everyday citizens who listen to competing expert testimony before announcing their own science and technology policy recommendations at a national press conference. *The Loka Institute initiated the first U.S. pilot introduction of this process in April 1997, on the topic of telecommunications policy. Following an invitation to brief Clinton Administration officials and Congressional staff, Loka is now laying the groundwork for nationwide citizen panels.*

- No nation on earth has an effective system for assessing technologies' direct and indirect effects on democracy itself. *The Loka Institute is collaborating with the Danish Parliament's Board of Technology to develop participatory methods through which citizens will be able to evaluate the democratic implications of alternative technologies and technology policies.*

- If one is concerned with the environment, as we at the Loka Institute are, there is a dense network of thousands of environmental organizations worldwide that one can join and support. *The Loka Institute has begun the long-term process of assembling a comparable network concerned with making science and technology more democratically responsive. Our Internet discussion forums and newsletters include more than 9,000 subscribers worldwide. Our publications, including our award-winning book, Democracy and Technology, are likewise being used in classrooms around the world.*

To join the Community Research Network, receive our free electronic newsletter, participate in our Internet discussion forums, or work with us, please contact the Loka Institute, P.O. Box 355, Amherst, MA 01004 USA; Tel. +(413) 559-5860; Fax +(413) 559-5811; E-mail <Loka@amherst.edu>; World Wide Web <www.loka.org>. Contributions to the Loka Institute are most welcome--indeed they are vital to our ability to continue our work--and they are deductible on U.S. tax returns to the full extent of the law. Thank you!