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From clients to citizens: Asset-based Community Development as a strategy for community-driven development

Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham

In this paper, Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) is presented as an alternative to needs-based approaches to development. Following an overview of the principles and practice of ABCD, four major elements of ABCD are examined in light of the current literature on relevant research and practice. This involves exploring the theory and practice of appreciative inquiry; the concept of social capital as an asset for community development; the theory of community economic development; and lessons learned from the links between participatory development, citizenship, and civil society. The paper outlines how ABCD both reflects and integrates trends in these areas, and stands to benefit from the insights generated from this work.

Introduction

In recent years, Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) has caught the attention of community development practitioners in North America as an innovative strategy for community-driven development in urban neighbourhoods and rural communities. It has attracted a small but dedicated following, particularly among those who are disenchanted with the needs-based approach to community development that is so entrenched in government and non-governmental service delivery. As an alternative approach, the appeal of ABCD lies in its premise that people in communities can organise to drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilising existing (but often unrecognised) assets, thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity. In particular, ABCD draws attention to social assets: the particular talents of individuals, as well as the social capital inherent in the relationships that fuel local associations and informal networks.

In terms of its potential for international development practice, ABCD can also be viewed as a response to dramatic changes in the social, political, and economic landscape. In most countries, liberalisation policies have resulted in a weakening of the social contract that gave government responsibility for providing programme-based solutions to community problems. At the same time, stronger, accountable forms of governance at the local level, and the emergence of effective civil society organisations, have been front and centre in the process of democratisation, particularly in countries of the Global South. Technological advances in

global and local communications provide opportunities for decentralised economic development for some communities. Other communities, meanwhile, struggle for survival, stretching their assets to unsustainable levels. In this period of flux, there is a twofold challenge at the community level: to create and seize opportunities for sustainable development, and to claim and retain the rights and entitlements of state and global citizenship.

ABCD embraces several ideas and practices that have risen to the surface during this period of flux. The case we make in this paper is that ABCD offers a coherent strategy for tying together these various complementary strands of innovative development agency practice, in both local and international development contexts.

We first provide an overview of the principles and practice of ABCD. We then examine four major elements of ABCD in light of the current literature on relevant research and practice. This involves exploring the theory and practice of appreciative inquiry; the concept of social capital as an asset for community development; the theory of community economic development; and lessons learned from the theory and practice of building active citizenship engagement and a stronger civil society. We show how ABCD both reflects recent trends in these areas and stands to benefit from the insights generated from this work.

Before proceeding, two words in our title need sharper definition: 'community' and 'citizen'. 'Community' is a particularly slippery concept, having been employed in a range of senses for at least 500 years, denoting actual groups of people (as when community is coterminous with village, neighbourhood, or ethnicity) as well as particular qualities expected of relationships among those people (as in 'a sense of community') (Regents of the University of California 1999). If it is used casually, therefore, the term can create the illusion that people in a particular location, neighbourhood, or ethnic group, are necessarily cooperative, caring, and inclusive. The reality may be very different, as power differentials in gender, race, and class relations may result in exclusion, and threaten the apparent cohesiveness of the group in question.

'Citizenship' is receiving renewed attention as a result of the current interest in rights-based approaches in international development, and of parallel efforts to strengthen democratic forms of governance. However, the term has had a similar linguistic experience of being a statement of both what is and what ought to be. In this case, while citizenship has primarily been territorially grounded (tying citizens in a contractual relationship with government in the modern nation-state, for example), it has also historically been associated with citizen-to-citizen ties and with 'active participation' (Barber 1984).

Bringing these two terms together, we demonstrate in this paper that Asset-based Community Development has the potential to encourage active citizenship in the sense of citizen-to-citizen ties, while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of people as citizens to claim their rights of access to assets on which they depend for their livelihood. Active citizenship originates in community, and Asset-based Community Development builds a sense of community, while enhancing the prospects for sustainable livelihoods.

An overview of Asset-based Community Development

Origins of the ABCD approach

Based on extensive inquiry into the characteristics of successful community initiatives in the USA, John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann at the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern University articulated ABCD as a way of counteracting the predominant needs-based approach to development in the US urban context. In the needs-based approach, well-intentioned efforts of universities, donor agencies, and governments have generated needs

surveys, analysed problems, and identified solutions to meet those needs. In the process, however, they have inadvertently presented a one-sided negative view, which has often compromised, rather than contributed to, community capacity building.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) point out that if the needs-based approach is the only guide to poor communities, the consequences can be 'devastating' (p. 4). One of the main effects is of fostering leadership that denigrates the community. Leaders find that the best way to attract institutional resources is to play up the severity of problems. Local leadership is judged on how many resources are attracted to the community, not on how self-reliant the community has become. Another consequence Kretzmann and McKnight identify is that people in the communities start to believe what their leaders are saying. They begin to see themselves as deficient and incapable of taking charge of their lives and of the community. Not surprisingly, community members no longer act like citizens; instead they begin to act like 'clients' or consumers of services with no incentive to be producers.

Yet another consequence of this approach is that local groups begin to deal more with external institutions than with groups in their own community. This reinforces the notion that 'only outside experts can provide real help' (p. 4) and further weakens neighbour-to-neighbour links. Funding is made available on the basis of categories of needs rather than for integrated approaches, which leads to 'the much lamented fragmentation of efforts to provide solutions . . . [This] denies the basic community wisdom which regards problems as tightly intertwined, as symptoms in fact of the breakdown of the community's own problem solving capacities' (p. 4). To make matters worse, the bulk of any funding tends to go to the institutions filling the needs. Perversely, these institutions begin to develop a vested interest in maintaining this approach.

Kretzmann and McKnight describe an alternative approach, one that recognises that it is the capacities of local people and their associations that build powerful communities. The process of recognising these capacities begins with the construction of a new lens through which communities can 'begin to assemble their strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production' (p. 6).

Experience in the USA shows how several communities have mobilised to take action for their economic and social development. Sometimes, this ABCD approach has evolved over a long period of time. For example, in Savannah, Georgia, neighbourhood redevelopment had been going on for more than 25 years, initially through municipal agencies responding to problems identified in local neighbourhoods. Over time, however, municipal agencies decided to 'lead by stepping back'; communities shifted from being 'consumers' of services to 'designers' of community programmes, and, finally 'producers' of community (Moore and Puntenney 1999). Lessons learned from experiences such as these spurred the IPR to lead by stepping back from the outset, and to encourage communities to take charge and have confidence in their own capacities. Communities are helped to build an inventory of their assets and are encouraged to see value in resources that would otherwise have been ignored, unrealised, or dismissed.

Such unrealised resources include not only personal attributes and skills but also the relationships among people through social, kinship, or associational networks. By mobilising these informal networks, formal institutional resources can be activated—such as local government, formal community-based organisations, and private enterprise. In fact, the key to ABCD is the power of local associations to drive the community development process and to leverage additional support and entitlements. These associations are the vehicles through which all the community's assets can be identified and then connected to one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness.

In summary, based on the experiences documented by Kretzmann and McKnight and on initiatives elsewhere that employ a similar approach, we propose that ABCD can be understood as *an approach*, as a *set of methods* for community mobilisation, and as a *strategy* for community-based development.

As an approach to community-based development, ABCD rests on the principle that a recognition of strengths and assets is more likely to inspire positive action for change in a community than is an exclusive focus on needs and problems. At its core are associations of community members, both formal and informal. As engines of community action, and as a source of power and leadership, these associations are considered assets of the community (Greene 2000).

Accompanying this approach is a set of methods that have been used to mobilise community members around a common vision or plan. While there is no blueprint, these methods could typically include:

- collecting stories of community successes and analysing the reasons for success;
- mapping community assets;
- forming a core steering group;
- building relationships among local assets for mutually beneficial problem solving within the community;
- convening a representative planning group;
- leveraging activities, resources, and investments from outside the community.

Finally, ABCD is a strategy for sustainable community-driven development. It differs from the World Bank's initiative in Community Driven Development in that it is focused on community mobilisation rather than institutional reform, though there is potential complementarity. Beyond the mobilisation of a particular community, ABCD is concerned with linking community-driven initiatives to the macro environment and promoting a policy environment conducive to such initiatives.

ABCD and other asset-based approaches

The growing interest in ABCD as a strategy for community-based development is in keeping with a noticeable shift in international development agency practice to asset- or strength-based approaches. This is evident in the NGO sector in the work of Myrada and the Association for Social and Health Advancement (ASHA) in India, Khanya in South Africa, Private Agencies Collaborating Together (PACT) in Nepal, and World Vision Tanzania, to name but a few. Among donor agencies, the sustainable livelihoods approach developed by DFID in the UK (and to some degree by UNDP) and the asset-building agenda now pursued by the Ford Foundation are examples of this trend.

Growing out of a concern that promoting income-generating activities was not synonymous with enhancing the livelihoods of the poor, proponents of the sustainable livelihoods approach saw the need to take into account many other factors: the vulnerability context in which the poor find themselves; the strategies that households employ to deal with economic shocks; all the human, financial, social, physical, and natural assets of households and the community; and the larger structures and processes (institutions, organisations, policies, and legislation) that shape people's livelihoods.

Asset building, in the Ford Foundation framework, places a similar emphasis on building an asset base in households and communities that is transferable across generations. Recognising that many such assets already exist to some degree in the community, the emphasis is on

promoting opportunities for building assets and eliminating structures that limit such opportunities.

In a forthcoming paper (Mathie and Cunningham 2003), we undertake a comparative analysis of these approaches and their compatibility with ABCD.

The elements of ABCD: learning from related areas of research and practice

ABCD integrates various themes in current community development research and practice. In this section, we examine five different elements of ABCD that reflect these themes.

Constructing shared meaning: learning from the practice of appreciative inquiry

In the initial phases of ABCD, the approach to mobilising communities has much in common with appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is a process that promotes positive change (in organisations or communities) by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past. It relies on interviews and storytelling that draw out these positive memories, and on a collective analysis of the elements of success. This analysis becomes the reference point for further community action. As Elliott (1999) emphasises in the title of his book, conducting appreciative inquiry is all about *Locating the Energy for Change*.

Appreciative inquiry draws on theories of knowledge construction and communications as well as on lessons learned from educational psychology about the sources of personal and collective motivation. This theoretical base is also an anchor for ABCD, particularly in the initial phases of working with the community.

According to Elliott, practitioners of appreciative inquiry assume that reality is socially constructed, and that language is a vehicle for reinforcing shared meaning attributed to that reality. Communities that have been defined by their problems (malnutrition, poverty, lack of education, corruption) internalise this negativity. Elliott explains:

What the appreciative approach seeks to achieve is the transformation of a culture from one that sees itself in largely negative terms—and therefore is inclined to become locked in its own negative construction of itself—to one that sees itself as having within it the capacity to enrich and enhance the quality of life of all its stakeholders—and therefore move towards this appreciative construction of itself. (Elliott 1999:12, emphasis in the original)

To achieve this transformation, appreciative inquiry adopts what Elliott calls the ‘heliotropic principle’ (p. 43). Just as plants grow towards their energy source, so do communities and organisations move towards what gives them life and energy. To the extent that memory and the construction of everyday reality offer hope and meaning, people tend to move in that direction. Parents and teachers are familiar with this principle; research demonstrates extensively that children’s performance is shaped by teachers’ and parents’ expectations more than by children’s own innate ability.

In Elliott’s view, two instruments are central to appreciative inquiry: memory and imagination. While these are flawed from the perspective of conventional inquiry because they lack the hallmarks of objective empiricism, they are effective in constructing a shared history and a shared vision for the future in a community setting. This is then translated into a community action plan and immediate community activity to set the process in motion.

Both ABCD and appreciative inquiry struggle against the prevailing problem focus of community development practice and its accompanying ‘deficit mind-set’. Both reason that,

although some problems require urgent responses, other problems may lose their urgency, or be solved indirectly, when an unrelated change in activity or circumstance takes place and the energy that was focused on the problem becomes re-focused. Ashford and Patkar (2001) illustrate this by quoting from the analyst Carl Jung:

All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This 'outgrowing' proves on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the horizon and through this broadening of outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge. (p. 86)

Focusing on strengths and capacities is one way in which communities can outgrow a problem, or redefine its solution as a product of renewed collaborative action. It would be misleading to underestimate the challenges of accomplishing this, however. Power asymmetries, the intrusiveness of ideology, and varying levels of commitment to the process may all frustrate effective communication. Yet Elliott argues that the process seems to offer community members a more powerful opportunity to get involved on a more equal basis. Role reversals take place in such settings, at least for the duration of the inquiry. Power asymmetries in the routine of everyday life may return, but 'the object of the inquiry is to splice stakeholders so firmly in the process that when pre-inquiry hierarchies are re-established, they are in fact qualitatively different. The old ground is simply unavailable' (Elliott 1999:285).

The potential of associations: learning from the literature on social capital

At the core of ABCD is its focus on social relationships. Formal and informal associations, networks, and extended families are treated as assets and also as the means to mobilise other assets of the community. By treating relationships as assets, ABCD is a practical application of the concept of social capital.

Despite concerns about the lack of conceptual clarity of social capital (see Frankenberger and Garrett 1998; Woolcott and Narayan 2000), there is agreement in the literature that social capital is present in the networks, norms, and social trust inherent in associations whose members work together in concerted collaborative action. In a literal sense, social capital is the store of goodwill and obligations generated by social relations. Looked at in this way, networks, norms, and social trust are all evidence of social relations in which social capital has been generated. Thus, as Woolcott and Narayan point out, in the adage 'it is not *what* you know, but *who* you know', people are talking about the potential support and assistance that stem from the social relationships they have cultivated or inherited through family or class membership. Like other forms of capital, social capital is a *latent* asset, and individuals can increase or deplete it depending on where they stand in the reciprocal exchange of social support and obligation.

Woolcott and Narayan differentiate between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. In this categorisation, bonding social capital enables people to 'get by'; bridging social capital enables people to 'get ahead' (see Gitell and Vidal 1998 and Putnam 2000 on the origin of these terms). Bonding social capital is evident in the close-knit relations of friends and families who can be depended on for basic survival in times of stress. It is bonding social capital, for example, that will be drawn upon by a family with insufficient food for survival, or by a woman whose husband is sick and unable to contribute his share of labour. Bridging social capital provides leverage in relationships beyond the confines of one's own affinity group, or even beyond the local community. Educated relatives in the town may, for example, guarantee a larger loan to accelerate the growth of a small enterprise run by extended family members. Relationships

cultivated by a community with local authorities might influence the decision about the location of a road to facilitate marketing.

Applying these ideas to ABCD, attention needs to be paid to the potential of community associations to mobilise bonding social capital and to increase bridging social capital. In particular, bridging social capital that links the community to the external environment is crucial for sustained economic development and prosperity. Such diversification of social networks stimulates expanded economic activity, which in turn goes on to generate opportunities for increasing and diversifying stocks of social capital. The challenge is to provide opportunities for the poor—who tend to depend on bonding social capital—to increase their stock of bridging social capital and access institutions independently (Woolcott and Narayan 2000). For social capital to be realised, however, transactional norms and social trust need to be established. In much the same way as material assets need a regulatory and legal environment in order to be realised as negotiable capital (see de Soto 2000; IFAD 2001), social assets can only be capitalised in an environment that shares similar expectations of trust and reciprocity. As Woolcott and Narayan (2000) note:

Weak, hostile, or indifferent governments have a profoundly different effect on community life and development projects, for example, than do governments that respect civil liberties, uphold the rule of law, honor contracts, and resist corruption. (p. 227)

Because it is a type of ‘capital’, the stocks of social capital will inevitably fluctuate in different circumstances. Putnam (2000) has documented these fluctuations and trends in the USA. For an industrial community in Brazil, Bazan and Schmitz (1997) trace the changes in social capital formation over a 50-year period, showing how some social capital stocks are replenished while others are depleted during particular periods. Social capital through kinship, ethnicity, and localness was important when the community was characterised by a small handcraft economy in the 1950s. By the 1990s, the economy was characterised by large-scale specialised production integrated into various export sectors. Consequently, deliberate investment in social capital was taking place along class lines and within integrated sectors of the economy, rather than according to kinship and ethnicity.

Even within a very short timeframe, however, the presence of social capital cannot be taken for granted. Moser’s (1998) study of four poor urban communities in Zambia, Ecuador, Philippines, and Hungary documents how, under extreme conditions, some households were pushed beyond the limit of sustaining reciprocity networks; women were reluctant to borrow from neighbours for fear of not being able to repay; and informal credit schemes floundered. Ultimately, increased levels of violence (fuelled by the economic crisis) further eroded social capital. The perceived increased risk to personal safety led to reduced levels of community activity and growing isolationism. These in turn reduced participation in the community-based organisations that had been the focus of community collaborative action.

The lessons here for ABCD are once again important. Further work needs to be done to establish the conditions under which social capital and associational assets are depleted or undermined, and, conversely, what additional factors enable such social capital to be activated even under the most stressful circumstances. Krishna’s (2002) work in India, for example, points to the variables of local leadership and intermediary agencies as essential for linking the ‘propensity for collective action’ with the opportunities afforded by the state and the market. Putnam’s (1993, 2000) findings that social capital is correlated with economic prosperity and with relative social equality is encouraging, but the direction of this correlation needs to be examined in a variety of social and economic contexts. Can high levels of social capital contribute to greater social equality, or is the formation of social capital inhibited by social hierarchy?

Recognising and developing economic capacity: lessons learned from community economic development theory

ABCD is a strategy for community-driven economic development. To date, theories of community economic development (CED) rely more on the theoretical contributions of community development than on those of economics, which fails to recognise the concept of community at all. Classical economic theory demands the free mobility of both labour and capital, and the concept of community gets in the way of this free flow.

The evolution of CED theory represents a confluence of three different development paradigms: (a) developing or improving economic systems and infrastructure; (b) developing the economic capacities of individuals; and (c) developing the economic capacities of groups to undertake community economic development.

The economic systems perspective sees the only difference between economic development and community economic development as one of scale. In other words, CED is merely economic development at the community level. Economic development is equated with economic growth. The main participants are outside experts and the types of initiatives employed tend to involve technological improvements and infrastructure development largely in the hopes of attracting investment and industry. From this perspective the development process is largely exogenous.

The individual capacity-building perspective sees CED as the by-product of the economic success of individuals. 'Community' tends to refer more to a 'target group' of individuals (usually those economically marginalised) rather than to a geographic locality. According to Diochon, economic development solutions are seen to rest with building the capacity of a community's human resources to exploit the potential of under-utilised natural and institutional resources. Collective action may be employed not as an end in itself but rather as a 'vehicle through which the institutional base identifies the problems and develops solutions that create innovation and entrepreneurship, more/better jobs, increased wealth and incomes and increased opportunities for personal fulfilment' (Diochon 1997:12). From this perspective, the development process can be either exogenous or endogenous. The main actors may be external NGOs or they may be local organisations established to promote individual capacity building.

In contrast, the group capacity-building perspective sees collective action as an end in itself. Collective action enables individuals who lack the resources to independently improve their well-being to work together to achieve this end. This perspective defines CED as an endogenous process. The main participants are by definition the members of marginalised groups formed to undertake collective action. Examples of these types of initiatives include peasant organisations striving for land reform, producer/consumer cooperatives and credit unions, and the movement for community-based resource management.

However, because it is believed that community economic development will not emerge spontaneously, advocacy is considered essential. This role is seen to be best filled by independent community-based groups and agencies who can gain broad-based community participation and establish partnerships with public and private stakeholders from within and outside the community (p. 13).

In many initiatives for economic development, all three perspectives are represented. Take the field of microfinance for instance. At one end of the development spectrum is the financial systems approach where the emphasis is on reforming existing financial systems (regulation and supervision, the role of central banks, the overhaul of the mandates and practices of rural development banks, etc.). The bulk of microfinance interventions, however, fall into the individual capacity-building category. The main expression of this is the 8000 or so

microfinance institutions that provide financial services to ‘clients’—either as individuals or in small groups. At the other end of the spectrum are the small savings-led microfinance organisations such as Self Help Groups, village banks, savings and credit cooperatives, and credit unions that focus on developing the capacity of member-based associations.

ABCD fits most comfortably in the group capacity-building camp. In the USA, one of the most notable examples of an ABCD approach to community economic development is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Roxbury, Massachusetts (see www.dsni.org). Group capacity building has been at the centre of this strategy. Involved groups include a community land trust that has provided hundreds of affordable housing units; a local merchants’ organisation that encourages a diverse economic landscape dominated by locally, independently, and cooperatively owned businesses; a group of 50 young people trained in urban agriculture; and the Resident Development Institute (which hosts community economic literacy workshops).

This is not to say that ABCD initiatives never involve individual capacity building nor advocate the reform of economic systems. The DSNI has been involved in activities ranging from the training of young entrepreneurs to the lobbying of governments for the power of eminent domain to expropriate vacant land for affordable housing. It is just that the ABCD approach has at its core the notion that communities (in particular local associations within those communities) must drive the development process. The role of outside agencies therefore becomes one of group capacity building to ensure that local associations are defining the community vision and mapping and mobilising local assets and resources to this end.

Learning about the distribution of power: linking citizenship, civil society, and participatory approaches to development

A central theme of ABCD is the relocation of power to communities—power that has otherwise been held by external agencies. Attention to power and control has also been at the core of at least two decades of participatory development research and practice. Arising as a reaction against mainstream approaches to development that marginalised the poor and powerless, participatory development work has pushed for change that builds the capacities of the disadvantaged and transforms inequitable social relations, whether these are within a community or in the relations the community has with external agencies.

In recent years, however, critics have argued that participatory development has become increasingly mainstream in international development practice, largely because of the assumptions about the efficiency benefits of participation rather than its potential to result in social transformation (see, for example, Cooke and Kothari 2001). The results of so-called ‘participatory’ initiatives have therefore been mixed. NGOs and government agencies have often set the terms of community engagement, limiting it sometimes to consultation rather than community decision making. While there is often an assumption of incremental stages towards decision making and self-mobilisation, experience suggests that NGO involvement can often, inadvertently, stifle such progression. Thus, *less* direct involvement from the outside might be more successful in bringing about change (Kaplan 1999; Fowler 2000).

At the same time, there has been a surge of interest in citizen participation in decentralised local governance, which is seen as having the potential to re-politicise the concept of participation in development and re-activate the debate about the rights conferred by citizenship and the institutional environment required to ensure that those rights are enjoyed by all who are entitled to them.

Where ABCD and the legacy of participatory development intersect is in helping to define the space for citizen engagement in both representative democratic spaces (for example,

through local government) and in participatory democratic spaces, created and defined by the people themselves.

In terms of engaging in representative democratic space, and resonant with the principles of an ABCD approach, Edwards (1999) argues that civil society plays an essential role in ‘humanising capitalism’ by nurturing social and economic assets that exist in even the poorest communities, and by advocating, and holding governments accountable for, a more equal distribution of assets. If civil society is to flourish, however, it requires the acceptance of basic rights of freedom of association and information, and of the rule of law (see Serageldin 1995). Efforts to strengthen civil society are therefore inextricably linked to the promotion of accountable governance at local, national, and international levels. Enhancing the capacities of people who previously have been excluded from participating in decision making and from enjoying the rights of citizenship is also essential, as is creating the institutional mechanisms for their voices to be heard.

To expand participatory democratic space, external agencies such as NGOs and local governments that use the ABCD approach are deliberate in leading by stepping back, strengthening the associational base of collective action in communities, and encouraging their federation as a means by which communities engage with external institutions on their own terms. Whether loose or tight, this ‘federation of associations’ is at the centre of a web of linkages with external institutions—public and private, for-profit and non-profit—that provide the information and other resources necessary to sustain community development.

Challenges for ABCD

A number of questions and challenges need further exploration and monitoring as new initiatives of ABCD unfold. These can be summarised as follows:

- *Fostering an endogenous process*: one of the cardinal principles of ABCD is that it should be a community-driven process. What, then, should be the role of external agencies? Clearly their role in the initial stages is as facilitators of a process, and as nodes in a widening network of connections the community may have with other actors. The challenge is to avoid a level of involvement that can induce dependency.
- *Fostering inclusive participation*: while ABCD is, in principle, an inclusive process in which the contributions of all are valued and appreciated, overcoming institutionalised exclusion (and the complementary acquiescence of the powerless) is no simple task. Of particular concern are the opportunities for women and the opportunities for lower-caste or -class groups to build confidence and ‘occupy the space’ for participation. Neither ABCD nor appreciative inquiry directly confronts the issue of unequal power and its attendant oppressions; instead, both tend to appeal to the higher motive of using power to act in the shared interests of the common good, and to uncover the strengths of those who might otherwise be less valued. Nevertheless, an ABCD approach can be applied in work with the most disadvantaged within the community along with or separate from a more comprehensive community effort. It is also a mobilising strategy that can be complemented by the kind of civic education associated with rights-based approaches to development.
- *Fostering community leadership*: because ABCD is community driven, and the role of the external agency is at arm’s length, for the leadership to sustain a strength-based approach like ABCD becomes a central issue. As it unfolds in different settings it will be important to learn about the qualities of essential leadership both in terms of the particular individuals involved and in terms of the nature of leadership itself. Is the leadership, for example, an individual or a group of individuals? Is it formalised, or is it a function of individual or group

initiative at particular times? What kinds of associations nurture the best community leaders? How does leadership help link the associational base to external resources?

- *Selecting enabling environments*: the external environment will influence the capacity of communities to realise their potential. The degree to which regulatory environments and local institutions are fair and responsive, and the degree to which norms of trust and reciprocity extend beyond the associational level, are important considerations for the introduction of ABCD. However, in the absence of a conducive environment, it is important to explore whether an ABCD approach may provide the best option for identifying and creating openings in an otherwise hindering environment.
- *Handling the fluidity of associations*: over time, and depending on changes in social and economic circumstances, the form and function of associations and informal networks will change. Users of an ABCD strategy need to understand how these patterns have evolved historically, and the effect of the ABCD process on social relationships and patterns of associations and networks. In particular, the implications of associations becoming institutionalised in an ABCD strategy need to be considered. Will such institutionalisation stifle ABCD, or will new associational forms emerge?

Conclusion: next steps

By outlining ABCD and unpacking its various elements, this paper has served to position ABCD as a promising strategy for community development while highlighting questions to consider when it is applied in different international settings. At the time of writing, several initiatives are underway, some of which are ABCD, and some of which are 'ABCD-like' in their approach. These include the application of an ABCD approach in rural communities in Ethiopia, the Philippines, and in Kenya by NGOs that have recently learned about ABCD and are interested in exploring its potential. These NGOs are collaborating with the Coady Institute in documenting the ABCD process as it unfolds. In addition, the application of ABCD in Curitiba, Brazil, by a collaborative partnership between United Way of Canada, Curitiba's City Hall, and Pastoral da Criança offers the opportunity to learn about the process in an urban setting. Moreover, there is much to be learned by viewing existing endogenous development through an ABCD lens, identifying the way in which assets have been mobilised in different contexts and how such spontaneous community-driven development might be stimulated elsewhere.

Finally, it is important to remember that ABCD is not *done to* communities by ABCD experts. Kretzmann and McKnight's work on ABCD evolved from initiatives that occurred spontaneously in communities and municipalities experimenting with different strategies for change. It is therefore equally important to document cases that are not called ABCD but which illustrate similar principles, practices, and outcomes. Without this recognition of spontaneous initiatives, and if the practice of ABCD is co-opted by the NGO sector and delivered *to* communities, there is a real danger that the strategy will be discredited as a self-serving initiative for external agencies. An important challenge to government and non-government agencies is to avoid this trap by genuinely stepping back, while fulfilling social obligations that are inherent in a government–citizen relationship. This may require radical changes in the culture and practice of these agencies, the institutions to which they are accountable, and the public they serve.

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