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Opening Remarks

From Clients to Citizens: Deepening the Practice of Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development

I'm going to share with you a very brief history of the Coady International Institute's experience with ABCD and then try to help stimulate our smaller group discussions late this morning with some of the findings from book – which sounds an awful lot like the title for this Forum (funny that) “From Clients to Citizens: Communities changing the course of their own development.”

In a way, this University's experience with ABCD goes back to before John, Jody or even the Coady Institute was born. In 1939, Moses Coady, the man after whom our Institute would later be named, published a book called “Masters of Their Own Destiny.” In it, he describes how communities scattered throughout northeast Nova Scotia were rebuilding the foundations of their local economies through producer, consumer and financial cooperatives - a phenomenon that became known as the “Antigonish Movement.” He described how at the height of the Great Depression people of very little means could accomplish this with this phrase: “They use what they have to secure what they have not.” Now, Moses Coady didn't call what he was doing 70 years ago ABCD, but he was describing it: citizen-led development that combined natural resources with people's skills, capacities, savings and social capital to build communities and local economies.

Fast forward to about a decade ago when several of us at the Coady started really thinking hard about some of the issues and ideas that John and Jody were challenging the North American community development sector on. We began to ask ourselves if our preoccupation with helping communities identify needs and diagnose problems was actually disempowering people - turning them into our “clients”, our “target groups”, our “beneficiaries” rather helping them become more active citizens driving their own development.

So we in turn started to take John and Jody's ideas and write about them wrap with an African, Asian or Latin American twist. This led to passionate email exchanges and later collaboration on testing out some of these ideas with the likes of Boy Mercado in the Philippines, Gladys Nabiswa in Kenya, Reema Nanavaty in India and Zegeye Asfaw, Bogaletch Gebre and Samuel Molla in Ethiopia.

It also led us to do what John and Jody did in researching “Building Communities from the Inside Out,” that is, looking for examples of communities that were having success in using what they had to secure what they had not.

This required us to look off the development superhighway - away from government or NGO sponsored projects to the activities that informal associations of people were undertaking. The more we looked for this “positive deviance” - as some call it - the more we realized how much these communities and initiatives have to teach development practitioners and agencies like ourselves.

This journey took us to a dozen countries such as Ecuador, where a small group of indigenous women sharing traditional herbal remedies at a marketplace one Saturday morning became a 600 member medicinal plant producers association exporting containers of processed plants to Europe and North America (Wilibir Ibarra from Jambi Kiwa is here with us this week) to our very own St. Andrews - a community just down the road with a 200 year tradition of innovation at driving their own development, including the building of a fire hall, ball fields, community centre, curling rink and seniors housing apartments (Mary van den Heuvel is also here with us).

We included both communities of place - rural villages, urban neighbourhoods - as well as communities of identity. We tried to understand the trajectory of these communities from an "inside" perspective. How did they use what they had - that is, identify and mobilize their assets, how did they build community identity, how did they sustain this over time, how did they get others to invest in them in order to "secure what they have not?" We were able to see how people organized to survive in times of crisis, how they organized to demand basic government services, and how they organized to stimulate their local economies. They produced livelihoods and community at one and the same time.

What did we find? We found that communities that build from the inside out and have citizens at the centre of the development enterprise have:

- Experience and stories of past organizing efforts or past successes (they are important as they inspire leaders to lead and motivate people to act)
- Leadership that is able to stimulate a sense of pride or opportunity
- Leadership that can draw on a well articulated set of values that inspire collective action; a "master narrative" of responsibility towards others
- Leadership that is spread through the community, not vested in a particular charismatic individual
- People who can bridge the gap between associations and institutions, between generations, between residents and migrants in the diaspora
- A capacity to innovate socially and technically, through blending local knowledge with new ideas and a capacity to identify new opportunities

Of course, all these successes occur in very specific contexts, each with their own structural constraints to overcome in terms of the social, economic and political environment, and each with different kinds of opportunities in the policy or market environment. Each case demonstrates people balancing risk, building security (through social relationships, savings, investments in education) that allows them to take the risk often associated with new opportunity.

And they have not worked in isolation from external agencies - many of these cases show how external organizations have been able to provide the right kind of assistance at critical junctures (information, training, technical assistance, linkages) yet without undermining community capacity. What distinguishes these communities is that people have been able to build a strong sense of control over their lives and their livelihood, and engage with external agencies on their own terms.

What are the implications of what we have found for development practitioners, local governments, donors and policy makers? One of the issues the cases speak to is the conundrum of balancing rights and responsibilities of citizenship - in other words how to help communities strengthen themselves without creating dependency. This is as true in Canada as it is in South Africa today. The question is the same: what should communities be doing for themselves and what can they expect governments to provide? Example of South Africa (15 years after the struggle to end Apartheid was won people are frustrated waiting for services to be delivered by government. While people have every right to expect the entitlements of citizenship, the community mobilizing muscles they built during the struggle have begun to atrophy. Similarly, in Canada, the post-war period has changed the expectations people have of what government should deliver. Now that governments are cutting back on services (due to financial or ideological reasons), communities are having to ask themselves what are the services they want the State to provide and what they can do for themselves. In St. Andrews - just down the road - the

community has undertaken some projects using only their own internal resources and others where they have sought government investment.

Another issue is the role of outside agencies? How can they accompany, support and invest in citizen-led development without undermining it? In a development sector organized by projects, time-lines, and a preoccupation with externally driven agendas and results, this is a real challenge for government and non-governmental organizations.

These are just a few examples of what we have been learning and struggling with here at Coady. We know that all of you have also learned an enormous amount and that you too must be struggling with these and other challenges. We are so looking forward to the in-depth discussions and debates we will have together in the next two and a half days.