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Thank you, Gord, and thanks, Coady International Institute.

I am so honored and delighted to be part of this distinguished panel, and to be in a room filled with people from all over the world who are committed to Moses Coady's vision of building powerful and just communities.

Moses Coady was, of course, the inventor of ABCD – Asset Based Community Development; “they will use what they have,” he famously remarked, their assets, “to secure what they have not,” to overcome their challenges and deficiencies. I am told that he never addressed an audience without holding up a symbolic glass, half full and half empty.

Of course, Father Coady was not the only inventor of Asset Based Community Development. In fact, since the dawn of human history, wise leaders in every generation and every culture have rediscovered this absurdly simple idea – that you can't do very much with stuff you don't have! So, let's see what we do have – our skills, our relationships, our groups and networks, our land, our stories, our faith, and our values – “let's use what we have to secure what we have not.”

But the companion truth is that there have always been those among us who are labeled as empty, needy, deficient and problematic. In modern times we have constructed massive institutions to diagnose problems and deficiencies, and to devise responses or “treatments.” This activity defines a good portion of the work of schools and universities, hospitals, government departments, & police forces. Should we include some international aid organizations, even some NGOs?

It is into this contemporary mix of problem-focused institutions that today's merry band of ABCD carriers has plunged. And against heavy odds, we seem to be seeing progress.

I don't want to claim total victory for a focus on the half-full glass – on the giftedness of every human being, and on the triumph of active and productive citizens over passive recipients and clients. But I do want to note briefly this evening that we might want to recognize the ever-expanding reach of asset-focused thinking and activity into many different realms of our lives. Let me point to asset-based approaches as they expand geographically, in our lives as individuals, and through major institutions and sectors of our societies.

Geographically, the almost pandemic spread of the asset-based virus is reflected in this room, with more than 30 countries represented. The moment seems ripe for growing this international trend into a movement, partly because the ABCD perspective resonates so strongly with a number of other strength-based approaches. Strategies developed around “appreciative inquiry,” participatory rural appraisal,” the “sustainable livelihoods approach,” the work which focuses on “resiliency,” and the range of local economic development initiatives, especially those involving micro-credit and micro-enterprise development—each of these, and others we could site, begin with a recognition of the strengths, skills, capacities, values, and experiences of local villagers, local neighborhoods, and community residents. Each of these approaches brings something powerful and unique to the development efforts, and are flexible enough to be customized to each unique setting, whether North or South, urban or rural.

A second dimension of the imperial growth of the asset-focused approach applies to individual lives. The ABCD mantra, “everybody is gifted, and everybody gives his or her gifts,” is being applied more and more broadly. Across the life-span, we increasingly recognize the incredible energy and capacity of young people to act as contributors to community building, and, on the other end of the age spectrum, in many societies we are rediscovering the eagerness of older adults who wish to continue giving their wisdom and experience to both community and economy.

In addition, of course, creative community builders contrive to uncover and mobilize the gifts and capacities of individuals who have been “labeled” and pushed to the community’s margins. It is heartening and exciting to observe the re-connection to productive community and economic opportunities of labeled folks – of “people with disabilities,” of people emerging from prison, of “at-risk youth,” of new immigrants of “frail elderly,” of people trapped in economic poverty. At its most effective, ABCD encourages strategies which build strong communities by including everybody. Everybody is gifted, and everybody gives.

Finally, in addition to its geographic spread & its effect on individuals, we have witnessed the empirical advance of ABCD into the worlds of some very large and powerful institutions.

A few brief examples:

More and more evidence indicates that safe and secure neighborhoods in urban areas are the result not of increased numbers of police but of active and connected local residents. As a result, new partnerships emerge between law enforcement and communities – “community policing” continues to spread.

Or, as more and more medical professionals refocus not just on the diagnosis and treatment of illness but on prevention and the production of health, they are coming to recognize that active, informed and connected communities are invaluable allies. Not doctors or hospitals, but relatives, neighbors and voluntary associations can affect the primary determinants of health – our personal behavior, our supportive networks & relationships, the condition of our physical environments and our economic status. Healthy people are “produced” by active, healthy communities.

Another example: finally, in the US at least, more and more people working in the criminal justice system are recognizing that imprisoning millions of our citizens constitutes insane public policy – and besides, it is hugely expensive. So, they have begun to turn to the wisdom of indigenous people in North America and around the world, people who have understood “crime” as an offense to the community, and have turned away from revenge and punishment to efforts at “restorative justice.” You’ve broken the law? Let us, your peers and community members, meet with you to decide what you must do to “restore” right relationships with your neighbors. Prison is not the answer – community hospitality is – as Bethel (___?) says to people coming out of prison, “Welcome home.”

So – “Community Health Promotion,” “Community Policy,” “Community-based Restorative Justice” – add to these “Community Schools” – learning is everywhere, for everyone.

“Community Environment Movements” – it’s our business.

“Community-based Food Systems” – eat local & slow.

“Community centered business creation” – through micro-lending and enterprise development.

“Community centered financial institutions” – credit unions and more.

What does all of this signify?

There is a pattern here, is there not?

It involves, in case after case, the recognition of the limits of gigantic institutions to produce the outcomes they desire.

They are discovering these limits, and at the same time their most powerful potential partners – active, mobilized, connected communities, filled with citizens who are ready and willing “to use what they have.”

One way of thinking about this is that communities are emerging as powerful producers of desired outcomes – or co-producers with major institutions – of security, health, learning, justice, environmental sustainability, and on & on.

We see this invention of community co-production all over the world – Global North & South, Urban & Rural – from Bottom-Up.

Increasingly convinced that we may be nearing what Malcolm Caldwell called a “tipping point” a whole lot of smaller unrelated happenings which begin to form a pattern, and finally emerge as a full blown movement, even a moment of revolutionary change.

I don’t know – but I do know we wouldn’t recognize it in the middle of its unfolding – only afterwards.

In the meantime, we must be content by knowing that these developments produce hope.