

Does ABCD deliver on social justice?

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Asset Based and Community Driven Development

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to working with communities that emphasizes people's assets, rather than their deficiencies, and encourages the mobilizing of community assets to meet opportunities for genuine community-driven or citizen-driven development. By focusing on "the glass half full", it diverges from conventional development agency practice that defines communities by their problems and deficiencies. This shift is intended to correct the inadvertent outcome of well intentioned community development efforts: communities that are hobbled by a self perception of their inadequacy and by a dependence on outside institutions for solutions to problems.

While there are tools and methods for identifying assets and opportunities, it is important to stress that ABCD is neither a prescribed set of practices nor a new way of community organizing. To the contrary, ABCD has been coined as a term to describe ways in which communities have successfully organized themselves in the past, usually without external agencies, such as NGOs or government extension services, showing them the way. Our own work is constantly informed and revised by the lessons learned from such communities. Promoting ABCD as a deliberate approach is designed to stimulate similar processes where they do not so far exist.

Does ABCD deliver on social justice?

This is a question we are regularly asked which I believe reflects some ambiguity in how we have been promoting asset-based/citizen driven approaches to community development thus far. In particular, skeptics rightly see the danger of interpreting ABCD as an excuse to "let the poor pull themselves up by their own bootstraps". Far from it.

In this presentation, I hope to demonstrate that in fundamental yet unexpected ways, an ABCD approach does indeed address social justice issues, usually (but not always) in conjunction with a focus on economic development. I support this position with some theoretical discussion together with practical examples and observations based on our work with partners around the world. The argument being presented is that ABCD (or successful community-driven development in general) has a transformative effect on the individual, on the social relations between and among individuals, and on the relations citizen groups have with external agencies. This transformative effect lays down some of the conditions required for the structural changes that will allow a more equitable distribution of, or access to, resources.

To put this discussion in some context, I should briefly describe the scenarios in which we have been collaborating with partners adopting an ABCD approach. Each of these scenarios offers its own particular brand of social injustice. First there is Ethiopia where optimism for transition to a fully fledged democracy has been dashed by a spurious election and subsequent political repression, where women's rights are accorded very little serious attention, and where shifting political fortunes of different groups under different regimes – feudalism, marxist military dictatorship, and “democracy” – have resulted in deep levels of mutual suspicion and mistrust. Then there is Kenya, still reeling from the effects of a particularly corrupt regime under President Moi, where signs in government offices exhort public officials to “Stop Being Corrupt” (“Don't be Corrupt” might give more people the benefit of the doubt), and where rural communities have little faith in government or the NGO sector. Next is India where injustices induced by sharp social and economic divisions – economic and caste divisions and women's position in society – threaten access to the opportunities afforded by economic growth. Finally the Philippines, where social movements have in the past routed out some of the worst injustices, but where uneven distribution of wealth and opportunity has left many in the twilight zone, and political leadership has again been tainted by charges of large scale corruption and cronyism.

ABCD's social justice heritage

The essential spirit and practice of ABCD, as described by McKnight and Kretzmann, draws inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement. For example, recognition of the strengths and assets of the so-called marginalized, and recognition of the debilitating effects of systemic paternalism by “professionals”, both formed the basis of Saul Alinsky's brand of community organizing in Chicago in the 1960s. He would say: “Never do for people what they can do for themselves”. Martin Luther King, while never shrinking from confrontation, believed that lasting change came from civic engagement through the “The love that does justice”¹, heralding the positive character of McKnight and Kretzmann's work.

Such sentiments neither started nor ended in the American Civil Rights movement. For example, prompting the Antigonish Movement in the Maritime provinces in Canada in the 1930s, Moses Coady would declare “You are poor enough to want it, and smart enough to do it!” and “Use what you have to secure what you have not!”. Gandhi's work in India and Nyrere's in Tanzania are better known examples of leaders of movements that achieved social justice, partly through transforming the self-perception of those who had internalized the inferiority conferred upon them by colonialism. A villager I met in the 1970s in Papua New Guinea just when “empowerment” was coming on stream in

¹ Michael Edwards recent paper discussed “The Love that does Justice” at length. He quotes Simon Greer of Jobs with Justice in New York: “As a front line organizer, I and many others were fighting out of hate for the other side, not out of love for where we could go as a community. I was proud because we were winning, but it wasn't sustainable. We needed to work from what we were in favour of rather than what we were against.”

development jargon said to me: “Empowerment? We don’t need empowerment, we need to prevent our disempowerment – that’s the greatest danger”

Perception and reality: ABCD identifies “capacity to act”

The essence of ABCD is its departure from a “the glass half empty” world-view (needs-based, problem-solving approaches) in favor of a focus on “the glass half full” (asset-based, opportunity focused approaches). While it would be facile to argue that development practitioners have never noticed or promoted community strengths and assets, it is nevertheless a fact that most development agency practice is rooted in, and justified by, the existence of poverty, disadvantage, and deficit. The more explicit these characterizations are, the more damaging the implications for the self-perception of the community members concerned; they will characterize themselves as casualties of forces beyond their control. If, however, community members or citizens are able to identify, recognize and mobilize their own strengths and assets they implicitly demonstrate their “**capacity to act**”; in doing so, they perceive themselves as having the power to exercise some control over their lives. The corollary of this is when “outsiders” recognize the assets and strengths of others and witness their “capacity to act”, it has a profound effect on them. They ask different questions and look for ways to collaborate or to invest, rather than delivering professionalized solutions to expectant clients or passive beneficiaries, or shying away from communities whose problems seem insurmountable.

What does this have to do with social justice? Belief in one’s own capacity to act inspires the confidence to bring about change and to seek out opportunity. Confidence in one’s capacity to act is also the basis for people to claim the rights to which they are entitled by virtue of citizenship, or to exercise influence through the political process. Social justice is therefore achieved through judicious mobilizing of assets: the two sides of the coin Moses Coady tossed at farmers and fishermen in the Maritime Provinces of Canada in the 1930s when he said “Use what you have to secure what you have not”.

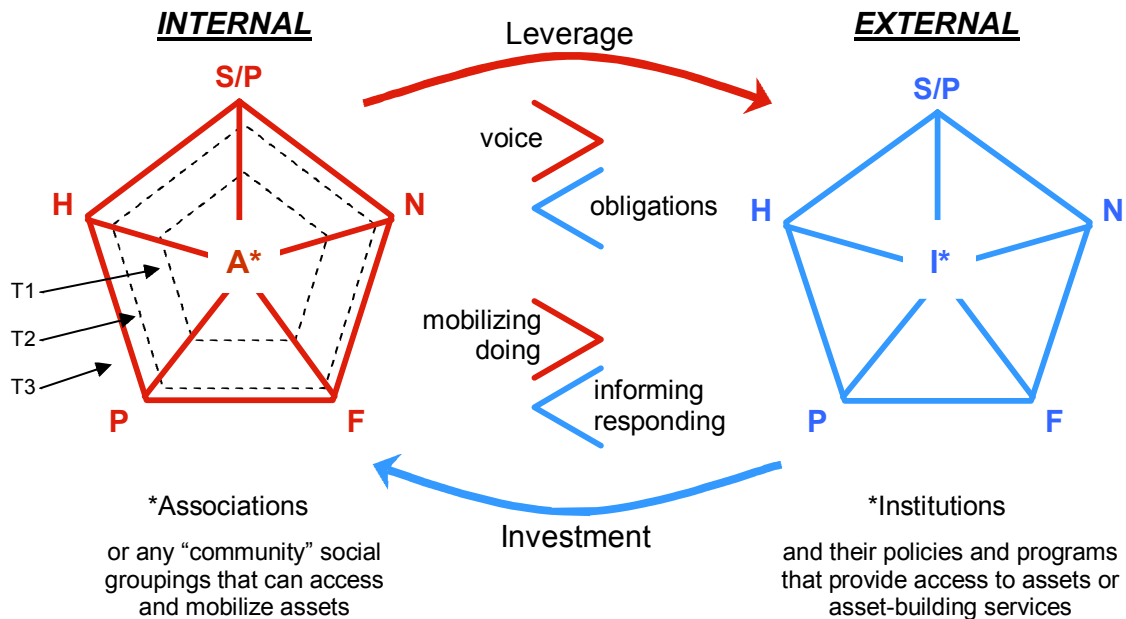
By way of example, self help affinity groups in India have mobilized their own savings and accessed group bank loans to invest in land and small scale enterprise. National bank lending policy, tilted towards wealthier individuals, changed in response to the proven savings and loan management capacity of these groups. In addition, many of these groups have gone beyond their initial mandate to advocate in local government for services that were otherwise neglected yet directly affect their well being. For example, in the villages where Myrada has been working in Southern India, self help affinity groups have successfully lobbied the local *panchayat* for water supply and sanitation and the promotion of girls’ education.

The following diagram helps to illustrate this relationship between internal mobilizing and external investing. The left hand assets pentagon represents assets that can be mobilized through or by the associational base of communities. The right hand assets pentagon represents the assets that can be mobilized by institutions to invest in community development. The more effectively the community can mobilize its own

assets the more leverage it has to attract investment from other sources, and the more confidence it has to find the space to claim the assets (or rights) to which it is entitled.

Asset-Based Community Driven Development

Livelihood Assets + Agency



Notes:

1. Points on the assets pentagon indicate the following types of assets (in a clockwise direction): Social/ Political, Natural, Financial, Physical, and Human
2. Over time, one should expect **asset-building** going on, with the internal pentagon expanding in size. Dotted lines indicate building of assets over time (T1, T2, T3).

Individual and social transformation: ABCD expands relationships of trust.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of ABCD is its focus on associations as building blocks for renewed community or group action whether it is a marketing cooperative, a group managing a rural electrification scheme, a savings group in a micro-savings scheme, a water users association, or a church group. Of course, associations can be exclusionary and can be the expression of divisive "negative social capital". However, when associational life as whole connects and extends social networks, it can build relationships of trust that are the basis of reformed or transformed social relations. Among the issues we are currently exploring is how successful community-driven initiatives result from the activities of leaders who are able to help identify "win-win"

situations between people with apparently conflicting interests. Meeting opportunities often requires new alliances and the building of trust through partnerships between relatively privileged and underprivileged.

In Kenya, for example, an ABCD approach has been the catalyst for farmers to shift from mono-cropping of low return cash crops to managing a diverse range of commercial and food crops, using improved, organic methods. Larger farmers have been approached by community groups to provide additional land and to collaborate with smaller farmers to access markets. Together, information essential to all farmers about markets and government programs have been accessed. Small businesses have emerged. Funding for rural electrification from the Constituency Development Fund has been accomplished through extended social and institutional linkages and the information flows. The shift here, though gradual and slow, is from passive farmers complaining about the failure of government marketing systems to active manager farmers confident of their own power to secure resources for which they are eligible and entitled.

Extending social networks and building trust within the community has positive consequences for creating the demand for more effective governance and for building trust in the larger institutional system. Pro-active engagement by citizens in civil society at the community level puts pressure on the system to work, as much research on local government decentralization has already shown.² Those of you who are UK- based may remember Onora O’Neil’s discussions about Trust in the BBC Reith lectures of 2002. Trust in one another and in the system at large is the basis of good governance and thus of greater social justice. It is important to strengthen activity along both directions of this two way street:

Passive citizens, who wait for others to accord and respect their rights and mistakenly suppose that states alone can do so, are, I think, doomed to disappointment. Active citizens who meet their duties thereby secure one another’s rights (O’Neil, 2002).

ABCD predisposes citizens to structural change for social justice.

Identifying the contributions of the “invisible” and engaging in a process of ABCD may be transformative in itself for the mind-set of development actors and therefore in their **predisposition towards structural change for social justice**. Much of the social injustice in the world was not invented by its perpetrators; it is simply “the way things are”; and it may even be prejudicial to those very persons who hold power over others. The importance of deliberate attempts at mutual understanding is revealed in the attitude of Rosa, an indigenous Ecuadorian, towards her “oppressors”:

We all have our personal journeys in life, where we mature – my personal journey has a lot of hard times-- but the challenge is not to be bitter. I gradually began to realize that the mestisos were being born into a system where they exploited the indigenous – this had been going on for centuries. I gradually

² See for example Dupar and Badenoch (2002) and Krishna (2002)

developed the idea that we need to come together – Mestisos must have their problems too. [I realised there was a need for dialogue and for reconciliation], a need to break the power of those who benefit by stoking the flames of difference (Rosa Guaman, quoted from Cunningham, 2004, field notes for Jambi Kiwa study)

As with class relations, so with gender relations. The experience of our partners overseas shows that when the value of the assets of women and the need for greater investment in their spheres of activity is clearly demonstrated, there is a greater receptivity to land reform in their favour, to the education of girls, and to the creation of space for their contribution to decision-making in the household and in the community as a whole. While anger about injustice may be a motivating force, confrontational strategies often have their own set of dangers – women bear many of the physical and psychological scars of this – and even if the battle is won, wounds take a long time to heal. As an alternative strategy, shining the light on the strengths and capacities of women (and all groups hitherto dismissed as irrelevant), and the value of their contribution, can be a more effective way of justifying the changes needed to restore or establish social justice.

In a rural community in Ethiopia, water supply for agricultural as well as domestic purposes was achieved after an ABCD approach identified how the community had organized successfully for water supply in the past, prompting the community to mobilize to achieve an appropriate water supply for current conditions. Women's knowledge, contributions, organizational capacity were incorporated into the activity and resulted in new respect and support for women's leadership and management capacities.

Changing official attitudes towards indigenous communities in the Philippines offer a further example. Indigenous *lumad* communities were denigrated as “uncivilized”, “backward”, “lazy” by local government authorities. Following an ABCD process, this community organized itself to make full use of its available assets to establish a community managed horticulture enterprise. Mobilising their own assets first, they then leveraged assistance for an NGO for materials to construct a water tank. Recognising the success of these efforts has transformed local government attitudes towards the *lumads*. In the space of 3 years, local government is now interested in, respectful of and responsive to *lumad* concerns. They have not achieved the full rights and privileges they seek, but have begun to prepare the way for the recognition of these rights by the wider society.

Conclusion

ABCD is all about exercising control over the assets you have and using the capacities that these assets confer to expand the asset base. An extension of that control is “communities/citizens driving their own development”. Social injustice has different arenas: within the household, within the community, within the country, within the world and “community”-driven activity can operate in anyone of these. The strategic question for people pursuing an ABCD approach is which citizens you work with and where the space is for effecting social and economic change.

Our experience suggests that an ABCD approach encourages a re-evaluation of the status quo, a point from which it is difficult to return to business as usual. Does it radically and immediately transform structures? No, but it prepares people for the changes that need to take place at all levels to ensure that people can function at their fullest capacity.

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