

## **Community Capacities and Community Necessities**

John McKnight Co-Director, Asset Based Community Development Institute  
Northwestern University'

**Opening remarks, July 8, 2009, at the “From Clients to Citizens Forum”,  
Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish,  
Nova Scotia.**

There is a new worldwide movement developing, made up of people with a different vision for their local communities. They know that movements are not organizations, institutions or systems. Movements have no CEO, central office, or plan. Instead, they happen when thousands of people discover together new possibilities for their lives. They have a calling. They are called. And together they call upon themselves.

In many nations, local people have been called to come together to pursue a common calling. It would be a mistake to label that calling “ABCD” or “Community Building”. Those are just names. They are inadequate words for groups of local people who have the courage to discover their own way - to create a culture made by their own vision. It is a handmade, homemade vision. And, wherever we look, it is a culture that starts the same way:

First, we see what we have – individually, as neighbours and in this place of ours. Second, we know that the power of what we have grows from creating new connections and relationships among and between what we have. Third, we know that these connections happen when we, individually or collectively, act to make the connections – they don’t just happen by themselves.

We also know that these three steps leading to our way can often be blocked by great corporate, governmental, professional and academic institutions. They often say to us, “You are inadequate, incompetent, problematic, or broken. We

will fix you.” It is our calling to ignore these voices that create dependency, for we are called to find our way – not follow their way.

We are striving to live in a democracy. A democracy is a politics that gives us the freedom to create our vision and the power to make that vision come true. We strive to be citizens: people with the vision and the power to create our own way, a culture of community capacity, connection and care.

Unfortunately, many leaders and even some neighbours think that the idea of a strong local community is sort of “nice,” a good thing if you have the spare time, but not really important, vital or necessary. However, we know strong communities are vital and productive. But, above all they are necessary because of the inherent limits of all institutions.

No matter how hard they try, our very best institutions cannot do many things that only we can do. And what only we can do is vital to a decent, good, democratic life.

People in the new movement know what only we have the power to do as local neighbours and citizens. First, our neighbourhoods are the primary source of our health. How long we live and how often we are sick is determined by our personal behaviour, our social relationships, our physical environment and our income. As neighbours, we are the people who can change these things. Medical systems and doctors cannot. This is why scientists agree that medical care counts for less than 10% of what will allow us to be healthy. Indeed, most informed medical leaders advocate for community health initiatives because they recognize their systems have reached the limits of their health-giving power.

Second, whether we are safe and secure in our neighbourhood is largely within our domain. Many studies show that there are two major determinants of our local safety. One is how many neighbours we know by name. The second is

how often we are present and associate in the public outside our houses. Police activity is a minor protection compared to these two community actions. This is why most informed police leaders advocate for block watch and community policing. They know their limits and call to our movement.

Third, the future of our earth - the environment - is a major local responsibility. The “energy problem” is our local domain because how we transport ourselves, how we heat and light our homes and how much waste we create is a major factor in saving our earth. That is why our movement is a major force in calling us and our neighbours to be citizens of the earth and not just consumers of the natural wealth.

Fourth, in our villages and neighbourhoods, we have the power to build a resilient economy - less dependant on the mega-systems of finance and production that have proven to be so unreliable. Most enterprises begin locally - in garages, basements and dining rooms. As neighbours, we have the local power to nurture and support these businesses so that they have a viable market. And we have the local power to capture our own savings so that we are not captives of our notorious large financial institutions. We also are the most reliable sources of jobs. For in many nations, word-of-mouth among neighbours is still the most important access to employment. The future of our economic security is now clearly a responsibility, possibility and necessity for local people.

Fifth, we are coming to see that a part of our domain is the production of the food we eat. So we are allied with the local food movement, supporting local producers and markets. In this way, we will be doing our part to solve the energy problem caused by transportation of food from continents away. We will be doing our part to solve our economic problems by circulating our dollars locally. And we will be improving our health by eating food free of poisons and petroleum.

Sixth, we are local people who must raise our children. We all say that it takes a village to raise a child. And yet, in modernized societies, this is rarely true. Instead, we pay systems to raise our children - teachers, counsellors, coaches, youth workers, nutritionists, doctors, McDonalds and MTV. We are often reduced as families to being responsible for paying others to raise our children and transporting them to their paid child-raisers. Our villages have often become useless; our neighbours responsible for neither their children nor ours. As a result, everywhere we talk about the local “youth problem”. There is no “youth problem.” There is a village problem of adults who have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbours in raising the young. There is a remarkable recovery movement that joins neighbours in sharing the wealth of children. It is our greatest challenge and our most hopeful possibility.

Seventh, locally we are the site of care. Our institutions can only offer service - not care. We cannot purchase care. Care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another. As neighbours, we care for each other. We care for our children. We care for our elders. And it is this care that is the basic power of a community of citizens. Care cannot be provided, managed or purchased from systems. Our way is made possible by the power to care. Democracy is the way we care for our freedom and responsibility. So it is the new connections and relationships we create locally that build community because in joining each other together, we manifest our care for the children, neighbours and the earth.

Health, safety, economy, environment, food, children and care are the seven responsibilities of our movement. They are the necessities that only we can fulfill. And when we fail, no institution or government can succeed because we are the veritable foundation of the society.

Fortunately, at the heart of our movement are 3 universal and abundant powers. The three basics of our calling are:

- The giving of gifts: the gifts of the people in our neighbourhood are boundless. Our movement calls forth those gifts.
- The power of association: In association, we join our gifts together and they become amplified, magnified, productive and celebrated.
- Hospitality: We welcome strangers because we value their gifts and need to share our own. Our doors are open. There are no strangers here. Just friends we haven't met.

Ours is the movement of abundance. There is no limit to our gifts, our associations, and our hospitality.

We have a calling. We are the people who know what we need. What we need surrounds us. What we need is each other. And when, we act together, we will find Our Way. The citizen's way. The community way. The democratic way. We are called to nothing less. And it is not so wild a dream.