From Needs to Assets: Charting a Sustainable Path towards Development in Sub-Saharan African Countries

Introduction

This paper argues for the need to redefine what we mean by development in many Sub-Saharan African countries, based on the contention that the asset-based approach to community development (ABCD) can make significant inroads into the socio-economic challenges facing the citizenry of these countries. Until recently, most NGOs operating in Sub-Saharan Africa used one or a combination of four approaches to their development work: a needs-based approach, a sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA), a rights-based approach, and/or participatory rural appraisal (PRA). We contend that ABCD[1] will have significant and sustainable development impacts when intentionally and consistently combined with all of the latter three approaches by government agencies, NGOs, CBOs, CSOs, faith communities, and businesses.

We go further in suggesting that if the needs-based approach is jettisoned, and the remaining three approaches are combined and operationalised by ABCD in practical action, aid, and governmental policy in response to such myriad challenges as AIDS/HIV, conflict mitigation, drought management, and humanitarian food assistance,

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[1] It is important to note that while ABCD is now a recognised development approach in its own right, in many respects it describes the 'self-help' processes by which communities in Sub-Saharan Africa have historically and culturally been their own first investors; it reflects how indigenous peoples have organised, and continue to organise themselves to survive and prosper. The Coady Institute for International Development through their recent publication, '*From Clients to Citizens: Communities Changing the Course of their Own Development',* have made a significant contribution towards shining a torch on the countless number of communities throughout the Global South, who having never heard of ABCD, nevertheless, drive their own development, without external development or other aid related assistance or support.

this combined approach to development will consistently generate solutions far superior to those that are currently emerging.[2]

ABCD as an alternative to the Needs-Based Approach

The needs-based approach, which defines poverty as the absence or lack of the basic elements required for human survival, was the preferred NGO approach to development in Africa throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Booy, Senaand, and Arusha, 2000: 4-11). By definition, its focus was almost exclusively on needs, such as primary health care, water supply, and humanitarian food aid. Without a rights-based analysis, however, such a model ignores the structural causes of poverty as well as the potential capacities that people may have to respond to their own crises - albeit with outside help and support as appropriate.

A legacy of the needs-based approach in Africa is that many receiving aid have learned to define themselves and their villages/communities by their needs and their deficiencies to the point where they can no longer identify anything of value around them. They have come to believe that only a state of degradation will enable them to attract resources. Individual citizens all too often define themselves by their powerlessness and absolute dependence on outside help to meet even their most basic human needs. The net result of the needs-based approach is that vulnerable citizens are left even more vulnerable when the next crisis arrives because they have traded self-

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[2] While making such assertions the authors of this paper are also working to the assumption that communities by their nature are highly diverse, factioned, unequal, and to varying degrees susceptible to external factors, some of which require emergence responses, as well a myriad of internal issues such as the incessant out migration of its young people. It is important therefore to acknowledge that there can be no 'cookie cutter' solutions. Instead what is proposed is a framework of approaches which allow sufficient flexibility to honour indigenous capacity, and build equal partnerships between citizens and NGOs; while simultaneously promoting greater levels of social inclusion.

reliance and the social capital that grew naturally for millennia within Sub-Saharan African communities, from inter-dependence with one's family and neighbours, for dependence on foreign aid and outside NGO support. Until the 1970s, aid organisations rarely asked citizens of Sub-Saharan African countries themselves what their priorities and concerns were, and almost never considered that they may have something of value to offer in responding to the myriad humanitarian crises they faced (Booy, Sena, and Arusha, 2000: 4-11).

Clearly, then, as voluntary activists are highlighting, the major disadvantage of the needs-based community development approach in Sub-Saharan Africa is that it all too often becomes self-perpetuating, generating ever greater levels of need. When funding is dependent on how many things are 'wrong' in a given community, there is no real incentive to reduce this deficit list for fear of a correlated reduction in funding. Thus, year after year, NGO-conducted needs analysis evidences the 'need' for greater levels of donor investment. Despite the dedicated work of many development workers who employ a needs based approach, there are fundamental problems with the policies that influence their work and its context. Firstly, needs based development work starts and finishes with a negative map of a given area that defines it according to its difficulties, its needs, its limitations and its dysfunctional attributes. At risk of stating the obvious, the map is not the territory; it is simply a superimposed impression of reality that is neither right nor wrong but can prove to be extremely helpful or tragically debilitating, depending on how sensitively and intelligently it is used.

Debilitation starts when local people begin to absorb the maps created by such needs-based analysis, and use these to navigate their villages (Kretzmann and McKnight,

1993:7). They no longer see the capacities that are part and parcel of the real landscape; all they see is what they do not have. They don't see a community that possesses numerous assets and untapped growth potential – just a place of real deprivation, health crisis, hunger, injustice, drought and poor sanitation. Yet, every struggling community is like a glass that can be perceived as either half-full or half-empty. Central to the ABCD approach is the observation that, focusing optimistically on the half-full, rather than pessimistically on the half-empty, glass, profoundly enhances citizen driven development.

Secondly when this mental map infects the collective mind-set of local people - who then start to believe that their community is no more than a barren landscape, bereft of productive capacity or value, which can only develop by bringing in outside help- this paves the way for experts who will come to fix their brokenness, fill their emptiness, and cure them of their maladies (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Mathie and Cunningham, 2002; Green, Moore and O'Brien, 2006).

Such external dependency does not build strong communities, nor, by extension, civil society. Thus, the needs-based model transgresses a central tenet of community development: communities are built from the inside out and not from the outside in (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993:7). When a community believes its needs are so significant that only outside professionals can address them, it becomes both more needy and further removed from its capacity to address its own needs. The reader of the map becomes completely dependent on the map and the mapmaker thereby becoming incapable of independently perceiving and understanding the territory.

Thirdly, over-reliance on outside services to build community will always result in some level of disappointment since communities, by definition, are places where people who live in them build their own sense of common identity, through acts of caring, cooperation, connection, association and shared problem-solving. Disappointment is something we can all live with. What we cannot live with is the over-reliance that underlies this disappointment - the process by which far too many citizens of far too many African countries are subliminally defined by external agents as no more than consumers of foreign aid instead of producers of social capital and other forms of capital, and, thus, active citizens on their own terms and prime drivers of their own development.

Asset-Based Community Development

What is ABCD?

In contrast to the needs-based approach that addresses perceived "deficiencies" through the use of outside experts and resources, asset-based development genuinely empowers citizens and strengthens government and agency effectiveness by drawing on local residents' resources, abilities, and insights to solve their own problems. Pioneered by John McKnight and John Kretzmann of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University in Chicago, ABCD approaches now span the world. With ABCD, outside assistance is still needed, but in a support role to citizen-led community development.

At the heart of the ABCD approach is deep appreciation for the organic steps that citizens take when instinctively building social capital. Social capital is best explained allegorically, as an invisible bank account into which the assets of social relationships and networks are invested. Assets such as time, energy, skill and vision are held there,

and as they grow, so too do the strengths, and social fabric of the community – in a sort of intangible compound interest. Like any capital, when wisely managed social capital enhances the well-being of the citizens who 'banked it'.

At a policy level, through asset-based citizen-driven development the primacy of social capital and associational living experiences (social networks) are being pushed ever more to the foreground. In so-called developed countries, policy makers and development workers alike are slowly and sometimes painfully realising that the material wealth of the 21st century has not rid cities, towns or rural villages of problems and that, even in the most prosperous areas, people increasingly feel isolated and disconnected. In Europe, leaders are citing Putnam's work (Bowling Alone, Better Together) as a road map for addressing declining community spirit. Putnam himself promotes the asset-based approach as a means to build civil society.

Putnam argues that those who dwell in communities with strong social capital have a greater sense of responsibility towards their neighbours (including those that typically are excluded) and their neighbourhoods; are more content with their lives; and are more likely to find sustainable solutions to local problems from within the community rather than continually and exclusively seeking outside help (Gesthuizen, van der Meer, and Scheepers, 2009: pp. 121-142). However, Putnam and McKnight differ in their analysis of what has caused diminished social capital. While Putnam claims that television and other features of consumerist self-centric society have drawn us away from 'bowling together', McKnight argues that civil society is weakened when we re-organise our social service institutions by replacing neighbourly connections with 'agencies' and 'services' (McKnight,1995: 161-174).

Complementary approaches and added value

The World Bank Participation Sourcebook (1996) defines **participatory rural appraisal** (PRA) as a label given to a growing family of participatory approaches and methods that emphasise local knowledge and enable local people to make their own appraisal, analysis, and plans. PRA uses group animation and exercises to facilitate information-sharing, analysis, and action among stakeholders. Although originally developed for use in rural areas, PRA has been employed successfully in a variety of settings. The purpose of PRA is to enable development practitioners, government officials, and local people to work together to plan context-appropriate programmes. Rapid rural appraisal was developed in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the perceived problem that outsiders were mis-communicating with local people in the context of development work.

Few would argue with the main tenet of PRA, namely, that projects can only achieve their objectives if local people actively participate and have ownership over them. In other words, the greater the number of citizen fingerprints that can be found on a project, the greater the likelihood that the project will be meaningful and sustainable. NGOs who use the PRA approach to development - consistently and with the rigour it requires - report significant results. Nevertheless, examples also abound in Africa of NGOs reverting to their default position (needs-based approach).

Asset-based community development approaches can deepen the PRA analysis and community building outcomes. ABCD recognises that, when carrying out PRA in an area where the needs-based approach was the dominant paradigm, two hidden dangers need to be taken into account. The first danger is what McKnight refers to as 'the institutional assumption' (McKnight, 1995), that is, the subliminal belief that outside

institutions exclusively hold the expertise, resources, and power to resolve issues of poverty, whether they be shortages of water or food or the ravages of HIV/AIDS.

Once people have become dependent on outside agencies for support, they find it difficult - even through PRA's excellent and methodologically sound process - not to appraise their needs in a manner which invariably concludes that what the village or urban neighbourhood requires are programs funded by an NGO or other outside institution. Of course, the fact that it is through a participatory process that they conclude that they need such programmes bodes well for the future success of such projects. The strength of PRA lies in its ability to moderate NGO influence on indigenous people, ensuring that projects and programmes are relevant to, and endorsed by those people for whom such projects were developed in the first place.

One of the great challenges of the PRA approach is to consider the following: in the final analysis, how many PRA-based projects or programmes are started by or result in citizen-led initiatives. It is beyond question that PRA decisively moves the NGOs that use it consistently and rigorously past the outmoded needs-based approach that treats local citizens as passive recipients. PRA treats local citizens as co-designers of projects and programmes, and few would reasonably argue against the value of so doing. That said, if meaningful and sustainable development is to be achieved in Sub-Saharan Africa, citizens in each of these African countries need to be in the driver's seat of development, not just in terms of services, projects and programmes, but also as the producers of their own political and economic well-being (The World Bank Community-Driven Development in Local Government Capacity Building Projects, 2004).

The second hidden danger in working to a needs-based backdrop is that people implementing the PRA approach tend to compulsively focus on the half-empty glass - the needs and deficiencies- and fail to see the inherent assets that exist within their community. Therefore, when asked what they need, they nearly always conclude that whatever it is it must come from the outside.

Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The definition of the sustainable livelihoods approach used by the Department of Foreign and International Development (DFID) incorporates these sentiments:

- 'A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base' (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) differentiates between a job and a livelihood, which are often used interchangeably**:**

- Jobs

  "A job connotes one particular activity or trade that is performed in exchange for payment. It is also a formal agreement, as manifested by a contract, between an employer and employee...... . A job can, however, comprise part of an overall livelihood, but does so only to complement other aspects of a livelihood portfolio.

- Livelihoods

  "A livelihood, on the other hand, is engagement in a number of activities which,

at times, neither require a formal agreement nor are limited to a particular trade. Livelihoods may or may not involve money. Jobs invariably do. Livelihoods are self-directing. ....

- Livelihoods are based on income derived from "jobs", but also on incomes derived from assets and entitlements. "

- "means of living or of supporting life and meeting individual and community needs"

The sustainable livelihoods approach creates a clear road map to economic development both in response to a specific shock or crisis and to the ongoing challenges of long-term poverty. Like PRA, its core strength is its focus on ensuring relevance in real time – unsurprisingly, as it integrates PRA methodologies. Indeed, the concept of sustainable livelihoods was formally introduced by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway in 1991 .Yet, developmentally -at least in more recent definitions- SLA conceptually goes beyond PRA because it proactively departs from needs analysis as a starting point, intentionally inviting participants to begin by mapping their assets and identifying their allies.

Another strength of SLA is its focus on area-based development; hence broadening the potential outcomes beyond projects and programmes in order to consider development in a much richer frame that includes considerations regarding policy, environment and technology. Current thinking in SLA (for instance World Bank, Community Driven Development) is moving beyond seeing local citizens as co-designers of responses to external shock and/or other challenges to recognising them as co-

producers (alongside relevant institutions) of sustainable economic and community development. The role of outside catalysts such as NGOs is to help local people identify and connect their assets as well as leveraging external assets with a view to developing economic responses, without creating dependency (Ellerman, 2005).

This approach and its associated methodologies are extremely powerful. When joined with an ABCD approach, SLA is well poised to extend beyond economic development (livelihoods) to the intentional building of bonding and bridging social capital, thereby creating strong social networks that include women and other marginalised groups.

The ABCD framework also offers SLA a means of practical, grass roots application where citizens own the process, often absent in SLA.[3]

In growing towards full independence and sustainability while addressing lack of income, communities can themselves use many of these approaches in building up social capital in ways that connect all members of a given community, especially those on the margins. Combining PRA, SLA and ABCD offers a powerful arsenal in addressing this monumental challenge, albeit one community at a time.

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[3] It is important to point out the SL approach is not intended to be blueprint for rural development rather an analytical framework which guides the thinking behind development planning and intervention.

Rights-Based Approach

The UNHCR defines a rights-based approach to development as a conceptual framework for the process of human development based on international human rights standards and oriented in practice towards promoting and protecting human rights. The underpinning principles include equality and equity, accountability, empowerment and participation. A rights-based approach to development contains the following elements:

- express linkage to rights
- accountability
- empowerment
- participation
- non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups

Such a holistic approach also actively provides for the development of an enabling environment to ensure delivery on entitlements, and adequate redress for infringements. This enabling environment, finds expression in law, social protection policies, systems of public administration, oversight bodies, and strong civil society working to promote a culture of transparency and accountability.

A rights-based approach also gives preference to strategies for empowerment over charitable responses. It focuses on the beneficiaries as the owners of rights and the directors of development, and emphasises the human person as the centre of the development process. The goal is empowerment: to provide people with the capabilities and access needed to change their own lives, improve their own communities and influence their own destinies.

The strengths of this approach hardly need to be stated. The challenge, though, lies in translating these laudable ideals into practical action at community level. Certainly PRA and SLA have much to offer in this regard, although the rights-based agenda goes well beyond participatory programmes/projects and livelihoods. The ABCD analysis adds some interesting insights with regard to the determinants of justice, in promoting citizens as producers or co-producers of justice, but argues that justice is not created solely by individuals or institutions of jurisprudence but by communities working in associational ways to actively contribute to its emergence. Yet, without rights-based values and principles, all practical approaches ring hollow. It is therefore only when these approaches are united that sustainable rights-based citizen-driven development can prosper.

Table of approaches:

Approach	Needs-based	PRA	SLA	Rights-Based Approach	ABCD
Orientation	External	Internal/external	Internal/external	Internal/external	Internal
Assessment	Needs, problems and what is missing	Needs and local wisdom	Assets and strengths	Assessment of human rights policy and practice	What has worked, community strengths and assets
Relationship between institution and community	Community as passive recipient of aid and programmes	Co-designers of services and programmes	Co-designers	Institution aims to empower and protect rights	Co-producers/ citizens
Development of solutions	Experts, externally-driven	Local knowledge to co-develop programs and projects	Local knowledge and area-based solutions	Citizens as centre of development process and directors of development	Citizen-driven internal solutions

Capacity building	External, professional/ institutional	Professional/ institutional	Economic development in response to specific shock and on-going poverty	Institutional and citizen	Citizen and associations
Social capital	Not a deliberate strategy	Linking Capital between NGO and community	Linking Capital between NGO and community	Linking Capital between institutions and citizens	Creation of bonding, bridging and linking capital

Table 1.1

Case study: ABCD in Kenya (Nurture Development Africa)

In the pastoral northwestern ASAL Kenya (Turkana South, Pokot Central, East Pokot, Samburu North and Samburu East) working with Nurture Development Africa, five organisations, namely VSF – Belgium, VSF – Germany, ACTED, Oxfam and Practical Action have established a Drought Management Initiative (DMI) consortium focused on developing the capacities of the local people in the 8 districts that they work in, for drought readiness, using an ABCD approach.

Citizens in each of the participating Kraals face serious and recurring challenges, including:

- *Difficulty accessing grazing fields during the dry seasons due to insecurity and fear for their animals because of raids; or the greater fear that conflict may break out while they are away from home (which often is for months at a time).*

- *Livestock affected by diseases, drought*

- *People with strengths but little opportunity to contribute and/or moblise those strengths towards a common good*

- *Remoteness to market/economic development opportunities*

Yet even to this backdrop in villages across these districts from Alale-Sasak in North Pokot, and Nakwamoru in Turkana, through ABCD processes of asset mapping (see appendix I for sample asset map) and community organising, villagers are identifying, connecting and mobilising their resource base, and in the process redefining their relationship with participating NGOs. The emergence of new partnerships where the solutions to drought mitigation are co-produced by citizens and NGOs has caused a

change not just in how both approach issues of drought, but change is also evident in respect of economic development, and areas of community development. Community efficacy has grown throughout the district, and often in stark contrast to previously high levels of dependency on external aid, examples of community driven development abound.

Conclusion: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) - what's new?

This paper has suggested that the ABCD approach complements PRA, SLA and the rights-based approaches to development. This assertion is in line with the findings of the Coady Institute for International Development (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003), which note ABCD's capacity to operationalise these other methodologies.

We go further in suggesting that, when aligned with PRA, SLA and a rights-based approach, the ABCD process creates a local citizen-led community development road map toward new futures[4] for Sub-Saharan African communities, starting where all development initiatives should - with local citizens and what they have. As John McKnight would say: 'How can you know what you need if you don't know what you have?' We contend, then, that by combining ABCD, RPA, SLA and rights-based approaches, we complete the four sides of a rectangle of development that will improve projects, strengthen economies and promote social equality in Sub-Saharan African countries, in ways that activate growth from the inside out.

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[4] Which ironically will likely reflect many of the features of how communities when driving their own development have always organised to survive and prosper. It is important not to romanticize indigenous responses to the challenges they faced in times past, least to suggest that they do not ever require outside support. This clearly is not always the case. Moreover it is important to acknowledge that foreign aid can when appropriately invested significantly enhance a community's capacity to survive and prosper; it can also do the reverse.

If fully adopted this rectangular framework of development has the potential to oversee the relocation of authority over how development unfolds, back into the hands of local communities and their local governments and out of the hands of external donors and NGOs. Additionally, this framework if appropriately implemented has the capacity to ensure that external agencies avoid the inherent trap -underlying some forms of aid giving- of treating the people of many African countries as 'their poor clients' who receive foreign aid, instead of 'active citizens' co-producing an inclusive democratic vision of the future that they own in every way, with when necessary, the support of foreign aid. Therefore, the job of external agents is to support them on the journey from 'clients to citizens'. (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009)

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Appendix I: Sample of an asset map

This is part of an asset map of the Turkana, Pokot and Samburu pastoral community in Kenya.

Individuals
Skilled people
Business skills
Farmers
Leaders
Businessmen
Women
Elders (traditional leaders)
Entrepreneurs
Activists
Warriors
Laibons / seers
Religious Leaders
Students

Physical Space
Rangelands
Pasture grazing fields – Kadengoi, Kataruk, Kasarani, Loru plains, Silale, Aroo
Hills – Kalangol, Lotiruk, Loriu, Silale, morwakiring, kamarok
Farms – Morulem, Lokubae, Elelea
Seasonal streams
Water source e.g. wells, boreholes and water pan

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Women groups	Dong'a Cultural
Youth groups	Groups
Development	Men's Groups
committee	Youth Mentoring
VICOBA	Groups
Group ranches	Mutual Support
Conservancies	Groups
Family Support	Neighborhood
Groups	Improvement
Health	Groups
Advocacy and	Political
Fitness Groups	Organizations
PFS	Recreation Groups
Youth groups	Religious Groups
Business	Social Groups
groups	Water users
Religious	Groups
groups	CAHWs vet shop
Elderly groups	groups
Community	Former livestock
Animal health	rustlers group
worker groups	

Institutions
MWUA / LWUA (food security)
LOMEDS (micro credit, peace, livestock marketing)
LCRC – meeting facilities
Schools (primary) Nginyang, Amaya, Ngoron, Chesawach,Kokwototo, Natan)
Secondary (Chemolingot, Barpello and Churo AIC)
Nginyang Polytechnic
Health facilities
Churches

Local Economy
Livestock trade (small scale)
Charcoal burning
Sale of animal
Drugs shops by CAHWS
For-Profit Businesses
Business Associations
Village banks
Micro enterprises

Stories
Of Burning of prosopys Juliflora by the women
Of Ashes from trees burning acts as manure to the soil
Of background and personal history
Of what we like to do and contribute
Of existing and ongoing skills and capacities
Of successful community development
Of economic growth
Of addressing discrimination
Of including those who are marginalized
Of recognizing the value of everyone
Of a time when we felt appreciated and valued
Of a time the community was at its best

Individuals · Physical Space · Local Economy · Associations · Institutions · Stories