Tackling poverty in England
An asset–based approach

Bethany Eckley

Analyses of poverty in the UK tend to be–gin with external ex–perts looking at the needs of a commu–nity. But this needs–based approach can lead communities to believe themselves incapable of taking charge of their own lives. An alternative asset–based ap–proach, however, starts with local indi–viduals and organisations uncovering and identi–fying the capacities present in their community. It is founded upon the belief that everybody has something to give, and proposes that sustainable change only occurs when community members are committed to achieving it.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, countless organisations and agencies have done their utmost to tackle pov–erty in England, yet despite a multitude of projects and programmes, significant and long–lasting change seems elusive. In 2013, certain communities are still characterised by low income, material deprivation, poor health, unemployment, low educational attain–ment and welfare dependency.

Why has sustainable change been so hard to achieve? To answer this question, a group of com–munity development experts have analysed different responses to poverty and come to the conclusion that certain types of responses may be part of the problem.

They argue that most responses fall into one of two categories, being either *needs-based* or *asset-based*. The first approach seeks to reduce poverty by identi–fying and addressing a community's problems, while the second seeks to strengthen local communities by discovering and using the assets already present within those communities. The first approach is seen as a more typical, yet deeply problematic response; the second is believed to offer the possibility of transformative change.

This paper introduces the concept of asset–based community development. It examines the primary characteristics of that approach and explores how it can be used to bring about significant transformation in deprived communities.

Two approaches to tackling poverty

In their attempts to tackle poverty and deprivation, organisations and agencies have typically chosen one of two approaches.

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A **needs-based approach** tends to start with external organisations or experts looking at the needs of a community. These experts build detailed images of deprivation and social break-down that are used to analyse an area's most significant problems. When seeking ways to target and tackle these problems, organisations will often take these needs assessments as their starting point.

However, these assessments have two significant consequences. Firstly, they shape perceptions of the nature of the problem and therefore the response given. Often used by anti-poverty organisations to write funding bids and research proposals, they determine the targets set and the solutions offered.

Secondly, they can have a psychological effect on the communities themselves. They help to develop a 'client' mentality in residents who think that their well-being depends upon their connection to an external agency and the solutions they bring. Residents may come to believe themselves incapable of taking charge of their own lives and their community's future. As a result, community development work that is based on an external needs assessment often fails to achieve sustainable transformation.

An **asset-based approach** starts with local individuals and organisations uncovering and identifying the assets and capacities already present within their own community. This process helps to build images of resources and strengths. The assets identified are then connected and mobilised to build up and strengthen the life of the local community.

This approach proposes that sustainable change only occurs when community members are committed to investing their own resources in achieving it. The key is to 'locate all the available local assets, and to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness.'[1]

The act of discovering, identifying and connecting people's assets changes the way that individuals view themselves and those around them. Instead of seeing themselves as 'needy' or 'deprived', they begin to believe in their own potential to make their community a better place to live.

> *"The act of discovering people's assets changes the way that individuals view those around them."*

As easy as ABCD

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a particular approach to community development. Pioneered by two international development experts, Kretzmann and McKnight, the approach is best identified by its three principal characteristics.[2]

Firstly, it is **asset-based**: It is founded upon the belief that everybody has something to give to those around them. Every single individual, regardless of where they live, how much they earn, or their academic achievements, has something to offer. This may be a particular passion, such as looking after children or playing music, an area of expertise, such as local history or business accounting, or a specific skill, such as plumbing, cooking or event organising. All of these passions, abilities and skills, broadly known as 'assets', are placed alongside other kinds of physical, financial, cultural or social resources that may be present within a community.

Secondly, it is **internally-focused**: ABCD is founded on the belief that strong, sustainable communities cannot be built from the top down, or the outside in, but only from the 'inside out'. They have to be founded upon the assets of the people who belong to the community and the associations or institutions operating in the area. As a place-based approach, it concentrates on the capacities of local people, associations and institutions rather than those of external agencies. This is not to minimise the role of external forces in creating certain structural problems or the need for external resources to help overcome them, but to stress the primary importance of local leadership and creativity.

Thirdly, it is **relationship-driven**: The process of identifying, connecting and mobilising community assets is inherently relational. It's based upon people talking with and listening to others. These conversations, and the social networks that they help to develop, enable people to come together, often in informal associations, and use their individual assets to create a stronger community.

Assets not needs

As an approach, ABCD challenges the way poverty is often understood and tackled, and stands in contrast to more traditional, needs-based responses.

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Needs-based approaches	Asset-based community development
Start by looking at a community's deficiencies and problems.	Starts by identifying the community's existing assets.
Tend to characterise people in poverty as victims or passive recipients of help.	Believes in local people as active agents for change.
Turn to external agencies – government programmes, researchers or charities – to find solutions and bring about change.	Believes that local people are the greatest resource for building a stronger community.
Are often target-driven and reliant on grant funding given on the basis of certain needs being addressed.	The journey is as important as the destination. On this journey, people discover their strengths and learn how to work together to overcome problems.
Can reduce community 'togetherness' as highlighting problems attracts outside resources and 'professionalised' solutions.	Encourages collaboration, using existing capacities to build the resilience and strength of the whole community.

Implementing this approach

There is no one way of doing ABCD. Indeed, ABCD is more about a change of mind and heart than a specific methodology. Once embraced, the approach can reshape community social action, ensuring that it starts by identifying the assets people already possess and uses those to drive forward plans and projects. It's no longer a question of 'solving what's wrong', but 'building on what's strong'.[3]

Having said that, organisations using ABCD for the first time might find it helpful to think about two stages. The first involves identifying the assets and capacities present within the community, by conducting a 'capacity inventory'. The second is about connecting those assets and mobilising them in order to build up the local community.

Stage One: Discovering
What do people have to give?

Capacity inventories aim to uncover and identify a community's existing capacities and assets. These can include:
- The skills, abilities, talents and passions of local residents
- The power of local associations
- The resources of public, private and non-profit institutions
- The physical and economic resources of local places
- The stories of people's lives and of their evolving community

Inventories are conducted through structured conversations. People living and working in the area are asked about what they have to give to others: What skills can they put to work? What abilities or resources do they have to share? What are the experiences from which they have learned?[4]

The process of conducting an inventory is simple and profound. At its heart is the act of listening. By inviting often unheard voices to be heard and inviting those used to talking, to listen, these conversations are powerful tools of change. They encourage people, sometimes for the very first time, to think about and 'discover' what they have to offer those around them. At the same time, a process of mapping the associations and institutions operating in the area helps to build a picture of local activity and identifies other physical, financial or cultural assets that can be brought into action.

"I've lived in this neighbourhood a long time and I always used a post office box instead of my address. I didn't want people to know where I was from because I was embarrassed. Since doing the [capacity] survey, all of us see how many great people, places and resources we have here, I feel different. We have a lot going for us. I feel proud of our neighbourhood and how we are the ones making things happen. Now I use my own address."

A Guide to Capacity Inventories, Kretzmann, McKnight and Sheehan

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When it comes to conducting an inventory, one tool does not fit all. The questions asked may vary depending on the community context or the way in which people choose to categorise 'capacities'. However, the act of listening and 'discovering' is fundamental to the process of empowering people to build communities from the inside out.

Stage Two: Connecting and mobilising
How can people give to others?

Once identified, these capacities can be mobilised for the good of the wider community. This is primarily done by enabling individuals to connect with other people, businesses, associations or institutions, leading to the development of productive and inclusive activities. Associations are particularly vital tools for mobilising the gifts and skills of community members:

> '[In associations] neighbours can decide what needs to be done, how it can be done and, of greatest importance, they are the people who can do it. In associations we are not consumers. We are not clients. We are the citizens with the power to make powerful communities.'[5]

Case study: Unsung Heroes

In 2011, a team at Hodge Hill parish church wanted to find ways to support and encourage their local community. Based on an outer estate in Birmingham, their parish is often described as 'deprived', but they wanted to discover and celebrate the community work that was going on there.

They came up with the concept of a 'Hodge Hill Unsung Heroes' event. This would be a prize-giving ceremony recognising and celebrating local people nominated by others for their valuable contribution to community life. It would help the church get to know people in their parish, learn about their work in the community and publicly acknowledge the value of such work.

To gather nominations, the team visited schools, pubs, shops, offices and community centres. This proved a positive experience in itself. It encouraged residents to think about the people they valued in their personal lives and their community and the team received a total of 97 nominations. They then visited each 'unsung hero', asking them more about themselves, their passions and their motivation.

The event itself, held in the local college in March 2012, was attended by all the nominees and their guests. Following dinner, each unsung hero was presented with a cut-glass award.

The evening provided the perfect opportunity for local people to celebrate their community and to think of ideas for new ventures. To help this along, the team placed a form on each table asking three questions: What are the best things about your neighbourhood? What are your dreams for your neighbourhood?, and What would you start in your neighbourhood if you could find two other people to join you?

These questions sparked many interesting conversations and led to several initiatives being launched, including a small theatre group and a women's community group. Ola Adegbite, one unsung hero (pictured above), has subsequently worked with a Near Neighbours development worker to host a Nigerian Independence Day celebration, set up a Nigerian Community Association, and start a small catering business. Almost a year after the event, these activities are all still running.

The Unsung Heroes event took all those involved on a journey. It helped church members get to know those who were supporting others in the estate, tirelessly and often without recognition. It encouraged community members, by celebrating them and their work and by building new networks to support them. And these relationships continue to grow as people feel encouraged to dream about ways in which they can improve their community.

For more details see 'A Theological Reflection on Asset-based Community Development' by Al Barrett, vicar of Hodge Hill parish church

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publicspirit.org.uk

Enabling individuals to join or create associations is therefore an important step in transforming a community by harnessing its assets.

Identifying, connecting and mobilising capacities has both *tangible* and *intangible* results.[6] Tangible results are the new activities that individuals and groups undertake, such as setting up a new business enterprise, establishing a new nursery or organising a new computer training programme. Once members have identified the activity they wish to start, external funding may well help to build on the existing contributions of gifts, time and skills.

Intangible results may be harder to identify, but are no less important. They are changes to people's attitudes towards themselves and others, that occur as a result of taking part in the process of identifying capacities. People begin to see themselves as having 'the power and the ability to initiate and carry out the changes they desire.'[7] Those previously viewed as 'too old', 'too young' or 'too poor' are now seen as valuable members of the community. Both tangible and intangible results are crucial for achieving lasting change.

What is the ABCD dream?
That everyone, without exception, can say of their place:
- The necessities are here, they are inexpensive and they are close at hand.
- Services are available, but not overpowering.
- You can contribute and participate, and truly make a difference around here and beyond.
- Here you can feel accepted, people have empathy.
- Here people work for social justice and inclusion.
- Here the sense of community is strong and we are supported by our state institutions to keep it so.
- Here everyone can find the resources to have enough to live a good life.
- Here our views and actions have an impact beyond our community.

(Cormac Russell, Nurture Development)

Conclusion
Many community organisations will already be putting into practice the principles and values that lie at the heart of the ABCD approach. However, putting this approach into practice consistently is not easy; it involves giving up control over plans and outcomes. Organisations can no longer simply offer services to meet a need; they have to engage in the lengthier process of empowering people to develop their own solutions. This approach calls for 'servant leaders'[8] who focus on supporting others to take action rather than taking a lead role themselves.

It may be difficult to resist the temptation to professionalise services and institute projects, but it is essential if community members are to be given space to use their own assets to achieve change. Continuing to focus on needs and deficits and providing external solutions, offers little hope for struggling communities.

Church Urban Fund, via the Together Network, supports churches as they work alongside others in their local communities to tackle poverty. In the coming months, we aim to develop resources which will help churches and community organisations explore and implement the ABCD approach, in support of the valuable work that so many are already doing to engage with the people around them.

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[1] John Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (Illinois, ACTA Publications, 1993)
[2] Summarised from John Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (Illinois, ACTA Publications, 1993)
[3] Nurture Development blog: nurturedevelopment.wordpress.com
[4] Summarised from John Kretzmann et al, *A Guide to Capacity Inventories* (Illinois, ACTA Publications, 1997)
[5] John McKnight, *A Basic Guide to ABCD community organising* (http://buff.ly/N8GIH1, 2013)
[6] John Kretzmann et al, *A Guide to Capacity Inventories* (Illinois, ACTA Publications, 1997)
[7] Ibid
[8] Peter Block, *Stewardship: choosing service over self-interest* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013)

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