

Communities in Control – Developing Assets

By Cormac Russell, ABCD Institute and Nurture Development

Finding solutions for urban and rural deprivation has long been a political priority in many European countries. National and local governments and the third sector have made various attempts to develop an integrated, partnership approach to tackling poverty, social exclusion and other related social problems. However, instead of putting citizens and communities more in control of their affairs, the social services model that has traditionally dominated European social protection policies more often than not relegates them to a position of passive recipients of state funded services, creating more dependency than empowerment.

Meanwhile, the worldwide economic crisis is refocusing minds and changing methodologies as government, donor and foundation funding comes under greater pressure than ever before, against a backdrop of increasing unemployment and deepening poverty and social exclusion. Hence the need for new ideas and strategies that, rather than being needs-based or funding-led, use existing assets more effectively and promote citizen led initiatives - in short, approaches which support communities to take control in a democratic and inclusive way.

In the final analysis, European policies aimed at promoting social inclusion, community development and anti poverty initiatives can only hope to reach fruition when they are implemented in a way that puts citizens in the driving seat. One international approach that embraces the real empowerment of citizens is known as the Asset-Based Community Development approach (ABCD approach).

“For the last 40 or 50 years we have been looking at communities in terms of their needs,” says Professor John McKnight, co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute. “We have run into a brick wall with that approach.” John McKnight and John Kretzmann pioneered the ABCD approach to urban problems that begins by looking at the assets that exist in a community rather than simply doing a stock take of what is wrong -the traditional ‘needs analysis’.



Empowering Citizens

This new approach genuinely empowers citizens and thereby strengthens civil society as the assets of communities are identified, connected and mobilised, and the abilities and insights of local residents become resources for solving a neighbourhood's own problems. This does not mean that troubled neighbourhoods do not need outside help, but rather that any genuine local revitalisation project must in fact be citizen-led, with outside agencies acting in a support role.

European examples of this alternative community building approach - which complements other participatory approaches - are emerging, particularly in parts of Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and the UK. To build on the growth of this approach in Europe, Cormac Russell and Henk Cornelissen (both Asset-Based Community Development Institute faculty members based in Europe) initiated the first ABCD European Summit.



Held at the New Urban Centre in Liverpool on June 2, 2009, this first ABCD European Summit brought together more than 120 citizens and a further 30 professionals to share and exchange their vision of a Europe where communities are in control, in a democratic and Inclusive way. The theme, Communities in Control: Developing Assets, was inspired firstly by the title of the UK Government White Paper on Community Engagement, and secondly by the movement in Australia of the same name that now meets annually to promote Healthy Communities across Australia.

The conference aimed to facilitate an exchange of experiences and knowledge about asset-based community development between citizens from Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK. On day two (June 3rd), delegates made field visits to a number of successful projects working to build stronger more sustainable communities in the Northwest of England, mainly in Manchester and Liverpool.



Conference organisers included Novas Scarman, Carnegie UK Trust, International Association for Community Development, Community Development Exchange, Development Trusts Association, Landelijk

Samenwerkingsverband Aandachtswijken (LSA), and Nurture Development. Cormac Russell, Faculty member of the ABCD Institute, Northwestern University and Managing Director of Nurture Development, chaired the conference, and Professor John McKnight, the co-founder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, delivered the keynote address.

Stories of Citizens in Control

The conference gave voice to some truly inspiring stories of citizens in control. Here is a selection of these stories:

Can do! the Dutch way (LSA)

In the Netherlands the Can do! Project challenges residents to come up with ideas to make their neighbourhood more attractive and pleasant to live in. The process begins with local campaigns to encourage residents to come forward with their ideas. With the help of a 'neighbourhood coach' funded by LSA, residents are given the opportunity to develop and implement these ideas.

Any financial support needed comes from the local housing corporations and/or local council. Residents themselves carry out their own ideas and remain in control of the project and what money is spent on. The direct cooperation between residents, corporations and councils, LSA and the sponsors is unique in the Netherlands.

Can do! Examples:

This project comes from Spijkenisse, a town near Rotterdam. A group of young people from the Dutch Antillian Islands are all too often linked to problems in the area, and labelled as a nuisance and the source of all anti-social behaviour by agencies and other residents. Indeed from the outset, the neighbourhood coach working as a community organiser for LSA was warned by professional Community Development organisations operating in the neighbourhood not to make contact with this group.

Ignoring this advice, he visited the young people from the Antillian community. They too were unhappy with their negative image, and so decided to do something about it. Their first action was to meet with neighbourhood residents in the busy shopping centre where they provided the residents with a traditional Antillian meal. In this way communication and interaction was stimulated and from this much activity favouring social inclusion has emerged.

This story speaks of how young people can redefine how they are being defined by sharing their assets and connecting with their neighbours through new relational dynamics. Their invitation to their neighbours is not so much a plea to be accepted as an offer to share

their gifts and talents with a view to co-producing new solutions to age old problems of anti-social behaviour and crime, and it is working!

Another group of delegates were inspired by the work of Latifa Elttabi who founded the Fata Morgana society to meet the needs of women and girls in the Malburgen neighbourhood in Arnhem. Participants meet regularly in each others' homes to share activities, and jointly problem-solve around a range of issues.

It is remarkable how one person, well connected in her community, can support women from many cultures out of isolation and into real association with each other in a manner that is both culturally sensitive and genuinely empowering.

Buddies for youngsters in Helmond

Citizens from the Netherlands also told of their 'Buddies for youngsters in Helmond' initiative. At the beginning 2000 the Police Commissioner from Helmond (town in the South-East of The Netherlands) caused a public outcry when highlighting what was seen as a huge problem with young Moroccans in the area. As a result some successful young Moroccans were encouraged to develop a project for young immigrants, with some help from SWH.

The project now is aimed at all young people in the so called risk group, not just young Moroccans, and includes with local schools. The idea is that young people who are successful in life (job, education, and housing) can act as buddies for young people and support them (and their parents) in their school career and free time activities.

This story bucks a common trend whereby so-called youth at risk are aggregated with other youth at risk and put into professional run youth programmes. Here we see productive adults, who are neighbours of the young people they mentor, acting as role models, not as deliverers of programmes, but just as people with a genuine desire to contribute and who care enough to respond to the needs of the children in their neighbourhood.

Rivierenwijk (Riverdistrict) Deventer: community in control?

Deventer is a medium-sized town in the east of the Netherlands. When the Riverdistrict had to be reconstructed and an investment made on a social level, the residents were given an important role to play. In the Netherlands, the involvement of the residents in this

neighbourhood is considered to be an example of 'best practice'. Residents have participated in this process from the outset. They have given their opinions on the problems, solutions and priorities.

The local council and professional institutes have made a great effort to involve residents. Within various projects, the residents were asked their opinion on the neighbourhood and how to improve it. Other projects were started in which the residents are central, taking into consideration their talents and capacities.

Organized residents, however, notice that they are allowed to give an opinion on everything but they are not the ones who determine the agenda of the renewal in their neighbourhood. This is generally the case in the Netherlands. Local residents have learned a lot in the years of planning along with local authorities and professionals, and some of them want to move further; they think a next step is necessary. Their aim is that their community is in control of the process.

Irish Workshop - Cranmore Community Co-operative, Sligo: Regenerating our community from inside out

Things are changing in Cranmore in Sligo, Ireland, at the present time due to the regeneration of the area. The local residents who form the Cranmore Co-operative recognised early on in the process that community participation and input was central to Cranmore's successful regeneration. They focused on building a strong relationship with the Cranmore Regeneration Team of Sligo Borough Council. This has resulted in a strong community partnership developed through intentional relationship building using the ABCD approach.

Building community in Cranmore has been a process of identifying assets, connecting them and mobilising them for the benefit of all. Residents quite simply refuse to be defined any longer by their deficiencies. Instead, they define themselves by their resources, both those that are visible and those yet to be uncovered, and insist that everyone else do the same.

At the conference, the Co-op shared stories of citizen-driven social and economic regeneration, including a story of an active citizen who began to connect isolated women by establishing a savings scheme (micro-finance scheme), which has generated incredible social capital.

This story is not about better partnership between a regeneration authority and local residents, but about the relocation of authority with regard to community building. It tells of a community that understands that in the process of building a sustainable community, there

are certain things only citizens can do; that professionals are simply just not equipped to do. Their story reminds us that only citizens can produce real care, which in essence is the freely given gift of the heart from one person to another.

Agencies on the other hand produce services and programmes, and while agencies are filled with caring individuals, their systemic nature focuses on service production. Only when citizens and agencies work in real partnership that mutually respects the intrinsic value of each, does real community building occur.

It strikes me that Peter Block (The Structure of Belonging, 2007) might say that these citizens are changing the conversation from one that speaks about regeneration to one of 'community restoration' as defined by the citizens themselves.

Regeneration in Europe and North America tends at best to be an 'outside-in' affair lead by professionals, with some attempts at consultation with residents about how best the 'outside-in' intervention should be done, while community restoration is an inside-out conversation. Block reminds us that when the conversation changes, so does reality. The reality in Cranmore is that citizens are stepping into their power and the local authority are also stepping up and taking responsibility for their part in the co-production of a sustainable neighbourhood.

Given that citizens are an essential ingredient in baking a successful community cake, it is worthwhile highlighting the number of citizens that are engaged in community building in Cranmore, and the diversity of that engagement. This is a genuine community - a neighbourhood where no-one is not needed and everyone is invited to contribute. The constant commitment by the ABCD initiating group (made up of residents with the support of one paid organiser) to facilitate door to door learning conversations that explore what each person cares enough about to act for change is remarkable and has created more bridging social capital than any other participatory or social inclusion intervention that community has ever seen before.

The initiating group uses these learning conversations to support connections across various interest groups, working with them to identify organising issues that bring the entire neighbourhood together. They then map out the internal assets that they have identified and when necessary, they leverage the external assets required. This has meant that they have built real collective power for change within Cranmore; from the ground up.

Halifax Opportunities Trust

Halifax Opportunities Trust is a Development Trust serving a community with a high level of in-migration, often with low levels of literacy and numeracy. The organisation's focus has been in helping people in the key areas of learning, employment, and business. The organisation delivers £2m worth of services each year from two Business Centres which act as 'hubs' for service delivery to the local community (learn direct, ethical employment agency, subsidised workspace, networking opportunities) and providing income for the Trust.



Halifax Opportunities Trust is now able to offer support to other community organisations - including support for other development trusts on asset transfers - and is working with six other key community organisations to survive the recession, to co-ordinate access to resources, and to ensure that key services (health, debt-advice) are retained for the community.

All too often community-driven change is inhibited by the funding criteria of external donors and government agencies. In an environment where mainstream funding sources are becoming like an oasis in a vast unforgiving desert, there is fierce competition among communities, and even community and voluntary organisations working within the same community. Therefore, an ability on the part of communities to develop viable alternatives to state funding is vital not only for the overall fiscal survival of the third sector, but also to maintain the integrity of sector and its commitment to bottom up development.

Hence, liberating existing under-utilised physical/infrastructural assets through social entrepreneurship, and prudent asset management and good corporate governance as Halifax Opportunities Trust has done also shifts the power balance, away from the agenda of external funders and towards the priorities set by local residents. It effectively relocates the decision-making authority away from external funders to

communities which are committed to sustainable and inclusive development of socially responsive supports.

Halifax Opportunities Trust is just one of over 450 such Trusts throughout the UK, all of them supported by the Development Trust Association (DTA). The DTA is a network of community practitioners established to support the set up of development trusts, and help existing trusts learn from each other and work effectively. Their combined income is over £260m and development trusts have £490m of assets in community ownership.

www.regen.org.uk

Goodwin Development Trust

Goodwin Development Trust was set up in 1994 by residents of the Thornton Estate in Hull to improve their quality of life and the services available on their estate. It is run by a Board of Directors comprised entirely of elected local residents. It now employs over 300 staff with a turnover of £12 million, a community asset base of £11m, working across 38 sites. Goodwin uses participatory appraisal techniques – an approach to learning about communities that places equal value on the knowledge and experience of local people and their capacity to come up with solutions to problems affecting them.

The assets owned by Goodwin are used for some of the following activities: Children's Centres and nurseries, resource facilities for the community, community health and recreation facilities, small business incubation space, conferencing and training facilities, managed office space and public access buildings, transport, catering and facilities management.

www.goodwintrust.org

North Allerdale Development Trust

North Allerdale Development Trust works in north Cumbria, covering the market towns of Wigton, Aspatria and Silloth and includes an area of outstanding natural beauty. It prioritises giving support to community organisations and structures, working to improve communications, resources and funding for them, especially for isolated groups. The Trust's main development has been the refurbishment of community offices. This £750,000 redevelopment of a market hall in Wigton into a multi-use community facility, provides offices for community organisations and space for training, meeting, community activities and an indoor market.

To paraphrase Rev. Moses Coady, the father of the Antigonish Cooperative Movement (Nova Scotia, Canada): 'they secure what they need by using what they have'.

Youth in Control: Asset-based Community Development in Cornwall

Named after their postcode in West Cornwall, the TR14ers are a remarkable group of young people who have transformed their lives and their community through the medium of street dance. The TR14ers were started in 2004, supported by the Connecting Communities (C2) programme, an asset-based, multi-agency approach to enable residents to lead change for themselves. Since it began, 586 young people have joined the group, which is led by 30 peer-selected dance leaders. Their message is one of respect and self-esteem and a vision to take dance to other youth in the country.



Their story is a strong reminder that everyone loses when young people are pathologised or hemmed into narrow categories such as pupil, client, anti-social, immature, or problematic. TR14ers are seen as hugely resourceful creative citizens who are co-producers of their community's well being. Every one of them believe they can transform and energise their neighbourhoods through dance and a endless array of other mediums, and they're right!



www.tr14ers.co.uk

Day two conference visits: Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council & Leasowe Development Trust

On the second day of the conference participants visited the Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council, and Leasowe Development Trust, both powerful examples of the power of asset transfer:

Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council (VNC)

Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council (VNC) was established in 1974 in one of the most deprived communities within the UK. It has 38 affiliated groups from within its catchment area and it is from the officers of those 38 groups that the VNC forms its Board of 15, all of whom live locally.

The Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council provides a wide range of services and activities for residents in the area and the City of Liverpool and in some cases across Greater Merseyside including:

- Lifeline Community Alarms
- Training in childcare, Leadership and Management training
- Communication courses
- Playwork courses Foundation Courses
- Facilities for meetings training events, courses and conferences
- Social facilities for function hire including 3 bars
- Office accommodation to rent and the “Scottie Press” Britain’s longest running community newspaper
- Information Technology (IT)

All these activities take place in one or other of the 2 buildings owned by VNC:

Vauxhall Training and Enterprise Centre (VTEC), which is a recently refurbished school at a cost of £1.2 million and the prestigious Millennium Centre, built at a cost of £4 million.

In addition to all the ABCD activity above the Board is keen to maintain some fun activities: such as after school computer club, youth singing, dancing and drama sessions, peer mentoring group, girls’ interest group, sewing classes, creative writing classes and a pensioner group.

Leasowe Development Trust

The Trust was established in 2000 by local community groups and local people on a housing estate in Leasowe. They now run the Millennium Centre, a resource for the community providing meeting and training rooms, office workspace and space for community activities.

The Trust is a company limited by guarantee and a charity. Activities now running from the Centre include a healthy eating café, provision of advice and guidance, office accommodation for not-for-profit organisations, a ‘free’ cash machine and a wide range of community activities including yoga, sports etc. A community learning programme provides opportunities for long-term unemployed residents, building skills and leading through to qualifications, including Open University.

The group’s main achievement has been in securing a long-term lease on the building and keeping it open even when it does not attract subsidy.

The community is engaged with the Trust through representation on the Board, from tenants’ organisations and dedicated seats for community representatives. Communication with the community is facilitated through regular residents’ meetings, which help to direct activities in the centre, a community newsletter and a forum for users of the centre.

“Principles of ABCD”

Much of the work outlined in these stories, bears out the validity of the observations of John McKnight over many years. John’s address to the conference summarised some of his key reflections on the community development process.

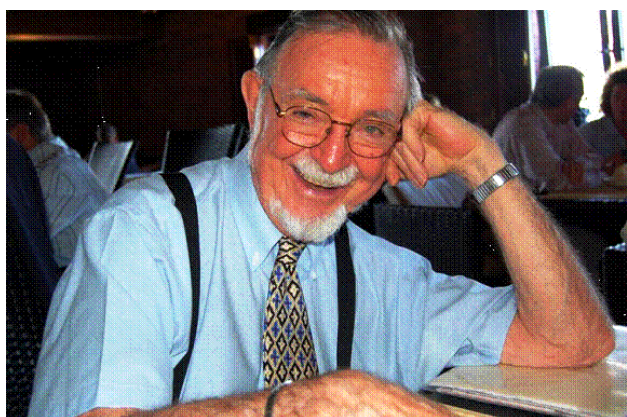
He began by noting that wherever we are in a local place, there are people with far more gifts, enthusiasm, and skills than any one person or organisation can know. Additionally, there are physical assets such as land, buildings, and other infrastructural resources. These two things - along with the support of institutions; vibrancy of associational life, and economic exchange - are the ingredients from which “we can bake a successful community cake”.

Planners and officials more often than not start by looking at what is wrong, what is missing, what is problematic – and having mapped all that is missing vis a vis their needs map, conclude that people need them and other services to come in and fix all the problems they have. And of course we always find what we look for, since the question always carries the criteria of its answer. Hence a needs analysis

will always conclude the need for outside professional intervention.

But citizens who want to develop their communities and are eager to get movement toward change under way, tend to start from the inside, with a deep intuitive understanding that “you don’t know what you need until you know what you have.” Starting from the inside, with “what you’ve got”, is the essence of citizen-led initiatives.

Citizen initiatives based on ABCD are springing up all over the world, from remote rural areas to towns and big cities. John felt strongly that this conference was part of an emerging pattern. In October 2008, delegates from nine Pacific Rim countries met to discuss ABCD and in July 2009, representatives from 14 countries from the Global South met in Canada with the same agenda. These various continental initiatives, considered alongside the work taking place in North America, suggest that a global movement is emerging.



Most citizen-led initiatives start around issues such as housing, estate management, and the local economy, but there is also action relating to health issues, the environment and community safety, and justice. A cross-cutting feature of all deeply rooted asset-based community development initiatives is the aspiration to involve all sectors of a given community. Often the issue that draws people together is ‘how we can support the children of our communities to grow up to be productive adults?’ If we believe that it takes an entire village to raise a child; what does it take to create a village where every child feels he or she belongs and has something to contribute?

John identified a number of key elements to successful citizen-centred initiatives based on his own observations and learning over many years in many communities of place:

- 1 Have a vision of what a place (neighbourhood) will be like in 10 years that everyone has had an opportunity to shape;
- 2 Continuously widen the circle of participation, ensuring ever more people are invited to engage in citizen driven initiatives. Remembering that a town hall meeting alone will not engage the majority of people;

- 3 Use new development tools, especially the internet, but remember that power is in relationship-building, and that information transferred through ICT may not always carry wisdom or facilitate genuine connections. It is relationships that bring about change, so we need to use ICT wisely to augment social networking but not to replace it;
- 4 Create new financial tools such as mini grants schemes that will attract people who don’t want to be part of a formal group or to be tied into restrictive funding criteria. These people are project oriented and want to make small changes with a number of their neighbours. Once they become engaged, we can connect them to wider more inclusive opportunities for community building;

John concluded by noting that local people, residents, citizens are “**producers of the future - their future and ours**”. When people are truly powerful, they are not in the role of consumers, they are not clients, nor are they advisors to the Authorities, instead they are at the centre of democracy. Citizens are therefore each other’s best teachers and democracy is the shell that creates the safe environment within which that can happen. Hence, in an era when big institutions are stumbling, citizens need to become more authoritative in the interests of democracy.

Next Steps

Following the conference, there may be the potential to establish a European ABCD Network. We know that there are Asset-Based initiatives in Sweden, Italy, Greenland, Serbia, the Balkans, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands. We also believe that many practitioners throughout Europe are using asset-based community-led developmental approaches. Such a network could function as a community of practice and facilitate the sharing of practice as well as creating an environment of mutual support and mentoring in the emerging field of ABCD community organising.

As we promote a shift from investing in deficiencies, to investing in capacities, some very real challenges will present themselves - but I believe the opportunities far exceed the challenges. I therefore can think of no better way to conclude this article than with these words:

‘Democracy is not a spectator sport. Democracy is about the participation of citizens. It is a journey where diversity is celebrated, the public good is negotiated, and intense deliberation and dialogue are conducted. It is about being involved.’

(M Wyman, Learning to Engage)

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