

## Reflections on the Catalytic Role of an Outsider in 'Asset Based Community Development' (ABCD)

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21 Feb '03

This paper was originally written for faculty members of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University. No effort was therefore made to explain 'Asset Based Community Development.' With its distribution to a wider audience, a brief introduction is now in order.

ABCD focuses on the strengths and capacities of local communities. It rests on the conviction that sustainable development emerges from within a community, not from outside, by mobilizing and building upon local resources. In contrast, most conventional development work can be characterized as needs-based, i.e., interventions typically focus on problems and deficiencies. This has the unfortunate effect of encouraging communities to denigrate themselves as victims and to put their worst face forward in an effort to attract external assistance. It also leads concerned outsiders into becoming charitable 'fixers.' These are not the most effective relationships for enabling long lasting change. This paper examines ways that outsiders, especially in international settings, can play a more creative catalytic role within an asset based approach.

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For more information about ABCD, see <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/>.

It was good to be a part of the ABCD international planning meeting at the end of January. As was obvious to everyone present, a preoccupation of mine was to draw together insights about outsiders playing an effective role as catalysts in asset-based development. What works, what doesn't, what are outstanding issues and questions? Here are some of my thoughts. They are organised around a number of lessons learned, propositions, examples, and concerns. Though rough and personal, I hope they will prompt others to share insights from their own experience. At some future time, it is my desire to be part of a small group who might eventually produce a more formal piece on the subject.

### *Insiders and outsiders*

Most local communities are composed of residents, associations, businesses, and institutions. The African and Asian villages where I've worked have similar aspects as these, though in a simpler form and on a smaller scale than those found in urban areas. The distinction between an insider and outsider in the countryside is more or less obvious: villages consist of local residents with everyone else being an outsider. In para-urban areas that ring major cities, it becomes a

little more complex but residency still remains the primary qualifier. Asset-based development means mobilising the skills, resources, and commitment of these residents, along with others grounded in the area, to strengthen the economic and social well-being of the entire community.

Though we would like to have community building ‘from the inside out’ occur spontaneously, some form of an external stimulus is usually involved. This can often be very minimal. In the Ethiopian highlands, it was exciting to see *kires* (informal funeral associations) initiate small-scale development work on their own after observing the accomplishments of nearby *kires* (see Box 1). But even in such cases, it could be said that the demonstration of successful mobilisation of local assets in one village helped stimulate ‘spontaneous’ activities in the other. For those interested in *maximising* this effect, major attention is focused on structuring and systematising the *minimal external stimulus* that can effectively occasion significant change across a large number of locations.

**Box 1: Stimulants and Spontaneity**

An interesting example of the ‘dynamics of spontaneity’ occurred at the Yilamo *kire* in the Debre Sina District of the Amahara Region. Yilamo residents made plans to improve their main spring during a community planning meeting. The *kire* organised a number of work days and succeeded, as they were proud to report, in “protecting their spring from pollution better than it had ever been done before.” The practical result was cleaner water and fewer health problems. This spring was located on the border with another nearby *kire*. When facilitators returned to conduct a follow-up session to the first planning event, some women from the neighbouring *kire* came and asked the Yilamo leaders if they could attend the meeting. They explained that they wanted to use the Yilamo spring because it was much cleaner than the springs in their *kire*; they also said they would like to join in the work to take care of the Yilamo spring. The Yilamo *kire* leaders, however, refused. They told the women to go back to their *kire* and get people to work on cleaning their own spring. The women said that people in their *kire* were not interested in working together like people in Yilamo, so they would not be able to clean their spring in the same way. Still, the *kire* leaders said “this is our spring and should be used only by members of our *kire*.” After this dramatic exchange, the women returned home and were eventually successful in cleaning their own spring in a similar manner as at Yilamo.

The form of such an external stimulus is multifaceted with a number of differing dimensions. Beyond individuals from outside of the community who play a ‘face-to-face’ role there are often various support structures, intermediate organisations, and funding mechanisms. Attention below begins by focusing on the catalytic activities of individuals before considering implications for organisations and structures.

***The purpose of a catalyst is to stimulate change***

Put simply, the desired change of ABCD is to see more ‘building of communities from the inside out.’ If one is interested in stimulating change, it is helpful to have a self-conscious framework for understanding how change happens. Since it is foundational to my views about the role of a catalyst, I’ll briefly share a theory about change that guides my work.

Behaviour, the way people act individually or within a group, is based on the way they see themselves in the world. It’s a matter of self-perception, self-story, self-image – which are all

ways of saying the same thing. For example, it could be said that the unilateral tendencies and actions of the current US government are consistent with an image of rugged American individualism. Images are created through the reception of ‘messages.’ People continually incorporate, or discard, new messages into their accumulated understanding of themselves in the world. Messages come in many forms: verbal, visual, and experiential. Education is an elaborate process of conveying various ‘messages’ about particular subjects. Messages come in varying degrees of strength: one reads all the time about the negative health effects of fatty foods. Yet these often only mildly alter one’s prevailing self-understanding and behavioural choices about diet. A heart attack, however, is a much stronger message – as are most experiential messages.

Images go through a continual process of change. Most involve minor adjustments as new pieces of information (messages) are aligned to an existing image. Inconsistent messages that challenge a strong image are usually ignored. Sometimes, especially if received several times from differing sources, or if the message is strongly experiential, ‘doubt’ begins to emerge as the contradictory messages gain prominence. Radical change occurs when an established image is replaced by a totally new self-understanding. When images change, behaviour changes. This understanding about change can be summarised in five points: 1) people live out of images, 2) images control behaviour, 3) images are created by messages, 4) images can change, and 5) when images change, behaviour changes.

The desired change in my work has been to shift community self-understanding from *passivity* (e.g., waiting as ‘clients’ to receive services; self-images of being ‘victims’) to becoming *active agents* of their own development.

***Catalysts play the role of a facilitator, not a direct implementer.***

Effective catalysts from outside of the community don’t do anything directly *for* people. They encourage people to do things on their own. ABCD emphasises that one leads best by stepping back. Communities drive their own development; catalysts facilitate the process. This implies a number of practical activities that are far easier to talk about than to do.

Catalysts enable a community to look realistically at itself. They hold up a mirror so residents can see themselves as they really are. Because people have been well conditioned to focus on their problems, facilitators emphasize analytic tools and exercises that help community residents to *identify and recognize strengths and capacities* which they may have overlooked or ignored in the past. Asset mapping tools developed by ABCD are valuable in doing this. Other methods from other sources are also helpful for identifying local strengths and capacities, e.g., those known under the name of “participatory rural appraisal” (PRA) are widespread in the ‘south.’ Key to them all, however, is a basic principle: Catalysts do not do the mapping, they facilitate community residents to map assets for themselves.

Catalysts *connect* people with each other and their existing resources. In doing so, they emphasize inclusiveness. Everyone in a community has something to contribute, be they at the centre of the community or on its margins. Facilitators, therefore, are leery of working only with small representational groups of ‘leaders.’ This often requires catalysts to play a role of

‘provocateurs’ because small cliques of leaders are typically quite content to assume responsibility themselves on behalf of the community at large. (More on a provocateur below.)

Catalysts facilitate the community to *affirm its real situation* without illusions or false hopes. It has been my experience that no matter how much a facilitator might focus discussions on a community’s assets (i.e., the half glass that is full), sooner or later local people insist that the conversation turn to needs and problems (i.e., the glass is half empty). Though foremost attention is focused on assets, an over reluctance to discuss problems is a subtle denial of the real situation. The ‘problem’ with discussing problems is that they quickly cause a community to turn its attention outside of itself. Local frustrations are blamed on others or solutions are seen as being dependent upon external realities or generousities. A sense of victimisation is reinforced rather than challenged. Affirming the real situation means acknowledging the active participation of a community in the problem. When a community recognises how it contributes to creating or perpetuating a problem, it also reveals practical ways that they themselves can self-consciously address that problem (see Box 2). Resolution may not be complete, but a way forward is always possible.

**Box 2: Examining the Situation from Within**

Discussions about local assets during the planning meeting were interesting to people in Endabeg, a village in the Babati District of Tanzania, but they also wanted facilitators to consider their needs. Q: ‘Okay, what do you think are some of your biggest needs?’ A: ‘We need for the co-op to deliver sufficient amounts of fertilizers to us on a timely basis.’ Q: ‘What is the problem that you hope will be solved?’ A: ‘Our crop production continues to go down every year.’ Q: ‘Besides your concerns about fertilizer, what are other possible reasons for the drop in crop production?’ A: ‘We are losing top soil to erosion.’ Q: ‘What practices are you following in Endabeg that might be perpetuating these problems?’ A1: ‘We are cutting trees on the high slopes above the fields; water is running too fast and flows over our fields.’ A2: ‘We are not careful about the direction in which we plow our fields.’ A3: ‘It isn’t a soil erosion issue, but we are always planting the same crop year after year so the ground is getting tired.’ Q: ‘What can you do differently in Endabeg to address some of these problems that are contributing to the ongoing drop in your crop production?’ A: ‘We could create small terraces, we could replant trees above our fields, we could rotate our crops, we could build some small dams to slow down the running water during the rains, we could ..., we could ... etc, etc. (Note: It takes patience and skill for a facilitator to ask probing questions in different ways; it also takes time to explore and consider different ideas and suggestions; small group work can be helpful here.)

Having identified its assets, catalysts facilitate people to build *practical plans of action* for mobilizing their resources and accomplishing realistic objectives. Local development plans thus become a symbol of consensus and a rallying point for inclusive action. They also give a practical foundation of any organizational issues that might arise within a community. My personal bias for being a catalyst is on enabling quick action rather than on long preparations periods for gathering detailed information and analysing it (whether on assets or other). In my experience, people learn best by doing and then *reflecting upon the experience*. The sooner people begin acting on something of substance (even simple activities can be substantial), the better. Key, of course, is local residents being the primary implementers of their own plans. Catalysts are cautious about playing a direct and overly active role in connecting local

communities with outside resources. The basic principle is this: don't do anything for people that they can do themselves.

***Catalysts embody a 'presence' that helps build trust.***

As a university intern living and working on the west side of Chicago in the late sixties, scathing reference to 'limousine social workers' made a strong impression on me. More than simply describing those who drove in from the warm comforts of the suburbs to help needy people in the inner city (the 'ghetto' as we spoke back then), it symbolised an inauthentic relationship. Sophomoric abstractions about 'bad faith' suddenly became very real to me as I wrestled with my own vocation. Creating a genuine relationship with local people is essential for outsiders if they are to effectively play a catalytic role, but how is it practically done? The answer probably lies more in the way one actively struggles with the question than in prescribing a definitive formula. During the meeting in Evanston, we heard about work in Bosnia and an outsider embodying a genuine 'presence' to the local situation.

Though maybe not definitive guidelines, there are factors that might lead one in a helpful direction. Catalysts are *accountable* to local communities. They are there, in some form or another, only at the invitation of the community. But as outsiders, they are upfront about their role and intentions so everyone in can see their purpose and understand their motives. In doing so, a creative sense of 'obedience' to the community is established. Catalysts are consistent: they do what they say they are going to do. They are transparent: they are forth-coming about their actions and are open to being questioned about them.

Outsiders are not insiders. There may be examples where outsiders have become insiders through a lifetime of commitment (often with significant personal sacrifice), but anything short of this probably means that outsiders will always remain distinct from the community. Even in relatively short-term engagements, however, a foundation for trust can be built through the integrity of one's empathetic respect and '*shared austerity*.' It means standing genuinely present to the local situation. This is intimately tied to the subtle communication of visual, verbal, and experiential messages. During preparations for launching the 'Community Empowerment Programme' in Ethiopia, this issue was faced directly. Facilitators began to see how many of their own ways of acting needed to change if they were going to be effective in working with the rural population. 'Shared austerity' in that context meant personal participation in many of the practical hardships experienced day in and day out by local community residents (see Box 3).

**Box 3: Shared Austerity**

One long session during preparations in Ethiopia dealt with ways that villagers typically perceive government workers. It was generally agreed that it was one of mistrust and suspicion. Group reflections took place around the following questions: What behaviour reveals mistrust? What images are consistent with that way of acting? What experiences might have helped create those images? If trust is an important factor for working successfully with villagers, what does this tell us about how we should carry out facilitation activities?

Conversation turned to travel modes of the villagers with whom they would be working – which consisted of walking along highland paths or riding donkeys and mules. There was near rebellion when the idea was first suggested that the facilitators do the same instead of traveling by four-

wheel drive vehicles. Agreement was only reached to try it on the first workshops and then to 'evaluate' its impact. The experience was a life-changing event for most of them: their interaction with villagers was at a depth they had never before known. Henceforth, the facilitators willingly took on severe hardships in conducting *kire* workshops. They traveled for hours by 'public means' to the distant districts (i.e., in the back of open lorries in dust and rain), walked or rode mules for miles over harsh terrain to reach designated *kires*, and had slept in the flea infested homes of peasant farmers for several weeks. This was a dramatic change for both villagers and young government professionals alike. Though not complete by itself, it did help to shift the relationship dramatically in the direction of mutual respect.

### ***Catalysts have an agenda.***

Those interested in ABCD want to see community development *driven* by the community. Outside catalysts are interested in providing minimal stimulus to overcome inertia and build momentum. They facilitate the process and avoid becoming a direct implementer. They are not the primary actors – those roles belong to members of the community. ABCD catalysts and facilitators, however, are not neutral. They have a definite agenda based on a coherent strategy with real aims. Without one, activities like asset mapping, etc., are reduced to being a series of rudderless techniques.

Effective catalysts, I believe, are bold in declaring their agenda. Important messages can easily be missed when conveyed in a timid manner. This, of course, doesn't mean that one should indulge oneself as an obnoxious dogmatist, but it does mean acting with clarity and consistency while remaining politely firm. Integrity, which is the raw basis for trust, comes hand in hand with the transparent declaration of one's own agenda.

Women's participation in rural Africa is a good example of an outsider's agenda. The strategic justification for involving women is the inclusive widening of the circle so that all assets within a community can be recognised and drawn upon. In African cultures, however, involving women in the planning and management of important economic and social matters is almost always an imposition from the outside. It is sometimes unwelcome and at times overtly resented. This is one mirror that many male leaders would just as soon not be held to their face. By insisting upon women's participation in strong patriarchal societies, a catalyst moves away from the congenial impressions associated with a 'neutral' facilitator and dashes headfirst in the direction of a provocateur or an agitator. The challenge is to play these roles respectfully while also remaining resolutely committed to the importance of a well considered strategy (see Box 4). The specific features of a strategy may vary depending upon differing circumstances, but an effective catalyst conveys them clearly and acts accordingly.

#### **Box 4: Facilitation and Transparency**

During preparations for the programme in Ethiopia, the facilitators said it would be difficult to have women and youth involved in planning community development activities; 'it's not in the culture of the highlands.' As with the transportation issue, we decided to give it an initial try during the first community planning events and then reflect on the experience. These first two were held in *kires* near to Dessie in South Wollo. Set-up work was done by facilitators who explained that the purpose of the planning, including the importance of women's involvement.

On the appointed day, I hiked with the facilitators to the first kire where we were greeted by a large number of men waiting for the workshop to begin. Those present easily represented 90% of the kire's 60 or so households, but no women were to be seen. When asked about the women, the kire chairman said 'we speak for our women here.' All eyes of the facilitators turned to me while silently saying 'we told you so.' I repeated the standard line – women's involvement is important for engaging and drawing upon all of the strengths and resources within the community. Once again we were told that women would not be allowed to attend. 'I understand your position' I replied, 'and I hope you understand ours. If women don't participate in the planning, we cannot stay and facilitate the process.' With that we thanked them for their time and hiked back to Dessie.

Word in rural Africa can spread like wildfire. When we arrived in the second neighbouring kire a few days later, an acceptable quorum of women was present (about 30) along with a number of young people (admittedly, they were all young boys, not girls, but a catalyst is always ready to be flexible!). Small groups of women, youth, and men met to discuss strengths of the community and to suggest ideas about things that could be done in the community through the use of their own resources.. A good substantial plan of small-scale simple 'infrastructure' projects were planned (i.e., a small check dam to control erosion, terracing on some problematic fields, and protection of the spring). In closing reflections, several men said they didn't know before that 'their' women had so many good practical ideas.

Community planning workshops with over 300 similar kires were held during the next three years in South Wollo. Never again was it necessary to cancel one because of insufficient women's participation. This probably had more to do with the facilitators' personal commitment to the agenda of the program, and the manner in which they presented it, than with anything else.

### *Leveraging external resources.*

Most development programmes in Africa are dominated by a 'needs' perspective. There is often an overly eager desire among outsiders, even among those who talk a good line about 'bottom-up' development and 'local capacity building,' to rush quickly into arranging financial and material support for local communities. At some point it probably is important for most local communities to leverage external resources to complement their own. An effective catalyst, however, is extremely cautious: the premature arrival of external sources can overwhelm local efforts. Special attention should be given to the word 'leveraging.' It implies the community is the driving force for finding and obtaining additional resources. 'Introducing' or 'providing' imply that the essential initiating actor is outside of the community.

Like most things in an asset-based approach, the appropriate timing for leveraging external resources depends upon particular circumstances. It is yet another important factor in the development of a coherent strategy for guiding catalytic action. It has been my experience that it is usually more effective to delay major attention on external resources. If uncertain about timing, it is better to error on the side of later rather than sooner. The reason for this has to do with perceptions and self-images within the community. The image of being a 'needy client' is often a deeply entrenched one. It causes people to look first outside of themselves for solutions to problems. Communities experience internal power by mobilising their own resources. The more times they successfully repeat it, the stronger the experiential messages become for reinforcing a new image (i.e., we are agents of our own development) to replace an old dominant one (i.e., we are needy clients). Forming a new image – which is the foundation for change – is a

delicate process. Emerging new images are easily overpowered by old familiar messages (see Box 5 below).

**Box 5: Unintended Results**

The “Cooperative Members Participation Programme” (CMPP) in east Africa was a strategic effort (via funding from the Swedish Cooperative Centre, *Utan Gräsner*), to transform local co-ops from being service providers to becoming organisational vehicles for local initiative and action based upon local resources. A small team of two or three facilitators would work with a village co-op to enable the creation of a local development plan. Facilitation of the planning, and then follow-up to assist in the review and adjustment of these plans, were the only external support offered by the programme: absolutely no material or financial resources were available through CMPP.

One of the first of these workshops was held with a village co-op near Kilosa in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania. During the workshop, villagers decided to finally complete construction of a small ‘clinic’ -- a simple 20 square metres building so that village women would have a place to go to give birth in a sanitary environment and rest for a few days afterwards. Construction on the building had begun two years earlier when UNICEF provided a small grant to the village for this purpose. The money, however, had run out before the building was completed: it had stood half finished ever since as the village waited for UNICEF to return with more money. It was decided during the meeting to make the clinic a top priority (the idea was brought to the fore by a large number of women, many of whom were attending a village planning meeting for the first time). Shortly afterwards, they organised the making of mud bricks, completed the walls, and made wooden shutters for empty windows. When a national cooperative officer happened to visit the village a few weeks later, the villagers explained that they were close to finishing the building: next week they were going to remove old rusting tin sheets from a collapsed co-op storage shed to complete the clinic by laying the roof. The official was extremely impressed with the way people were working together and using their own meagre resources to accomplish things. To support and encourage their efforts, he told them that his organisation would buy the village new roofing sheets so there was no need for them to use the old rusting ones. The villagers cancelled their workday anticipating the arrival of the new metal sheets. Unfortunately, the official could not make good on his commitment and the materials never arrived. When the facilitators returned to the village three months later to conduct a progress review on the village development plan, the clinic remained unfinished and was beginning to deteriorate once again.

***Mini-grants as the ‘leading’ catalytic strategy and its relationship to face-to-face facilitation***

This is certainly not an either/or issue. After three and a half years of work in Ethiopia, the primary proposal from those of us who worked closest with the ‘Community Empowerment Programme’ was to establish ‘District Development Funds’ that would manage and oversee mini-grants to local *kires*. Though funding for this was not secured (so it never happened), it does seem an appropriate complement to face-to-face facilitation – especially in the more mature stages of a strategy based on face-to-face interactions.

Because of my limited experience with community foundations, I have questions about using mini-grants as a *leading*, or initiating, catalytic strategy (i.e., without much face-to-face catalytic interaction). This is especially true in Africa. My questions are primarily concerned with other ways of nurturing a ‘learning environment’ within local communities. The practical skills and institutional infrastructure of rural villages in Africa are far different from those found in North

America. I would like to personally learn more about different experiences of community foundations in the ‘south.’ I would especially like to learn more from Latin America where I have no experience at all. What practical mechanisms have they found for enabling a learning environment to occur in the absence of the face-to-face interaction. Or am I being too narrow in my thinking with the assumption that mini-grants strategies are overly constrained (at least in the early stages of proposal writing and project formation) by paper interactions? Clearly, I need to learn more.

***How long should an outsider be involved in the catalytic process?***

In Africa, I have favoured quickly moving into action without overly long preparation stages of data gathering and analysis. The emphasis has been on structuring and systematising the minimal external stimulus that can effectively occasion significant change within a large number of communities. These are clearly aspects of a *broad expansive strategy* for catalysing change. This is sharp contrast to a more *in-depth intensive strategy* that focuses on a smaller number of communities – perhaps as small as one. The intention among intensive strategies is to widely influence other communities through the power of their demonstration. Expansive strategies imply more brief engagement over shorter periods of time while intensive strategies imply lengthy involvement over the long haul. Indeed, it seems that within an intensive strategy, if involved for a truly long time, an outsider almost loses one’s identity as such and becomes more or less a member of the community. Their immersion is a confirmation of vocational commitments manifest in where they live and how they work.

Neither strategy is better than the other, but they are different. Playing the role of an external catalyst is an art and not a science. There is no one ‘right’ way to do it. Forming a particular coherent strategy depends upon aligning a range of factors within the local context. The big issue, I’d suggest, is consistency and transparency in making the alignment. To summarise my experience, the structure of a bare bones ‘minimal external stimulus’ of an expansive strategy working with several communities in near proximity (e.g., a district) might look like this:

- 1) An initial meeting with established local leaders in their home villages to discuss the idea of doing development based on local resources; a contextual discussion about expanding inclusiveness via gender and age in the planning and management; agreement (or not) to host a community planning event and clarifying preparation issues.
- 2) A two-day community-wide planning event that identifies key assets and creates local action plans based on the connection and utilisation of local resources.
- 3) Four quarterly community-wide ‘review’ meetings where progress reports are given, physical inspections are made, and everyone at the meeting is engaged in reflections about lessons learned; this is followed by preparation of action plans for the next quarter.
- 4) At least one district-wide meeting during the course of the year where representatives of communities and government officials come together to celebrate local accomplishments, share ideas about accelerating the process, and draw together lessons learned about bottom-up development.
- 5) Regular learning events (at least quarterly) for outsider catalysts to meet together, share their experience, reflect upon lessons learned, and make modifications for their next steps of interaction with local communities.

Since I have worked with several programmes along these lines over the years, I am always asked about long-term change within this ‘minimalist’ approach. Though short-term effects are modest, I believe them to be significant. While I have extensively studied many communities in the short-term (e.g., I followed activities in two Tanzanian villages through annual visits over a three-year period – the cases are available to those interested), I, too, am curious about long-term change. Now that ten years have passed, it would be valuable to visit those same two villages in Tanzania again (or some of the *kires* in Ethiopia) and learn what has happened since.

### ***How do outsiders learn to become catalysts?***

An environment for mutual learning is crucial. The environment (participants in attendance, location for site visits, a participatory format) is as important as the composition of topics to be considered. Since there is no one right way to be a catalyst, the more diversity of experience and perspective the better. When I have facilitated such events, I’ve structured time and participatory exercises around subjects that allow for a lot of interaction and group reflection. Contextual frameworks are provided primarily to stimulate conversation and creative thinking. Good topics and exercises for enabling outsiders to learn about catalytic action might include:

- how does change occur?
- what happens to a community when it focuses on assets? what happens to a community when it focuses on needs? how is the difference between the two informative to someone who desires to be a catalyst?
- site visits to successful examples of an ABCD approach.
- a review of various facilitation techniques; practical experience of using such techniques.
- designing engagement plans for catalytic action in the group members’ home situations.
- sharing and reflection (and creative critique and feedback from others).
- lessons learned about funding and leveraging external resources.
- what are the most appropriate ways for an outsider to enter a community? what is a genuine ‘invitation’ (and what isn’t)?
- what lessons have been learned about what an effective catalyst does and does not do?

In making this list, I realise that these are the ‘hot topics’ that I personally want to explore! Which is appropriate since learning is at its strongest when it is a shared experience and a lifetime pursuit. It does offer an insight, however, for designing any learning event: topics and exercises, etc., are tailored around the interests and questions of the particular people who have come together to learn.

### ***What lessons can be offered to intermediary organisations in the effective design and management of ABCD-oriented activities?***

For those of us who are working within an ABCD context, there is an inherent skepticism to interventions designed, managed, and controlled by organisations outside of a local community. Most have been fostered within a needs perspective and treat community residents like clients. Social service agencies, municipal governments, united ways, and various humanitarian organisations have sprung from this tradition and are susceptible to its perpetuation. In many

ways ABCD is an alternative defined over against this perspective. In the ‘south,’ non-governmental organisations (NGO) have emerged as a major presence in the social development landscape. While they are not the only form of intermediate organisations working in the field of community development, they are a dominant one.

Problems and criticisms are as easy to list for intermediary organisations in the ‘south’ as they are elsewhere. The project orientation of their work is usually short-term: it feeds upon problem identification and a quick fix. They are accountable primarily to donors, board of directors, or other external authorities – and not, in the first instance, to the people they serve. It is in their self-interest to remain problem-focused because it secures their own role as problem solvers. Many NGOs, accordingly, have begun to closely resemble businesses that hawk their wares (i.e., services), and in doing so provide ongoing employment for their professional staff. In regards to packaging their projects and programmes, there is a strong tendency to co-opt new sexy language (ABCD could easily become one) without substantially changing practices that perpetuate the professional-client relationship. As one recent book points out, many have turned the creative insights of ‘participation’ into a new tyranny. There are times when ‘lords of poverty’ isn’t much of an exaggeration.

Though it is easy to see a glass half empty, it is also possible to find and build upon the assets of NGOs and other intermediary organisations. Though actual practice may lag far behind the rhetoric that these groups commonly use about community-based development, many individuals within these organisations have a genuine vision to which they aspire. Through them, there is an opportunity for an ABCD faculty to enable wider institutional learning to occur.

Within any particular intermediary organisation, this means holding up a mirror and letting it reveal naked realities. The selection below is a ‘mirror’ that I held up to a programme in Zambia (see Box 6). It served as the central reference point for a two-day workshop with staff and senior management of the NGO. Admittedly, deep discussions in learning environments like this don’t immediately overcome complex contradictions. After all, the ‘mirror’ revealed structural flaws as well as issues in daily practice. But they can call forth new perspectives that encourage and enrich personal convictions. Besides altering practices in the present, it may also lead toward different ways of approaching community building in the future. A major challenge is to engage donors in a similar learning process for it is they who often have an extremely influential role in establishing overall frameworks. Publications and documentation of good examples of ‘building communities from the inside out’ is obviously another way that the dialogue can be intensified.

**Box 6: Mixed Messages**

The Programme of Support for Poverty Elimination (PROSPECT) in Zambia gives an example of an inadvertent gap between rhetoric and practice. This multi-million pound project is funded by the British government and implemented by CARE. Its objective is the alleviation of poverty and improved household livelihoods in the para-urban ‘slums’ of Lusaka through locally planned and initiated projects. Capacity building of community institutions is a central part of the entire programme and PRA techniques have been used throughout its operation. In the first instance, it is not a typical intervention with a focus on a particular sector but it does include provisions for funding infrastructure projects selected by the community. It is intended that local capacity building and organizational development should take place around these inputs. More often than not the infrastructure development desired by the community is an improvement in water supply.

Yet 'mixed signals' are caused by an emphasis on bottom-up development and local capacity-building on one hand and the completion of large infrastructure projects on the other. They lead to immense confusion and conflict in regards to community participation, ownership, and service. Community residents with whom PROSPECT works are told that they are the 'owners' of the water project but soon discover that the municipal water company is really the 'legal' owner while the community is merely the 'symbolic' owner. They are told that ongoing 'sustainable' development can only occur through local initiatives, and the labour spent on water construction should therefore be voluntary, but previous work within the programme's immediate predecessor (which was also implemented by CARE) was paid with 'food for work.' In planning implementation schedules and work plans, community residents discover conditions and externally imposed deadlines.

When such 'blended' approaches are employed (combining traditional 'blueprint' projects with open-ended 'process' programmes), even when the ultimate intention declared in programme documents is empowerment and local capacity building, 'external management' during the phases of project implementation, to one degree or another, is a very difficult problem to overcome. Handovers in ownership clearly imply transfers. People may be consulted and given a role to play in various phases of a project's life through actively seeking their participation in one form or another; this may include the use of PRA techniques. Ultimately, however, authority for such projects resides outside of the community and is largely governed by interests of external agencies. Though characterization of 'external management' may be seen as a harsh judgment by NGOs like CARE (especially within participatory capacity-building programmes like PROSPECT), introduction of major infrastructure projects greatly enhances the potential risks of externally determined objectives that must be fulfilled in one way or another. This external agenda greatly influences, or even drives, the process, regardless of how enlightened programme intentions may be.

What practical advice might be offered to intermediary organisations in the 'south?' A good approach begins with a good design. Good here essentially means 'consistent.' The gap between rhetoric and practice usually arises when a programme design attempts to 'blend' approaches. Historically, needs-based approaches have attempted to do things *for* people. There is a lot of discussion today about doing development *with* people. An asset-based approach emphasises development *by* people themselves. Blended approaches are a result of cut-and-paste efforts to marry together activities from two or more of these approaches. The primary contradiction for most community-based programmes, I believe, is one of *mixed messages*. Blending approaches creates a structural recipe that virtually ensures confusion. Good intermediary organisations strive to identify these contradictions and work very hard to alleviate mixed messages wherever they might creep in. Ultimately, this is where the integrity of an outside catalyst is truly at stake; this is also where an external catalyst is most vulnerable.

### ***Conclusion***

During the January meeting in Evanston, it was pointed out that focusing on detailed categories is an academic tendency to break things down into manageable parts. My reflections above have done just that. Being an effective catalyst, however, is an artful matter of aligning actions into a holistic, unified undertaking. May we all continue the journey of learning from each other about the effective orchestration of the whole.

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