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## **Asset-based and citizen-led development: Using a diffracted power lens to analyze the possibilities and challenges**

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### **Abstract**

Asset Based Community Development or Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development (ABCD) is being used in a range of development contexts. Some researchers have been quick to dismiss ABCD as part of the neoliberal project and an approach that perpetuates unequal power relations. This paper uses a diffracted power analysis to explore the possibilities associated with ABCD as well as the challenges. It focuses on the application of ABCD in the Philippines, Ethiopia and South Africa, and finds that ABCD can reverse internalized powerlessness, strengthen opportunities for collective endeavors and help to build local capacity for action.

### **Keywords**

Asset-based community development; Power; Collective action; Philippines; Ethiopia; South Africa

## **Asset-based and citizen-led development: Using a diffracted power lens to analyze the possibilities and challenges**

### **I Introduction**

Asset-based community development (ABCD) (or asset-based and citizen led development as it is also called) is an approach to community and economic development that starts with a community's existing assets. Whether these assets are tangible (such as land and physical buildings) or intangible (such as people's knowledge, interests and skills) they are the raw materials that community members can harness and build on. This is in distinct contrast to those community and economic development approaches that start by identifying the needs of a community and how these needs can best be addressed.<sup>1</sup> As much as anything, ABCD is a process of reframing a community in terms of the resources that are already at hand—with the intention of using these resources as the basis for collective action. ABCD can thus be considered as one of the strength-based approaches that can be found in a range of fields, including the strengths perspective in Social Work (e.g. Saleebey, 2008); positive psychology in Psychology (e.g. Seligman, 2004) and appreciative inquiry in Organizational Change (e.g. Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

There is growing interest in using ABCD in a range of development settings across the globe (e.g. Mathie and Cunningham, 2008). Some have been quick to align this growth with the spread of neoliberalism. The focus on existing resources and community-based activity is seen as justifying the withdrawal of state support, thereby offloading responsibility for social and economic issues onto individuals and communities, while also creating openings for market-based interventions (e.g. MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). In the strongest critiques, ABCD is seen as undermining possibilities for progressive social change because it is thought to maintain rather than challenge the current concentration of power in the hands of an economic and political elite (e.g. DeFilippis et al. 2010; Hyatt, 2011; Veltmeyer, 2011).

Others, however, are less ready to reject ABCD outright and ask whether this might be to overlook 'radical possibilities' (e.g. Burkett 2011, 574). To inquire into the possibilities, radical or otherwise, means suspending judgement and not presupposing the outcomes. This is the position we adopt in this paper. We take ABCD as an object of inquiry and adopt an open stance so we can explore how ABCD operates in practice, the types of outcomes that result and the possibilities that emerge.<sup>2</sup> Given that critics of ABCD are concerned with the power relations that characterize the contexts in which ABCD is used, we pay particular attention to the power dynamics that are at play. To do this we use a diffracted power lens

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<sup>1</sup> We have found that even approaches that attempt to be even-handed by using a SWOT analysis invariably focus on the weaknesses and threats.

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson (2015) adopts a similar approach in his investigation of cash payments in southern Africa.

that allows us to see power operating in relational and distributed terms (rather than only in the sovereign and unidirectional form foregrounded by critics).

The paper is not intended as a systematic evaluation or assessment of ABCD; instead, we are interested in exploring the possibilities of ABCD while also being attentive to its challenges. We use selected instances from our own experiences in the Philippines, Ethiopia and South Africa (supplemented by published materials) that provide insights into both the possibilities and challenges. We have used ABCD for close on several decades in a variety of contexts; however, the paper is not intended to be overly laudatory of ABCD. We are well aware of the concerns and criticisms that have been raised in the literature, as well as the challenges that are faced in the field. Our aim is to draw from our experiences to reflect on both the possibilities and challenges. We start by overviewing the principles and practices of ABCD, we then introduce the power analysis that we use and apply it to instances from the Philippines, Ethiopia and South Africa.

## **II Principles and practices of ABCD**

As outlined above, Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to working with communities that brings to the fore their assets and resources, rather than their needs and deficits. By making often undervalued assets more visible, it helps to encourage people to combine their strengths and resources, however few, as the starting point for development. ABCD can serve as an antidote for more conventional approaches that start with a community's needs and problems—and tend to produce a self-perception of inadequacy and a dependence on outside institutions and 'experts' for solutions. ABCD shifts the focus to the 'glass half full' and people's capacity to take action. Importantly, ABCD requires governments, NGOs and donors to rethink their own role; if citizens are to be agents of their own development it falls to external institutions to work with communities, sometimes in partnership or sometimes acting in response to citizen-led initiative. This means having to rethink the focus on predetermined deliverables and upward accountability mechanisms.

The ABCD acronym was coined by Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight to capture the ways that communities in the US had successfully organized themselves in the past, mobilizing local skills and capacities through informal and formal associations. From the stories that communities told them, Kretzmann and McKnight drew lessons for community organizing, as elaborated in their 1993 book *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (and extended through an ongoing series of workbooks published by the ABCD Institute). Emerging from the experience of North American civil rights and urban-based community organizing, Kretzmann and McKnight differentiated ABCD from Saul Alinsky's style of organizing, with its focus on demands for the equitable distribution of services. Instead, ABCD focuses first and foremost on organizing internally to mobilize existing resources, then leveraging external

resources to support the shift from consumer to producer (McKnight and Kretzman, 1995: 157), or from client to citizen (Mathie and Cunningham, 2008).

The work of Kretzmann and McKnight (and others) has codified ABCD as a deliberate process designed to encourage citizen agency, using the language of assets to generate activated subjects and collective actions. In community settings, the language of assets is introduced via informal techniques that draw out people's stories of past achievement and shed light on their strengths and assets. The door is opened to identify a range of capacities in the community from individual skills and attributes, to social connections evident in associational life, to the various natural, material, institutional and financial assets available. In the process of appreciative conversation more abstract assets such as voting power, linkages with relatives in faraway places, savings capacity, cultural values and various forms of leadership begin to emerge. An array of popular education tools and techniques have been developed to draw out and inventory these assets and opportunities for building on them (e.g. Cameron and Gibson, 2001; Cunningham, 2011; Gibson, 2010). The point of 'mapping' assets and strengths is to stimulate purposeful organizing; it is not an end in itself nor a means for outside organizations to extract information.

The shift of focus from needs to assets helps to prompt a momentary change in subjectivity. People begin to see themselves and others in a new light. For example, describing an exercise in documenting personal assets in a poor rural community in the Philippines, Cahill (2008: 299) writes:

We also conducted a survey ... in which 305 people documented the range of skills they used in everyday life. ... The project team used the survey as an opportunity to generate discussion about the abundance of capacities in the town. Exclamations such as "Really? I didn't know you could do that" and "Can you teach me how to do that?" were common during each survey session.

These 'Aha!' moments are characteristic of ABCD, and they are the moments in which an internalized sense of powerlessness is challenged as people reframe themselves as subjects capable of acting in concert with others. It is at this point that asset mobilization and collective action becomes the focus of attention. People are encouraged to organize around initiatives they can take on themselves—the so-called 'low hanging fruit.' Following this, more ambitious activities are tackled enlisting the support of others, including NGOs, and government and private sector actors. This involves a process of transforming the momentary subjectivity changes people experience into a more permanent commitment to a shift in subject position—from done to, to doer.

Repositioning people who are usually seen as 'objects' of development also impacts development workers who have reported how their habitual focus on problems distorts their

perspective. An Ethiopian fieldworker, for example, used to being the one to solve the problems of others, was struck by the new insights he gained by asking people about successful past experiences: ‘I have worked here for many years; I never knew about these accomplishments’ (Teshome, personal communication, 2003). In this recognition lies the ability of the fieldworker to respect community members as capable and active citizens rather than dependent clients of service delivery.

The uptake of ABCD in the Global North has emanated from the influence of the ABCD Institute based at Northwestern University, Illinois and its associate faculty. Since the late 1990s ABCD has spread internationally from the USA and Canada, to Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Europe. In the Global South, the focus of this paper, ABCD has been promoted for both social and economic development purposes by various organizations, including the Coady International Institute (e.g. Mathie and Cunningham, 2003; 2008). Taken as a whole, the use of ABCD is by no means uniform. For example, we have encountered well-meaning but ‘shallow’ applications in which assets are identified and built on, but in ways that result in short-lived and ‘feel-good’ initiatives that do little to change the circumstances of people’s lives nor challenge top-down service-delivery models. The instances that we discuss in this paper are indicative, we believe, of a deeper application of ABCD in which the language of assets generates shifts in subjectivity that pave the way for citizens to work together to take meaningful action. To explore how this takes place, we use a diffracted power analysis.

### **III A diffracted power lens**

In the development field, a number of authors have proposed that it is useful to disaggregate power relationships and distinguish between four types of power—power over, power to, power with and power within (Rowlands, 1997; VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). This distinction opens up a space for interrogating the range of power dynamics at play in applications of ABCD, not just the relationships that place power in the hands of a few.

‘Power over’ is the most commonly recognised form of power as it refers to the idea that power can be used to dominate and oppress others. In this framing, power is a finite and centralized resource owned and controlled by some and not others (Allen, 2003), as in the statement from a development studies handbook that the few ‘hold the levers of economic and political power and reap a disproportionate share of society’s productive resources’ (Parpart and Veltmeyer, 2011: 8). ‘Power over’ can be seen not only as the property of individuals or classes, but as wielded by institutions and ideologies, such as neoliberalism.

‘Power to’ refers to the productive or generative potential of power and the new possibilities

or actions that can be created without using relationships of domination. Rowlands (1997: 122) refers to this as ‘the power to create and participate in new forms of activity’. For Gaventa (2006: 24) this is ‘the capacity to act; to exercise agency and to realize the potential of rights, citizenship or voice’. This understanding of power is aligned with the Foucauldian view of power as a form of distributed agency.

‘Power with’ refers to the relationships and possibilities that can emerge when people collaborate. This is the power of solidarity that has long been activated in social movements ranging from unionism to feminism, but it is also found in small informal alliances. It can be mobilized both within and across differences, including those that are found in extended family groupings, and across class, caste, ethnic, gender, and age differences.

‘Power within’ refers to a person’s sense of their own capacity and self-worth. It is related to the productive sense of ‘power to’ that is activated when new subjectivities are aroused or produced.

In the following discussion we examine how various applications of ABCD activate forms of ‘power within’, ‘with’ and ‘to’, and potentially counter the more familiar dynamic of ‘power over’ associated with neoliberalism (see also Cahill, 2008).

#### **IV Analyzing ABCD using a diffracted power lens**

To explore how ABCD operates in practice, the types of outcomes that result and the possibilities that emerge we draw from instances in the Philippines, Ethiopia and South Africa. We provide an overview of the initiative and then discuss the forms of power that were mobilized as a result of the ABCD approach. This helps to reveal both the possibilities of ABCD as well as the challenges faced. We start with a discrete five-year project in the Philippines, then we discuss an NGO-based initiative that commenced in Ethiopia in 2003 but has become an ongoing approach, and finally we examine the more recent and widespread application of ABCD in South Africa. As identified in the introduction these three settings, of varying temporal and geographic scales, are selected from our own experiences for the purpose of exploring both the possibilities and challenges of ABCD.

##### *1 Philippines*

From 2003 to 2008, an ABCD approach was trialled as part of an academic-NGO-local government action research intervention in two poor rural communities in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> The Community Partnering Project aimed to foster economic development alternatives to the

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<sup>3</sup> The project was funded by the Australian Research Council (Grant No. LP0347118) and AusAID, Australia’s official development assistance agency, and included a research partnership with the Philippines-based NGO Unlad Kabayan Migrant Services Foundation Inc.

mainstream pathways that promote labor export and income earning through the return of remittances. The project was co-conceived as a response to increasing despair that, after more than a decade of trade liberalization and the decentralization of government that placed the onus for economic development onto Local Government Units (LGUs), poverty was not declining and regional inequalities were growing (Balisacan and Hill, 2003).

Pairs of paid village-based community researchers recommended by the municipalities of Jagna on the island of Bohol and Linamon on the island of Mindanao partnered with university researchers to work with community members to identify individual and community assets and then develop community-based enterprises based on these assets (Gibson et al., 2010; for more on this application of ABCD see Cameron and Gibson, 2001; 2005a; 2005b). Using an ABCD approach was particularly challenging in this context where the ‘dole-out mentality’ was rife. Previous community development initiatives had faltered but had instilled a strong sense that outsiders coming to ‘improve things’ were a prime target for some kind of hand-out. At project information sessions held in *barangays* (local hamlets that are the smallest unit of government) the research team was often met with demands—‘Fix our broken irrigation pipes!’—or derision—‘What can you possibly do for us?’ There were stories of an ill-fated goat breeding project where every family was given goats to care for and breed, but when it came to selling the goats there was no market, no abattoir, and little local desire for eating goat meat.

The village-based community researchers located members of economically marginalized sectors to work with, principally young mothers, part-time laborers, poor farmers and elderly women in Jagna, and out-of-work young people, young mothers and farming women in Linamon. These groups also had time and interest to participate in needs and asset mapping exercises, and the group discussions that followed. When the research team presented the findings of this exercise to local municipal councilors they were met with disbelief and scorn. One councilor chided ‘If we had all those skills and assets we wouldn’t be where we are [an impoverished fourth class municipality]’. Despite the disdain of some elected officials, whose power base depended on their reputation for patronage and to whom the idea that people had resources and capacities they could mobilize was something of a threat, LGU employees associated with the Departments of Agriculture and Labor were eager to assist with the incipient enterprise ideas that emerged from the asset mapping. Groups of interested community members formed around each enterprise idea. In some cases, the groups were based around pre-existing associations, such as the Laca Women’s Group, the Porters Multi-purpose Cooperative and the Small Farmers Coconut Growers Association. Other groups were made up of young mothers who were neighbors and relatives, and unemployed young people.

The ABCD process assisted the groups to engage in their own business R & D as a first step towards mobilizing their assets. Rather than relying on outside experts to tell them what to do, members travelled to other community-based enterprises to interview people about business planning, production processes and market strategies; they conducted their own market research within the municipality, seeking out reliable buyers and dependable raw material producers; they looked into the feasibility of labour and capital supply; and they took hard decisions about what to proceed with and what not. Through this process the group of port labourers with dreams of establishing a trucking business realized that their organization was not up to the task of such a complex operation. On the other hand, the group of young mothers found a ready market with the local schools for a set of graduation garments to be rented out each year and in their 'spare time' sewed a collection of gowns. The elderly women of Laca stepped out to the local market and interviewed stall holders to see if they would sell their *salabat* (ginger tea powder) and, once they had secured a sense of the demand, began production in earnest in the local *barangay* hall. These community enterprises drew on traditional practices of labour exchange, in-kind payment, volunteering and gifting to jump start their business. LGU officials helped with advice on packaging, quality control and networking with markets further afield (Cahill, 2008; Gibson et al., 2010).

Not all the enterprise initiatives were successful. In Jagna, the plan to manufacture and market *nata de coca* (a fermented coconut-based dessert) faltered when the group's organizational ability was not up to maintaining a production site and keeping the 'mother nata' alive. Their initial production site had been vandalized by unknown opponents in the village and this demoralized the group who did not have a pre-existing association to fall back on. In Linamon, the virgin coconut oil manufacturing enterprise run by out-of-work young people with assistance from some older women also faltered because of the limitations of the production site which did not have a reliable water supply, the high cost of the product and small local demand, but also because over time the young men gravitated to other interests. To some extent this initiative had been 'taken in' by regional authorities who aggressively promoted virgin coconut oil as a hot commodity. A more thorough supply chain analysis would have established that the group did not have the standard of equipment to manufacture edible oil and that there was no local market for the massage quality oil that they could manufacture.

In what ways did the ABCD process enacted by the Community Partnering Project enroll and challenge different forms of power? Certainly all participants reported an increased sense of their own agency (associated with both 'power to' and 'power within') and, in some cases, this translated into a willingness to challenge those who wielded 'power over' in the community. Members of the porters' organization took issue with a corrupt LGU official who was taking a cut of the cost of new ID tags demanded by the municipality. Women told of



challenging their husbands on issues relating to household finances, child rearing, reproduction and freedom of movement outside the home. Cahill even describes how one woman reported that her husband no longer hit her ‘because she had confronted him more confidently, knowing that she had more support and economic options outside the home’ (2008: 301).

The mobilizing force of ‘power with’ others is something that rural Filipinos are especially familiar with through longstanding traditions of communal work and care that constitute a rich source of economic resilience. What they were less familiar with was the power of working ‘with’ outsiders and government officials in collaborative and non-hierarchical ways. The experimental process of community enterprise development addressed this by harnessing a variety of actors and engendering horizontal relationships across the municipalities and beyond to the provincial level.

The Community Partnering Project demonstrated the capacity for people to mobilize their ‘power to’ diversify their local economy and begin to challenge mainstream development imaginaries and provide new ways of making a living. The Laca Ginger Tea Community Enterprise, for example, continues to generate enough income to supplement a group of elderly women’s mostly subsistence livelihoods, for example, enabling them to access health services. When demand for their tea increased, the women decided not to increase their own workload but invited other women to become part of the enterprise. This included targeting younger women who might otherwise be drawn to working overseas as domestic workers. The capacity for such small initiatives to be networked into a more resilient provincial economy can only happen with the support of government and non-government institutions. This occurred in Linamon Municipality, where the NGO Unlad Kabayan Migrant Services Ltd established a Social Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development Hub in an abandoned Agricultural Training College with assistance from the LGU. The community enterprises begun as part of the project have been supported to develop new facilities, change their focus in the face of challenges, and continue to grow and foster glimmers of a radical new way of harnessing local assets for citizen-led development. The pathway to building vibrant community economies in the uneven, unequal and highly liberalized economic landscape of the Philippines is still taking shape; yet from our experience, the method of ABCD can help unleash the different forms of power necessary for the collective enactment of a different economic future.

## *2 Ethiopia*

In Ethiopia ABCD was initially piloted in five communities in 2003 by the local NGO partners of Oxfam Canada, in collaboration with the Coady International Institute. In the early 2000s there had been a prevailing concern that little was being done to shift aid

dependency and disenfranchisement associated with repeated famines and the control that the Ethiopian state wields over the country through its centralized plans and delivery systems. Furthermore, land is under government control and in many parts of the country is being expropriated from communities to meet a growing demand from foreign corporate interests. Under such conditions, NGOs are interested in approaches to development that might reinforce local capacities and strengths, and help to diversify livelihood options. Oxfam Canada was willing to experiment with using ABCD, and its local NGO partners agreed. Remarkably, for the time, communities in five different regions agreed to work with them even though there was no promise of financial assistance.

Following training, NGO fieldworkers worked with community members to identify community assets and how these assets could be built on. ABCD groups formed to work on 'low hanging fruit' (i.e. initiatives they could undertake without external resourcing). This stage particularly highlighted the important role of existing formal and informal associations—the burial societies, and savings, credit and insurance groups that have long been traditional mechanisms for mutual support in Ethiopia. The 'leaky bucket' (a community economic analysis technique adapted by the Coady International Institute as part of their suite of ABCD tools) was used to examine inflows and expenditures out of the community as a way of identifying opportunities for increasing and diversifying income flows, decreasing expenditures and stimulating the multiplier effect of financial flows locally. This resulted in initiatives that ABCD groups and existing association could do themselves, ranging from negotiating with the local school to use land for potato production, to reclaiming land for use by landless young people, to pooling resources for purchasing pumps for irrigation. In some cases the most immediate result was the evaluation of household income and expenditures. As one woman recounted:

The change in our community is not complete but we are starting to get organized ... we sell our grain together through the cereal bank. We have a group of farmers trying a backyard composting system and no longer using chemical fertilizers, and many of us have changed our habits of spending and saving. We diversified our income through gardening and fattening our livestock. (cited in Cunningham, 2008: 272)

The next stage was to explore how this demonstrated organizing capacity could be matched with partnerships with external organizations. One community joined forces with other communities through their respective *Iddirs* (burial societies with pooled savings), pooled their labour, and secured the donation of bulldozing equipment from a private contractor and financial support from a local NGO and local government so they could build a road to help them access markets. Another community successfully completed a number of initiatives with their own resources. These initiatives included reviving traditional irrigation practices, blending these traditional practices with new techniques, using composting to reduce reliance

on chemical fertilizers, establishing a tree nursery, planting trees and building terraces to reduce erosion, and digging additional wells and boreholes. They then attempted a more ambitious dairy cooperative project involving almost 200 women who pooled their household milk production for selling to larger markets. The project secured resources from local and international NGOs, and local government (but was not successful, as we discuss below).

These roadbuilding and cooperative marketing activities required negotiation with government departments, a process that was often facilitated by the participating NGOs. Given that the civil society sector in Ethiopia is often treated with suspicion, these relationships were easier to secure when the community's plans aligned with government plans. Even when plans aligned, external linkages were often challenging. For example, the dairy cooperative project folded after several months. In retrospect it was evident that the speed and scale of development was being driven more by the concerns of the external agencies than by the community's capacity—as a result, the ABCD principles were being compromised (Peters, 2013: 22-23). This example highlights the importance of taking an organic approach to development in which the community's capacities drive the plans. On a more practical note, the experience has led to the formulation of a 'producer-led value chain' (Ghore, 2015), a popular education tool that can help farmers to better understand how their own production processes are linked into the value chain, and to organize themselves to negotiate more effectively with actors along the chain.

'Power with' is a recurring theme in this ABCD work in Ethiopia, especially given the traditions of mutual solidarity in local associations. The project evaluation (conducted by both an external and an internal evaluator) found that the ABCD process was linked to an increase not just in the number of associations but in the size of the associations. This was because the associations became more effective as they integrated ABCD into their activities (Peters, 2013). Yet, it is important to recognize that power imbalances are embedded here too and to query whether ABCD goes along with the status quo in communities rather than challenging social inequities such as gender inequality. Even though addressing gender inequality was not a specific focus of the process, the evaluation found that women's skills and contributions were highlighted throughout the process, and that women increased their level of participation in economic activities as a result. They had also claimed a stronger role in decision-making in the household as well as leadership of group activities. This suggests that even without an explicit gender orientation the ABCD approach helps to build women's sense of self confidence and their 'power within' and 'power to', while also making women's skills and contributions more visible to men.

While some of these gains are small and localized they are significant in so far as they demonstrate openings in the development landscape, and a changed conversation among development organizations in the country. Indeed, by 2013 there had been a moderate scale-out with the number of communities involved growing to over 24 as Oxfam Canada and its partners became more confident of the results (Mathie and Peters, 2014). More recently, other NGOs have adopted ABCD as a strategy for helping groups of farmers increase their productivity and capacity to negotiate in a growing market for commercial food crops. In this sense, ABCD is fostering economic ‘power with’ through collective enterprises that counter the individuation associated with neoliberal marketization. It is thereby helping to reverse the deepening of inequalities associated with globalization and mainstream economic growth, while at the same time it has led people to mobilize ‘power within’ to challenge the status quo of gender relations.

### *3 South Africa*

In South Africa, ABCD has become something of a buzzword (Peters, 2014). The ideas and practices of ABCD are seen as a means for rekindling the energy released in the struggle against apartheid and its aftermath. Post-apartheid there were high expectations that the standard of living would increase and that extreme levels of social and economic inequality would be reduced. People anticipated that change would come quickly, and that political freedom would equate with economic freedom. Twenty years after the end of apartheid there is frustration that the promise has not been realized. It is in this context that development actors have, over the last ten years, been drawn to ABCD. These actors include community development areas of government; universities with outreach programs; corporate social investment arms of businesses; and NGOs and foundations. What is perhaps unique in South Africa is the range of ways that ABCD is being deployed and how the various uses reflect features of the national setting. In what follows we offer just three instances to convey something of this intersection between the national context and the application of ABCD.

Ikhala Trust is a non-profit trust which provides micro-funding to small community-based organisations in the Eastern Cape region. Ikhala Trust funds initiatives that build on a community’s existing assets. The Trust distinguishes their ABCD approach from what it sees as the prevailing needs-based approach in South Africa that ‘treats vulnerable communities as passive recipients in need of help and fixing’ (Ikhala Trust, 2012: 2).<sup>4</sup> For Ikhala Trust, ABCD is consistent with two aspects of southern African history. First, by funding initiatives that build on the existing assets in the community, the trust invariably finds that community

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<sup>4</sup> Ikhala Trust has worked with Coady International Institute to run workshops and seminars on ABCD for community-based organisations and other non-profits.

members are involved on the basis of *Ubuntu*, which Bernie Dolley, Director of Ikhala Trust, describes as:

an age-old African ethic focusing on caring, respect, and compassion for others ... captured in the Zulu proverb *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which can be translated into English as “A person is only a person through interaction with others” (cited in Eliasov and Peters, 2014: 2).

The Trust’s view is that this tradition is being eroded by the ‘needs-based approach which has fostered the proliferation of “expert” service providers portraying themselves as best positioned to address community needs’ (Eliasov and Peters, 2014: 3). Second, the Trust locates ABCD in the lineage of progressive politics in South Africa. It identifies that ABCD is consistent with the way that many South Africans had to draw on their assets and resources during the apartheid period, and also how community members stepped forward to take action and build the mass movement that ended apartheid (Eliasov and Peters, 2014: 3). Thus for Ikhala Trust, ABCD is consistent with both long-standing cultural traditions and the more recent era of political activism.

A second feature of the South African context is the national system of cash payments which are currently received by over thirty per cent of the population (or more than sixteen million people) (Ferguson, 2015: 6).<sup>5</sup> Overwhelmingly the evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, is that the payments ‘work’ and have played ‘an absolutely vital role in sustaining poor households and communities and in preventing the worst sorts of destitution (10). Even though the payments are to individuals there is evidence that the payments are being used to foster livelihood strategies that are based on relationships of mutuality and reciprocity (*ibid*). Development actors in South Africa are recognizing how ABCD can be used to realise this ‘social’ as well as economic potential of the payments. For example, the Greater Rustenburg Community Foundation (GRCF) used the ‘leaky bucket’ tool as part of a process of mapping community assets. The foundation trialed the tool in the village of Mathopestat, a community of around 1,000 people in the north-west mining belt of South Africa. Around 80 community members attended (principally grandmothers and unemployed young people), and they quickly established that total household income in the community from grants alone was approximately 3.7 million Rand, and that an additional R 1 million came from the sale of livestock and wages earned. When it came to spending, participants estimated that around R 3.6 million was leaving the community and being spent in the City of Rustenburg, 60 kilometres away. Participants then worked through various examples, and calculated that R 210,450 was being spent on eggs in city supermarkets, R 150,875 on school uniforms, and a similar amount on alcohol, ‘even though most village residents knew how to raise chickens,

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<sup>5</sup> The payments are non-contributory meaning that they are paid irrespective of whether or not the recipient has previously contributed.

sew, and brew their own beer’ (Cunningham, 2011: 11). This exercise ‘created an “Aha!” moment when community members started thinking of ways to capture money leaking from their community and invest it into income-generating activities’ (*ibid*). One group of women were prompted to act almost immediately—one week after the workshop they started to pool their savings to purchase dairy goats to produce milk and cheese for sale in Rustenburg. Thus the ABCD process was used to help reframe cash payments as a social rather than individual resource. For similar reasons, the director of community development (CommDev) has been championing the integration of ABCD principles in South Africa’s Department of Social Development’s Sustainable Livelihoods Approach and its National Development Plan - Vision 2030 (Motsuenyane, 2013, 2014).

A third feature of the South African context is the emphasis that is placed on Corporate Social Investment (CSI). As of 2013, one percent of net profit after tax, and at least 75 per cent of CSR activity must benefit those South Africans who have been historically disadvantaged (US State Department, 2015: 17-18). There are, however, concerns about how CSI is practiced. Two colleagues from the CSI arm of Legalwise (a private insurance company) began to ask questions such as ‘Why are so many projects unsustainable? Why can’t we be more appreciative and responsive to what communities are already doing, and build on that? Are we really relevant? Are we causing more harm than good? Why don’t donors ever shut up and listen to their NGO partners, and they in turn to the communities they work with?’ (cited in Peters, 2014: 2). As a result they embarked on a partnership with an NGO to work directly with a community using an assets-based approach. What resulted was a joint effort to build a school library, and a process in which the corporation took a firm stance that their role was not to provide cash to simply build a library but to work alongside each partner (including the community) and for each to contribute the assets and resources that they could (Peters, 2014). This experience involved all the ups and downs of community organizing but confirmed for Legalwise the value of an ABCD approach, perhaps best captured in the words of one local school teacher:

“We can’t believe it, but we did it.” ... “It reminds us of the times we built the schools and we realize again that it is possible for us to do positive things together.” (cited in Peters, 2014: 6)

ABCD is now the foundation of Legalwise’s funding framework, a framework that they hope other corporations in South Africa will adopt.

For almost fifty years in South Africa, ‘power over’ was entrenched in a system of apartheid and it has left a legacy that cannot be broken overnight. The practice of ABCD at the community level is slow and challenging. But at the same time other forms of power co-existed with ‘power over’—groups of people exercised ‘power with’ others (especially through traditions such as *Ubuntu* and through political activism) and as a result found the

‘power to’ break the system of apartheid. It is these relations of power that development actors recognize as resonating with an ABCD approach. Of course, mobilizing these forms of power can be a difficult process. The Legalwise team had to insist that they were not providing a hand-out and that community members had to contribute what they could (usually in-kind labor). The Greater Rustenburg Community Foundation has adapted the ABCD process to incorporate discussions about how power operates within the communities that it works with. The process can be confronting for community members but in the Foundation’s view, it necessary for all to understand and even anticipate the roadblocks that projects might encounter (Nicolau and Delpont, 2015: 5).

## **V Conclusion**

The instances of ABCD discussed in this paper illustrate how ABCD harnesses ‘power within’ (by reversing internalized powerlessness), ‘power with’ (by strengthening opportunities for collective action) and ‘power to’ (by emphasizing and building local capacity for action). These horizontal and associational relations add up to new ways of addressing relations of ‘power over’ that are often associated with the contexts in which ABCD is being applied. There are, however, clear challenges faced by applications of ABCD. As shown in the Philippines case, the durability of community-based enterprise is linked to institutional support from municipal and provincial government. It is here that there can be resistance to newly activated and empowered citizens, especially in a context where ‘power over’ at the local level is wielded by vote buying and established lines of patronage. We have found that there are, however, progressive LGUs that are not threatened by the people power unleashed by ABCD and these have become champions of its application. In Ethiopia, we find that the power of government to set the development agenda is an important factor. While some communities have been able to secure support for projects that intersect with government agendas there is a risk that the pace of development desired by government runs counter to the pace of ABCD with its focus on citizen-led and collaborative forms of initiative. In the South African context, government is going some way towards establishing a fertile setting for ABCD, albeit that neither the current system of cash payments (and the very real possibility of a universal Basic Income Grant, as discussed by Ferguson, 2015) nor the CSI requirements are specifically designed with an assets-based approach in mind. We could say that there are opportunities for ABCD to coopt the policies of government. It seems that the bigger challenge for ABCD in South Africa comes from the legacy of the apartheid era and the high expectations that accompanied the post-apartheid era.

Rather than dismissing ABCD (and other asset-based approaches) out-of-hand, Burkett (2011: 574) proposes that they are ‘worthy of serious consideration’ so as not to overlook their ‘radical possibilities.’ What does our exploration of ABCD reveal about these possibilities? We find that ABCD is building on long-standing traditions and helping to

deepen opportunities for collective action. In all the instances discussed, ABCD provides not just a framework, but a practical process and a series of tools that harness the tradition of collective action for the contemporary challenges communities face. The collective action that results draws on a range of economic practices. In some instances, traditional practices of labour exchange, in-kind payment, volunteering and gifting are being put to use. In other instances, collective action is directed towards market-based activity. We find that markets are providing an avenue for collective forms of enterprise and entrepreneurialism. This raises the possibility that markets are not necessarily capitalist or neoliberal but are simply one mechanism for exchange that can be used for multiple purposes (see also Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). We also find that ABCD is not a replacement for government activity; rather, governments are being asked to play a pivotal but supporting role to help sustain the collective actions that are being initiated. This can involve a range of things, from providing strategic technical and knowledge support, to adjusting their own expectations to fit the pace and scale of community-led development, to introducing the types of policies that create a canvas on which communities can act creatively. This also applies to NGOs (including donors and foundations) who are likewise being asked to contribute as the supporters and partners of communities rather than leaders. For government and non-government institutions this implies a change in the direction of accountability; it is not just that communities have to be accountable to institutions, institutions are equally accountable to communities. Taken together, these findings imply radical possibilities for the role of communities, governments and NGOs in the community-led development pathway opened up by ABCD.

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