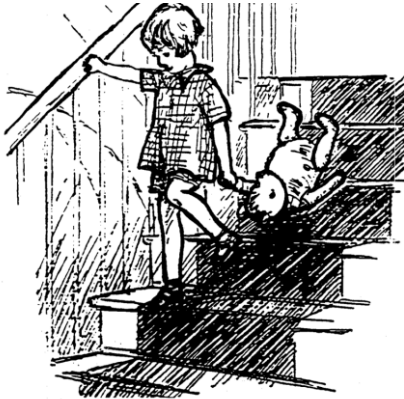


Asset Based Community Development



Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping a moment and think of it.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is an evidence-based approach developed on the basis of extensive global examination into what characterises a thriving community. This approach has proven particularly successful in communities experiencing marginalisation or disadvantage in breaking the cycles of poverty.

It has been shown that communities that are thriving have strong relationships and community dialogue that connects people with resources and is focused around what that community is most passionate about. Strong and thriving communities generate their own leadership and embrace diversity in a way that brings out the gifts and resources that otherwise may have been ignored or dismissed.

ABCD approaches have been successfully applied by some of the world's largest aid agencies such as World Vision in tackling all the effects of extreme poverty and corruption and also by small rural community centres in places like Australia working to combat youth unemployment. So no group, association, organisation or Church is too large or too small to apply this approach.

One of the great benefits of working from an asset based approach to community development is that it allows those most marginalised or voice-less in the community to move from the margins to the centre.

Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

Traditional community development has always started by looking at the needs of the local community. Professionals have asked what is wrong with this community and how can we work with the people to fix it. This approach has often looked like a cavalry of people and services marching in and providing programs and otherwise “doing good things” for a community.



Unfortunately what has often resulted from this approach is families, communities and neighbourhoods that are acutely aware of what is wrong with them, what labels apply to them, and what help they need. This approach has inadvertently fostered leaders and agencies who denigrate their own communities and who learn that the worse picture they paint of themselves the more outside support and money they will get. Marginalised people within these communities are seen as people needing to be fixed. The truth is that communities live up to their reputations. Community leaders and members internalise these negative images of themselves and begin acting like clients with nothing to contribute. This, of course, makes matters worse not better by deterring business investment in the community, breaking down neighbourhood trust and ensuring the community becomes less welcome and resilient.

This more traditional needs based approach has assumed that when people are poor or unemployed or otherwise marginalised then there must be something wrong with them and it's up to us to fill that gap. It fails to recognise that many communities' needs and issues are often symptomatic of a break down in a community's belief in their own wisdom, ability to make positive change or solve problems. The greatest experts on a community are not social workers or ministers or people with PhDs in community development but the people living in it. People are the best experts in their own lives.

The truth is that every community has unmet needs and problems but this is, at best, only half the story. While the glass is half empty is it also half full.

An asset based approach to community development begins by recognising what a community DOES have rather than what needs to be fixed. It helps communities to recognise where things are already working, to recognise their existing strengths, and to tell stories of past successes. ABCD helps people to understand that together they have what they need to build the future they want. This builds hope. ABCD works on the principle that to focus on the strengths, gifts, talents and assets of a community is far more likely to generate energy and inspire change than to focus on what is wrong and needs fixing.

The Role of the Church

To put this in spiritual terms it is about discerning where the Spirit of God is already at work bringing about reconciliation, restoration, healing and wholeness and drawing people's attention to this:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8

Churches can assist in this practice by facilitating processes that help communities to dream together about a preferred future. "What might this community look like if it were thriving?" By taking a "treasure hunt" mentality to the community and its people we are able to help the community see itself in a new light and support people to move from seeing themselves as 'clients' or 'consumers' of programs and services towards being co-designers and creators of a community. By forming strong and diverse networks and using the various tools in our toolkit we can support leaders in the community to see new ways of using and mobilising their assets, new ways of working together, and new possibilities for moving forward towards a preferred future. In this way we can be an instrument of hope.

Churches also understand the need to value people whose voices might otherwise be dismissed in our communities and to actively seek out these people and their contribution. Examples of unheard people groups might include People with a Disability, Indigenous Australians, New Migrants and Children. Taking an asset based approach to community development demands that we consider the gifts of every person who makes up our community and that we actively look for ways to promote contribution from those whose gifts may be more hidden. A thriving community is one in which every person's gifts are able to be given.

How do we DO this?

ABCD is primarily an ethos and approach to this work rather than a tool in itself. For this reason the ideas and principles will necessarily look and feel different in every community in reflection of that community's unique giftings. Having said that there are a number of steps used in many communities wanting to apply an asset based approach to development:

- **Focus.** Define the space you want to see enrichment. That may be a neighbourhood or some other natural section of community.
- **Finding Bright Spots:** ask for, listen to, and collect stories about your community's current and previous successes. Identify the capacities within the community that contributed to those successes.
- **Hosting the Vision:** organising a group who can articulate and hold the vision throughout the process and ensure everything keeps moving.
- **Asset Mapping:** write as completely a list as possible those people, organisations, associations and local institutions who can, and already are, contributing to the community.
- **Treasure Hunt:** Dig deep for those who might be less visible. Consider who may be voiceless or marginalised in the community and work at creating opportunities for their contribution.
- **Networking:** Show up and become a part of neighbourhood life. Bring together and building strong trusting relationships and connections with and among local "assets". Build relationships over mutually advantageous activities within the community.
- **Discover Passion:** Creating as many opportunities for people in the community to discover what they truly care about enough to act upon.
- **Develop a Community Plan:** using a wide range of community engagement tools draw on as broad as representation of community members as possible to build a community vision and plan. Start establishing achievable first steps.
- **Mobilise the Community's Assets** towards what they have articulated as their desirable future. Work out easy wins.
- **Leverage Outside Support** (eg. grants, activities, people) only in a way that provides greater equipping of people already in the community.