

Asset-Based Community Development in Urban Agriculture: experiences from the southern Philippines

In recent years, the Asset-Based Community Development Approach (ABCD) has been recognised as an innovative strategy for community-driven development in urban and rural areas and as an alternative to the traditional needs-based approach applied by national government agencies, NGOs, and institutions such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (O'Leary, 2007).

Usually, community development work starts with the process of identifying needs and gaps within the community, and in most cases, this list tends to be very long. The focus on the community's problems, however, conveys negative images of the community and the residents begin to accept these images as the only guide to the reality of their lives. As a result, communities often believe their situation can only be improved through outside assistance, and, thus, they remain passive. In contrast, the ABCD approach seeks to uncover and highlight the strengths within communities as a means for sustainable development. ABCD is applied for successful community building across continents and cultures ranging from neighbourhood development in Seattle (Diers, 2004) and youth work in Egypt (El Hadidy & Mathie, 2005) to micro-credit projects in India (Lee, 2004). The basic tenet is that, although there are both capacities and deficiencies in every community, a capacities-focused approach is more likely to empower the community and therefore mobilise citizens to create positive and meaningful change from

within (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The appeal of ABCD lies in its premise that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilising existing but often unrecognised assets, thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunities. In particular, ABCD draws attention to social assets: the gifts and talents of individuals, and the social relationships that fuel local associations and informal networks (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Focusing on the positive assets will help build the community and give residents hope and a positive view of themselves. It recognises that everyone in the community, including individuals, organisations and businesses, has skills, abilities, talents and experience that can be utilised to make their community a better place to live. Additionally, communities may have natural and physical resources. The process starts with what is present in the community and not what is problematic or absent. ABCD is a positive strategy, which sees the "glass" representing individuals and the community as half full rather than half empty, or, in other words, a place half full of residents with skills, capacities and gifts to give and share rather than a half-empty place of residents with needs or deficiencies that they expect to be filled from external sources (Central Coast Community Congress Working Party, 2003).

The following table summarises the basic differences between the traditional needs-based development approach and the capacity-focused ABCD approach:

Traditional Development (needs-based paradigm)	ABCD (capacity-focused paradigm)
<i>top-down approach and outside-in (solutions come from outside, dependent on agencies)</i>	<i>bottom-up approach and inside-out (solutions come from inside, community fabric is built)</i>
<i>focuses on needs, deficiencies, problems</i>	<i>focuses on capacities, assets, dreams, strengths</i>
<i>projects a negative mental map</i>	<i>projects an optimistic mental map</i>
<i>creates client mentality</i>	<i>fosters citizen participation</i>
<i>undermines local leadership</i>	<i>builds local leadership and confidence</i>
<i>creates dependency</i>	<i>enhances empowerment</i>
<i>divides community</i>	<i>builds connections</i>

THE CAGAYAN DE ORO EXPERIENCE

Urban agriculture related community projects using the ABCD approach have been introduced in the past four years to five urban poor communities and two elementary schools in Cagayan de Oro, Southern Philippines. These pilot projects were initiated following the completion of agronomic, health and socio-economic studies conducted in cooperation with universities and local government units from Europe and Southeast Asia (Holmer & Monse, 2006). Located on allotment and school gardens, the projects focus on ecological sanitation and basic hygiene practices in combination with health promotion, food security and environmental sustainability within the WHO frameworks "Healthy Cities" and "Health Promoting Schools & Communities".

The internal and external resources of the pilot communities were first defined and consequently utilised as follows: (1) Many of the urban poor have skills and knowledge related to farming, welding,

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Joint pig raising Mount Carmel Allotment Garden

carpentry, masonry and many other activities. However, these “assets” are often not fully harnessed due to the lack of access to resources such as land and appropriate technologies. During the setting up of the allotment gardens, these skilled members of the community became the driving force for change. Whole families were ploughing the fields, hauling materials, digging wells and constructing the necessary tool sheds, nurseries and ecosan toilets.

(2) Although Cagayan de Oro City is booming economically, many lots within its urban and periurban boundaries are still idle and unproductive. The local government representatives approached the private land owners to negotiate the temporary use of the lots for vegetable production by groups of urban poor. The landowners’ fear that their land would be illegally squatted was addressed by a memorandum of agreement signed by all stakeholders, which stipulated that the land would be used for agricultural purposes only. Conversely, this agreement also enabled the legal access of the urban poor to land for a specified period of time (Holmer et al., 2003). To further ensure security of tenure, a city ordinance is presently being finalised that will give tax breaks and other incentives to landowners who make their plots available for allotment gardens.

(3) Knowledge of integrated crop management practices, composting and ecological sanitation is available in scientific publications and presented during international conferences but is often not accessible

for poor communities. By linking the academic community with the local communities and the local government, this knowledge came into actual use and was further adapted and improved by the continuous exchange of experiences between the stakeholders (Guanzon & Holmer, 2003).

(4) Biodegradable solid and liquid wastes from the community households (including human wastes) can cause environmental and health hazards if treated inappropriately. With access to technologies such as composting and ecological sanitation these “misplaced resources” suddenly became assets since they can be used as nutrients and soil amendments to sustain and improve crop production.

Each allotment garden is therefore now equipped with a compost heap where biodegradable wastes from the garden as well as from the neighbouring households are composted, thus also contributing to the local government’s integrated solid waste management programme. Further, all gardens are equipped with so-called urine-diverting dehydration toilets (Holmer & Miso, 2006), which further contribute to improved sanitation in the community.

In summary, the urban agriculture activities in Cagayan de Oro using the ABCD approach stimulated the further strengthening and building of neighbourhoods by improving food supply, increasing income

as well as enhancing the community spirit of marginalised groups and enabling them to become reconnected to other sectors of society. The city government’s role was to facilitate the community organising including the formation of associations with corresponding constitutions and by-laws, while the academics shared their technical know-how and the community provided skills and labour. This approach contributed strongly to the local ownership of the project, which is in stark contrast to the traditional “dole-out” projects. These are still very popular in many parts of the Philippines, where poor communities receive goods and services from politicians in exchange for nothing, except, perhaps, their votes during the next election. However, most of these projects are only short-lived. The ABCD approach, thus, was initially something of a “culture shock” to some community members, but the sustainability of activities over a period of more than four years without outside financial assistance proved that it was the right way to go.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by the pilot projects in Cagayan de Oro, successful community development is asset-based, internally focused, and relationship-driven. Although some resources from outside the community are often needed, the key to lasting solutions comes from within. The gifts and skills of residents and the assets of the physical community should always be the starting point. Asset-based community development is about finding ways in which to create connections between gifted individuals. Making these connections and building relationships are the heart and soul of community building. Community-based gardening in particular offers an important niche in an increasingly urbanised world “by fostering care for the earth, nurturing human relationships, and supporting a vision of a liveable future” (Wang, 2006).

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