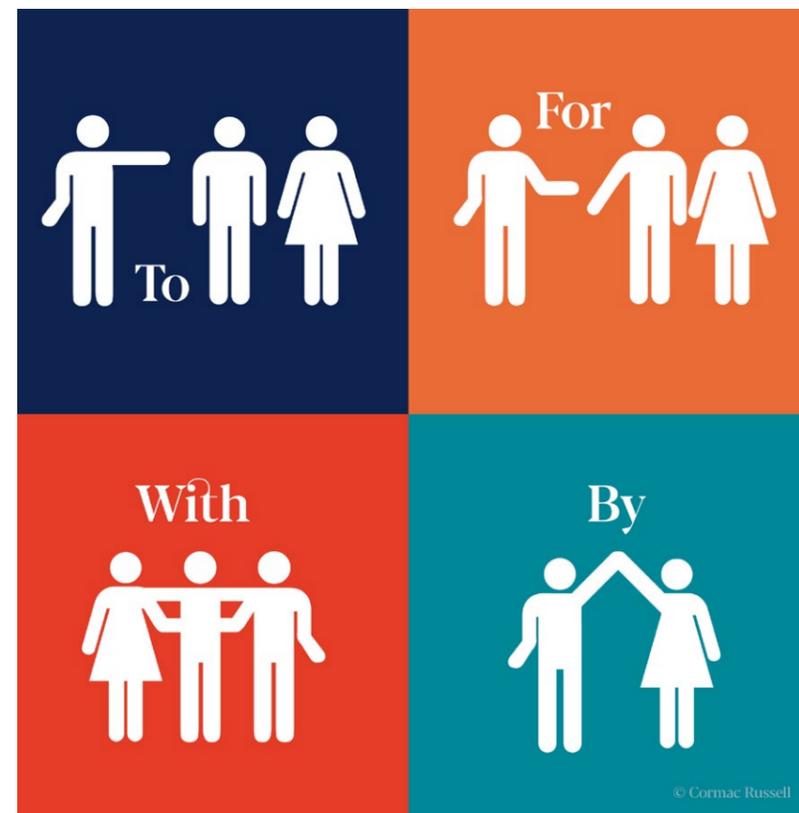


# From what's wrong to what's strong

A guide to community-driven development

*There are four main modes of social change: to, for, with, and by. While there is a place for all four within community and economic development, avoiding the pitfalls of traditional 'aid' requires a well-delineated approach. As the Managing Director of Nurture Development and a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at DePaul University, Cormac Russell is working to facilitate more effective and sustainable social change. The ABCD approach focuses primarily on the strengths and resources within a community, and not on what is wrong or on what outsiders can contribute; outside supports are mostly supplementary. ABCD and other strength-based approaches have been successfully applied around the world. Now, through a new platform – The Community Renewal Centre – practical support and training is available for those embarking on community-centred development.*



In a long-held adage, if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day; if you teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime. However, it is increasingly apparent that this paternalistic approach to 'help' is no longer fit for purpose, if it ever was. Fishing know-how does not support a person with no access to fish-stocked waters or whose waterways are polluted.

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in thinking away from (ideally) well-meaning, 'expert' outsiders imposing change on communities to one of community self-empowerment, where local stakeholders are the drivers of their own social, economic, environmental, and political change.

In general, there are four main modes of social change: to, for, with, and by. 'Doing to' involves imposed change that is coercive/directive and seeks to fix or cure; this approach can often be authoritarian and serving of the needs of distant agendas. 'Doing for' is less coercive, and is generally benevolent and well intentioned, but still sees 'professionals' and outsiders in the driving seat. 'Doing with' seeks change via more equal and reciprocal relationships between communities and outside players. Finally, 'doing by' makes communities the architects and drivers of their own change.

As the Managing Director of Nurture Development and a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University (Chicago), Cormac Russell and his colleagues are working to facilitate more effective social change where communities are in the driving

seat: 'done by the community'. While there is a place for all four modes within community development, avoiding the pitfalls of traditional 'aid', which both starts and ends with 'doing to' or 'doing for', requires a well-delineated approach. Russell argues that this approach can be likened to a three-lane swimming pool: the process starts with discovery of what communities can do using their own resources alone. Next, moving to the second lane, is the discovery of what communities can do with a little help from outside actors. Finally, in the third lane, communities gain real clarity about what they need from outside actors. Following this sequence is critical but is a rarity in the practice of institutional professionals. To address this, Russell and his colleagues advocate for an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach.

## ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

ABCD is a strength-based methodological framework with a focus on what is positive, not on what is wrong. Russell argues that, despite the overwhelming evidence that effective and sustainable change must start with identifying the capacities and abilities of individuals and communities, we as a society overwhelmingly focus on the negative, obsessing about what is perceived to be broken or problematic. The unintended consequences are felt around the world. People and communities are defined not by their strengths but by their weaknesses. Money intended to help those in need ultimately goes to those providing services to those in need rather than those living in poverty. Active citizenship and grassroots activity retreat into the background, feeling inadequate and unqualified by comparison with professional helpers. Communities labelled as deficient internalise that narrative and come to accept they can only be 'saved' by money and by professionals and programmes imposed from the outside.

Based on extensive research with communities around the world, there are six main assets or 'resources' that are critical for enhancing local wellbeing and facilitating genuine change:

- residents' skills and contributions
- local social networks



ABCD focuses on the capacities and abilities of individuals and communities instead of defining them by their weaknesses.

## ABCD is a strength-based methodological framework with a focus on what is positive, not on what is wrong.

- the resources of local institutions
- the physical and economic resources of local places (including both the built and natural environments)
- fiscal and non-fiscal exchanges
- stories that record culture, heritage, and customs.

The seven main methods by which communities can identify and connect local resources include:

- discovering what is there
- welcoming strangers
- making resources visible to all
- sharing learning, impact, and resources
- celebrating community efforts
- developing a vision for the future
- connecting community resources.

There are seven primary loci of change:

- enabling health
- assuring security
- stewarding ecology
- shaping local economies
- contributing to local food production
- raising children, and co-creating care.

Key to any process of effective change is evaluation; during ABCD, evaluation offers communities the chance to reflect and learn from their journey. Critically,

this process should not be seen as an audit; rather, it should be iterative and on-going, allowing mid-course correction where needed. Moreover, even if outside support is sought, the process should be owned by the community themselves.

A key aspect of ABCD is the shift in focus and starting point from 'deliverables' to 'discoverables'; that is, from top-down 'services', to locally driven, community-wide, socio-political solutions. This process aims to address the imbalance between service providers (ie, organisations, institutions) and the communities that consume those services. Instead of viewing communities as passive consumers, it recognises them as active producers: citizens.

### PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Russell's approach to community-led development has been applied around the world, reaching 36 countries over almost three decades. A critical aspect in all cases is the role played by community builders and local resident connectors – individuals who bring together and support the mobilisation of community-led action.



ABCD connects people to their communities, for example by sharing skills.

In Leeds (UK), the approach has been harnessed to address loneliness across the life course. Through work with communities, civic leaders, and community builders, the city has moved to a model whereby it does not simply build bridges to connect older people with services, but it builds bridges to connect older people with the centre of community life, with neighbours of all ages and interests. Russell highlights the case of Robin (76), a recently bereaved and grieving gentleman who, in discussion with a community-builder,

the local government, or even through community litter-picking, but instead by gathering community members to create a beached pirate ship from driftwood and other shoreline rubbish. The Black Pearl is now a focal point of the community, a draw to tourists, and the reason for the beach being cleaner than it has been in living memory.

In Rwanda, Russell has worked with the WellSpring Foundation and supported its projects with over 49 schools and 484 villages to grow community from the

## The Community Renewal Centre offers support and practical training for individuals and organisations embarking on community-centred development.

revealed a love of making walking sticks. Instead of simply being a sounding-board for his grief, the community-builder supported Robin to bring together a group of people, young and old, who shared his interest; the group now shares their sticks and other creations with the wider community. In short, Robin moved from being a service user to being an active citizen within his community, where his skills and strengths are an asset.

On the Wirral (again in the UK), a local artist and community-builder, tired of the litter plaguing local beaches, addressed the problem not through petitioning

inside out. Among various grassroots and community-led initiatives, one saw community members reconnected with street children. Through dialogue they learned that formal education was not the right path forward for many; rather, it was facilitating local vocational training that gave those children a chance to be citizens within their community. In another case, a community 'market' was created within a school, allowing underpaid teachers to continue their work without fear of financial hardship.

One of the most insidious outcomes of the decline in community-driven

interdependence is declining population health. Particularly in marginalised communities (be it economically, socially, culturally, or all three), there are strong links between social malaise and poor health. Russell suggests that the ABCD approach could help to address this issue, primarily by showing that individual health is a function of community health; he says, 'we don't have a health problem – or a social care problem, or a youth problem *per se*: we have a village problem'. Solutions begin with the discovery, connection and mobilisation of local formal and informal face-to-face associations, where the members do the work and lead the change in their local neighbourhoods.

### GLOBAL CHANGE FROM LOCAL SOLUTIONS

In an effort to advance the ABCD approach, Russell and his colleagues at Nurture Development have created a platform to support grassroots initiatives around the world. The Community Renewal Centre offers support and practical training for individuals and organisations embarking on community-centred development. It is their hope that they can reach commissioners from institutions around the world who genuinely want to advocate such change.

While the concept is simple, the journey is not. ABCD asks us to rekindle democracy and challenge deeply held prejudices ingrained in the collective psychology of many consumer societies. It asks us to cast aside the notion that economic hardship reflects personal failings, when in fact it reflects a rigid social structure that benefits some at the expense of others. It asks us to acknowledge that social change and community/individual wellbeing do not primarily depend on institutional or 'professional' interventions. It asks us to open our eyes to the power asymmetry between many service providers and those whom they serve. Russell asks us to redefine how we see the world. He asks us to imagine a world in which everybody who is defined as a problem secures the power to redefine the problem. He asks us to be the change we seek by creating space for others to be the change they seek.



# Behind the Research Cormac Russell

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## Research Objectives

Cormac Russell studies sustainable community and economic development to support professionals working in citizen space, and support residents to cocreate flourishing, healthy lives.

## Detail

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### Bio

Cormac Russell is MD of Nurture Development and a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute. He has worked in 35 countries, at all levels of society, facilitating the application of ABCD and other strengths-based approaches. He is the author of two books. His latest publication is: *Rekindling Democracy – A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space*.

### Collaborators

Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University, Chicago

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*Development - Redefined*

## Personal Response

**In the United Kingdom, David Cameron made much of his plan for a 'Big Society', but many felt this was simply a ruse to cut social services to the people who needed them most. How do you see the role of the State in community development?**

1. The State should not direct, displace, replace, or overwhelm community capabilities. Instead, institutions can create a supportive dome of protection around communities, within which community inventiveness and associational life can flourish. The challenge for institutions is to avoid appropriating functions that belong primarily to communities.
2. Community care has become systematically outsourced, commodified, and placed into institutional space, creating a narrative where the work of citizenship is seen as what happens after the important work of professionals is done. In order for professionals to help in a way that does no harm in citizen space, it is necessary that they step back enough that they help to reveal the abundance of communities, but not so far that they abandon or gaslight communities. Supportive institutions and the services they provide will always be needed. However, outside actors cannot know what is needed in citizen space until we all fully appreciate the abundance of what is there. In short, we cannot know what a community needs until we know what a community has.
3. Welfare must be understood as more than services and programmes.

These points do not preclude a functioning and properly funded welfare state (eg, healthcare, social care). Instead, they recognise the three domains from where welfare is produced: Kinship (personal, family, and community assets), Civic (democratic interface between civic efforts and institutional resources), and Institutional (goods, services and technology augmented through democratic processes).