Arts & Humanities | Cormac Russell

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.

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

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 unappreciated by comparison with professional helpers. Communities labelled as deficient them by their weaknesses. ABCD focuses on the capacities and abilities of individuals and communities instead of defining them by their weaknesses.

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

- 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.

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Behind the Research

Cormac Russell

Research Objectives

Cormac Russell studies sustainable community and economic development to support professionals working in citizen space, and support residents to co-create 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

References

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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 not 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).