

John McKnight Address to New Haven Foundation

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Terry Chatfield, Chairman, New Haven Foundation: Our speaker today has asked communities across the country a very intriguing question: "Neighborhood capacity....is the glass half empty or half full?" To help us examine how we look at and react to the neighborhoods in our region, let me introduce John McKnight. Mr. McKnight is director of Community Studies for the Center of Urban Affairs and Policy Research and professor of Communication Studies and Urban Affairs at Northwestern University. As both lecturer and consultant, he has shared his expertise in social service delivery policy and institutional racism with community groups. He has also researched and written widely in these fields. Please welcome Mr. McKnight.

John McKnight: That introduction is wonderful if untrue. I should really say that if I am a professor of something, it is of church basements, because we have spent most of our life with neighborhood organizations in city church basements where, it seems to me, we most frequently gather. So in that sense, if there is something we can share with you, it has to do with the view from the church basement. It's a view I suspect that many of you know about. I have a problem talking about "community", because it is one of those things that everybody knows about.

There is a Sufi story, incidentally, I love Sufi stories and this particular Sufi story starts as all Sufi stories do, with a moral. The moral of this story is that "you will only learn what you know." It takes place in the Middle East. And the story is this:

One little village heard that there was a very wise person in the next village, and they wanted to know what that person knew. So they invited her over to their village and when she arrived, she began by saying, "Do you know what I am going to tell you?" And everybody said, "No." And she said, "Well, you know, you will only learn what you already know. And if you don't know what I'm going to tell you then there is no use for me to speak." And she left.

They were very puzzled about this, talked it over, and invited her back.

And when she came again she said, "You know what I am going to tell you?" They all answered as one, "Yes!" And she said, "Then obviously there is no reason for me to speak." And they invited her back once again, have really figured it out.

They gathered in the village square, and when she said, "Do you know what I am going to tell you?" the people on one side of the square said, "Yes," just at the same time as the people on the other side of the square said, "No." So it's a chorus of "Yes's" and "No's." And she said, "Will the people on this side of the square who said yes tell the people on that side of the square who said no." And she left and didn't return. And that night a very wise woman had a dream and she came to the village the next morning and she said, "I know what she taught us, and that is, 'the ultimate wisdom is in community and not in expert.' And she left us very clearly with that understanding."

That's the understanding that I think you already know, but I think it is not the understanding upon which most leadership operates in relationship to neighborhoods that are thought of as being lower-income neighborhoods. I think that we don't think about the wisdom, the knowledge, and the capacity of community as being central resources in those places. We think of those communities as maybe "poor" or "minority" or "low income."

Let me tell you a story that may be similar to something you've seen. I have a sort of summer home in a little town in Wisconsin that has about 1,700 people. It had no town hall. And there is a group of men in the town called the Knights of Columbus. They decided to build a meeting hall. But they decided also to make this meeting hall the town hall and the community center. They were going to build it and meet in it occasionally, but they're giving it to our town.

One summer day I was walking by, and I saw four men building the community center. And I want to tell you about them. I won't tell you their last names for obvious reasons, but the first one who was up there building the community center is a man named John. And John is a drunk. He's an alcoholic; everybody in the town knows it. And the second person, who was up on the scaffold, is a guy named Jim. Jim left school after the eighth grade. And he says (he's about fifty- five now) he left because the teachers were too dumb to teach him. I think today he would be labeled developmentally disabled and sent away to some special school. But he just stayed in our town and all he could do now is just build the community center. The third person is a guy named Bill. Bill has dark days. So dark in his mind that he doesn't go to work, and I would imagine that those are dark days for his wife and children. And the fourth man is John, another John, and he has one leg. And these people, I see, are building our community center.

That's a kind of strange story, isn't it? Let me tell you the story again. The Knights of Columbus decided to build our community center. And, fortunately, among their number were four people who had the necessary skills: a guy named John,

who is a plumber; a guy named Jim, who is a carpenter; a guy named Bill, who is an electrician; and a guy named John, who is a roofer/tiler. I think you know this, that every community building that was ever built, and every community that was ever built, was built on the capacities of deficient people.

Every community is built on the gifts of needy people. Communities are built with the ability to use a hammer by a drunk. Every corporation is built on the capacities of inadequate people--ask any personnel director. Every university is built with a group of average fuzzy-minded people who become scholars. Every community has to face the question as to whether or not the focus of the community is going to be upon the capacities or the deficiencies, the skills or the needs.

Now, what has happened to lower-income and minority communities too often is that they have become the victims of those who insist that the important thing about them is their deficiencies and needs. Incidentally, I live in a fairly well-off community. One of the things I know from the people on the block is that, going up and down the block, I find all kinds of deficiencies and needs. I've got a lot of them myself. But we're powerful people in our neighborhood. Some neighborhoods are not so powerful. And a sign of a not-so-powerful neighborhood is that people from the outside have been able to tell people inside the neighborhood that the most important thing about them is their emptiness, their needs and deficiencies.

Look into your own life. Supposing I said to you, I'm going to give you a job. However, we're going to decide on your pay tomorrow. And I want you to go home tonight, and I want you to write down every psychological problem you have, every physical malady you have, every skill deficiency you have. And you bring me that list tomorrow, and the longer the list of things wrong with you is, the more money you'll get paid. That is obviously a perverse set of incentives that will make you feel inadequate even if you didn't before I gave you the message that you are going to find your cash flow tied to this look into your emptiness.

Singapore

Now, neighborhoods have been victimized by exactly the same process. Neighborhood folks have been asked to go around and count up their emptiness, count up their deficiencies, count up their problems. These are called "need surveys." And when you count up enough of them, and when you find enough emptiness, then you could cash that in for major resources. Think about what that would do in your life to you, think about what that would do to your community and its view of itself.

If we say—we that have real influence—"Will you count up your unreadiness, will you count up your drop-outedness, will you count up your early childedness, will you count up your unwalkingness? And if you count enough of that emptiness and bring it to us, we will give our money to somebody *not* in our neighborhood, someone who will come into your neighborhood and fill you up with the stuff you're missing."

We've reached the end of the line in terms of the utility of that way of proceeding. Is it true that every neighborhood and every individual has needs and emptiness? It is. Is it true that every individual and every neighborhood has capacities? It is. But the critical question from a policy perspective for our society at this time is whether or not we are going to develop policies and resource allocations that focus on capacities and capacity development or on deficiencies and needs meeting.

I think it is a perfectly unnatural act for neighborhood folks to go around and count up their needs. Would you do it yourself? How many evenings have you sat down and said, "I'm going to make a list of everything wrong with me." Do you know anybody who does that? Do you know any middle- or upper-middle-class neighborhoods that do that? It is a perfectly unnatural thing, this "needs survey" orientation. And it has been taught to people who aren't powerful enough to resist it.

There are five great teachers of deficiency to folks who don't have much power. And these teachers have to change their message. The first great teacher of neighborhood deficiency is universities. And I speak with pure, great expertise.

The second great teacher of deficiency in neighborhoods is government programs that trigger resources by asking you to count up what you aren't.

The third great teacher of deficiency is the United Way, which has the most advanced system of deficiency counting in the world. Highly complex.

The fourth messenger is many, but not all, philanthropies.

And the fifth great deficiency messenger is the mass media.

And each of these messengers of deficiency give messages to *two* audiences: One, to the middle- and upper-class public, but secondly, and with much more devastation, to the folks in the neighborhood who must be at the center of rebuilding the community if the community is ever going to be rebuilt. And they must be at the center; their capacities must be central; their commitments and belief in themselves are the only hope we ever have had any place at any time for any community to build. And it isn't until the capacities of people are recognized, honored, respected, and lifted up that outside resources make much difference. And I want to make very clear that I am not presenting a position that disbelieves in the value of outside resources. I know, on the other hand, the disvalue, the dysfunctionality of outside resources that insist that people focus on their needs and their deficiencies.

What is the other way? The other way, I believe, is to begin to have the great messengers think again about what they are doing, and to begin to say, "We do believe that every single person has a gift, has a capacity, has a skill." And the poverty that we have here is our inability to summon those people to make that gift that can be given. That's our poverty—our inability to develop our community so that everybody has a way to contribute. And therefore, our central focus should be what people have to contribute and an examination of what gets in the way of that contribution.

We, with a bundle of neighborhood organizations in Chicago, in order to try to send the message to the messengers, have developed a little document called "Mapping Community Capacity." And it is an effort to help people outside the neighborhood see what people inside the neighborhood know. And that is, what are the gifts, skills, and capacities that exist in every neighborhood and that must be honored, respected, and lifted up if our cities are to be renewed.

Let me remind you of something I think I know. Let me remind you of some of the *basic capacities* upon which the process of city rebuilding absolutely depends.

The first one is the capacities of individuals. We have done a series of interviews with people in neighborhoods, asking them what they can do. We put this into something called "a capacity inventory." And it is incredible what people can do. But that's not what they're asked. They're asked, "When did you drop out of school?" Nobody comes and says, "do you know how to paint? Have you ever taken care of an old person who is sick?" These capacities and gifts, connected to the market, are the first step in the redefinition of the possibilities of communities.

So, the first thing is, whenever anybody tells you about anybody who has a label that is deficiency oriented, say, "I want to hear about the other half. Okay, so she has a baby and she's sixteen, but does she sing? How well does she sing? Has she ever been involved in doing something that can be thought of as useful with her hands? How does she skate? Who does she talk to? Who has she ever taken care of? I know that there is something about her that is infinitely more important than her sixteen-year-old babiness, and from that something the future will be built; but from her sixteen-year-old babiness, I'm afraid not. Something may be done for her in a limited way as an individual in terms of what you count as her deficiencies, but her community will not be built that way. Her community will be built on the recognition of the gifts she has to offer and the mobilization of those gifts, and there is no way out from that truth. That is the way your community was built, your family was built, that's the way it always works."

The second major asset in every neighborhood is the capacities of citizens when they get together in groups, and every neighborhood has a lot of organizations, clubs, and associations. We did a study in a low-income neighborhood in Chicago in which we gave ourselves one month to find out how many groups and associations were in that neighborhood: one month, one graduate student. And she found in this neighborhood 941 organizations. Not agencies, not outposts and social services, not that. I'm talking about locally controlled citizen groups. About 500 that were not associated with churches and about 440 that were. Those are the central building blocks of our society and they are largely outside the game when the deficiency system moves in and replaces the capacities of citizens and associations with professionals and experts who say we will free you by filling *you* with *us*. America was not built that way. America was built on citizens in association, and every neighborhood has associations of all kinds. Those associations and their mobilization—rather than the extension into neighborhoods of service systems—are essential to the question of relocating power to those whose capacities must be mobilized from those who now hold the power because they are experts and outsiders. And incidentally, when I say associations, I mean, too, within that group, churches. They are central.

Other assets in every neighborhood include all the public wealth that is in neighborhoods but is used to maintain poverty rather than to release people into the economic main stream. Our welfare system and its currency definitions give about two thirds of all public money for low-income people to the social service and health systems, and one third of its money in cash income to people. It is the major piece of public money that is used for maintenance rather than for inclusion. And there are some wonderful initiatives that some women in some places who experience welfare are now making. Folks are beginning to say, "We will not accept your pre-allocations of two thirds of our money to professionals; we think we can figure out a better way that will get us into the mainstream."

The second piece of public wealth that too often maintains rather than mobilizes is the

public school money. And one of the reasons for that, I see in many neighborhoods, is that we have allowed the school to become a bank for children over in the corner.

Where you begin to see the community's assets mobilize, it is because some folks in the neighborhood have said to the school, "We ask not what the community can do for the school, rather here we ask what can the school do for the community." And when that question is asked, the school is understood as a community building asset rather than a twelve-year bank of young people.

The same is true of the capital budget money: it's spent *downtown* to mobilize economic investment, but it's spent in the neighborhoods to maintain sewers. But it can be turned into investment incentive in the poor neighborhoods of the United States as well. These are neighborhoods where the capital investment, where the school investment, and where the public welfare investment have been wildly distorted so that they are captured in a deficiency mode that maintains people in poverty. We have great potential if we think how our public wealth can be invested around the capacities and possibilities of folks in neighborhoods.

The last capacity that I wanted to denote, one that I have learned about in the last three years, is that every neighborhood is filled with hospitality. We now see in some neighborhoods that folks are willing to welcome people, to act as hosts welcoming people who have been sentenced to the world of human service, bringing them out of clienthood back into citizenship to be part of the community's life. The booklet describing neighborhoods doing that is called "The Gift of Hospitality." Most social service is a second-rate substitute for community and hospitality. What we don't know much about, but are beginning to see, is how the asset of hospitality can be activated and people brought back home whose labels have focused on their deficiencies but are now incorporated around their gifts.

We're working with a neighborhood organization in Chicago. A man there is called "developmentally disabled" and is surrounded by

nothing but social services. Some citizens, who are now initiating efforts to bring people home, bring them out of the exile of social services and into the fullness of contributing their gifts to the community, met with this man. And this man stands most of the time, doesn't speak, just stands. But they noticed one day that when a police car went by, he rushed to the front porch and stood there and smiled and waved his hands at the police car with the siren and the blue light. And they said, "He ought to be involved with our police--this man who doesn't speak, can't grunt, just stands." And they took him to the local police station in a tough Chicago neighborhood, a station right out of "Miami Vice," and they introduced Daniel to the captain of the local station.

They said, "Captain, this is Daniel, he loves the police." And the captain said, "Nah, nobody loves the police." They said, "No, Daniel does. Look, you can see him smile." And the captain said, "This is unusual." And he introduced him to the sergeant, and the sergeant introduced him to a vice detective named Joe. Joe felt a special affinity for Daniel. And Daniel sits right next to his desk in the station today. I asked the police officer, "What does Daniel do here?" and he said, "He makes us feel good. I hadn't felt this good any time before he came." We see now that the gift of hospitality is even in the police station, and the gift of people who got tagged around their deficiency can be lifted and their gifts recognized and cherished.

Did you know that most people in the human services are depressed and burned out? And the reason is because you can't live your life focused on people's deficiencies and not lose your own power, too. Every guard in a prison is always in a prison and, finally, is a prisoner.

We can see renewed hope when we once again focus on that which Americans know is the basis for the growth and expansion of our country. We did not start this country with institutions that were focused on people's deficiencies. We created, and Alexis de Tocqueville told us, associations that took people, no matter how limited, and mobilized their capacities and assets; gave them a framework for belief in themselves

and in their neighborhood, and then brought to them the resources from outside.

That's the way our country was built. That's the way our country can be rebuilt. We cannot build it on needs and deficiencies. We can build it on citizens. We don't need any more clients; we don't need any more consumers. We need citizens building communities based on their capacities, and public policy that focuses on issues of providing decent incomes, rather than the second-rate substitute—more services.

We need public policies to give incentives to our institutions to bring people into the mainline of society, to search out their gifts, to emphasize their gifts, to bring them in. That's what happened to me. When the war was over, the government said to universities and to the housing industry, "You know this guy John McKnight who is four years behind in his schooling? He's valuable to you. If you let him in, we'll pay the tuition and we'll give him some money to go, too." And the mainline institutions reached out to me, and brought me in. Now, they didn't say that the housing industry should take the risk of lending money to this poor guy, John McKnight, "If you'll lend him the money to buy a new house," they said, "we'll take the risk." And I

became valuable. Public policy, public wealth focused on institutions saying, "He's valuable. He has something to offer. Come on, pull him in."

The alternative, the grave mistake is the other way. We cannot say to the housing industry, "Don't pull him in. We'll build public housing here over in the corner." And if we won't give industry the incentive to pull him in for a job, what we do is set up endless training programs. And what we must say to Northwestern University is, "You have all those upper and middle class people around there, like Yale does; we're going to give you a big incentive to find the gifts and capacities of people who are on the edge of society."

We're not going to focus on deficiency; we're not going to create services; we're not going to create separate systems; we're not going to emphasize deficiency; we're going to change the message. And the message is the American message, that a society is built on the capacities of citizens. And that's the American dream that came true, and it can come true all over again. It's not so wild a dream. The reason I can say that is because I've told you what you already know. Thank you.

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Much of Professor McKnight's recent work on asset-based community development is captured in his co-authored book, Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets (1993), which has circulated through a broad range of community, government, business, nonprofit, and educational institutions in the United States and Canada. Articles Professor McKnight has written over the past two decades were published in The Careless Society (1995). Professor McKnight serves on the Board of Directors of numerous community organizations including the Gamaliel Foundation and The National Training and Information Center. Before joining Northwestern, Professor McKnight directed the Midwest office of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.