

AGENTS RATHER THAN PATIENTS – REALIZING THE POTENTIAL
FOR ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A Building and Social Housing Foundation consultation

St. George's House, Windsor Castle

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**ABCD AND THE ENABLING APPROACH:
COMPLIMENTARY STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

Address by

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Honourable Chairperson,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First I ask that you accept my deepest apology for not being able to address this consultation on its opening day. Yesterday I attended a ceremony at University College London at which I was granted an honorary doctorate of science degree. This was a high honour for me and one that I could not accept in absentia. The delay in attending this consultation only serves to heighten the satisfaction I feel in being with you here today, all the more so in light of the theme that has been chosen for this year's consultation - asset-based community development.

I must confess at the outset that this phrase is fairly new to me, and I am here as much to listen and learn as to deliver an address. It is my understanding that asset-based community development principles and practices are a positive approach to building and mobilizing the assets of individuals, citizen associations and local institutions. I further understand that these principles and practices derive from the work of John McKnight and John Kretzmann who visited thousands of communities across the United States in the past two decades. They identified neighborhoods that are "communities" in a true sense. These neighborhoods demonstrated that in every economic condition and among every race or ethnic culture the most successful communities concentrated on what they have, not on what they lack or "need." These communities focus first on local skills, talents and resources – or assets - of individuals, associations, and institutions – and later organize and mobilize those resources or assets to fulfill a community vision.

Community assets fall into five categories: individuals, local associations, local institutions, physical assets and local economy (including local business assets and local expenditures).

At the risk of restating that which is already known by all of you, asset-based community development – or ABCD - is a capacity building process in which people who live and work in the community play the central role in the development of a vision, the decisions made, raising the money and doing the work necessary to build their community. ABCD training inspires communities and groups to recognize that every individual in a community has something important and worthwhile to contribute to the good of their community and that these contributions can be mobilized along with resources of community groups, organizations, businesses, and government agencies to realize the common vision. Projects developed through the ABCD capacity building process have proven to be sustainable because ideas, strategies, and skills to implement projects derive from the communities themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When stated this way, asset-based community development is not completely new to me after all. UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, has been applying a related approach for the past fifteen years in countries all over the world. We call it the enabling approach, which was first described in the Global Strategy for Shelter to the year 2000 that was adopted by our Governing Council, prior to 1990, as part of our work programme for the coming decade.

The enabling strategy was next raised to the level of international policy in chapter 7 of Agenda 21, which emphasized the participation in the decision-making process by community groups, women, indigenous people, the elderly and people with disabilities. The enabling strategy was further elaborated in the Habitat Agenda, the main political document that emerged from the United Nations 1996 City Summit in Istanbul – a document that was signed by over 140 countries.

In the Habitat Agenda, Governments committed themselves to the strategy of enabling all key actors in the public, private and community sectors to play an effective role – at all levels – in human settlements and shelter development. A few of the ways in which this would occur are:

- Working in partnership with youth in order to develop and enhance effective skills and provide education and training to prepare youth for current and future decision-making roles and sustainable livelihoods;
- Promoting gender-sensitive institutional and legal frameworks and capacity-building at the national and local levels conducive to civic engagement and broad-based participation in human settlements development;
- Institutionalizing a participatory approach to sustainable human settlements development and management, based on a continuing dialogue among all actors involved in urban development;
- Promoting equal access to reliable information;
- Facilitating participation by tenants in the management of public and community-based housing.

Yet, I now see that asset-based community development goes beyond these commitments and objectives, which are normative devices to facilitate further community action. Allow me to suppose that asset-based community development seeks to uncover and highlight the strengths within communities as a means for sustainable development. The basic tenet of this approach 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 mobilize citizens to create positive and meaningful change from within.

This concept is not directly stated in the enabling approach, which seeks primarily to remove institutional barriers to civic engagement. Many of these barriers are, in fact, problems. Please correct me if my conception of the two strategies is incorrect, but I now see them as complementary. And, this is important for countries in the developing world.

Most of the Internet literature on asset-based community development comes from the United States, with some from Europe. Almost no examples of the ABCD approach refer to applications in developing countries. Why is this? I think it may be because developed countries normally have fewer institutional barriers to self-starting and self-correcting communities. All that is required is leadership, motivation and fortitude. Of course I oversimplify, but in many developing countries even the most basic assets can be withheld or taken away from those living in poverty – in slums, for example. Yes, the poor may eke out a livelihood in the informal society (but that may be taken away by an absentee land owner at a moment's notice) and they may have a large extended clan (some of whom may contract HIV/AIDS and require care that drains the remaining assets of the family).

Yet, there is nothing in these situations that refutes the principles of asset-based community development. The situation of the urban poor in developing countries just makes it harder for people to identify and hold on to their assets, so much so that they often do need outside help – at least in removing some of the very high barriers to community development.

While asset-based community development may be our strategic vision, an enabling approach that develops skills among individuals, helps build local institutions, assists in securing assets and improves the local economy may still be essential in many settings.

As we have learned over the past few decades, involving the community in its own development (i.e. using participatory approaches to empower community members) is critical for sustainability. The ABCD approach requires thinking about communities in an entirely new light. Communities can no longer be thought of as complex masses of needs and problems, but rather as diverse and potent webs of gifts and assets. Each community has a unique set of skills and capacities to channel for community development. But many communities are unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps without the good will of their governments and local authorities.

UN-HABITAT, which works through operational projects at the local level in almost half the countries of the world, has applied many community-based techniques for development. These are often preceded by negotiations with governments to remove barriers to the participation of individuals within their own communities. Take, for example, the legal prohibition for women to inherit and hold property in some societies. Just by removing this one obstacle, half the individuals in a community may be granted the possibility to own physical assets that might not otherwise be engaged for community purposes.

At this point, I admit to not having sufficient knowledge of the ABCD process to even imply that it may not be designed to deal with such institutional problems. What I wish to say is that strategies, in general, might better be described in terms that are less dichotomous than “asset-based” versus “problem-based.” I also understand that the asset-based community development process leads to problem identification and problem solution, but as viewed through the eyes of community residents working together.

UN-HABITAT would be comfortable with both the ABCD approach and the enabling approach. Perhaps that is because we are uniquely positioned to work directly with governments in looking for solutions that can be leveraged through policy and law. What is not often possible to accomplish through community action can be made possible with the help of the United Nations. And placing the shoe on the other foot, we are always pleased to learn from communities what solutions they believe should have the highest priority in our normative work with governments. After all we are all working for the benefit of civil society.

That is why we have adopted slum upgrading as our mission for the next 20 years. Slums are the most visible and extensive manifestation of urban poverty and they are comprised of many real communities. Here is where the asset-based community development strategy will fit best with our work. But, it will certainly help matters if we also work to establish secure tenure among the residents of a community and on helping governments become more open, transparent and accountable in their dealings with civil society.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

UN-HABITAT stands ready to learn from those that have successfully applied the asset-based community development approach. It is my hope that we can adapt it to our work in developing countries. UN-HABITAT is also prepared to help in the normative work of dislodging institutional impediments to asset-based community development. For this task we are always prepared to listen to what communities have to say about their own problems and needs.

I thank you for your attention.