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Our work is about revealing, connecting, and celebrating this invisible world where power is produced by citizens connected around their own vision.

In 1969, Northwestern University was forming an urban research center. I had graduated from that university in 1949 with a bachelor's degree. The university invited me to cofound their new research center even though my post-graduate work had been in neighborhood organizing and civil rights activism.

On arrival, I talked to the center’s 24 academics about their research. It was very impressive, but it also offended me because their work focused exclusively on the needs, problems, and dilemmas of people in neighborhoods. They showed no recognition of the capacities, strengths, and achievements of the local people with whom I’d been associated for years. This “half empty” focus seemed unscientific to me. It would be like a physician who knew about only the lower half of the body. Therefore, I decided that it would be good if we did some research about neighborhood people and their capacities, civic achievements, problem-solving abilities, and creative inventions. In exploring...
the “half full” of neighborhoods, I thought we could learn what citizens could produce and what supported their productive work. In this paper, and in ABCD’s work, we use citizen not as an indicator of a person’s legal status in relationship to a government, but rather as an indicator of a person with the power to both create a vision and to join with other people to make it real.

As we began this research effort, an incredibly creative community organizer, Jody Kretzmann, joined me. Together, we took a four-year learning journey. We visited about 20 cities and, together with some graduate assistants, we talked to more than 2,000 neighborhood people. We knocked on doors and asked, “Can you tell us what people who live on this block or neighborhood have done together that made things better?” We collected hundreds of their stories and analyzed them in terms of what neighbors had used when they made things better.

Our basic finding was that people drew from five neighborhood resources no matter what the story was about. We called those resources “assets,” and they were:

- The talents and capacities of the local residents
- Their voluntary clubs, groups, and associations
- Their local institutions—for profit, not-for-profit, and government
- The land and other physical assets
- The process of exchange—sharing, bartering, trading, buying, and selling

Based on this finding, we published a book called *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Neighborhood’s Assets*. The book describes what the five neighborhood assets are and shows how they can be identified and how they can be used through their connection.

After four years doing this research, we were happy to be finished with the project and to have published the book. We were ready to go on to something else. However, a change came into our lives. Very quickly there was a huge demand for the book and an overwhelming request for us to make presentations, conduct consultations, and do trainings. Because there were just two of us, we were turning down three or four groups every week. That seemed like a tremendous loss. However, we knew a lot of neighborhood practitioners who knew how...
to work in the world of assets and the citizen base of society. We invited 24 of these people to join us at the university for several days. We shared with them the core findings of our research, and it resonated with the work they were already doing. While only two of the attendees had doctoral degrees, the group decided to call themselves the Faculty of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. Since their formation, they have been the key actors in precipitating an international ABCD movement.

As we began, the faculty shared some basic premises. First, the center of our purpose is to enhance the power of citizens to be the producers of the future. Second, we can help people see that there are local community-building assets that they may not recognize. Third, the productive use of their assets depends on the connection of the local assets that are not connected. In addition, we came to see that there was a decision-making process in many neighborhoods that was unusually fruitful and usually unrecognized. It involved local residents asking three questions in this order:

1. Once we have identified all our neighborhood assets, how can we connect them in ways that will help us achieve our goals and become more powerful?
2. Now that we know what we can achieve with our own assets, what can we also do if some outside institutional support is added?
3. Once we know what we can do with our assets and the support of outside assets, what else will we need?

Most institutions tend to start with the third question, which is identified through a “needs survey.” These “needs” are conditions that institutions claim to fix or remedy. Therefore, they are the principle producers of the outcome. In this process the citizen is at the edge of the undertaking and is actually disempowered. Citizens are empowered when they decide what is to be done, how it will be done, and who will join them in doing it. Here, we bow to the insight of the great theorist of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville.

Today, many people believe that they can buy a good life.

In the context of citizen power, the response for institutions is not “Let us serve you” or “We can coproduce with you.” Rather, the response is, “How can we support you in ways that will enable you to be more powerful than you were when we started our relationship?”

So we began with these common premises. However, we had no plan. We dispersed throughout North America and manifested our common ABCD premises in the domains where we acted. In essence, ABCD happened because we did neighborhood research, summarized it in a workbook, experienced a tremendous demand for the book’s orientation, and we couldn’t meet that demand. ABCD emerged as the 24 local practitioners dispersed.

Today more than 125,000 copies of Building Communities from the Inside Out have been sold, and many have been given away. The faculty
has made thousands of contacts with groups throughout North America, and ABCD is cited in more than 80 books. We have received hundreds of unsolicited letters saying that the asset-based idea has created a paradigm shift that has changed individual and organizational thinking about community. The larger ABCD network organized four international conferences. By the time the second one was held, groups from 22 nations joined in. While we knew about 8 of them, the other 14 were a surprise. The conferences were self-organized and self-defined. This made us realize that we had precipitated a movement with no intention, no plan, no system, no management, no money, and no marketing.

So the question is, How did 24 practitioners and two guys in an office end up with this worldwide citizen manifestation? How did that happen when they didn’t create an organization, system, or institution in the normal sense of the word? Looking back, there are at least three reasons why we didn’t create an institution. Each has to do with the peculiarities of Jody Kretzmann and myself.

First, both of us hate management. We don’t want to manage anything, and we think of it as a method of moving away from community toward a technological society. Whenever management emerged as a possibility, we just didn’t do it. We believed it was not a part of the path we were walking.

Second, we never coded our language. We always stuck to the vernacular, which was the language of the neighborhoods where we worked. The mark of a professional is that he or she has a specialized coded language. However, people in neighborhoods know by stories while people in institutions know by studies and coded theories. Thus, our book and publications are in the vernacular, which frankly doesn’t fit well with the language of a university. However, if we had chosen to communicate in the language of the university, we would have had very little influence locally and a movement would not have emerged.

Third, we didn’t want to make any money from what we were doing because citizenship isn’t a market. It isn’t the world of money that motivates citizens to do their work. The money world is based upon scarcity and competition. The effective citizen world is based upon trust and collaboration.

At the same time, we have run into obstacles along the way—both institutional and cultural. Three institutional obstacles stand out: funders, governments, and universities. Funders usually wanted us to see things in terms of deficits and needs. They generally reward research that quantifies deficits. Governments were usually seeking to use asset-based citizen efforts for their own program purposes—not to enable or support more
powerful citizens. Universities live in a world of numbers and coded language that serves other institutions well but does not serve neighborhoods well.

There were at least three cultural obstacles as well. First is the intensive focus on leadership rather than “connectorship.” Every neighborhood story we heard was not mainly about a leader. Rather, the core was associated citizens precipitating connections that weren’t there before they acted. The second cultural obstacle is the ever-growing fear of the “other” manifested by so many people at the local, state, and national level. Collective action is difficult when everyone is a potentially dangerous stranger. The third cultural obstacle is the commodification of functions that once were performed by citizens in their communities. Today, many people believe they can buy a good life. This consumer conviction is an obstacle to understanding that we have the capacity to make a good life.

What did we learn in the last 25 years? First, we tried to analyze why ABCD spread in a movement-like form. We are unsure, but our speculation is that it happened because, without thinking about it, our work was simple, doable, and universal in its understanding of locality.

The second thing we learned is that if you think of yourself as being amid a movement, you think differently from if you think of yourself as being part of an institutional entity. Movement thinking understands that you are surrounded by hundreds or thousands of citizens who are connecting in their neighborhoods around untold visions, interests, concerns, and causes. Just because you can’t see these many citizens doesn’t mean they aren’t there. When they begin to cohere and manifest their convictions together, they become visible and we call them a movement.

The third thing we learned is that there is no substitute for face-to-face relationships if citizens are to achieve their goals in local places. A developing threat to this understanding is the idea that personal relationships between citizens can be replaced by computers. Face-to-face means that you are entering the world of the personal and intimate, which is exactly the opposite of the electronic world. Two people in contact electronically are literally out of “touch.” They can’t shake hands or feel whether you are trustworthy.

The fourth thing we learned is the most wonderful of all. There is an enormous untapped base of citizens who have incredible capacities. Universities live in a world of numbers and coded language that serves other institutions well but does not serve neighborhoods well.

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The fourth thing we learned is the most wonderful of all. There is an enormous untapped base of citizens who have incredible capacities. We know that if you go to a block and ask residents just four questions—what are your gifts, skills, passions, and knowledge that you are willing to teach, every single person can give you at least one response to each of the four questions. On average, they will give you three for each question. And over 90 percent will agree to share their capacities with neighbors and children on the block. This incredible pool of invisible citizen capacities is largely unused, to the great detriment of our current democracy.
Who is willing to call this talent forward? Which institution, what program, what funder? It is only the associational world that necessarily calls forth the local citizens’ capacity and powers as the means for engagement. Understanding how to make visible and support this amazing associational power may determine whether our democracy survives. ABCD has consistently endeavored to make visible the vital democratic center of America—its associations. As Tocqueville wrote, “In democratic countries, the science of associations is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress [associations] have made.”

Today, many people have been institutionally blinded to the associational form of citizen power. It is largely invisible in the world of institutions, markets, and media. However, it is this invisible world that has been the homeland of the people in the ABCD movement. We have been a part of a process that reveals the local power of a culture of contribution. Our work is about revealing, connecting, and celebrating this invisible world where power is produced by citizens connected around their own vision.

Finally, a few words from Jody Kretzmann, my great colleague in initiating ABCD. He has recently experienced a stroke, so his words are limited and yet profound. Speaking of walking the ABCD way, he said, “How would you be so you are aware of all the possibilities? Look for capacities in unexpected places. Be surprised. Welcome everyone. Invite them in. Move slowly and quietly. Be open to what’s there, and don’t be looking for something that isn’t there. Don’t look through conceptual glasses like a scholar. Never be a boss. Toss the ball to others and assume they have the gifts to run with it. Remember that a story is a neighborhood’s way of knowing. Finally, respect everyone as being like you.”

John McKnight is a professor emeritus at Northwestern University and Cofounder of the ABCD Institute at DePaul University. Building Communities from the Inside Out, a book coauthored with Jody Kretzmann, is the basic guide to an asset-based approach to community development.