

10 Inequalities, assets and local government – opportunities for democratic renewal posed by the global economic crisis

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According to John McKnight speaking in lectures and workshops across the north-west last year, 'you don't know what you need from the store until you've looked in your own backyard first'. This metaphor, which contrasts a consumerist approach to public sector services with one based on collective self determination and asset husbandry, is at the heart of McKnight's work at Northwestern University in Chicago over the past 35 years (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

McKnight was a close friend of the late Ivan Illich, whose critiques of the disempowering effect of conventional medical and educational practice in the 1960s was part of the intellectual cocktail of stimulants at that time (Illich 1975). McKnight and his group have been acknowledged by US President Barack Obama as having taught him more in the three years it took to become a community organiser in downtown Chicago than in his years of study at Harvard Law School. The language in Obama's speeches gives more than a clue, with its constant emphasis on 'we' rather than the usual politician's 'I' and the recurrent sense of bringing people together to solve problems collectively, rather than seeking nostrums from outside.

So what is Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), as expounded by the Chicago School, and why could it be central to re-energising democracy and public services after this year's general election, and at the same time creating a real opportunity of doing something about social and health inequalities?

We know from our own experience in this country that inequalities are entrenched and, if anything, are growing. We also know that despite a massive emphasis on public service solutions, there is a general disillusionment with local and national government and an alienation from our political representatives (Ashton 2000). There is a feeling that our institutions of government don't work and that the services they provide are nannying, paternalistic and unresponsive. On the other hand there is a sense that the public has unrealistic expectations of services which they are not prepared to pay for. McKnight's analysis points to the vicious conundrum which has been collusively created by treating the public as consumers, and politicians as infallible parents who have all the answers. Child-like

dependency and adolescent heckling are the inevitable outcome of such an unbalanced approach to resource allocation and the realisation of millions of individual and family aspirations.

'Red Tory' philosopher Philip Blond is receiving increasing attention for his views on the Welfare State. His argument, that it has disempowered working class people by taking away their ability to self-organise, strikes a chord with those familiar with the rich range of community assets such as the cooperatives, friendly societies, working men's clubs and the trades unions themselves which were part of the original infrastructure that created the Labour Party. By implication, the main beneficiaries of the white collar public sector have been the new middle class, who have left the remains of the industrial working class behind.

For McKnight, whose work has until now been little known on this side of the Atlantic, individuals and communities are always half full, not half empty. Everybody has gifts and talents, and in emasculating citizens from participation we not only score an own goal, but we squander massive amounts of energy and resource and fail to use public assets to the full.

McKnight's work sits alongside that of Robert Putman, whose book *Bowling Alone* is a bible for understanding social capital and which has itself been very influential in recent years, especially in North America (Putnam 2001).

A disciple of Saul Alinsky, the North American father of community development, McKnight's academic work began with the establishment of the ABCD Institute in the 1970s. The programme of teaching and the training of community organisers was based on 3,000 stories captured from household and neighbourhood interviews. These stories were derived from the answers to a single question: "Can you tell me what people who live in this neighbourhood have done together to make things better?" The result was a framework for mapping the assets of communities where change was possible, and a set of tools described in the best selling Community Development manual, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

All stories had five components:

- individual local residents with skills, abilities and assets (gifts) who believed that they could make a difference with regard to a particular issue
- small groups of individuals (active citizens) getting together (associations) to pool their gifts for the common cause (unpaid)
- groups of local people getting together to do something, but who are paid to do it (organisations, businesses, NGOs)
- physical assets and resources such as buildings, land and transport
- a process of exchange and facilitation linking the first 4 (connectors).

All the stories were about unconnected assets becoming connected.

From an Asset ABCD perspective, the critical community-building issue is how local residents and their associates produce a result – from consumer to producer. In the United States context, as well as in the UK, ‘participation’ or ‘collaboration’ usually means that the real producer is an agency or government. In ABCD, the agency or government has a supportive role.

On the recent visit to the north-west, McKnight illustrated the work of Asset Based Community Development with many stories, but the following were typical:

In answer to the question about what had happened recently to make a difference, a single mother of a teenage girl said that during one school holiday, and a couple of years before she had reached puberty, her daughter had begun going around with another girl. By the end of the holiday, both girls’ mothers were worried that their daughters were going off the rails. They decided to do something about it, and came up with a list of activities that they might pursue with their daughters in the next school holiday. Realising that, as working single mothers, it would be impracticable to pursue the list, they found several more mothers with the same predicament, and together came up with a solution whereby they could take it in turns to have the group of girls for a day. The outcome was a programme for the school holidays with several strands to it.

- A visit to an insurance office where the firm willingly put on talks about insurance, the business and the job opportunities. An interesting day’s outing, as a group had the bonus of prompting the girls to broaden their thoughts on their futures in the world of work beyond becoming pop singers.

- Contact was made with the local park keeper, who agreed to the use of a room in the park office for group sessions. These sessions brought in members of the local community with arts, crafts and music skills as volunteers to run sessions with the girls.
- A weekly project of community benefit included one in which the girls designed coats of arms for each household in the neighbourhood illustrating the families’ backgrounds and histories. These were then translated into flags which were hung on each house.

According to the witness, “by the end of the school holiday we had become a real community; the mothers had got to know each other; the girls had got to know each other and the mothers had got to know their daughters.” (and barely a professional in sight).

In another story (soon to be familiar?), the state schools were required to make 10 per cent budget cuts. One local school responded in the usual ‘soft touch’ manner by doing away with the music and arts teachers. The community responded by mapping the local assets and finding over a hundred volunteers with arts and music skills willing to become involved with the school. So successful was this initiative that the school has since become an acknowledged Centre of Excellence in these areas.

In this country, community development has had a chequered history, with an organisational and professional ownership that has moved around between adult education, housing, local government and regeneration. Most recently there has been interest from health. At a conference held in Salford in 2000, the focus was on answering the question, “What would it mean for the public sector to function in a community development style?” (Gowan 1999 and Ashton and Hobbs 2000) The public sector seems to have always found this difficult because of a deeply entrenched, paternalistic approach to delivery.

Politicians in particular can seem threatened by active citizens providing leadership in their own communities, either alone or in association. What McKnight’s work teaches us is that Community **organisation** in contrast with **development** can celebrate active citizenship and collaborative problem-solving to everybody’s benefit. The challenge is to place this approach at the heart of policy.

One of the constant challenges for ABCD is continually to build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local government and public sector organisations. Relationships are very important in ABCD for every person and group in the community.

Those relationships will always be based upon the strengths and capacities of the parties involved, never on the weaknesses and needs.

To support this approach, it is essential to have robust evaluations of projects and programmes. Public sector partners have a vital role to play in supporting and leading this evaluation. The outcomes have to meet the outputs and targets by which all organisations are measured. However, they must also meet the requirements of the community. ABCD gives an opportunity for local public sector partners to develop strong links with local universities to support ABCD, both in terms of research and of evaluation, alongside training and support for public sector organisations and community leaders.

For McKnight the starting point is a change of language.

From	deficits	To	assets
From	problems	To	opportunities
From	charity	To	investing in assets orientation
From	grants to agencies	To	investment and leverage
From	the good society = more services	To	the good society = less services
From	emphasis on agencies	To	emphasis on associations
From	a focus on individuals	To	unit of analysis of neighbourhood
From	maintaining clients (client = Greek for 'on your back')	To	development of citizens
From	fixing people	To	developing potential
From	programmes are the answer	To	citizens are the answer

A sense of déjà vu pervades us. In the lead up to the 1979 General Election, the Black Report on Inequalities in Health was published (Townsend and Davidson 1980). Thirty years later as Michael Marmot's report on inequalities is received, we look towards a general election in 2010 in which the old solutions will not be an option, whoever is in the driving seat. Thirty years of initiatives from both major parties of government have largely failed.

The tantalising vision and prospect is of a new settlement between individuals, communities and the public sector where co-production is a real possibility. The very fact of having well-developed public service systems in the UK, compared with the USA with its traditional suspicion of government, means that we are well-placed to deliver a different type of public service if it can be re-orientated to be enabler, connector and resource investigator.

Now is the time to honour the work of John McKnight and to give life to an idea whose time has come.

NOTE:

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Professor John McKnight to my thinking about public health and public services and Professor McKnight's comments on the draft of this article.

References and further reading

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