

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MYANMAR

Asset-Based Community Development in Myanmar: Theory, fit and practice

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Author Note

Disclaimer: I have been a voluntary advisor to the board of GraceWorks Myanmar since 2011, a relationship which began during prior research into the development approaches of INGOs in Myanmar (see Ware 2012). In this capacity I have been involved in the design, funding applications and training of the GraceWorks Community Development Education program described in Case Study 2 of this paper.

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Effective community development empowers the marginalised, powerless and poor to achieve better life outcomes and a higher level of wellbeing for themselves. This requires imagining their world differently and taking action to change their circumstances, implying a high level of participation and empowerment (Eyben, Kabeer, & Cornwall, 2008, p. 3).

Myanmar has been a highly complex and very restrictive socio-political context for poverty alleviation and development activity over the past two decades. Attempts to address the high levels of poverty in the country were frustrated by a government highly suspicious of the motivations of international agencies, by a domestic priority on security over poverty alleviation, and by strained international relations over human rights concerns¹, which resulted in economic sanctions and restrictive international assistance policies. Recent political reform is bringing very welcome change, however research conducted prior to this reform (Ware 2012) found highly participatory, community-led approaches to development to be effective forms of poverty mitigation and community empowerment even within this restrictive context. One of the more highly participatory approaches first researched then is now the focus of the discussion in this chapter.

This chapter explores the applicability and effectiveness of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) within this context, both theoretically and in practice. After this introduction, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the socio-political context of Myanmar within which the case studies of

¹ The Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly passed resolutions condemning human rights abuses in the country at every sitting from 1991/2 until recently. I would say that this issue of human rights violations and how it was being addressed was a central driver for the strained international relations and sanctions, whether we think they originated from an overly western perspective or otherwise. This is taken up in the background section.

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ABCD take place. The second section offers a brief overview of ABCD theory, from Nietzsche to Freire and Chambers, and then the literature on Asset Based Community Development itself. The third section examines the effectiveness of ABCD within this context by offering two case studies, the Action Aid Myanmar *Change Maker Fellowships Program*, and the GraceWorks Myanmar *Community Development Education* program (with which I am personally involved). The final section concludes with implications and lessons learned from the case studies.

Background: Myanmar context

Poverty is significant issue in Myanmar, and the poor in Myanmar suffer deep multidimensional poverty. According to the UNDP (2011), almost a third of the estimated 55-60 million population are multidimensionally poor, with forty-five per cent poor in at least one dimension and facing significant risk of multidimensional poverty. The UNDP report also finds that those who are multi-dimensionally poor in Myanmar typically suffer a particularly high intensity of multidimensional deprivation, with almost ten per cent of the population living in 'severe poverty'.

The most recent and thorough poverty data on the country, the *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar (2009-2010)* (IHLCA, 2011) concludes that twenty-six per cent of the population live in absolute poverty, unable to purchase the minimum food and non-food items required to maintain a basic calorie intake while continuing to subsist. As a result, thirty-nine per cent suffer moderate-severe malnutrition, while almost one in five have no access to healthcare, thirty per cent lack safe drinking water, and almost a quarter have no toilet or sanitation. More than half the population does not have more than a grade four education, with two-thirds having no access to secondary education. Economically, Myanmar is so far behind its neighbours that U Myint, chief economic advisor to the new president, has suggested that even if double-digit GDP

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growth could be sustained (which is unlikely based on the performance of other Asian economies), “it would take 39 years to catch up with the level of per capita GDP that Malaysia hopes to attain by 2020” (U Myint, 2010, p. 22).

The poverty and vulnerability of the people was highlighted in 2008 by Cyclone Nargis, which resulted in 140,000 deaths and caused "unprecedented destruction", affecting 2.4 million people across the Delta region of Myanmar (TCG, 2008). Nargis was only a category-3 storm, the same strength as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or Cyclone Yasi in northern Australia: Hurricane Katrina hit a more densely populated urban center with higher wind strength and a storm surge of similar magnitude and only killed 75 people, and Cyclone Yasi resulted in only one fatality.

International attempts to provide relief to this poverty have been frustrated over most of the last two decades by a combination of domestic and international restrictions. Poverty in Myanmar is the result of decades of isolation, poor governance, failed policies and inept bureaucracy, characterised by the personal power politics of authoritarian military-led regimes (Ware 2012). The military took control of the state five decades ago on the mantra of preventing the breakup of the union due to civil conflict, and preventing neo-colonial subjugation to a foreign power. Civil conflict continued in many parts of the country, largely unabated since Independence until the ceasefires of the last decade, and claiming an estimated million casualties—almost a third of all civil conflict casualties in Southeast Asia during that time (Steinberg, 2010). Foreign backing for these insurgencies, particularly during the Cold War, reinforced the idea of being surrounded by enemies and the danger of foreign domination, driving the polity of isolation and fuelling the fears of the political elite (Selth, 2008a). Thus when the new regime came to power in 1988, they again claimed they were saving the country from disintegration or foreign subjugation (Taylor, 2009).

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International ire against this new regime was kindled by their perceived close association with the massacre of thousands of civilian demonstrators in 1988, even though the massacre itself occurred immediately prior to their coup. The regime's ongoing authoritarian crackdown on dissent, culminating in the arrest of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1989, and failure to transfer power after legitimate democratic elections in 1990, turned international opinion strongly against them. Tough economic sanctions were then applied by many Western governments after an attempt on Suu Kyi's life and her re-arrest in 1995, and were only strengthened during the intervening years prior to the current political reform. The seriousness of international opprobrium is illustrated in that the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council passed resolutions condemning human rights violations in Myanmar at every sitting between 1991 and 2011.

The impact of the resultant international tension can also be highlighted by the standoff which occurred immediately after Cyclone Nargis. Apparently paralysed by the need to allow an international presence to assist with the emergency response, the regime delayed in responding to international offers until ASEAN intervened. In the meantime, the alarm the international community felt at the difficulty of obtaining permission to deliver aid and bring in expertise led to calls by numerous Western politicians and activists for an armed incursion into Burmese sovereign territory, to deliver aid under the *Responsibility to Protect* mandate (Selth, 2008a, 2008b). Neither domestic fear and restrictions, nor Western confrontation and conditionality, were helpful in alleviating the immediate needs of the poor victims.

International attempts to help alleviate poverty have thus been frustrated on the one hand by a government highly suspicious of the motivations of international agencies, and by domestic priority on security over poverty alleviation, and on the other hand by strained international relations which resulted in economic sanctions and restrictive international assistance policies.

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Anthropological research during this period suggested that the psychological impact of five decades of military rule on the wider population was an aversion to risk trying new things, and they people felt highly disempowered in decision making (Fink, 2000, 2001; Skidmore, 2003, 2005). Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) spoke of the people living under constant fear, leading, she suggested, to the poor having pronounced, learned helplessness and dependence. She argues that a chain of command culture trivialised people who did not enjoy formal positions, de-motivating initiative and independent self-help action.

This is exemplified by the response to protests such as the Saffron Revolution in 2007, so-called because it was led by large numbers of monks in robes. The campaign began as a series of peaceful protests through the streets, initially over price rises caused by the removal of a fuel subsidy, and it was led by the monks as they were thought to be relatively immune from military oppression. The 'revolution', however, failed, and large numbers of monks were disrobed, with an estimate of hundreds of protesters killed and thousands more arrested in the subsequent crackdown, accentuating a reversion to non-confrontation with authority.

It was particularly surprising, therefore, when my previous research found that INGOs widely reporting highly participatory, community-led approaches to development were particularly effective in Myanmar, even prior to the current political reform (Ware, 2012). With minimal government assistance, few civil society organisations beyond religious institutions, and little by way of international assistance, people apparently learned to depend on themselves and one another. Agencies reported that with deliberate planning and time dedicated to getting the process right, and through elite cooption to create a safe space and assist, the fear of risk and self-initiation could be overcome and self-reliance could turn into effective community leadership. This readiness for self-

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reliance was illustrated in the spontaneous emergence of civil-society assistance after Cyclone Nargis (CPCS, 2008). Buddhism, the dominant religion, has also taught people to be self-reliant.

This chapter examines in more detail one of the more highly participatory development approaches observed in Myanmar during this earlier research, Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). It explores the practice and reasons for effectiveness of the Action Aid Myanmar's highly effective *Fellowships* ABCD program, as well as GraceWorks Myanmar's *Community Development Education* program, with which I have subsequently become involved.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Theory

Highly participatory development based on empowerment has a long history within philosophy, sociology and development studies. Nietzsche's critique of modernist thought, for example, called for individuals and communities to be empowered such that people are able to reclaim ownership of their own futures; utilising their own strengths, resources and culture to move beyond oppression and deficiency (see Hipwell, 2009). Nietzsche's ideas of *active ethics* and the cultivation of the *will to power* are reflected, at least implicitly, in the rationale of ABCD.

Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), similarly argued that traditional processes of teaching in which a teacher transfers knowledge to students is both ineffective and a form of oppression. This, he suggests, is especially true in development, which assumes professionals from a more 'advanced' position provide solutions. Rather, Freire argues, learning should be a process of people rethinking their assumptions and acting upon their own ideas, more than of consuming the ideas of others. This paradigm has become a foundation underlying all participatory approaches to development, including ABCD. Freire's (1972, 1974) primary contribution is the concept of *conscientização*

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(Portuguese), translated as critical consciousness, conscientization, or awareness-raising, which refers to a process of facilitating people becoming aware of oppression, its sources, and the means available to them to do something about it. Education or development, then, should not revolve around the transmission of preselected knowledge but the facilitation of self-discovery of circumstances, and how to act upon the material situation and social structures.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Fals-Borda, 1987, 1991), and its subsequent incarnations as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), et cetera, have argued development professionals need to shift from being on 'on-top' to 'on-tap', emphasising they should approach their role with the values and disposition of facilitator rather than expert (Fals-Borda, 1987, 1991). Building on this foundation, Chambers (1983) conceptualised poverty as powerlessness due to marginalisation, rather than as a lack of income, assets, services or even knowledge. Highlighting the often inappropriate knowledge outsiders bring to development contexts, Chambers argued for a reversal in the management of development, transferring decision-making primarily into the hands of recipients.

ABCD is a coherent development approach which includes a set of participatory tools, built on the premise that recognition of strengths and assets is more likely to inspire positive action for change than is a primary focus on needs and problems. The significant innovation of ABCD beyond most participatory development practice is thus its focus on the appreciation and utilisation of otherwise unrecognised community assets, both tangible and social, as the primary resources for self-managing their own development, and reliance on community leadership, social networks and advocacy to bring about substantial change (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, 1997; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). It encourages active citizenship in both the sense of citizen-to-citizen ties and citizen-state relations, and thus

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involves working at the community level in two dimensions, one to create and seize contextual opportunities for sustainable development, and the other being to help people leverage outside assistance and claim the rights and entitlements of state and global citizenship.

In practice, ABCD therefore replaces professional development workers in the communities with individuals trained and willing to facilitate community processes. Such facilitators do not necessarily need the same level of education, status or access to finance as community development professionals. However, rather than replace them, facilitators network with development experts to the community relationally. Thus, the community is empowered to access their resources or the resources of others on an as-needed basis.

ABCD seeks to reignite hope and release an entrepreneurial imagination that empowers people to look for ways they can take control of their own futures, with outside workers acting as facilitators in a process of deliberate capacity building focussed on community processes and empowerment rather than largely being a conduit for financial assistance. "The appeal of ABCD lies in its premise that people in communities can organise to drive the development process themselves, by identifying and mobilising existing (but often unrecognised) assets, thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity" (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003, p. 474).

This community development strategy starts with what is present in the community: the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area—not with what is absent, or with what is problematic, or with what the community needs. . . . The development strategy concentrates first upon the agenda building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, local associations, and local institutions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 9).

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The application of ABCD therefore commences with either the training of local community members to function as facilitators – or a period of relationship building by a trained outside facilitator – followed by the development of community processes and planning in which assets are identified, a new story of the community is formulated, and new community skills and relationships are developed (Ennis & West, 2010). This involves both internal-focussed community work (such as asset mapping and developing community processes), as well as external-focussed activities (such as understanding and entering into dialogue with political, economic, cultural, and legal structures).

The greatest criticisms of ABCD are made when the focus on internal assets obstructs impact upon the external structures affecting communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). This is an easy imbalance to slip into in practice, given the distinctive focus of ABCD is on reliance upon previously unrecognised tangible and social community assets. However, the focus on assets is to combat a deficit and dependency mindset, and is only the first step of effective *conscientização*. Successful ABCD thus involves both efficient application of local assets to address local needs, as well as active citizenship, advocacy and engagement with authorities and others, to bring additional resources to the community and create change in oppressive structures.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Action Aid's 'Change Maker' Fellowships Program

Program Description.

The Action Aid '*Change Maker*' *Fellowships Program* is the largest ABCD program in Myanmar. It commenced in 2006, in partnership with local NGOs Metta and Shalom (Nyein) Foundation. Based on early successes, the program was quickly expanded to now

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have numerous local partner organisations, and more than six hundred young 'agents of change' supported to work full-time in communities.

As with many highly participatory development programs in Myanmar, the '*Change Maker' Fellowships* program has both local grass-roots development and broader democratisation goals. It seeks to both stimulate positive change at the local level through ABCD, based on the communities' priorities and resources, as well as contribute to broader macro change through community empowerment in their contact with government agencies and by developing the potential of idealistic and passionate educated young people (ActionAid, 2010).

Fellows are recruited by local partner organisations through their direct contact with communities. Most commonly, an advocate from a local partner facilitates an open community meeting, explains the program and invites the community to nominate suitable young people to receive intensive training with Action Aid. Nominated fellows must be under twenty-five years of age, and have commonly completed a tertiary degree. Many graduates in Myanmar don't have good employment opportunities in the narrow and poorly-developed economy, and a good number return home after completing tertiary studies. However, given almost two-thirds of the rural population do not have more than a grade four education (IHLCA, 2011), these tertiary-educated young people are a potentially powerful force for community empowerment despite their youth.

Fellows are recruited for a two-year placement, and are commonly placed in their own village area or are at least sent back to their own region and ethnicity. Thus, despite their youth, they start with a measure of credibility and program understanding by their communities. Action Aid provides a month of intensive training to the fellows, which includes training in participatory development tools as well as personal development before they are sent back to facilitate participatory processes in the community for two years

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(Ferretti, 2010; Löfving, 2011). Fellows are provided a minimal support salary and little additional financial resource, but are given personal support through networking with other fellows and intermittent ongoing training opportunities.

The program then “[throws] the fellows in at the deep end ... [providing] fellows with tools and capacities to mobilize people, but with no blueprint on how mobilization should proceed” (Ferretti, 2010 p.2). Described as a learning program, focus is on building the capacity of the fellows and not on prescribing change. Given freedom in the tools and types of activities they initiate, they most commonly commence by facilitating some of a range of self-help groups with interested community members, ranging from savings and loans groups, to literacy groups, to rice banks. Only after they have built credibility do they seek to form and train village-level community development organisations to take responsibility for the planning and implementation of projects and processes. Over time, fellows then seek to establish community based organisations (CBOs) out of these committees. This is an express goal of the program.

Action Aid emphasise rights and advocacy in their training, together with personal development for the fellows. Fellows report that one of the biggest challenges is to change attitudes about the authorities, to convince themselves and communities that engagement through non-confrontational strategies is possible (Ferretti, 2010). Such engagement involves adopting methods often referred to as ‘elite co-option’, noting that even when their vested interests may lie elsewhere, constructing “persuasive narrative around notions of joint gains” rather than by attempting to blame or shame, can result in officials becoming involved in “constructive dialogue about the nature, causes of and solutions to poverty in ways that will maximise their empathy and engagement with the issue, and minimise the danger that they will feel railroaded into responding” (Hossain & Moore 2002 pp.5, 10). One of the most oft-reported outcomes at fellows’ conferences, and the most surprising outcome for most new

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fellows, is their increased confidence to engage with authorities in this manner (Ferretti, 2010; Löfving, 2011). While initial suspicion of the fellows has at times resulted in threats, even arrests, and while describing engagement with state actors as a long and complex process, a real strength of the program is this extent to which it has successfully engaged the structures affecting communities.

Fellows usually start by promoting community action around tangible areas such as health, education, livelihoods, and developing an environment of cooperation and social cohesion, through the self-help groups as above and by use of participatory development activities with those open to work with them. Later, as they develop a track record, they shift the focus more to development of community-wide inclusive participatory decision-making structures, and community engagement with state and non-state actors to obtain the space and resources required for larger-scale development activities:

The programme views communities as inherently resourceful and capable of identifying their own needs, formulating ideas and initiating and leading processes of change. ... [It] seeks to inspire communities to realize their development aspirations through advocating to and forging linkages with state and non-state actors. ...

Underpinning [the program] are the complementary concepts of *self-reliance* and *empowerment*. (Löfving, 2011, p. 2)

Where support is achieved from government officials, this most often comes from seeking assistance after the community has demonstrated how much they have already achieved on their own (Ferretti, 2010). Communities that could demonstrate a self-reliant approach, that were well organised, and which had a long term plan for their village were more likely to have their requests taken more seriously by officials and other external actors (Löfving, 2011).

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Fellows are seen as catalysts for change, as opposed to field staff, and work alongside local village volunteers. It promotes a model of low cost interventions that emphasise self-reliance. It makes a "conscious investment in the long term empowerment of communities ... the processes of community led development are anticipated to extend far beyond the duration of the program itself" (Löfving, 2011, p. 2).

Effectiveness.

Yeneabat & Butterfield [ENREF 22](#)(2012) propose evaluating the effectiveness of ABCD programs against 5 key building blocks of the ABCD approach, namely: effectively *mapping the capacities and assets* of individuals, citizen associations, and local institutions; *convening a broadly representative community group* who plan and build community vision; building relationships for mutually beneficial problem solving within the community; *mobilising the community's assets* for information sharing and economic development; and, *leveraging activities, resources, and investments* from outside the community to support locally defined development. On this set of criteria, these ABCD programs have proven highly effective in Myanmar.

External evaluations of the program find that that almost all communities develop a representative committee within the life of the 2-year fellow's presence, and the mobilisation of local assets plus those from outside the community has results in very impressive outcomes (Löfving, 2011). They had 160 fellows in communities by their first national fellows' conference in January 2011, when they compiled reported outcomes to that point. In the education sector, results included the opening of 40 early childhood centres, the construction of schools in 30 villages (with a mix of government and non-government funding), local community members providing voluntary teaching in 30 underfunded primary schools, 22 villages negotiating for government-paid teachers, and over 1,600 people in adult literacy groups. Health and sanitation outcomes included 77 wells in 33 villages, well

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cleaning in another 50 villages, 45 ponds constructed in 26 villages, 1,500 new toilets across 75 villages, health clinics built and staffed in 11 villages, vaccination programs in 44 villages, and 19 villages obtaining health workers, with another 27 villages negotiating new mobile health services from other NGOs. Similar outcomes were seen in the livelihood sector, with, 152 savings and loans groups established, plus 60 rice banks and many other self-help groups supporting livestock, farming, and so on. These outcomes are based on facilitators self-reporting of their achievements to external evaluators, and have not been verified in the communities, but they are nonetheless significant.

These results are significant across a broad range of sectors, particularly given the minimal level of funding supplied by the international agency and the youthfulness and relative lack of training of the fellows. Also significant is the impact of this ABCD on the external structures affecting communities, through the use of community social assets to co-opt officials, government agencies, or sometimes other NGOs. Based on the significance of these outcomes, Action Aid have subsequently almost quadrupled the number of fellows in this program since the January 2011 conference.

Case Study 2: GraceWorks Myanmar's Community Development Education program

Program Description.

Developed independently, GraceWorks Myanmar's *Community Development Education (CDE)* program is remarkably similar to the Action Aid program in aims and approach. The CDE program seeks to empower local communities to pro-actively organise, make decisions and implement their own development according to priorities they determine, starting with effective utilisation of their own assets and resources, then moving quickly to leverage this through engagement with officials and other outside assistance.

A primary difference between the GraceWorks and Action Aid programs is that GraceWorks sets no age or educational criteria in the recruitment of facilitators. GraceWorks

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likewise recruits facilitators via local partner organisations, but the criteria are focussed on motivation and personal attributes. As a result GraceWorks' facilitators are, on average, considerably older and less well-educated than those of Action Aid. Based on the dynamics of their partner organisations, CDE facilitators are also noted to more often have been recruited from outside the communities they work within. Who the facilitators are in relation to the community, and how they relate to local community members, is therefore significantly different. Bringing a good deal more life experience and social status with them, GraceWorks facilitators can sometimes quickly gain acceptance and influence with community leaders and local authorities. However, the older they are and more status they bring, the more easily they defaulting back to an outside expert role, and they may also be less innovative as a result.

Countering this, many GraceWorks facilitators don't have a secondary education, and some are functionally illiterate, helping them connect with the poorer members of the community more as peers than experts. To address the functional illiteracy of some of the rural adult facilitators, and also to train those facilitators in using the same style with which they will need to train functionally illiterate committee and community members, GraceWorks' training emphasises oral learning techniques. GraceWorks also adapt the training to a just-in-time training format. Rather than providing a month-long intensive to train facilitators, GraceWorks provide one week training per quarter, every quarter, with the training matched to the implementation stage the facilitators face. GraceWorks believe this caters better for rural adult oral learning styles.

Like Action Aid, GraceWorks implements their program through local partner organisations that are very grassroots, very close to the local people and communities. Facilitators also commit to four years in a community, rather than two, allowing a longer project cycle, and as in the ActionAid program facilitators are only supported with a minimal,

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subsistence level of financial support. GraceWorks' CDE program facilitators are chosen by the local partner organisations through their membership networks, rather than directly from the community. Facilitators are, however, usually from the same geographic region and ethnicity as the communities they work with. Nonetheless, because of this recruitment method many of the facilitators are single (or single again), with minimal family commitments.

With most facilitators being outsiders, avoiding potential community resistance is important. This has been achieved in the experience to date by spending time slowly building trust over the first half-year to full year, building a track record through a series of simple 'seed projects' planned and implemented together with community members whom they have most quickly established rapport. These seed projects include self-help groups similar to those of Action Aid, or simple community repairs to local infrastructure, or things like organising classes for children in the absence of a government-appointed teacher. After six to twelve months of informal work in the community in this manner, in an act of deliberate empowerment, facilitators arrange an open community meeting to communicate in detail what a full CDE program could look like. These awareness meetings run for several hours, often over several evenings, and clearly communicate ABCD principles and the details of the operation of the proposed program. At the conclusion of the meetings, communities are given an opportunity to invite a full CDE program to commence in their community, or politely decline. Communities who decline may choose to participate in a CDE program at a later date if they desire, without prejudice, subject to availability of a facilitator, and facilitators who face such an outcome move to commence with a new community. Where communities do request a full program, facilitators are encouraged to relocate, at least part-time, into the community.

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Effectiveness.

No external evaluations of GraceWorks' CDE program have yet been compiled. As of early 2013 the program has sixteen full-time facilitators, and the early results are encouraging in terms of community ownership, and the breadth and effectiveness of the program.

According to self-reporting by facilitators during quarterly training and internal reports accumulated by staff from the local partner organisations, communities have accepted the outside facilitators quickly, mobilised representative committees, and chosen to work on projects such as road repair, sanitation, water purification and preventative health awareness programs, for example, as well as repair of preschools and schools, placement of community teachers, construction of a jetty and footbridge, and planning for a community blood-type register for emergency transfusions. The program has also seen functionally illiterate facilitators function effectively, and facilitators work successfully in regions like rural Rakhine State, where the formal illiteracy rate is twenty-five per cent and functional illiteracy is closer to ninety per cent (IHLCA 2011).

These results are encouraging in the extent to which implementation has remained highly participatory and community-owned even in the very poorest communities. Based on the informal evaluations of the program to date, the two major changes are being recommended: a) to further increase the use of oral tradition, narrative-based means of communication of program principles, and b) to move to having more facilitators chosen directly by communities themselves, from the community, rather than chosen and sent by the local partner organisation.

Conclusions and Implications for the Field

This chapter demonstrates that ABCD can be implemented very effectively and at very minimal cost in poor Asian contexts, and is very adaptable in its implementation. These two case studies are most illustrative of the principles and possible implementation modes of

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ABCD generally, despite being very grounded in and developed specifically for the restrictive context of Myanmar as it was prior to the political reform that began in 2011.

ABCD is a coherent development approach built on the premise that appreciation and utilisation of otherwise unrecognised assets inspires positive action for change. It draws heavily on Friere's *conscientização* as the model for facilitating communities' self-discovery of their true situation, and self-reliant action to change both their material situation and the social structures affecting them. It therefore involves empowering the community to sustainably improve their material circumstance by drawing on their tangible and social assets, leveraging outside assistance from the state and global community, and working confidently to change oppressive social structures.

The Action Aid and GraceWorks Myanmar case studies illustrate a number of keys to successful implementation of an ABCD program. Of greatest importance is the placement of facilitators rather than development experts into communities, whose focus is on process and relationship more than program, and these facilitators working through extended involvement in communities. Both programs suggest that it is not the amount of training the facilitators receive which is important, as much as the character, approach and personal development of these people, and their ability as facilitators. Also key is the focus on community mobilisation around previously unrecognised assets, drawing in the resources of other actors after commencing with their own. Both programs likewise illustrate that it is helpful to limit the resources easily available to facilitators from the international organisation, as too much outside resource could undermine this community asset focus. These examples show, however, that ABCD can be implemented to avoid the trap of dependency, and can preserve, even capitalise on, a strongly self-reliant culture. Both programs also highlight that concurrent with a focus on self-reliance as a basis to address material concerns, an equal

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focus must be maintained on engaging with the state and other actors to seek changes to oppressive social structures.

As well as illustrating key principles, these two case studies also illustrate the degree of flexibility and diversity possible in implementation of ABCD programs. For example, Action Aid and GraceWorks Myanmar select and train facilitators quite differently. The key for both is the care taken to negate personal power and status issues that could see facilitators elevated to the role of experts by communities, rather than facilitators. Action Aid use youth, education and unemployment as strengths in selection of their fellows, and turn a lack of life experience and low status due to age into assets to help negate power and assist fellows be related to as facilitators. GraceWorks reverse this, turning the lower level of education and sometimes even functional illiteracy of adult facilitators into assets to negate the greater status and positive skills that greater age and life experience can provide. Their age and states are an advantage in communicating with community leaders and local authorities, but careful selection of facilitators and careful focus in training is required to ensure they facilitate, not lead. Either model appears to work well. What stands out is the different but significant contextualisation of both models, and the important catalytic rather than expert role the trained fellows/facilitators play in community development.

Returning to the Myanmar context in particular, a number of conclusions and observations can be made about the effectiveness of these programs in that context. Firstly, the emphasis given by these two programs on building trust and respect, both internally within the community and with officials and other stakeholders, is a significant contributor to their success. In a context in which significant tension between the state and the international community resulted in suspicion of international agencies, officials appear to have been a little less suspicious about community-led approaches. Seeking to work with, rather than shame officials was also important, as was the building of social capital within communities

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in a context with deep political and ethnic tensions. Secondly, in a context where authoritarian rule created an aversion to risk trying new things and people highly disempowered in decision making, using the international agency and the facilitator to assist create a space for action, and facilitators talking about engaging with officials reduced fear and empowered decision-making.

The third factor in the effectiveness of these ABCD programs, and the one most emphasised by NGO managers interviewed for this research, was the power of *conscientização*, awareness-raising. This factor relates strongly to the above point. For a population long fearful of authority and scared to risk change, awareness-raising of the way the local political and civil service processes work, and the opportunities available under the current political context, demonstrated great effectiveness in empowering communities even prior to the recent political reform process in the country. Now, in the midst of the rapid and wide-ranging socio-political reforms in the country, such awareness-raising of ways to affect change has become even more effective. Action Aid in particular, an organisation which has adopted a rights-based approach to development globally, has demonstrated that this awareness-raising training about active citizenship, ways to approach officials, and forms of advocacy can be very effective in helping communities mobilise necessary resources and take control of their own developmental future. In many ways, ABCD practice is summed up in Friere's concept of *conscientização*.

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