An assessment of empowerment through highly participatory asset-based community development in Myanmar

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Introduction

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a highly participatory approach to development that seeks to empower communities to draw on tangible and social community assets to manage their own development. The strength of ABCD is its ability to facilitate people imagining their world differently, resulting in action to change their circumstances. Previous research has shown international non-government organisations have found highly participatory, community-led approaches to development to have been particularly effective forms of poverty mitigation and community empowerment within Myanmar, even before the current reforms, which is surprising given the restrictive socio-political context created by authoritarian rule by a regime with an international reputation for human rights violations.

This paper documents ABCD programs within Myanmar, one of the poorest countries in Asia suffering major underdevelopment and ranking poorly across a wide range of socioeconomic indicators. It explores the operation, effectiveness and reasons behind the success of ABCD programs in this environment, and reflects on the role of outsiders in ABCD in the light of underlying theory and this contemporary experience. This research draws largely on recent field interviews and personal experience working in this sector within Myanmar, as well as surveying a number of evaluation reports which have been made publically available.

ABCD theory

The significant innovation of ABCD beyond most participatory development practice is the focus on an appreciation and utilisation of pre-existing community strengths and assets as the primary resources for development, and reliance on community leadership, social networks and advocacy to bring about substantial change. A key distinction of ABCD approaches is therefore that ABCD practice often does not make much outside finance available to the village development committee, instead continually redirecting community attention back to tangible and social community assets. Outside workers, therefore, act as facilitators of community processes rather than as a channel for financial assistance.

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 empowerment 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), 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, where the teacher comes from the supposed superior position of being more ‘advanced’. Learning, according to Freire, should be a process of people rethinking their own assumptions and acting upon their own ideas, not merely consuming the ideas of others. But he lamented that the poor were trapped in a ‘culture of silence’ and lacked a voice in learning and development.
While not freeing development from outside help to the extent Freire might have hoped, this paradigm has become a foundation underlying the theory behind all participatory approaches to development, including ABCD.

Participatory action research Fals-Borda (1987, 1991) argued is an approach that development professionals need to shift to from being on ‘on-top’ to ‘on-tap’, emphasising they should approach their role with the values and disposition of facilitator rather than expert. Building on this foundation, Chambers (1983) conceptualised poverty not as a lack of income, assets, services or even knowledge, but as powerlessness due to marginalisation. 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. Chambers advocated methodologies in which local knowledge, participation and decision making is central to the planning and management of projects, and that the marginalised are empowered ‘when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently’ and take action to change their circumstances (Eyen, Kabeer and Cornwall 2008:3). Such participation has become widely accepted, at least in theory, as the minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes (Chambers 2005).

ABCD seeks to combine all these elements, replacing professional development workers in the communities with individuals willing to facilitate community processes, but often without the same level of education, status or access to finance. In so doing, true development experts are networked to the community, with the community being empowered to access their resources or the resources of others on a needs basis.

McKnight and Kretzmann (1993, 1997) coined the term ‘asset based community development’ after observing that most development initiatives relied on external people and agencies delivering services to meet deficiencies, despite the fact that the poor possess a wealth of under recognised and under-utilised assets. ABCD is a practical expression of highly participatory development which seeks to reignite hope in the future and release an entrepreneurial imagination which empowers people to look for ways they can take control of their own futures, working with them as facilitators in a process of deliberate capacity building. Mathie and Cunningham (2003:474) observe that, ‘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’.

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 and McKnight 1993:9).

The practice of ABCD thus involves assisting communities to see value in existing assets and strengths of the community which would otherwise have been ignored, unrealised or dismissed, especially social assets inherent in the collective knowledge of individuals, and social capital in informal networks and community-based associations (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 1997; Mathie and Cunningham 2003).

The application of ABCD therefore follows a process of trust building, where assets are identified, documented and mapped, a new story of the community is formulated, and new skills and relationships are developed (Ennis and West 2010). This involves both internal focused community work (such as asset mapping and developing community processes), as well as external focused 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 and Cunningham 2003). Thus, active citizenship, advocacy and engagement with both authorities and structures must be an integral aspect of successful ABCD.

**Participatory approaches to development in Myanmar**

Previous research (Ware 2012) has shown that even prior to the current political reform in Myanmar, INGOs found highly participatory, community led approaches to development to be particularly effective at poverty mitigation and community empowerment. This is a surprising finding, given the restrictive socio political context associated with two decades of highly centralised and authoritarian military rule on the back of three decades of a centralised, socialist, military led bureaucracy. Many, including Alston 1995, have suggested that it is quite unrealistic to expect highly participatory development to succeed in a country which is fundamentally authoritarian in nature. Anthropological studies also found a debilitating climate of fear in Myanmar in the decade prior to the current political reform (Fink 2000, 2001; Skidmore 2003, 2005; see also Aung San Suu Kyi 1995).

What this previous research found, however, was that with deliberate planning and time dedicated to getting the process right, and through elite cooption, participatory development was both possible and highly effective in Myanmar. Senior managers with INGOs in Myanmar suggested that when achieved, highly participatory development may be even more effective in Myanmar than many other developing countries because of the high levels of volunteerism, self-reliance, self-motivation and independence within the culture (Ware 2012). Such traits are seen to make highly participatory programs particularly suited to the context.
ABCD programs in Myanmar

ActionAid’s Change Maker Fellowship program
The ActionAid Change Maker Fellowship program is the largest ABCD program in Myanmar. It commenced in 2006, in partnership with local NGOs Metta and the Shalom Foundation. Based on early successes, the program was quickly expanded to now 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, Change Maker has both local grassroots development and broader democratisation goals. It seeks to both stimulate development and change at the local level through ABCD, based on the communities’ priorities and resources, as well as contribute to broader macro change by developing the potential of idealistic and passionate educated young people (ActionAid 2010). Fellows are usually recruited through direct contact with communities by a local partner organisation, inviting them to nominate suitable young people to receive intensive training in ABCD skills and personal development with ActionAid, before being sent back with minimal financial resourcing to facilitate participatory processes in the community for two years (Löfving 2011; Ferretti 2010). Fellows are provided a minimal support salary, networked personal support, and intermittent ongoing training opportunities.

Fellows are usually in the 20–30 year old bracket, and commonly have completed a tertiary degree. Many graduates, however, don’t have many employment opportunities in Myanmar’s narrow economy, and many of the fellows are recruited after having returned home to their rural communities. They are recruited for a two-year placement in their own village, or are at least sent back to their own region and ethnicity. They commence their work by facilitating a range of self help groups in the community, then later forming and training village level community development organisations to take responsibility for the planning and implementation of asset-based community development projects and processes in the community, as well as offering training in rights and advocacy. The establishment of a community based organisation (CBO) out of these committees in each community to oversee ongoing development is an express goal of the program.

Fellows usually commence through the promotion of community action around tangible areas such as health, education, livelihoods, and developing an environment of cooperation and social cohesion. Later, the focus more on development of inclusive participatory decision making structures, and community engagement with state and non-state actors to obtain the space and resources required for development.

The program 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 2011:2).

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’ (ibid).

GraceWorks Myanmar’s Community Development Education program
Developed independently, the Community Development Education (CDE) program is remarkably similar to the ActionAid Fellows program. GraceWorks Myanmar (GWM) recruits adults rather than youth as facilitators, through local partner faith based organisations, and provides training one week per quarter without a month long intensive at commencement. Training relies on oral learning techniques as much as literary teaching styles, as rural adult facilitators are not necessarily as well educated. However, this allows facilitators to naturally reproduce oral learning approaches when training community members in ABCD principles, so it is advantageous even for better educated facilitators. Facilitators also commit to four years in a community, rather than two, allowing a longer project cycle, but like the ActionAid program, workers are only supported with a minimal subsistence level of financial support.

Given that GWM facilitators often come from outside the community within which they work, facilitators spend the first half to full year building rapport with communities through a series of simple relationship-building ‘seed projects’. After six to 12 months work in the community in this manner, in an act of deliberate empowerment, facilitators request an informed invitation before commencing a full CDE program. To allow this, facilitators arrange an open community awareness seminar with community leaders and members, which runs for several hours over several nights to clearly communicate ABCD principles and the details of the operation of the program. The community is then given opportunity to invite a full CDE program to commence in their community, or politely decline, allowing the facilitator to move to a different community. Upon formal invitation, though, facilitators help the community elect a participatory committee, then train the committee and volunteer team in community processes, PRA assessment tools, project planning and management, and advocacy, all the while attempting to place their networking to their organisation ‘on-tap’ to connect the community to other resources where community connections alone are insufficient. The four year project cycle allows facilitators more time to focus on process, and help a strong, independent CBO emerge out of the community development committee.

Other ABCD programs in Myanmar
A number of other ABCD programs are operating in Myanmar, including programs operated by Dan Church Aid.
and SWISSAID. Two complementary programs operated by Norwegian People’s Aid places trained workers in villages either for approximately two weeks followed by frequent visits and support, or three months, followed by less frequent visits. In both cases, the initial time spent in community is aimed at organising and training the community committee in community processes, PRA planning tools, and project cycle management. Their rapid departure from the community aims at rapidly delivering control back to the local community.

**Effectiveness of ABCD programs in Myanmar**

Yeneabat and Butterfield (2012) propose evaluating the effectiveness of ABCD programs against five key building blocks of the ABCD approach: 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.

ActionAid report that almost all communities develop a representative committee within the life of the two-year fellow’s presence, and the mobilisation of local assets plus those from outside the community has very impressive outcomes. They had 160 fellows in communities by their first national fellows conference in January 2011, when they complied known outcomes to that point (Ferretti 2010). 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 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 results are significant, 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. Achieving these outcomes often involved using community social assets to approach officials, government agencies, or sometimes other NGOs, asking or advocating for additional services and resources. Based on the significance of these outcomes, ActionAid have almost quadrupled the number of fellows in this program since these statistics were compiled.

GWM’s CDE program has not had the same length of time to generate more than anecdotal evidence on impact, however, the initial results are extremely encouraging in terms of community ownership, and the breadth and effectiveness of the program. Anecdotally, the ABCD programs of Dan Church Aid, SWISSAID, and Norwegian People’s Aid also appear effective.

**Reasons for success in the Myanmar context**

A number of reasons were proposed by INGO managers and project staff for the success of these ABCD programs in Myanmar. First is the emphasis given by these programs on building trust and respect, both internally within the community and with officials and other stakeholders. This is a significant factor in a society that has seen significant abuse of personal power and has long been fractured along political, ethnic and religious lines. The second is the emphasis on facilitating consensus decision making processes and community organisation. The third and most emphasised reason for success by those interviewed was awareness raising.

For a population long fearful of authority and scared to risk change, awareness raising of the opportunities the current political changes present, and the means of affecting additional social change on factors impacting negatively their situation, provides significant empowerment to impoverished communities. Thus, beyond raising the ability of communities to analyse their context and problems, and their awareness of local assets and resources, ABCD in Myanmar has emphasised training in how communities might obtain the resources they need or change the social structure around them. ABCD has also extended the culturally strong spirit of volunteerism and charity to highlight the inequalities, marginalisation, and power relations undermining these efforts both within and impacting upon communities.

**Conclusion**

ABCD programs appear to have been surprisingly effective in the difficult socio political context of Myanmar. A number of reasons have been proposed for this, not the least of which being that ABCD fellows and facilitators have taken an educative, awareness-raising role. Such a role challenges, and is challenged by, Friere’s idea that the process of teachers transferring knowledge to students is itself a problematic power relation. ABCD in Myanmar appears to have been particularly effective precisely because of the educative dimension of the projects, albeit with very careful selection of topics about which to educate communities, and careful selection of the status of the fellows and facilitators and their approach to communities in order to mitigate in part the inherent power relations in taking a teaching role.

It is found that an educative process of awareness-raising about local resources and opportunities, social change processes, and the socio political structural context
impacting the community, have led to significant change in a substantial number of communities. Together with training in advocacy and deliberate capacity building of a community development committee, this training has been a key factor in empowerment and community change. The success of these programs in Myanmar thus suggests that there is still a significant place for a carefully constructed educative role from outside workers within highly participatory development contexts, provided power issues are carefully considered and power differentials minimised.

Note
Anthony Ware is a voluntary adviser and project manager for GraceWorks Myanmar’s Community Development Education program.

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