

Poverty & Community Development

Description:	This session introduces the “When helping hurts” framework of understanding poverty through the lens of fractured relationships and systems. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is then explored as a preferred alternative to standard charity as a recommended stance for our supportive programs.
Key Terms:	Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), Agency, Development, Food Insecurity, NIMBY, Posture

Biblical Reflection

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the assembly of Israelites whom Cyrus the Great had allowed to return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. They were a traumatized community, still under considerable threat, characterized internally by grave disparities in wealth and status – but who were nevertheless sincerely pious and assuming that prayer and fasting would convince God to secure their future. As with all the prophets, Isaiah’s message brings with it an invitation to discomforting practices of justice that lead to greater intimacy with God and others, especially those who have been pushed to the edge of society.

Isaiah 58: 9-12 (*The Message*)

“If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.

In discussions of poverty and community development, we must start by looking at unfair practices, victim-blaming, and how we talk about other people’s sins. As we go through this session, take note of your biases and places in your communities that Isaiah would call out, if he were here today.

When Helping Hurts - A Framework

What is Poverty?

When most people think of poverty, they think of homelessness, food insecurity (lack of access or ability to purchase appropriate and healthy food), poor living conditions, and lack of resources. While addressing these challenges is part of a compassionate response to human need, we must also explore why poverty happens. Research done by the Chalmer Centre¹ discusses four relationships outside of material lack that lead to poverty. When any of these four components are in a deficit, poverty soon follows.

- **Relationship with God:** This is the connection to that which is bigger than us. This relationship helps us to establish meaning and purpose in life. The language used around this relationship can be that with God, Creator, Universe, and many others. But all of them understand it as a spiritual source that guides, creates and oversees the world we live in. This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flowing out of this one.
- **Relationship with Self:** The relationship with self is about understanding and accepting ourselves as intentionally created beings, with inherent worth, and efficacy to know that each person has something to contribute.
- **Relationship with Others:** Our relationship with others is about our connection to others as individuals that collectively create communities. God created us to live in loving relationship with one another.
- **Relationship with the Rest of Creation:** The relationship with the rest of creation is a direct mandate from Genesis 1:28–30 in which humans are given the task to steward, protect, and manage the world that God has created in order to preserve it and to produce bounty.

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves ON the face of Earth.”
God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God’s nature.
He created them male and female.
God blessed them:
“Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”
²⁹⁻³⁰ Then God said, “I’ve given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth
And every kind of fruit-bearing tree,
given them to you for food.
To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes,
I give whatever grows out of the ground for food.”
And there it was.

Genesis 1: 28-30 (The Message)

¹ <https://chalmers.org/get-started/>

These four relationships are surrounded by the systems that are created and sustained by these relationships. The way that humans create culture—including economic, social, political, and religious systems—reflect our basic commitments to God, self, others, and the rest of creation. The systems that humans create, including both formal institutions (governments, schools, businesses, churches, etc.) and cultural norms (gender roles, attitudes toward time and work, understandings of authority, etc.), reflect the nature of our foundational relationships to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Then Who Are the Poor?

If poverty is first rooted in fractured or incomplete relationships that lead to corrupt and unjust systems, we can then understand that every person experiences poverty. Until we embrace our mutual limits, hurts and barriers, our work with low-income communities will likely do more harm than good through:

- Being oblivious to our own poverty or fractured relationships
- Viewing people experiencing poverty as one dimensional, seeing only their lack and not as a complex and whole human being
- Viewing material poverty as deficit, while not acknowledging the wealth of relationships, knowledge, wisdom, and experience those individuals may have
- Displaying the need to “save” others through the finances or other resources because of a perceived privilege over the “other” (sometimes referred to as a "Saviour Complex")
- Putting incorrect assumptions, limits, or boundaries on the person

Not In My Backyard

We use the phrase “NIMBY”, an acronym for "not in my backyard," to describe the tendency of residents of a neighbourhood to designate a new development (e.g. shelter, affordable housing, group home) or change in occupancy of an existing development as inappropriate, unsafe, or unwanted for their local area (**see shelter module**).



Opposition to affordable, supportive, or transitional housing is usually based on the assumed characteristics of the population that will be living in the development. Common arguments are that there will be increases in crime, litter, theft, or violence, and that property values will decrease. The benefits for residents of the development are often ignored.

NIMBY-ism addresses people’s desire to maintain safety, while not addressing what safety actually is. It rarely considers actual statistics on what happens when developments create supportive services and housing, or the amount of homelessness experienced already in a neighbourhood- both visible and invisible (many people experiencing homelessness go unnoticed

as they tend to hide in plain sight). Ironically, the safety of the people experiencing homelessness is significantly more negatively impacted by NYMBY-ism, than the communities that the developments are moving into.

Common Responses to Poverty

Among the many ways that people approach poverty alleviation, the following are the typical:

- **Relief** – the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis
- **Rehabilitation** – beginning as soon as the acute crisis is over, we seek to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions
- **Development** – ongoing change that benefit all people involved — both the “helpers” and the “helped” — moving everyone closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation -includes (re)building, training, partnerships etc.²

If Not This, Then What?

Each of those responses have their place, but much like thinking of an emergency room as the only place to get healing, it is limited. For the purposes of many of the programs and communities that we are connected to, our focus must be on development with the community. For the remainder of this session, we will address more sustainable practices to community development and poverty alleviation.

Asset Based Community Development ³

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a globally adopted approach that recognises and builds on the strengths, gifts, talents and resources of individuals and communities to create strong, inclusive, and sustainable communities. Community Development is a process where connected individuals come together to take collective action on common problems. ABCD is the stance that any sustainable action must be based on a community’s resources, skills, and experience, not be reliant on outside assets. This process assumes that:

- Each person in a community has something to contribute
- People must be connected through personal relationships for sustainable community development to take place
- Community members are the driving force of action, not merely the recipients
- Institutional leaders should step back from leadership after opportunities for community-member involvement have been created

² <https://chalmers.org/get-started/>

³ https://www.ieder.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Participatory-Community-Building-Guidebook-2020_v2-1.pdf

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- Decisions should come from conversations where community members are asked for ideas, not presented with probable solutions⁴

ABCD is a key posture when addressing people and communities experiencing poverty. Often these communities are viewed and treated as if they have a deficit which leads to learned helplessness, poor self-efficacy, and untapped resources from the community itself. By building relationships and creating the space for opportunities to emerge, community members become engaged, gain agency (the ability and understanding to make ones own decisions and are responsible for those decisions), and are more in control of their own decision making.

Principles of ABCD:

- Focus on community assets and strengths rather than problems and needs
- Identify and mobilise community and individual assets, skills, and passions
- The community is always built on community leadership
- Everything is rooted in relationship

An ABCD approach recognizes that needs and challenges exist in vulnerable communities. The key difference is that the starting line has been moved from deficit to asset.

Six Types of Assets to Connect:

- Talents, skills, and passions of individuals
- Community groups and networks or associations
- Government and non-government agencies (Institutions)
- Physical assets (land, property, buildings, equipment)
- Economic Assets (productive work of individuals, consumer spending power, local business assets)

John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann founded the ABCD Institute, based on their community work in the preceding decades. Challenging the traditional approach to solving urban problems, which focuses service providers and funding agencies on the needs and deficiencies of neighbourhoods. ABCD is a powerful approach to community engagement and development that focuses on abilities and potential, rather than problems and deficits by discovering the resources that are already present in a community.

⁴ Stan Rowland. "What is Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)." *Collaborative of Neighborhood Transformation* (2008)

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- Stories, heritage, local identity, and values

Every single person has capacities, abilities, and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, and gifts given. - John McKnight

Drivers of ABCD

Key drivers that support the work of ABCD in communities are:

- **Hope** – helping other possibilities emerge
- **Care** – discovering what people care about enough to act on or invest in
- **Relationships** – building and strengthening relationships is key to action

By building relationships, discovering what people truly care about and helping possibilities emerge, community can not only survive, but they will also thrive!

Where to Start

There are many ways to do ABCD, but regardless of what you do it is important to **keep the community and its people at the centre**. The process of ABCD actively gives agency and decision-making power back to the community (who often feel like it has been taken away). This is done by asking open ended questions, having individuals self-identify their assets, observing, and *only when necessary*, teaching people how to leverage their assets. Have your group ask:

- What functions can community residents perform by themselves?
- What functions can community residents do with some additional help from government and agencies?
- What functions must government and agencies perform on their own?
- What functions must government and agencies STOP doing?

There are many tools that can be used to in an asset- based approach in any community (**see resources for more information**). It is easy to only consider looking at programs and support systems as the assets in the community. However, ABCD asks us to dig deeper and to focus on individual skills and abilities, as those are often missed when collecting information. Asking community members what they see as an asset or what they can contribute to the community will yield those deeper pockets of information. This is something that you could do on your own or in a group, either way, you do not need permission to start.



The following are two examples of tools that can be used when practicing ABCD in your communities.

Tool #1: Treasure Hunting: Find Resources Through Asset Mapping

Asset mapping is a tool that can be used to uncover resources in your neighbourhood. Start with making (or finding) a list of available programs, but the key to asset mapping is to interact with the neighbourhood. Take a walk, talk to people, go into businesses, services, and community programs to introduce yourself. Use a physical map, a notebook, or a "google map" to document your findings.

Using the framework of the diagram below, we can picture the role those different assets play in the community. Again, note how the individual is always at the centre.



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Please note that these are just examples of assets, there are many more to discover as you practice ABCD in your communities.

Tool #2: Personal Guide to Uncovering Assets – The 5 H's Exercise

This exercise helps community members to self-identify what their assets are. For some, it can be hard to think of the gifts that they can share with the community, especially for those that

⁵ www.abcdinstitute.org

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have internalized narratives of helplessness and dependence. Use the following prompts to generate conversations between individuals, with groups or the larger community.

- **Gifts of the Head** – things I know something about and would enjoy talking about with others (e.g., art, history, movies, birds)
- **Gifts of the Hands** – things or skills I know how to do and would like to share with others (e.g., carpentry, sports, cooking)
- **Gifts of the Heart** – things I care deeply about (e.g., protection of the environment, civic life, children)
- **Gifts of the Heel** – things I do to help me stay grounded and would like to share with others (e.g., meditate, walk, breathing exercises, hang out with friends)
- **Gifts of Human Connection** – things I do to stay connected to my community (e.g., join an interest group, connect people with similar interests)

More detailed process for both of these tools are located in the appendices of this handout. Additionally, you can learn about other tools at The ABCD Institute and the Tamarak Institute (**see resources for more information**).



Conclusion

There are no straight pathways to overcoming poverty, but fortunately we have a faith that gives us guidance as we pursue it. If we take the direction of Isaiah and “get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims” to look at the relationships and systems that have the ability to harm or help, we will get a better understanding of the Kingdom that God is creating. The exploration into community development, especially from an Asset based perspective keeps teaching us to humble ourselves, trust and love others, and give control back to the Creator of all these things. As we move into the next sessions, ABCD will remain the framework for how we engage, care for, and respond to communities.

Reflect and Review

1. How would you describe poverty given the information this session covered? Has your view expanded or changed how poverty is experienced? If so, how?

2. In what ways do you be experiencing poverty yourself?

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3. What are some ways that you have knowingly or unknowingly participated in NYMBY-IsM?

4. How might ABCD offer you and your programs or communities more opportunity? What are you curious to learn about your community?

Learn More

Below are a variety of resources for you to investigate as you continue to learn and grow in your desire to support and walk with communities.

Read:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● John McKnight and Cormac Russell, <i>“The Four Essential Elements of an Asset Based Community Development Process”</i> (DePaul University, 2018) ● John McKnight and Peter Block, <i>The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods</i> (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012) ● The Christian Community Development Association ● Steve Corbett and Brian Finkert, <i>When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself</i> (Moody Publishers, 2014) ● Wayne Gordon and John Perkins. <i>Making Neighbourhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development</i> (InterVarsity Press, 2013)
Watch:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Take a street and Build a Neighbourhood- Shani Graham TEDx Perth ● Something more to life than Consuming- ABCD- John McKnight
Listen:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Ending Poverty Together Podcast- Episode 5 When Helping hurts
Study:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deepening Community – Tamarak Institute- Tools ● The Homeless Hub ● Asset- Based Community Development Institute ● Jeder Institute- Participatory Community Building Guidebook
Do:	Do an Asset Map around your house or church and start to identify what is already there

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Contact churchrelations@ugm.ca to explore these ideas further.