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## **Assets on the Right(s) Track?**

**Reflections at the intersection of Human Rights-Based Approaches and Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development**

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## Introduction

Consider this: a vulnerable woman who lives in a nearby town is struggling to achieve a livelihood for herself and her family. How do you approach this from a development perspective? Do you focus first on what assets she and her community has and what they can do today? Do you first look at what rights she has, what services she is entitled to, and what she can demand from her government? How do you balance a focus on her gendered experience of systems and structures (i.e., why is she vulnerable in the first place?), with the fact that she and her children need to eat today? Is it either/or? This paper is an attempt to answer this last question.

Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development (ABCD)<sup>1</sup> is at the core of the Coady Institute's philosophy. Using community strengths as its entry point, the approach focuses on how local resources can be used as the basis for communities to take action on community-defined issues of importance. Similarly, human rights (and human rights-based approaches, or HRBAs) also underpin much of the Institute's work. Alongside its focus on empowerment and participation, HRBAs place emphasis on the structural causes of poverty and apply universally-accepted norms related to accountability, non-discrimination, and equity, and links development with the international human rights framework. ABCD and HRBAs also represent counter-narratives to charity- or needs-based approaches to development and are well-aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While ABCD and HRBAs are combined in a number of ways within Coady's existing programs, there has been no systematic, Institute-wide attempt to articulate them. As early as 2004, a gap was identified in terms of articulating HRBAs with the Institute's areas of focus (Pettit, 2004). Several Coady graduates have also noted this gap in our development leadership programming. For these reasons, in 2017, we began exploring the linkages and tensions between these approaches in a discussion paper,<sup>2</sup> which served as a primer for three participatory workshops tailored to Coady staff members (2017), to human rights practitioners and educators (International Conference on Human Rights Education, 2018), and to ABCD practitioners and policy-makers (ABCD Imbizo, 2018), respectively. In late 2018, further discussion with graduates and associates of the Coady Institute were captured through an online course called *Building Assets and Agency: Lessons Learned from Around the World*.

Together, the reactions, comments, questions, and criticisms collected through these activities make up the basis for this reflection paper. As the original [discussion paper](#) is available in full, this piece will summarize major themes and takeaways from the entire process, rather than systematically



Figure 1: ABCD Imbizo participants, South Africa, February 2018

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we use ABCD interchangeably with “citizen-led, asset-based and community-driven” (CLABCD) approach to development also commonly used in Coady's work (and referenced in the discussion paper which informs this publication).

<sup>2</sup> The original thought piece, *Human Rights Based Approaches and Citizen-Led, Asset-Based and Community-Driven Development: Discussion paper*, is available at <https://coady.stfx.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HRBA-and-CLABCD-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

review the original paper's contents. In the sections that follow, we include a brief discussion of the key elements of HRBAs and ABCD and a summary of the seven frames of analysis we used in the workshops to propose linkages and tensions between the approaches. We also include a consolidation and analysis of what we heard from participants in these workshops and our lessons learned, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

Since the participants represented very different contexts, disciplines, and sectors, varying experience and interpretations of each approach inform this work. While this diversity led to some instructive and fairly conclusive generalizations, it also came with nuanced differences of opinion. Based on these conversations, we found strong linkages in the areas of participation and empowerment inherent in both approaches, coupled with some remaining questions related to accountability, non-discrimination, and unsurprisingly, direct linkages to human rights. Of course, context matters immensely, and without more evidence on the ground, when exploring the question of "either/or" posed above, we simply had to be satisfied with responses such as "it depends."

## **What We Proposed: A Brief Overview of Approaches and Linkages**

There are many definitions and understandings of both HRBAs and ABCD. As a basis for exploring the linkages between them, we proposed some definitions, including some of the key principles typically associated with each approach.

### *Human Rights-Based Approaches (HRBAs)*

Human rights-based approaches put into practice a conceptual framework for development that is based on international human rights standards (UN HRBA Portal), and seek to integrate human rights norms, principles, standards and goals into the plans and processes of development (Boesen & Martin, 2007). To operationalize the approach, human rights principles have been presented or categorized in a number of ways and boiled down to the following 'key elements' (see Boesen & Martin, 2007; Nazzari et al., 2014; Russell & Smeaton, n.d.; UNDP, 2005; UNFPA, 2010):

- a direct *linking* of development interventions to *rights*;
- channels for meaningful *participation*;
- acknowledging power imbalances between duty bearers and rights holders and holding the duty bearers to account for rights violations (*accountability*);
- building in equity to ensure equality and *non-discrimination*; and
- empowering rights holders with the capacity to claim rights (*empowerment*).

One way to recall these key elements is the acronym *PANEL: Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment, and Links to rights*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are varying interpretations of the key elements to operationalize HRBAs (see for example, Broberg & Sano, 2018). The PANEL framework was proposed here because of its widespread use by graduates, associates, and partners.

### *Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development (ABCD)*

The term ABCD was originally coined by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) as an alternative or critique to needs-based or problem-focused approaches to development. Needs-based and problem-focused approaches, despite the best of intentions, can result in community members internalizing this view of themselves and their communities. Such negative self-perception can lead to a sense of apathy and hopelessness and a belief that external institutions—which include NGOs, government departments, and the private sector—are largely responsible for addressing these problems. It can also lead to community members being treated as clients or beneficiaries of outside interventions rather than citizens as agents of their own development, entitled to rights, but also with civic responsibilities.

Although Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) based their research in urban neighbourhoods in Chicago, the approach has since been “introduced” globally to promote inclusion, economic and social development, and environmental conservation (see Burkett, 2011; Cameron & Gibson, 2001; Fuchs, 2018; Fuchs et al., *in press*; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003, 2005, 2008; Mathie et al., 2017; O’Leary, 2006; Russell & Smeaton, 2009; Wilkinson-Maposa & Fowler, 2009; Wilkinson-Maposa, Oliver-Evans, & Mulenga, 2005).

By contrast, an ABCD approach draws on existing capacities and strengths of communities (social, natural, cultural, financial, physical, human, etc.) as the starting point, acknowledging the contributions that have often gone overlooked or undervalued by external development actors (Ashford & Patkar, 2001; Elliott, 1999). Without ignoring that needs and problems exist, the approach draws on positive psychology by identifying core community strengths and assets that explain what works and by exploring how to build on these for further action (Seligman, 2002). The role of the outside institution is thus one of facilitator and responsive supporter or investor in citizen-led activity, as opposed to the instigator or the driver (Bergdall, 2013).

In summary, ABCD as an approach includes:

- Using participatory methods to draw out strengths and successes in a community’s shared history as its starting point for change;
- Focusing on people’s assets, including the social assets inherent in social relationships, as evident in formal and informal associations and networks;
- Encouraging active citizenship and organising to mobilize assets for action; and
- Strengthening civil society to engage with, or hold formal and informal duty-bearers to account, over time.

### *Frameworks for Analysis*

With these approaches in mind, we proposed seven potential “linkages” (i.e., ways of understanding synergies or tensions between ABCD and HRBAs), each using a particular frame of analysis. We deliberately presented these as binary questions in order to elicit reactions, provoke reflection, and create debate during the workshops. Table 1 provides a brief description of each linkage. Links are provided to the original discussion paper for access to full descriptions.

Table 1. Summary of Proposed Linkages

Frame of analysis	Question: Is this the link?	Summary of proposed linkage: In a nutshell...
<a href="#">Vertical and horizontal (political and economic) citizenship</a>	Justice is achieved through associational and rights-based action?	Initially, ABCD focuses on building horizontal forms of citizenship (e.g., self-reliance, mutual self-help). HRBA focuses on vertical citizenship in linking development to human rights (and corresponding obligations). The two approaches are therefore complementary.
<a href="#">Accountability equations and varying risk of rights-based work (context)</a>	ABCD is a less risky entry point for (eventually) claiming rights?	HRBAs place the state as the ultimate duty bearer and identify the chain of actors (duty bearers) accountable to “supply” rights. ABCD focuses the associational/community level, relying less on engaging institutions (duty bearers) at the outset. Where making claims and demands on rights carries risk, ABCD can be a useful and less threatening entry point to eventually claim accountability from the state and other duty bearers.
<a href="#">Human rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural)</a>	(Some) rights are assets?	If defined broadly, assets include the rights and entitlements that people possess by virtue of being “human” or “citizens.” Freedom of association and information, for example, are important assets. Where rights are respected (especially civil and political), there is a more enabling environment for participatory approaches, like ABCD.
<a href="#">Power: Power analysis and alternative forms of power</a>	ABCD builds alternative forms of power which are necessary to change systems and structures?	While ABCD usually does not initially address <i>power over</i> as directly as HRBAs, it seeks to build <i>power within</i> , <i>power with</i> , and <i>power to</i> in order to ultimately address “power over” in time. Inasmuch as this is achieved, it aligns with the <i>empowerment</i> element of HRBAs.
<a href="#">Livelihoods, assets and agency</a>	ABCD builds capitals and agency, and leverage to claim rights?	ABCD mobilizes assets and increases internal capital of communities/associations (rights holders), which can be leveraged to attract investment (i.e., responsiveness, whether based in rights claims or not) from institutions (duty bearers).
<a href="#">Alternatives to needs-based approaches</a>	ABCD and HRBAs are aligned in what they are not?	ABCD and HRBAs are both framed as alternatives to charity- or needs-based approaches to development. Seen this way, similarities emerge around the roles of citizens, their relationships with the state, and with each other.
<a href="#">Critiques and limitations</a>	Opposites attract? What critiques/limitations do you see?	To some extent, each approach can address limitations of the other: HRBAs consider the structural causes of injustice that ABCD is criticized for (sometimes) addressing only indirectly; ABCD’s internal focus lends itself to endogenous development initially, is not bound to the individual rights enshrined in the human rights framework, and is genuinely grounded in diverse local realities.



## What We Heard: Findings and Analysis

The participatory workshops gathered the comments, reactions and reflections of upwards of 75 development practitioners (including Coady staff members, ABCD practitioners, and human rights educators and defenders). In their respective sessions, participants were asked to think about, discuss, and react to the linkages proposed above. In debating these, they often used different language to refer to similar issues and ideas, making it difficult to draw conclusions or make recommendations on any particular framework. We also acknowledge some overlap in the ideas underlying many of the seven frameworks, as well as in the ways these were interpreted.



Figure 2: Participants engaged in discussion, South Africa, February 2018

For these reasons, the findings and analysis presented in this section are structured around the key elements of HRBAs, since much of the discussions converged around one or many of these: *participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and links to human rights*. Below, we use each principle as a lens through which to report on some highlights of what we heard and to provide some preliminary reflections on complementarities and tensions between HRBAs and ABCD. Admittedly, this dichotomy is somewhat artificial because it implicitly “compares apples with oranges” in that the two approaches do not claim to have the same principles or end goals in mind. However, this framing is useful in developing a common language, or simply acknowledging where the two approaches do, or do not, intersect.

### *Participation: Yes, but What Kind and for What?*

As both ABCD and HRBAs are participatory development approaches, it is no surprise that participation as an avenue for exerting voice, agency, and inclusion was readily referenced as a conclusive point of complementarity between HRBAs and ABCD in all workshops. Not only is participation a human right, but HRBAs also frame the participation of rights holders as a central channel through which citizens access, demand, or claim rights to achieve development. Participation occurs with a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Developing capacities for active participation is core to HRBAs, often seen as an important result in itself.

ABCD places similar emphasis on participation, and finds its roots in a number of participatory influences: rapid rural appraisal (Chambers, 1981), participatory rural appraisal, participatory action research, the importance of building social capital for collective action (Putnam, 1993), as well as histories of mutual self-help and social movements that demonstrate these principles.<sup>4</sup> Many ABCD practitioners challenged the use of the word “participation” because it was considered loaded and overused and has often been tokenized by NGOs or governments inviting communities to participate in projects designed without them. Participation, in this limited sense, does not represent the essence of an ABCD approach. Rather, participation is ultimately

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<sup>4</sup> The emergence and evolution of these methods and approaches are commonly attributed to various influences tied to popular and adult education rather than a specific author or practitioner.

understood to mean self-mobilization, with outside actors acting as facilitators and supporters of community-defined action.

In contrast, some participants felt that HRBAs imply that the participation of rights holders cannot be de-linked from their relationship(s) to duty bearers. This often involves outside actors to initiate or support the development process, whether through awareness and education, advocacy campaigns, or citizen participation in decision-making. Since the aim (the realization of rights) tends to be more ambitious than that of many ABCD processes, citizen participation is often complemented by outside expertise (e.g., legal), and there is often a need to engage with multiple stakeholders.

A second difference between HRBAs and ABCD is related to the motivation for participation (Coady staff member, 2017). The entry point for HRBAs tends to focus on rights violations, injustice, and a lack of awareness or protection of human rights as a motivating force for action. Conversely, ABCD often relies on appreciative processes: analyzing stories of past success and asset inventories of the resources available for creating locally-defined future changes. The open-ended, endogenous, and appreciative methods used to implement ABCD may or may not explicitly involve discussion of human rights, even though that very participation likely constitutes the exercise of individuals' rights to participate in their own community affairs and development.

#### *Accountability: Building Citizenship Horizontally and Vertically*

How and why communities engage with multiple stakeholders requires a closer look at the relationships citizens develop and sustain—both among citizens (rights holders), and with other actors (duty bearers)—through their participation. In this spirit, Mathie, von Lieres, Peters, Lee, and Alma (2017), citing Kabeer (2005), associates citizenship with:

[...] justice, recognition, self-determinations, and solidarity, and its combined sense of rights and duties. Expanded definitions include ideas of inclusion, empowerment, and agency as well as the idea of citizenship as community member, participating actively in mutually supportive relationships, especially where the state is too distant to be meaningful in people's lives. (p. 79)

Underlying this notion of citizenship is the principle of accountability, which imposes certain terms on the mutually-supportive relationships among rights holders (horizontal), and between citizens and duty bearers within the state, private and civil society sectors (vertical), that is, rights, entitlements, responsibilities, obligations, and duties. Using this definition, both the "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions of citizenship (and the accountability relationships they imply), can manifest formally (e.g., through legal frameworks), and informally, through moral duties that arise as a result of power relations between duty bearers (e.g., a parent) and rights holders (e.g., a child).

As Mathie et al. (2017) pointed out, the horizontal dimension is embodied by citizen-to-citizen accountability, mutual obligations, reciprocity, and working towards the common good. ABCD (and ABCD practitioners informing the workshops) placed a particular emphasis on this dimension. Indeed, it is a starting point for the approach. Vertical citizenship, on the other hand, is embodied by actions that identify, engage, and demand accountability from duty bearers for fulfilling their duties and obligations to protect and deliver on human rights. While this is a cornerstone of HRBAs, it does not preclude also fostering horizontal accountability and



citizenship (i.e., one individual cannot impinge on another's rights in claiming their own rights) and leveraging collective action to challenge power. Nor does ABCD's leaning towards horizontal forms of citizenship preclude self-interested or vertical activities that involve macro-level actors and duty bearers from the start.

Yet we heard about other ways the relationships between rights holders and duty bearers evolve. The sustainable livelihoods framework (DFID, 1999) describes how communities mobilizing and growing internal assets (social, political, natural, financial, physical, and human) lead to increased capacity to leverage external investment and support for community-driven development. Relationships develop between communities and government institutions from a place of responsive investment from institutions attracted to organized community groups that have demonstrated success. Building assets at the community level also strengthens agency, or the capacity to demand that duty bearers deliver on the rights, entitlements, and services, which HRBAs might approach from an "obligation to account" perspective.

ABCD practitioners (2018) cited numerous examples of asset-building policies that responded to community aspirations, needs, and demands. For instance, they described:

- programs to support member-based organizations, such as self-help groups, to build social capital;
- supports to motivate savings informally through village loan and savings associations (VSLAs) or more affordable interest rates on loans to build financial capital; and
- the construction of important physical infrastructure such as roads to provide more linkages to markets, and access to clinics and schools, building human capital.

Government officials also described using ABCD in the areas of integrated planning, social development, and enterprise development (ABCD practitioner, 2018), including more flexible and responsive funding in line with citizen-led initiatives.

### *Empowerment: Building and Challenging Power*

Power is at the heart of building and changing relationships between citizens and the state. As an analytical lens, it offers a common language between ABCD and HRBAs, evidenced by the ease with which practitioners of both approaches linked power and empowerment to their work. Workshop participants even suggested more refined power analysis frameworks than what was proposed initially.

That said, there was agreement that both approaches contributed to building alternative forms of citizen power (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002): *power within* (confidence, recognition, dignity, awareness); *power with* (collective action and voice, sharing resources to meet opportunity or overcome challenges); and *power to/for* (agency, capacity, acting together to make tangible changes and improvements). In other words, it builds the *empowerment* element of an HRBA, "which implies that each individual and (in cases of collective rights) group acquires the ability to think and

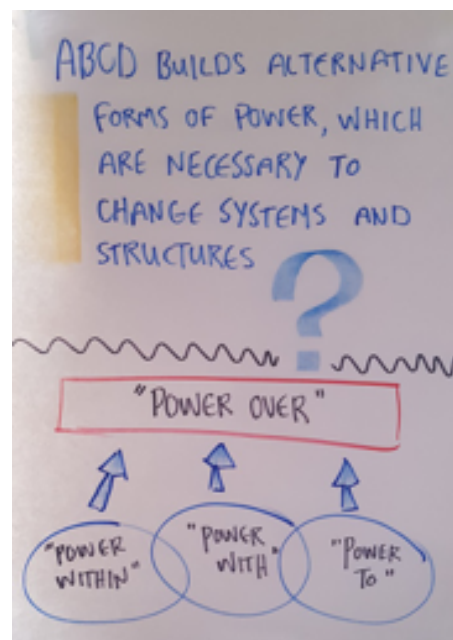


Figure 3: Workshop poster on one frame of analysis: Alternative forms of power

to act freely, to take decisions and to fulfil his or her own potential as a full and equal member of society” (Broberg & Sano, 2018, p. 668).

The ability to directly or indirectly engage “horizontally,” then, is a clear point of overlap between approaches. Where the difference laid, for human rights practitioners in particular, is in the extent to which power analysis – and the actions resulting from it – directly and explicitly challenged *power over*, as enacted and wielded by duty bearers (i.e., the vertical dimension).

Whereas HRBAs place this dimension at the centre (see *Linkages to Human Rights* section below), ABCD may or may not lead to engaging vertically and challenging power structures. This remains optional, and ultimately up to the collective wisdom and agency of citizens and communities to decide whether it is necessary or beneficial to their particular development aims. As such, ABCD was perceived by some practitioners to be a more gradual, less risky, and benign process that “follows a slow, but realistic human scale and development calendar” (ABCD participant, 2018), first on a local level, building up momentum and capacity in one’s own resources and capabilities (agency). This agency is also used to act collectively, putting people in a better position to challenge or negotiate with powerful outside actors on their own terms, thereby addressing *power over* using a less direct approach.

### *Non-Discrimination*

The right to non-discrimination is key to HRBAs, and gives particular attention to equality, equity, and marginalized groups. HRBAs require that the question of who is marginalized be answered locally, and that development be pursued in a way that ultimately levels the playing field, through formal, substantive, and transformative equality (Barrett, 2016). As such, those individuals and groups typically excluded from development decisions are seen (and empowered) as rights holders, and attention is given to the systemic, attitudinal, and structural barriers that limit access to rights and development (see Fredman et al., 2017, p. 6).

Whether equality and equity are as central an element of ABCD was debatable for several reasons. First, those who felt ABCD was consistent with equity described the simple power of focusing on what everyone has to contribute, regardless of how few assets (or rights) they possess. Bringing the gifts and talents of those who are often excluded or marginalized to the forefront naturally led to a more inclusive and appreciative process that built on strengths that were often overlooked or undervalued, and often led to a greater dignity, capacity, and confidence to take action. One example brought to light was the considerable change in the perception of people with disabilities by shifting the focus from needs and deficits to strengths (and rights) (ABCD practitioners, 2018; Coady staff member, 2017).

Second, some ABCD practitioners noted that the process usually involved very few external resources (apart from facilitation) initially. In many cases, a lack of quick, material gains weeded out potential gatekeepers who already had a relatively higher standard of living or privilege. On the other hand, some noted that an ABCD approach cannot be forced, and often started with a few motivated individuals who already had the capacity to take action, bringing others on board when they saw that change was possible. We often heard remarks about “following the energy” or “running with the strong ones” (ABCD participant, 2018). Without broader political awareness or analysis, focusing on the early adopters inevitably ran the risk of reinforcing inequalities or to “privileging the privileged” (Coady staff member, 2017). The importance of civic-minded leadership with an awareness of, and orientation towards, inclusion and equity was central here.

## Linkages to Human Rights

HRBAs use human rights standards as the foundation for all development work in all sectors and in all phases of programming, from planning to implementation, with the goal of promoting human rights and human dignity for all. As its explicit aim and, arguably, its main differentiating feature from other participatory development approaches such as ABCD, HRBAs are clear in what they set to achieve. In other words, HRBAs come with a defined and evolving normative framework in linking development initiatives to the international human rights system. This provides an answer to the question: “Development to what end?": All human rights for all. While this is often touted as one of its strengths, it is worth noting that its universal relevance and applicability was also called into question by workshop participants.

From an ABCD perspective, there was agreement that rights could broadly be framed as assets. Part of the criticism stemmed from the fact that human rights focus on individuals (as opposed to collective, or other, rights), and the view that in certain contexts, the notion of rights may itself not be seen as legitimate (e.g., an externally-imposed idea) or useful (e.g., claiming rights can carry considerable risks).

Meanwhile, the principles of ABCD place Indigenous and endogenous ways of knowing, being, acting collectively, pursuing development (and claiming rights) at the centre. In other words, because ABCD principles can be interpreted broadly, are not universally applied, are voluntary, and are contextual, they may not necessarily be tied directly to human rights, though the outcomes may be in support of human rights. Whereas HRBAs prescribe the ends of development (and provides principles for the means), ABCD emphasizes the means, and trusts that the ends will constitute an improved situation for those involved. As a Coady staff member put it, “the end game is not the same for everyone” (2017).

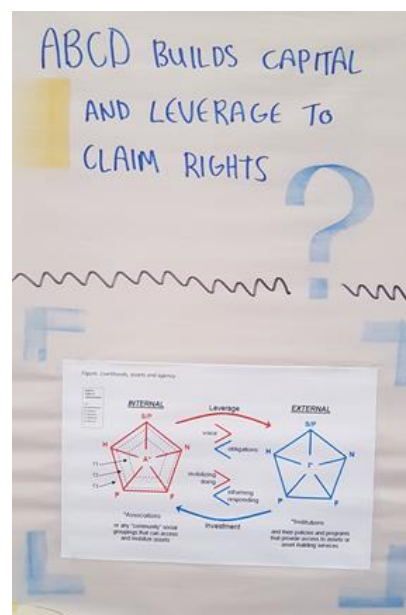


Figure 4: Workshop poster on one frame of analysis: The relationship between assets and rights

According to some participants, one advantage of ABCD was that it allows for flexibility, a deep understanding of the context, and caters to local identities, preferences and priorities (Fuchs, 2018). This emphasis on the local was also considered a drawback because the approach can be too specialized to have broader impact and scale, and too many nuances for a unified goal or agenda. Grounded in the pursuit of human rights, HRBAs, on the other hand, may have the advantage of building trans-local movements that span across borders through technology to have more reach and influence among a variety of stakeholders seeking the same goal (Coady staff member, 2017; Resource person, 2017).

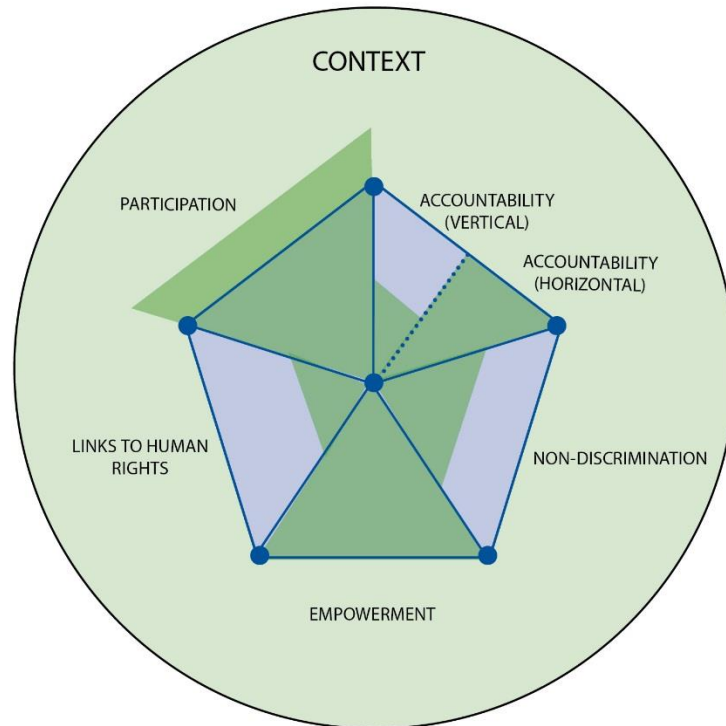
## What We Learned: Lessons and Paths Forward

### *On Synergies and Tensions*

From the discussions and feedback received, there is significant recognition of the compatibilities and potential for synergies between ABCD and HRBAs, albeit with some caveats. Moving the analysis from the seven linkages proposed in the discussion paper and

workshops to using the key elements of an HRBA as our lens, we hope to have moved beyond some of the inevitable but rich debates that took place, towards grounding some of these synergies (and tensions) in one conceptual frame. As we understood it through the workshops, Figure 5 maps out the extent to which ABCD (in dark green shading) aligns with (or exceeds) those key elements (in blue shading) in a particular community context (light green shading).

Figure 5. Mapping ABCD's Alignment with Key Elements of an HRBA



With its solid track record of meaningful engagement, building capacity and capital, and bottom-up development successes, ABCD is well aligned to drive or to support the *empowerment* and *participation* aims of HRBAs. Indeed, ABCD's grounding in endogenous, participatory, community-based, and citizen-driven processes may push its emphasis on *participation* beyond that implied by HRBAs. As such, participation of this nature tends to benefit from a stronger connection to the cultural and identity-based realities of the community development context than rights-based participation.

Again, associational life, civic duty (horizontal citizenship and *accountability*) is important with both approaches, with HRBAs clearly placing a greater focus on the vertical dimension than ABCD. Meanwhile, ABCD processes may incorporate (or not) an equity and inclusion lens (i.e., by making concerted efforts to engage marginalized groups, or to emerge within those groups), and may frame (or not) their aims around claiming rights. As such, ABCD potentially, but not necessarily, aligns with the other three elements of an HRBA: *non-discrimination*, *linking to rights*, and (vertical) *accountability*.

Admittedly a simplistic analysis, the above still harkens to one of the critiques of ABCD as system maintaining, or as necessary, but not sufficient to attain social justice, as participation

and empowerment can occur without impacting on power relationships with duty bearers and the systems in place that allow for poverty, inequality, and unjust access to rights to exist.

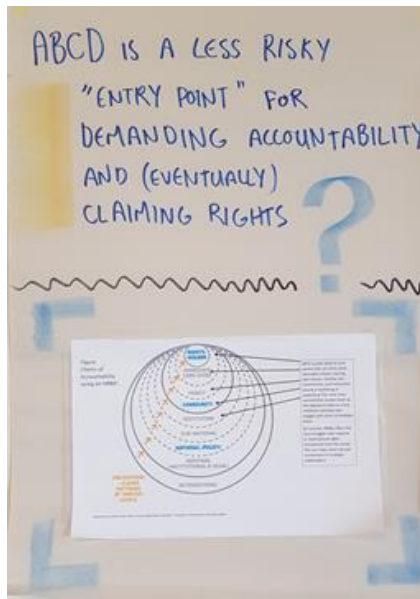


Figure 6: Workshop poster on one frame of analysis: Entry points for action

That said, ABCD has the potential to address one of the critiques of HRBAs: that these are difficult to operationalize because they are not contextually-driven enough, because they can be perceived as confrontational and threatening (and therefore carry risk), because they require more access to and engagement with diverse stakeholders (including duty bearers), and thus require more time and (often external) resources. ABCD's starting point, geared toward opportunities and positive attributes of communities, can lead to quick wins, address people's immediate situations, and ignite a sense of possibility and motivation that support the longer-term objective of seeking redress, achieving accountability, and claiming rights.

Further, ABCD practitioners (2018) highlighted how the approach does, sometimes, influence systemic factors, increasing citizen participation in public decision-making and creating more space for ownership, and therefore sustainability. This reduces the likelihood of ineffective programs and policies (thereby reducing wasteful spending), and creates more balanced and mutually-beneficial

partnerships.

What clearly emerged is that the extent to which one or another (or both) approach is appropriate depends on context.

### *On Context, Systems, and the (Messy) Realities of Implementation*

A second current through the discussions is the tension between theory and practice and the place that context has in bridging it. Legal, political, economic, cultural, social, and environmental systems influence which approach (or approaches) might be appropriate, effective, and responsible in any given context. For instance, the space that exists for citizens to organize to take action and exert voice, a government's willingness and capacity to respond, and the level of awareness of communities around their rights and responsibilities were cited as key considerations.

Where governments cannot or will not respond to community-level action, an ABCD approach has been criticized for offloading government obligations onto communities while at the same time building the agency to confront duty bearers when cracks within the system appear. Yet where civic space is restricted and rights-based action and advocacy carry serious risks, ABCD can provide a more accessible entry point to social change work, as it is arguably less threatening to institutions.

Obviously, the reality of implementation is not as clear cut as following a set of principles or a methodology, and some participants stressed the importance of looking more closely at practical examples and cautioned against an ABCD–HRBA dichotomy. To overcome this, a systems thinking approach could further refine a conceptual framing of these approaches in a particular community, or around a particular set of issues (or rights). By reminding ourselves

that development is about more than participatory approaches, understanding the broader systems within which those have to operate, it may become clearer whether it is best to work within the system to achieve change, work to change the system (e.g., so it is more aligned with HR), or both.

### *On Relationships and Leadership*

Both ABCD and HRBAs rely on building, strengthening, or transforming relationships. This is at the core strengthening *power with*, building social capital, and building horizontal citizenship and accountability. Relationships are also key in linking rights holders to duty bearers, and finding ways to help the duty bearers meet their obligations, whether through collaborative, facilitated means (e.g., dialogue, capacity building), through investments in self-driven initiatives (e.g., policy responses to support communities mobilizing their assets effectively), or through making demands (e.g., advocacy and activism).

In this light, ABCD has been used as a language to have more nuanced conversations around the social contract, seeking the right balance between horizontal and vertical forms of citizenship:

What can communities do better than institutions with their own resources? What can communities initiate, but require partnerships with others for additional resources? What do governments need communities to contribute in order to supply rights and entitlements due to lack of resources, concerns over ownership, and attention to the nuances and particulars of each community? What should governments simply be providing—without participation—in the way of services endorsed in the social contract? (Coady staff member, 2017, adapted from McKnight, 2013).

Again, the answers to these questions are context-specific, and they raise the issue of leadership. While ABCD's explicit bias is for a citizen-led approach and HRBAs propose a set of roles and responsibilities for both rights holders and duty bearers, there is a spectrum of roles that citizens and civil society actors can play in mediating these relationships of accountability, investments, or other. ABCD practitioners speak of the important roles “gappers” play in bridging communities and institutions, while scholars of citizenship have framed this as *mediating* citizenship (von Lieres & Piper, 2014). This involves a variety of roles, at least at the outset: facilitating processes to raise awareness, contributing to citizen empowerment, building relationships, fostering dialogue, creating spaces for engagement between citizens (rights holders) and decision makers (duty bearers), whether these are articulated formally within the context of the state or not. It also serves as a reminder that those seeking to use ABCD and/or HRBAs must be aware of the players and their relative levels of power.

### *On Process and Methodology: Lost in Translation?*

We draw another set of lessons from the methodology and process we used to gather practitioner reflections. Substantively, participants in all three workshops and during the online course generally had very few issues with the linkages proposed between ABCD and HRBAs. However, they reacted critically to how those were framed. As explained above, we posed binary questions and deliberately phrased linkages as broad, sometimes blunt, statements. This did provoke reflection as intended, but some participants found the process unnecessarily divisive, polarizing, and purist.



There were also objections to some of the language used. For example, some participants replaced the word “asset” with “strength” because of the former’s neoliberal and narrowly understood definition related to economic development. The term *investment* sometimes provoked the same reactions. Second, *citizenship* and *rights* were, at times, contentious. Although *citizenship* was defined to include both informal and formal characteristics (beyond legal rights, for example), some felt the term was exclusionary in that it ignored the informal ways that citizenship is expressed, for example, through self-help movements or through interactions between different layers of decision-makers, such as those outside of the state. Certain perspectives challenged the notion of rights tied to legal understandings, pushing instead for a broader view of the concept, including collective and other cultural rights that predate the inception of (and coexist alongside) “universal” human rights and other legal regimes.

This led to participants sometimes talking at cross purposes while describing similar concepts or ideas, using different terms from their particular field or personal experience. Indeed, this linguistic challenge remains, to some degree, even as we attempt to distill common tenets to these approaches.

Finally, a further piece of related research that emerges from this work is the importance of moving from frames, concepts, and principles—with very few intentional and concrete examples—to exploring practical experiences from the ground up to see how linking ABCD and HRBAs operates in practice. As an educational institution grounded in practice, this seems like a logical next step for the Coady Institute.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In December 2016, we were challenged by a few participants of Coady’s Diploma in Development Leadership who, at the end of their 5-month program, were left wondering how the ABCD principles they had learned and observed connected to the human rights-based approaches they already used in their work. It was a good question, and we hope to have scratched the surface towards a response. Building on the 2017 discussion paper we produced based on Coady’s original work in these areas and a scan of the literature, this paper has summarized the reflections we have drawn from multiple discussions and debates with both ABCD and human rights practitioners.

As an *Innovation in Thinking*, we acknowledge that the conceptual focus we have had throughout this process provides only a partial picture of what linking ABCD and HRBAs looks like in reality. Yet, we believe that it is a useful starting point to build upon for further exploration. Again, as the global SDGs continue to guide development agendas, it remains important to “put hands and feet” on participatory approaches that not only connect development to the universal values of human rights and dignity (see Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.), but also couch those goals and targets in context-appropriate, community-driven initiatives.

In hosting discussions around the approaches, we hope to have addressed in part some of the critiques of each—inasmuch as considering the complementarities can shine a light on areas for improvement in each approach. That said, we are reminded of the limitations of merely juxtaposing approaches and of the importance of moving beyond an “either/or” mindset around the fundamentals of each approach. Instead, the focus needs to be on how the approaches might adapt (and combine) for greater impact.



On the one hand, ABCD's focus on the local level can be enhanced with HRBAs' explicit connection beyond local dynamics to larger systemic issues. Similarly, ABCD principles are effective in shifting mindsets and mobilizing bottom-up, citizen-led action, but then what? How can HRBAs help answer that question by providing a goal (the full realization of human rights) and a normative framework to guide the process? On the other hand, HRBAs are critiqued for being difficult to implement. If ABCD has had a good track record of applying at least some of the key elements of HRBA (empowerment, participation, non-discrimination, accountability, esp. between rights holders), then integrating ABCD within an HRBA (where it is complemented with explicit links to rights and vertical accountability) can perhaps be an innovative pathway to implementing HRBAs.

So, *is it either/or?* Based on our own experience and that of our graduates and other practitioners, we believe that it is not. As we move from our initial question in the introduction, another set of questions emerge, connected to the fact that HRBAs are plural because they are not one specific approach: there are many HRBAs. Perhaps a question to ask, then, is how to adapt ABCD to become more of an HRBA? Or how to adapt HRBAs to include asset-based ways of thinking and doing? Or whether the two approaches are simply different shades of the same thing? A related thread to keep in mind is the evolution and expansion of rights within the human rights framework, as well as the diversity in rights regimes that govern various groups or people (e.g., customary rights), which can challenge us "not to reduce rights, a broader concept, to 'human' rights" (D'Souza, 2018, p. 3). In doing so, perhaps further alignment with an ABCD approach would emerge.

Finally, this *Innovation in Thinking* is just that: challenging ourselves to think in a novel way about approaches fundamental to Coady's work. While one lesson is that there is no shortage of combinations and permutations to consider linkages between ABCD and HRBAs in theory; however, there is only so much value in doing so before one has to explore this in context and in practice. And indeed, we recommend moving in this direction to advance this work further.

In terms of practice, it will be important to identify and work with organizations, groups, and communities who are combining (or grappling with) both approaches. Exploring practice will continue to inform the preliminary theoretical outlines above, and couch these reflections more concretely within the broader systems at play in different contexts. It may also be useful to revisit Coady's previous work on [political and economic citizenship](#) through this lens, as it informed some of the analyses and frameworks proposed here.

As an educational institution, this nexus of theory and practice ought also to inform future curriculum, tailored to global practitioners of either approach. For instance, this could involve testing how to infuse human rights into some of the pedagogical models and tools of ABCD (e.g., appreciative inquiry, asset mapping) as rights do constitute assets that every person (at least potentially) has. These potential next steps would hopefully move us closer to answering the question that sparked this work in 2016, when our participants posed it.

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