

## **A Working Guide to the Asset Based Community Development Approach in Egypt**

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### **Abstract**

Many communities in Egypt, specifically in the rural areas, are unquestionably distressed due to the major economic and political shifts that have occurred over the past few years. Strategies of community development are currently viewed as radical remedies for poverty-related problems. In Egypt, community development strategies are usually driven by traditional approaches, including charity-, needs- and rights-based approaches which focus on basic human needs such as shelter and food. These approaches have major limitations as they ignore the structural causes of poverty and address symptoms only. Therefore, an alternative capacity-focused practice becomes an urgent need. This study argues that Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) could offer a coherent strategy of sustainable development for rural and poor communities in Egypt. The research presents a detailed and practical stepwise model for the implementation of the ABCD approach in rural areas, derived from both the Egyptian experience and international guidelines. The results make a substantial contribution to the understanding of the reasons for success, and challenges, of the ABCD approach. Thus, a possible way could be paved to generalize this bottom-up development strategy for rural communities. The findings of the study are most relevant to developing countries, and to those emerging from state capitalism and centrally planned economies.

**Keywords:** asset based, development, rural communities, developing countries, Egypt

## Introduction

According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) Egypt's poverty rate reached 26.3% for the year 2013 compared to 25.2% in 2011. The latest official data of CAPMAS indicates that 49.9% of Egyptians were below the upper poverty line in 2015. In the same year, the World Bank mentioned that 28% of the population lives in extreme poverty, with poverty rates as high as 60% in rural Upper Egypt. Poverty is increasing continuously, particularly in rural areas. Poverty rates in rural areas constitute 42% of the total Egyptian population, in comparison to 7% in urban cities (El-Tawila et al., 2013). One of the main differences between rural and urban Egypt is access to public infrastructure. Inhabitants of rural areas, unlike their urban counterparts, rarely have access to electricity, water or sewage system (Nagi, 2001). Even within rural areas, poverty rates differ from one province to another; rural areas of Upper Egypt are much more impoverished than those in Lower Egypt. For instance, three governorates in Upper Egypt – Assiut, Al-Minya and Suhaj – have 794 villages where impoverished people constitute 82% of the total number of poor people in the countryside (CAPMAS, 2012).

Although a number of other inveterate factors, including isolation, unemployment, lack of education and deteriorated health services contribute enormously to poverty, strategies of community development are currently viewed as the radical remedies for poverty and poverty-related problems. Eradication of poverty and community development became more interdependent goals after they were highlighted by the United Nations (United Nations, 2000) as goal number one and eight respectively in the millennium development goals (MDGs) (Khadka, 2012). As a result, the concept of community development in accordance with the concept of poverty became intertwined and passed through various stages of remodeling. The strategies used to tackle poverty, and develop communities into more humanized and livable places, mostly need focus. Adams and Page (2003) argued that solving societal problems, especially those pertained to education and medical care, could mitigate poverty-related problems. While Olivares and Santos (2009) found that launching small enterprises, and supplying the poor with loans and planned frameworks could serve as a feasible solution for poverty, some countries provide a monthly allowance to fresh graduates and unemployed citizens in an attempt to protect them from poverty. Other researchers have suggested that poverty could be diminished by decreasing the wage gap, providing food security and eradicating illiteracy (Fahmy, 2004). These strategies mainly focus on basic human needs and rights such as shelter, primary health care, water supply, and humanitarian food aid. They are usually driven from traditional development approaches to development, such as charity-needs-based and rights-based approaches (Nagi, 2001).

Most traditional approaches are externally-focused mechanisms that have been adopted extensively to eradicate poverty and accomplish the MDGs. The implications of such approaches cannot be discounted; nevertheless, these are associated with certain limitations that hinder their ability to address policies and regulations that could make radical changes (Uvin, 2007). Long-term problems such as poverty cannot be solved by such approaches alone, and can often be exacerbated by the influx of external resources. The strategy of traditional approaches views the community as a set of needs and problems. This forces community leaders to distort the shape of their communities, highlight problems and deficiencies, and hide capacities and strengths. Leaders are acknowledged by how many resources are attracted to the community, not on how self-reliant the community has become (Marglin, 2008). This strategy denies the basic community wisdom, discourages people from participating at higher community development levels; thus, community members start to feel powerless and see

themselves as people with special needs that can only meet by outsiders. In other words, they get converted into clients rather than citizens (Keeble & Meisel, 2006). Furthermore, focusing on resources based on needs or rights directs the benefits to suppliers, rather than the needy community members (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1997).

Traditional approaches generally require outside expertise, funding and resources which perpetuates the local perception that only outside experts can provide real help and solve problems. They also create a wall between lower income communities and the rest of society; make local groups deal more with external parties than with individuals of their own communities, and eventually weaken the social bond within communities (Roehlkepartain, 2005). Reliance upon needs identified as the sole way to determine what the community deserved could be destructive to its well-being; this creates an endless cycle of dependence as current problems must be worse than those of the previous year for fund to be renewed. Further, the way to determine what the community deserves is questionable. It is corrupted with subjectivity because outsiders are responsible for judging the importance of certain community needs which they are not fully aware of (Keeble, 2006). Traditional strategy can guarantee only survival, but can never lead to serious change or community development as it keeps alive the image of the philanthropist and the needy; and needs of the poor are only met when resources are available (Boyd et al., 2008).

While there are circumstances where some outside assets may be necessary, the way to sustainable resolutions always originates from inside the community (Rans & Green, 2005). In response to these excessively shortages-based methodologies came an alternative capacity-focused practice called the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. ABCD has attracted the attention of community development academics and practitioners as an alternative strategy for development in urban and rural communities. It was created in 1993 by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. Asset-based approaches recognize and build on a combination of the human, social and physical capital that exists within local communities. It is an internally focused methodology, and aims to reduce poverty through sustainable development, participation and citizen empowerment (Fisher et al., 2009).

ABCD could be seen as an approach for development, as a set of methods for community mobilization, and as a strategy for sustainable community development. As an approach to development, it depends on the principle that the recognition of qualities, natural resources, gifts and assets of members and communities is more acceptable in motivating constructive activity for change than a single concentration on the needs, deficiencies and problems. Seeing the glass half full or half empty is a fundamental principle of ABCD (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003); it is not to deny the real deficits that a community confronts, but to stimulate a positive charge on how every single part has a value, and contribute in significant accomplishments to community development.

Following this approach is a set of methods, called ABCD process, that have been used as a platform to compile starting communities around common framework, and to facilitate communication within, as well as sorting some ideas on mapping the capabilities of the community (Boyd et al, 2008). McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) proposed thorough guidelines to facilitate the ABCD process. The ABCD process could be conceptualized as a strategy for sustainable community-driven development. Beyond the identification and mobilization of particular community assets, ABCD approach focuses on restating micro community assets – physical or human resources – to the macro external environment. In other words, a great

amount of effort is made to destruct non-tangible insulated walls around local communities. More attention is paid to the community position in relation to local institutions and external economic environments (Pan et al., 2005). Asset-based approach recognizes and builds on a combination of human, social and physical capitals that exist within local communities. It complements public services and traditional methods for reducing poverty and creating public value (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993).

In Egypt, ABCD is quite well-known among developmental organizations; nevertheless, it is not incorporated in their development activities. Several international and national development organizations such as Copse Egypt and Center for Development Services (CDS) employ ABCD terms and equivalent concepts on their websites. Despite this, their development programs follow traditional approaches to development, and ABCD has not been translated into the implementation stage. On the contrary, the Egyptian Small Enterprise Development Foundation (ESED) is a non-governmental organization that adopts and embraces the ABCD approach in all of its activities and community development projects. It was founded in 2003 and concentrates its activities in rural communities of Upper Egypt. Therefore, this organization and its programs were chosen to achieve the research objectives of the current study.

This study has two interrelated purposes. The main objective is to comprehensively examine the application of the ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt through scrutinizing one ESED activity as a case study in a retrospective manner. The research aims to translate such activities into well-identified steps and clear processes derived from both the McKnight and Kretzmann (1997) guidelines and the Egyptian experience. Thus, a proposed model of ABCD implementation could be introduced to generalize this bottom-up development strategy all over distressed communities in Egypt. Another purpose of the research is to explore and document the outcomes, challenges and reasons of success of the ABCD approach in Egypt; this would serve as a directory for further projects, and give a chance for community developers to build upon former experiences.

## **Methods**

Data gathering for this study was dependent on qualitative research methods, and mainly focused on meanings, views, and perceptions, where participants' descriptions of their situation was highly valued. Multiple methods, including in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted. This variation was valuable as it ensured validity and reliability of data. The questions were designed to elicit a vivid picture of participants' perspectives of the ABCD approach, and the current status of community development in Egypt. The questions were semi-structured to let the interviewees talk freely, and probing questions were asked if the discussion skewed to unneeded directions; questionnaires were used in some interviews (Annexes 1-11).

Two IDIs were conducted, with the technical manager and the site manager of Al-Kayat project of the ESED. The discussions during these interviews pertained to details of the process they use for community development, and day-to-day activities of the project. Another interview was conducted with the administrative manager of the ESED; questions pertained to the successful methods of management of development projects. In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted with the three of them, and two community developers who work with the ESED. As well, two interviews were done with community developers working at different grassroots organizations in Al-Kayat village; they were considered beneficiaries and

community developers. Questions about race, participation, and the impact of the project on the villagers were asked. Two more IDIs were conducted with the beneficiaries of the project. Similar questions were asked, in addition to questions about the outcomes of the project and challenges they faced. An additional interview was done with a community developer working at the CDS organization; questions about the approaches they adopted in their projects, challenges they face and the future of community development in Egypt were addressed. The final interview was conducted with the director of the innovation unit of the Egyptian ministry of local development. The questions in this interview focused on the role of the government in community development, and the current developmental programs of the ministry. Quotes of the interviewees were used as needed in the Findings section of this study, followed by the interview number.

Purposive sampling strategy was used in selecting participants; preliminary criteria relevant to the research objectives were predetermined to guide the selection process. The criteria included: participants should include both community developers and beneficiaries, the ratio between pioneers and novices was weighed, and diversity in demographics, educational background, and affiliated sectors were taken into consideration. The number of interviews was determined on a theoretical saturation basis, when data no longer bring additional insights to the research.

### **Case study: “Al-Kayat Village”**

Additionally, a case study approach guided the documentation of the research. As Yin (2008) argues, case studies are the preferred strategy when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary and real-life phenomenon. The Al-Kayat village was selected as an optimum rural case in which ABCD approach is implemented. It is one of the poorest villages of Al-Minya province, located in Upper Egypt. The Al-Kayat is extremely marginalized and isolated from the government services including education, health care, infrastructure and urbanization. This greatly minimizes job vacancies, and in turn, aggravates unemployment. Moreover, Al-Kayat suffers from political conflict and intermittent religious conflict. In terms of assets, it has natural assets summarized in the land and palms, and human assets summarized in the large number of inhabitants and basic farming skills. The village's economy is based on date trade. Although the palms are the major assets of the village, they represent a problem. The palm fronds (the hard leaves of the palm) are aggregated in piles everywhere in the village; it blocks the way, causes fires and sometimes injures children. From this problem, the idea emerged of converting the palm fronds to wood. The project of converting fronds to wood started in 2010. It is still operational and up till now the results are promising. From the fronds, two products are produced—parquet wood, which is used for the floor of fancy houses and hotels; and MDF wood which used for building homes and furniture of villagers. Moreover, from the fronds' residues a poultry feed was produced which increases the productivity by 25% more than regular feed. In addition, the project provides a number of job opportunities and adds skills to the villagers. The products of the projects are being sold in many exhibitions, and the revenue is used to cover the project expenses and providing other services for the village.

### **Ethical considerations**

All research activities including IDIs and FGD were started after receiving IRB approval (# 14-15-21; Annex 12). The interviews were conducted in Arabic, then translated and transcribed in English by the researchers. Before conducting the interviews, all participants were informed about the nature, purpose and possible outcomes of the research through the informed consent (Annex 13); and permission was obtained on record, where needed. All interviews, recordings

and handouts were kept confidential; names and initials never disclosed, and the data were analyzed and interpreted by the researchers.

## **Findings**

The first part of the findings defines the development activities conducted by ESED, and puts them in a stepwise framework guided by McKnight and Kretzmann's ABCD approach.

### **Step 1: Determination of the location**

Determination of the community deserving help is the first step in any development approach, and is also a very difficult step that organizations sometimes cannot accomplish by themselves.

*“Sometimes, we chose the village by ourselves and in other cases, external entities offer a village for us, but in both cases, we have certain inclusion criteria that should be fulfilled in the village” IDI #02*

Strategies used to locate the deserving village differ from one project to another. For instance, some villages were selected because they were categorized among the poorest 1,500 villages in the UN report of 2003, others were suggested by private companies as part of their corporate social responsibility. However, selection of Al-Kayat village was done through field study by ESED with the help of the Resala charity organization. The ESED prepared a questionnaire as a guide to compare 11 villages in Al-Minya. This included questions about the number of palm trees, unemployment rates, rental rates, daily wages, local industries, and local NGOs and their activities. Then 22 volunteers from Resala took over the field study. They were divided into 11 teams each comprised two volunteers and started to collect the data from villagers, grassroots organizations and local directorates.

After deliberating upon the results of the field study and reports of the World Bank and the Egyptian center for economic studies on 1,000 of the poorest villages in Egypt, Al-Kayat village was selected. The selection process usually differs from one village to another; however, each village should possess certain criteria to be accepted.

*“No specific system for selection, but common attributes should be inscribed in our selected villages; number one is extreme poverty, then assets availability then accessibility” IDI #03*

Three conditions need to exist in a village to be selected; the village should be poor, contain assets, and be accessible. Poverty and asset availability are two consistent factors that cannot be separated. If the village is poor but has no assets, the project will have nothing to build upon and cannot be operated. Vice versa, if the village is not poor and has assets, then the core value of development and poverty eradication is lost and there is no need for the project. Additionally, reports from international organizations such as the UN and World Bank about development in Egypt always act as guides in the selection process.

### **Step 2: Exploring community assets**

Step two of ESED development approach views the glass as half full. Regardless of the deficiencies and needs, it builds an inventory of all the strengths and qualities within the community. Beaulieu (2002) proposes that the ideal way to address the difficulties of any group is to precisely evaluate its accessible assets, and suggests disclosing the learning and abilities existing within the community.

*“The step is pretty compounded, it includes sub activities. It usually starts with selection of team number one, who will be responsible for initiating the communication between the ESED and the village” IDI #01*

Discovering community assets could be subdivided into two successive stages. Stage one encompasses selection of team members (team 1). Certain features should be present in the members of team 1, thus a lot of time is allocated to select them. The members should be from diverse backgrounds and professions. Social, administrative, technical and psychological skills should be represented within the team. Furthermore, they should be reputable, trusted and have a valuable position in society. The team members are often life mavens and have former experience in community development projects. Spending more time at this stage is recommended, as team 1 will be responsible for building mutual trust between ESED and the community. All team members settle in the community as they try to join the villagers in their daily activities. The exact period of this step is determined according to the nature and complexity of the project, but is usually not less than three months. Creating a robust relationship between the team and the villagers will transfer the process organically to stage two.

*“Then this team will start doing a comprehensive study that enables us to know everything about the village such as natural and human resources and also allows us to get closer to the lifestyle of the villagers. It occurs through informal interviews” IDI #02*

Stage two involves conducting a comprehensive field study by team 1. The principal objective of this study is to identify all the natural, physical and social assets that could be mobilized, in line with understanding power relations and gender sensitive issues, and realizing norms, culture and key personnel within the community. First, the team engages in formal visits to community leaders to introduce the project, then continue with storytelling tools to elicit the needed information from community members. Second, a preliminary feasibility study of the project could be done to give a general idea about the benefit risk ratio of the project. The elongation of this step differs according to the social acceptability of the community and size of the project. For instance, this step took longer for the Al-Kayat project. Identification of community assets depends greatly on the results of the comprehensive field study and, to a lesser extent, on official data obtained from CAPMAS, local directorates or other NGOs. This step yielded the identification of palm fronds as a precious source of wood in Al-Kayat village, and exploration of neglected assets in other villages. Kong (2008) supports this idea of finding significant value in casual conversations among community members, which can evolve into practical applications for identified assets.

### **Step 3: Preparation for mobilization of assets**

Step three expands to develop an equal identity and shared vision for the project through formation of the steering committee mentioned by Kretzmann and McKnight in 1993. This step is a transition state between the idea of the project and its actual implementation. It involves numerous tasks that build upon step 2, while all the data used to execute these tasks are derived from the comprehensive field study that is done by a team 1 in the previous step.

*“The preparation phase is the most important step; it includes a lot of activities, which after that determine the success of the project. We can say that this step is the manual for the project; it basically consists of conducting scientific research and long-term plans for the project” IDI #02*

The preparation step comprises three stages that are done in varying orders according to requirements of projects. It usually starts with conducting scientific research in which community developers integrate their technical and scientific backgrounds to turn neglected community assets into profitable resources. For example, in the Al-Kayat project, researchers conducted various experiments on converting the palm frond into wood. After reaching a satisfactory point in scientific research, the planning stage starts. The planning phase comprises a detailed feasibility study and generic project plan, which identify the time plan, financial plan and resource plan of the project. A communication plan that determines various entities and institutions that would help in the execution of the project, usually follows the project plan. Aigner (2002) supports multisectorial collaboration through ensuring that community members ought to join as equivalent partners to engender positive impacts for their communities.

*“Choosing the team no. 2 members should be done carefully; they will monitor the activities throughout the project and build friendship with the villagers. The team of Al-Kayat project is carrying out the project activities during the day and is making social visits (such as attending weddings, condolences and frolics) during the evening. The choosing of facilitation committee members should also be done carefully; these members are appeared to be powerful, trusted and have enthusiasm towards the project, and the information about them are obtained from the comprehensive field study of the previous step” IDI #01*

The final stage of step three involves formation of team 2 and the steering committee of the project. Members of team 2 are community developers selected from the ESED; they are usually youth of diverse backgrounds, and could also be culled from members of team 1. Their role is to ensure implementation of the project and compliance with the plan. They are not only responsible for facilitating day-to-day activities and overcoming problems, but also building trust and social relations with the community members. Team 2 continues until the end of the project as it represents the connector between ESED and the community. The number of team members and number of days they are going to stay vary according to the complexity of the project. In the Al-Kayat project, two members are responsible for such activities and spend three days every week in the village. Selection of the steering committee members is also done in this phase. It is composed of individuals from the community, who were previously recognized by ESED members as natural leaders. They are individuals who have a strong passion for the cause, appreciated status and good reputation among villagers. They are insiders; therefore, they are able to successfully lead the way for team 2 throughout the project.

#### **Step 4: Implementation of asset mobilization**

Step four incorporates the actual processes of asset mobilization; it starts with small scale implementation, then customization, and ends with large scale implementation. Lack of capacity to support continuous participation can form a barrier to community mobilization (Foster-Fishman, 2006). Consequently, the tasks of team 2 continue with this step.

*“Operationalization of the project should flow smoothly if the previous three steps were perfectly done. Thus, this step is easy compared to the previous ones” FGD #04*

Mobilization of community is composed of several activities. First, the research that was conducted in laboratories should be transferred to the community. However, this is not blindly transferred; it is modified to suit the village circumstances and villagers' skills. This involves the replacement of sophisticated devices with simple instruments that community members can readily operate, and taking into consideration environmental conditions of the village. A pilot experiment is then done, and the final product is subject to certain tests to ensure validation

and compliance with quality standards. After meeting the requirements, a training program is conducted for the villagers to familiarize them with the process, instructions and instruments. Ultimately, the project progresses to large scale production. In certain cases, female villagers have played a successful role in actuating the project and controlling turnover problems.

### **Step 5: Independence of the project**

The final step describes the post-mobilization stage; different courses of action are taken, according to the conditions of the community. However, they all aim to ensure the success and perpetuation of the project.

*“No specific action is taken at this stage; we do the action that the community members prefer. Sometimes, it is a company while in other cases it is a charity organization; it is all about their preference” IDI #06*

This step involves finding an entity to take over the project. The objective of this step is to ensure sustainability of the project through proper management by community members. It begins when ESED members observe that their domination over the project has become unnecessary for its existence. The interpretation of such observation differs from one project to another according to the overarching circumstances of the community. In certain cases, a grassroots organization, which has been established before, manages the project and handles revenues in discharging charity activities. In other cases, an association is established to administer the project, which comprises community leaders, members of the steering committee and interested community members; and in some communities, the project is controlled by the village mayor. Members of the association are usually selected on recommendations of team 2. Certain proceedings are performed to prepare leaving the community. In previous projects, the role of ESED was over after optimizing all operations within the project, ensuring its success and perpetuation; no further interference was necessary. However, at the Al-Kayat village, additional action is proposed; an agreement that shapes future communications between the community and ESED would be settled. This conveys that part of the project revenues will be used by ESED for further development projects, and a representative of ESED will be a member in the final project association.

As the Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) process is global in perspective, it concentrates more on the conceptual framework of the ABCD approach, and less on the practical steps that should be implemented. This study found that ESED process addresses the two aspects carefully; it highlights the conceptual framework of ABCD approach and the functional steps efficiently. Moreover, it gives additional insights for location determination and the post-mobilization stage.

The second part of the findings was designed to examine implications of the ABCD approach in rural communities through disclosing outcomes, challenges and reasons for success. The data for this part was obtained mainly from beneficiaries of the projects and, to a lesser extent, from the community developers.

## **Outcomes**

### **Development of local economy**

Implementation of the ABCD approach leads to mobilizing natural and physical assets. This effects positively the economy of the community, and the wellbeing of its members. The ABCD approach does not seek external help; it depends on utilizing the resources and positive

aspects within the community to achieve sustainable economic development (Pinkett, 2000). Al-Kayat village has 25,000 palm trees which naturally produce dates and palm fronds. Palm fronds were not only a neglected asset earlier, but they also represented a major cause of injury to the village as a fire hazard. Through embracing the ABCD approach, neglected palm fronds are converted to valuable raw material, wood. The products of the projects are sold, and revenues used to improve community services including, but not limited to, infrastructure, education and healthcare. This simple process activates economic self-reliance of community members, and creates a sustainable local economy for marginalized communities. ABCD, as a strategy for sustainable economic development, makes communities less dependent on the state economy and government services.

### **Job opportunities**

Another outcome that was realized from adopting the ABCD approach is generating numerous job opportunities. According to World Development Report (2013), development happens through jobs.

*“Before this project we know nothing except farming, which is not guaranteed. A farmer can work for only five days in a month and each day he earns 30 pounds (\$1.5) and of course 900 pounds (\$45) per month cannot cover his family expenses. Previous projects that were done in the village provided us with jobs, but just like farming they were not guaranteed. In this project I can feel some kind of stability; at least I can draw prospective plans based on my salary.”* IDI #08

Creation of job opportunities brings about a huge reduction in unemployment rates which, in turn, increases productivity and fortifies the local economy of the community. Job vacancies decrease crime rate, immigration rate and psychological disturbances associated with unemployment. Other development approaches can also create job opportunities; however, the opportunities created through adopting the ABCD approach are sustainable ones. The natural assets of the community are sustainable; therefore, jobs created through them are stable. Stabilized jobs provide regular income that can enhance living standards of the workers, and give better access to education and healthcare services. Beyond earnings, jobs provide a sense of security and share in capacity building of community members. Generally, the wellbeing of community members is improved by implementing an ABCD approach to development.

### **Social cohesion**

The importance of social cohesion in any community development work cannot be overstated; it can inevitably lead to success or failure of the project (Perkins et al., 2004).

*“Social conflict is a major problem that we used to face in the beginning of each project, but upon implementing the project, the conflict turned to be harmony”* FGD #04

*“We were eating each other like fish at the beginning of the project, but now we get to know each other better and have the desire to do something to our village”* IDI #05

Due to its tribal structure, rural communities in Egypt suffer from social conflict and in some cases, religious conflict. Moreover, political conflict has risen due to political instability too. Such conflicts are aggravated upon adopting charity, needs or rights development approaches as community members start to fight over the benefits they can gain from externals. Contrarily, the ABCD approach depends on the assets of community members so they feel that externals have nothing to give them; instead, they only help them to exploit their assets. Adopting an

ABCD approach connects the interests of community members; it enables them to have a common background and unifies them around a shared vision. Moreover, it leads to establishing new networks of relationships between conflicting parties. For instance, the steering committee of Al-Kayat project contains members from rival parties; yet they agree on supporting the project and find a way to communicate with each other successfully. Gilchrist (2009) states that networks which connect individuals and various sections of the local community are an invaluable resource, operating as communication systems and organization mechanisms. Hence, the ABCD approach is able to strengthen and extend networks of relationships and, in turn, foster social cohesion in rural communities of Egypt.

### **Empowerment**

A central theme of the ABCD approach is the relocation of power to communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003); this was obviously recognized in the rural community of Egypt under purview here. Empowerment of community members was not only realized from their speeches, but also in their body language and facial expressions.

*“We used to see external people who come and take the fronds for free, but we never know what they are going to do with it. Now no one can deceive us, we became aware of what we have” IDI #09*

*“We have treasures more than urban areas and our products can compete the products of the biggest companies in Egypt” IDI #09*

*“A lot of people from different cities in Egypt come to see our project; they cannot imagine what we have done, and many times television interviews were made with us about the project” IDI #05*

The ABCD approach achieves empowerment through awareness, participation and capacity building of community members. Informing community members about their assets puts aside the idea of ‘philanthropic and needy’ that is associated with other development approaches. Community members have a feeling of richness and enhanced self-esteem. Awareness also decreases reliance on external agencies and eliminates the concept of “only outsiders can help”. Moreover, the active participation of community members in all steps of ABCD process increase their self-confidence and involvement. Capacity building that has been implemented through an ABCD approach also helps in achieving empowerment. Community members have multiple skills; they feel productive and perform various tasks. Empowerment of community members through the ABCD approach turns them from clients to citizens.

### **Challenges**

The asset-based approach holds great promise for development of distressed communities; however, its actual implementation encompasses numerous challenges that could be similar in different rural communities of Egypt.

#### **Lack of trust**

Lack of trust is one of the major challenges for promoters of ABCD approach in rural communities. This may be traced back to the fact that members of these communities have been deceived several times by externals, who tend to use the human and natural resources for their own interests, and never consider community interests.

*“In the beginning, the villagers were always afraid of us. They refuse to take with us, and every time we enter a public place, they tend to leave it. Even when they start to communicate, after a while, they were very cautious not to release any information” IDI #03*

*“When I first met them, and heard about the project, I was nodding my head to pretend I am convinced but deep inside I am not. I only got convinced when I found them living with us” IDI #06*

Exploration of community assets is done through casual discussions between community members and community developers. Lack of trust hinders such effective communication, and could eventually lead to termination of the project, if not overcome. The criteria for team 1 members and the tools they use to conduct field study are key to gain community members' trust. The members of team 1 are usually males, elderly, have good reputation, and have from the villagers' perspective influential professions in society, such as a journalist, engineer or physician. These characteristics are greatly appreciated in rural communities of Egypt. Moreover, the team lives with the community for a long time, adopting the lifestyle of community members. During this time, day-to-day communications and friendly discussions take place. Finally, team 1 does not leave the community until a mutual trust has been achieved.

### **Cultural difference**

Cultural difference is another challenge faced in using the ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt. Culture refers to a set of behaviors, habits, rules, traditions and norms that apply to a particular community. Each village in Egypt has its unique culture that could be completely different from the neighboring village. The success of a development project in a certain community does not refer to its spontaneous success in different communities.

*“The attitude of villagers varies greatly from one village to another within the same district. In some villages, you cannot talk to female villagers while in other villages you can talk, but without making eye contact” “From my point of view, Shammass project was failed due to cultural difference; we were not able to engage within the community culture and understand their customs and traditions” IDI #01*

Understanding the culture of the community before implementing an ABCD approach to development is crucial to achieve success. Moreover, inefficient interpretation of culture within the community inevitably leads to failure of the project. That is what happened in a previous project; community developers were not able to relate to the norms and behaviors of the community members. Consequently, they did not recognize that community members prefer to gain their leaders' satisfaction rather than self-benefits, and the project was terminated. Understanding culture is an ongoing process that starts with step one and continues throughout the ABCD process. In some communities, the steering committee acts as a cultural meeting point between community developers and community members. However, team 2 often takes over the responsibility of understanding the community and culture; and, in turn, adapting the steps of the ABCD process to perfectly fit into the culture.

### **Social conflict**

Most rural communities in Egypt suffer from social conflict. Reasons for social conflict differ from one area to another. For instance, rural communities in Upper Egypt engage in religious conflicts, while rural communities in Lower Egypt suffer from political conflicts. In addition, the tribal structure of rural communities of the West is the reason behind social conflicts. Regardless of the reason, the ABCD approach cannot function in the face of such social

conflict. Conflict is associated with disruption of power, and the ABCD approach needs the collective power of all community members to achieve development.

*“We exert a lot of effort and spend a lot of time to reach an agreement from all stakeholders of the village, but this is necessary for proper implementation of the project” IDI #03*

Resolving the original cause of the social conflict is impossible. Instead, creating a common objective upon which community members agree is the path to unify warring parties. The steering committee, which includes leaders of different interests, enforces them to find a way for productive communication. Moreover, the association that is formed in step five of ABCD approach ensures the sustainability of this effective communication.

### **The development concept**

The idea of endogenous development is an alien concept to rural communities. Community members act as passive consumers in development projects based on charity-, needs- or rights-based approaches. Therefore, they view themselves as a vulnerable group of people with many needs and problems. The development concept for them is all about gaining services from outsiders with minimal participation. Active interaction of community members and self-reliance are the cardinal principles in ABCD approach. Here is the challenge: community developers should modulate the concept of development from passive clients to active citizens. Moreover, the involvement of the community developers should be thoughtful to avoid induction of dependency.

### **Reasons for success**

While studying the implementation of the ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt, certain factors have been realized for their great contribution to the success of the approach. Utilization of storytelling tool could be considered a factor for success of the ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt. Storytelling is one of the tools used for needs assessment in needs-based approach. It is based on deriving community needs from the stories narrated by community members. In the ABCD process, the storytelling tool is extensively used to get deeper information about the physical, natural and human assets of the community. In addition, it creates a friendly environment between community developers and community members, and facilitates the social acceptability of the project.

The characteristics of community developers who employ ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt are a major factor for success. All of them have a passion to ensure concrete achievements and a great sense of responsibility towards distressed communities in Egypt. They work in a horizontal hierarchy with team spirit, and conduct weekly meetings to discuss the status of projects. Moreover, they never share personal, religious or political views with community members. Community developers try to be as objective as possible and always envision sustainable development as their ultimate goal.

Certain considerations should be kept in mind to achieve success of the ABCD approach in rural communities of Egypt. First, community developers are very careful about power relations; they always start by conducting meetings with community leaders before members. In addition, they are fully oriented to gender sensitive issues among different communities. Second, community developers incorporate key personnel of the community on the steering committee to ensure their loyalty throughout the project and, in turn, the success of the project. Finally, community developers never initiate a project until previous projects and peers' experiences have been carefully examined.

## Conclusions

By outlining the ABCD process and unpacking its steps and outcomes, this study has served to position ABCD approach as a promising strategy to achieve development and eradicate poverty in rural communities of Egypt. In accordance with that, the research highlighted a few limitations of the approach that should be considered when applying it in similar settings. The asset-based approach to development builds upon strengths and resources that already exist within a community. Therefore, an extremely poor community with no assets cannot embrace the ABCD approach. Moreover, creating a strong relationship between community developers and community members is one of the main pillars upon ABCD process is based. This could lead to personalization of projects in some cases; and community members may refuse to facilitate the process except in the presence of certain community developers whom they trust. Even though the ABCD approach aims to reduce the level of external dependency that is associated with other approaches, it still depends on outsiders help to undertake the development initiative. In addition, sustainable development which is the ultimate goal of the ABCD approach needs external funding to be initiated and a long period of time to be maintained.

The ABCD approach proved to be capable of bringing development and alleviate poverty in rural communities of Egypt. It views community as a source of positive energy and self-sufficiency that can ensure social justice and inclusiveness, and is able to handle changes. However, the efficacy of ABCD does not only depend on the approach itself, but also on how the organizations, individuals and practitioners involved incorporate it within their communities. Besides, establishing and maintaining social cohesion among community members is fundamental to achieve sustainable development. It could also be concluded that ABCD is not a “copy and paste” process; it needs customization and cannot be imitated directly from theories. Another area that needs extensive improvement is the relationship between the government and NGOs. Unfortunately, it was realized in the course of the interviews that government support is diminishing and ineffective. Cooperation is crucial for successful generalization of ABCD in Egypt’s rural communities. The government should play a bigger role in aspects such as monetary aid, technical and marketing support, and elimination of bureaucracy. Finally, this research study developed a directory for further implementation of asset-based sustainable development in Egypt; and more research by different disciplines will be continuously required to fill in emerging gaps of ABCD processes as time goes on.

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