

Question the questionable questions: worklessness or community abundance?

Recently someone asked me this question: “how can you use Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in communities to address a culture of worklessness?”

Questions like this slip below the radar and into common coinage and policy quite regularly, because they reflect a scarcity mindset that is dominant in many societies around the world—especially in the West. This one for example casts aside the capacities and possibilities of entire neighbourhoods to build up their local economies. It also attributes the ‘problem’ to them and/or their culture: their way is the ‘workless’ way. Those on the far right will blame the poor for it; while those on the far left will seek to build technocratic machinery and trickle-down economics to rescue them from it.

In contrast an asset-based perspective works with the belief that enduring change only happens bottom up; when local people believe they have capacities and can create power by coming together in deeper community.

And that change happens from inside out. The syntax of enduring change:

Starts with the identification, connection, and mobilisation of assets that are local and in community control. Putting authority for the invention and production of solutions in the hands of local people, not outside experts.

Then progresses to focus on resources, that are local but outside of community control. Bringing these resources under democratic community influence is made more possible by virtue of the above starting point.

Ultimately powerful, inclusive communities can confidently move towards assets that are outside of community control and proximity when and if they need to—this will not always be easy and hardly every conflict free. This process enables communities who are often defined as problematic and needy to build civic muscle and the collective authority as citizens to produce their own solutions using local resources where appropriate, and then to draw in and on external support as needed. This sequence ensures that when outside solutions come they match up with the abundance of community, not its scarcity.

In contrast a scarcity mindset would lead us to start and all too often remain at the third stage of the sequence described above. Since, the scarcity perspective would have us believe that the limited, yet most valuable resources, exist outside of our communities in institutions. This is a half-baked truth, and even if it were completely true, liberating those external institutional resources without first liberating local capacities results in top down, bureaucratic solutions that simply do not work.

In this blog I want to try to deconstruct the ‘worklessness’ question above. That question on wordlessness emerges from this kind of deficit based view of the world, hence before we can question the question, we have to question the nest (worldview) from which this question and others like it are hatched.

The framing of this particular question for example, is questionable and unhelpful at five separate levels:

- It maps the territory negatively, and then assumes the map is the territory.
- It fails to get to the root of the problem, because it mistakes the symptoms for the cause.
- It creates a dangerous binary equation in thinking about poor people, where the only options are perverse: poor people are either a. deviant, or b. deserving, either way they are powerless.
- It suggests the best solutions come from outside experts.
- It suggests the problem of ‘worklessness’ is persistent, pernicious, permanent and pervasive. It’s part of the ‘culture’ now.

Let’s go through each of these one by one...

1. **The Map is Not the Territory**

Firstly, this question maps the territory negatively, and then assumes the map is the territory: ‘a culture of worklessness.’ Why not a culture of timefulness or of abundant labour? After all the two commodities low-income communities have in abundance is time and labour.

2. **Fails to get to the Root of the Problem**

Secondly, it goes on to mistake the symptoms of a collapse of local community culture for a culture of worklessness. Thereby failing to go to the root of the issue. We can only get to the ‘root’, by asking radical and disruptively innovative questions. That process starts by looking upstream to understand what has caused the density of so called ‘worklessness’ in the first place, or for that matter a culture of low educational attainment, drug use, or whatever pathology takes your fancy.

Misattributing such symptoms and by implication their root causes to the current culture of a community, puts the communities and professional helpers -be they policy makers or development practitioners- in a developmental cul de sac, where the remedies start defining the maladies.

A better question therefore is: how can we support local residents in any given place to re-cultivate a culture of community? And, if we want to be really radical: “how can we support local residents in any given place to re-cultivate a culture of community, despite decades of poor policy decisions, corporate greed, endemic individualism, the ravages of globalization and the tyranny of experts that have eclipsed their indigenous local culture and rich producing capacities?”

In the same way that a common fruit tree disease can destroy the apple producing capacity of an orchard, consumerism, technocracy, and globalisation can cause a culture of production and self-reliance to collapse in human communities. Just as it does not make sense to say the orchard has a culture of non-apple production. It makes ‘none-sense’ to say that communities are possessed of a culture of worklessness. It is shocking to think how often nonsense forms the basis of policy decisions not just with regard to worklessness, but across a range of socio-economic and political issues.

3. Deviant or Deserving?

The third fatal flaw in the question is that it sets communities up to be seen and to see themselves as either deviant or deserving; deviant in the sense that they are workless due to some flaw in their personality, behaviour and / or moral character. Deserving in that they are the sum of their deficiencies, and more likely victims, or easy prey to external forces such as industrialisation because of their deficits and dysfunctions. Hence they need to be rescued.

It is easy for the most part to contest the views of those in the ‘deviant’ school of thought. But, woe-betide anyone who challenges the ‘deserving’ school of thought. They are on the side of the angels, and hell hath no fury like an angel scorned.

The framing of the ‘deserving school’ all too often defines poor people in terms of their consumption of public and third sector services, and is for the most part trapped within the ‘institutional assumption’. That assumption presupposes that services determine wellbeing and income. It remains almost silent on the production capacities of local communities, and marginalized or labeled groups, excepting their capacity to advocate for better services or legislative frameworks that lead to better services.

Of course if you say this in public you best expect to be publicly branded a Neoliberal.

4. Outside Experts know best: The Tyranny of Experts

Fourthly, it places the solution to so called ‘worklessness’ in my hands or some other external ‘expert’, or some piece of magic called ABCD. ‘How can you use ABCD...to address a culture of worklessness?’ Sweeping the tacit knowledge, skills, talents, and capacities of the local people, their cultural heritage, environment and their current local economies aside.

These days we all so love a good ‘programme’, ‘project’ or ‘model’. Urban legend has it that enduring change is just around the corner, it will come in the shape of some external expert who will stay faithful to this model or that, and lead the poor beleaguered masses out of poverty. According to this myth the modern day messiah will come in the form of a social designer, who will use words like ‘prototyping’ instead of ‘pilots’, and end every conversation with “don’t worry there’s an APP for that, and if there isn’t, there soon will be”.

While effective community builders are essential and should be appropriately remunerated in my opinion, their effectiveness does not lie in their fidelity to one model or another, or how tech savvy they are, but in their capacity to form appropriate relationships with and between local residents and the place they move through, with citizens at the centre, and Community Building practitioners in service.

5. The 5 P’s: The Problem IS Persistent, Pernicious, Permanent and Pervasive

Finally, it plays with generalities to steal all hope of a local handmade and homemade solution away, suggesting the community is ensnared by a culture of worklessness. Pretty soon people start assuming ‘everyone around here is unemployed!; that as well as being pervasive, the situation is permanent, and persistent. Eventually people loss hope, and start to believe that that’s just the way things are around here, the perniciousness of it all takes hold; pretty soon onlookers starting thinking that, ‘that place is a backwater of pathology’, and so too do the people who live there.

But here is another angle to seriously consider, who says worklessness is a problem in all instances? Ivan Illich wrote a wonderful reflection on this very question, entitled: “The Right to Useful Unemployment and its professional enemies.”

A Tale of One Community through two lens: scarcity v's abundance

What would this look like in reality? Let's take a scenario and play it out in two ways. The first asks and answer the question of worklessness from a scarcity perspective, the second from the perspective of abundance.

Scenario One/Take #1: Countering a Culture of Worklessness

In a local neighbourhood (near you), where some believe there is a culture of worklessness. Following a local comprehensive community consultations (LCCC) -they even had a party-it was found that a high number of local residents were concerned about the lack of facilities and activities for young girls between the ages of 12 and 15.

The response by agencies was impressively rapid, taking this as their call to action they proceeded to establish an ad hoc local task force, which included local people, that they referred to as 'experts by experience'. This taskforce had representatives from all agencies, especially those that provided family support and young peoples services. They agreed an: 'inter-agency, wrap-around, co-ordinated, integrated, seamless, no-wrong door, person-centred, co-produced approach', to developing programmes for young girls which would be rolled out before the school summer holidays. Just before final sign-off someone suggested that they should throw in the words 'asset-based approach' into the promotional literature because it's in vogue right now, and anyway "these girls have strengths too, right?"



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The programme targeted the most at-risk young girls in the neighbourhood, and provided a range of therapeutic and occupational supports; they also intentionally designed work experience programmes outside of the neighbourhood to raise their aspiration levels. Trained professionals formed trusting relationship with the young people, and the programme evaluation showed that the young people who participated increased in confidence, and life-skills.

How did it work out in terms of the relationship between young people and the wider community? Not so well, not one new trusting relationship was formed between these girls and productive adults living in the neighbourhood. Most of the girls defined that their aspirations had indeed raised, which was code for saying they were now more determined than ever to get out of that neighbourhood: to flee from its 'culture of worklessness'. Well, on balance, at least anti-social behaviour was down that summer, so everyone was happy. Right?

Scenario One/Take #2: Connecting local gifts to nurture local economy

In a local neighbourhood (near you), which some have labeled as having a culture of worklessness, a couple of local neighbours on each street have been having conversations with their neighbours about what they care about enough to act on, and what capacities, skills and talents they have that could be useful toward those ends. They didn't have any pre-engagement agenda, aside from trying to weave the community together.

Nevertheless one of the concerns that several local mothers raised during these relational conversations was that "it's coming close to summer and my girls have nothing to do around here", they felt the absence of some meaningful ways for their daughters to engage in community life, and productive activity generally. Their fear was that if this issue wasn't addressed, 'they'll fall in with the wrong crowd'.

At first each of these mothers raised this concern in isolation of each other, through one-to-one conversations, but with the support of a paid community builder and some of their neighbours they took action. What happened was that some of their neighbours were busy trying to better connect up the neighbourhood by finding out what people cared about, and what capacities, skills etc. that people living in that neighbourhood have to take action. Some of the local residents -who have some or all of the [7 Habits of Highly Connected People](#) -who were leading these conversations brought the seven women together around a kitchen table simply to talk to each other and explore what they might do together that they couldn't do alone.

They started a conversation that also included their daughters, and their connected neighbours pitched in their knowledge of what else was going on in the neighbourhood that could be

helpful. That conversation identified that what the girls wanted was activity that was real, not choreographed, or over programmed, and not aimed at trying to fix them, but that enabled them to be useful and make a contribution.

In essence what they needed, was to be needed, not by outside professionals but by their families and neighbours. They met weekly around that kitchen table for several months, and they thought deeply about the questions they wanted to address; looking at what were the local resources that they could influence that would make for a fun productive summer. They choose not to focus on 'worklessness', and not to sign post their daughters to professionally run programmes.

One girl said: 'you know people think nobody works around here, but lots do', that led to another girl suggesting that they ask local neighbours who are working to bring them to work with them for a day throughout the summer".

The community has a population of about a 1,000 households, and the unemployment rate is extremely high right now: 37% of the working population. That said each evening that year between Easter and the summer holidays these young people and their moms spent time thinking about what they had to share, and what they wanted to learn, and also finding over 100 local neighbours who worked in a wide range of jobs. They spoke to every one of them and got to know them, not just by their job title, but also found out their passions, and hopes for their shared community.

Then they asked each of those working neighbours would they be willing to bring them to work one day over the summer. Nearly everyone said yes, and they were flattered to be asked. And so a summer programme that was not a programme at all was born, using the assets of local people and then going outwards to engage with the assets of each of their places of work, many of which were institutions outside the community, including Police Stations, Hospitals, Churches, For Profit Businesses, Not For Profits. Now the Community was outreaching the institutions, and suddenly the rules of the game had been turned upside down.

The community, in the Take #2 scenario are de facto no different than the first, in fact they are the same people, in the same place, what was different was the practice, and the consequence in the second played through the lens of abundance is that local people have become the exception to the prevailing rule: 'nobody works around here, and the only way that that will change is if someone from outside with expertise comes in to reverse that cultural trend'.

This was not originally the community's rule, they had it imposed from outside, sadly up to that point many local residents especially young people, certainly had internalised it. But just because

you swallow someone else's poison, does not make it yours. The antidote in this instance and many like it is to start with what you have, where you are, not with a view to settling for what you have, or accepting what you've been given, but so that you can make things better, and build the power to change from inside out.

There are no Hollywood endings in either scenario. But I commend the second scenario to you primarily because it seeks to be neither palliative or curative, it falls neither left nor right, it is a handmade and homemade way, that takes the politics of small things and joins them in an act of profound mischief making into a force for emergent and enduring change, that can and does change economies, health and well being.

Today this community through a lens of abundance has created a different script, for themselves and future generations. Of course these kids still struggle to find jobs, fight with their parents, make decisions about illicit substances, and duck out of school on occasion, but they also have networks, that like a complex web weave new possibilities for a sustainable and sustaining livelihood, and now have a context within which they can commit reckless acts of community building towards that and other shared ends.

Today these kids are no longer leaders of tomorrow, they are leaders of today; they are no longer youth at risk, they are youth 'at promise'. They are living proof that it takes a child to raise a village.

It is thus how democracy is made.

Cormac Russell.