

From Deficit-based to Asset-based Community Driven Responses to COVID-19 (Part 1)



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Wednesday, April 29, 2020 -- Cormac Russell

Over the next few months, I will regularly share new parts/sections of an emerging 'Guide for Professionals working in Citizen space, during and beyond COVID-19'. I hope you'll tell me what's useful and what's not, and that you'll also share some stories that support us all to see practical ways to be responsive and generative, in these challenging times.

Over the next two weeks, I will focus on how best to pivot from an exclusively

deficit-based response to the crisis, towards an asset-based community driven approach and I propose 11 shifts in narrative and approach.

Before I share them though, I wish to honour and appreciate professionals all over the world who are doing an amazing job, under extraordinary pressure. Your courage, compassion and inventiveness in the face of extreme stress are deeply valued and rightly celebrated across society. I also share the concerns of many for your wellbeing, and worry that this experience puts too many of you at risk of burnout. You cannot be expected to do this alone.

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Thankfully in every town and hamlet; in every village and estate; in every neighbourhood and parish, there are millions of active citizens engaged in a resurgence, one that will call upon us as residents to welcome functions into our communities traditionally reserved for professionals. The message these active citizens are sending to dedicated professionals is clear; we don't expect you to do this alone. Citizens have a central and irreplaceable role to play through these complex times, for which there is no government or not-for-profit proxy. Examples of this can be seen across the world and are exemplified by examples such as [this community-led effort in London](#).

Professionals and their organisations are in a difficult position, not just because of the immediate medical and social care stresses of the pandemic, but also because they face the pressure of having to strike the right balance in supporting communities to respond to this public health crisis. I see the additional stresses along four interwoven strands, as follows:

1. **On the one hand** if they are too domineering and engage in organisational overreach, they risk overwhelming, undermining and displacing the social capital within communities that is so vital in responding to COVID-19. While on the other hand, if they step too far back, they risk abandoning those that are most vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of the virus.
2. **Additional pressure is on professionals and politicians alike** to assume a rapid emergency response, which has the virtue of addressing (or at least being seen to address) the basic needs of those most directly and indirectly vulnerable to the impacts of the coronavirus while simultaneously risking shortsightedness and superficiality in addressing the actual priorities of citizens and communities. Another, more farsighted school of thought would advocate for taking on a renewal focus, with a keen eye towards the future. On balance given the circumstances, it is not an either/or decision, this situation requires professionals to pivot between both emergency response and future renewal strategies.
3. **Building on the above strands**, the current demands on professionals is to be reactive to acute problems, when what is required most is a generative approach. Experience in other public health crisis teaches us that fast-paced, quick fixes, often lead to 'fixes that fail' and sometimes do harm. By contrast, generative approaches are grounded in the belief that communities themselves are best placed to know what their priorities are and, with the right support and clear information, can take on key functions in generating locally sensitive solutions to those priorities. Of course, there will be a range of issues that communities are not well placed to address; for which professional expertise is required. But in the final analysis communities can't know what they need outside actors to do for them, until they first know what they have and can do themselves. It is therefore incumbent on professionals serving communities (even and perhaps especially in a time of crisis) to develop approaches which tap into the local knowledge and capacities of the communities they are supporting with a view to generating sustainable community driven responses, that build long-term resilience and renewal.

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4. **Focusing exclusively** on named target groups of the “vulnerable”, the “needy”, the “hungry” has the merit in “theory” of ensuring limited resources reach those most in need; of ensuring food supplies and medicines etc. reach those sheltering in place or being shielded. The further challenge though, as well as addressing the basic needs of those considered most needy, is how to

ensure that those at the margins are also actively, safely and reciprocally connected to near neighbours, and not just to salaried strangers or anonymous/remote — albeit very well intentioned — volunteers. As Elisabeth Moss-Kanter reminds us: “when we do change to people, they experience it as violence. But when people do change for themselves, they experience it as liberation”. That in mind we must figure out ways of being helpful that don’t diminish the people we are aiming to support.

In a crisis such as this, roles very quickly blur and one may say, ‘who cares who walks my dog, or calls to see if I’m lonely?’ Yet in the coming weeks, we may reach a point where professionals and remote (or centrally organised) volunteers may not be able to reach those most vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19. If that reality comes to pass — as it did in Spain a few weeks ago — then it is critical to ensure that professionals work as far upstream as possible (i.e. in our neighbourhoods) walking alongside communities; supporting them as they organise and develop street based, networked response and preparedness plans. I believe it is critical that local residents have a strong collective sense of authorship, ownership and authority in respect of any such plans. Additionally, if we are to ensure a sustainable renewal of communities through and beyond COVID-19, it is vital that we measure professional support efforts and the impacts of centralised volunteering activities by the extent to which those most isolated have become interdependent within natural communities and not by the number of food parcels delivered, or helpline calls made and received.

In responding to pandemics, the dilemmas often nudge us into seemingly impossible choices: overreach versus abandonment; relief versus renewal; target groups or community building; reactive or generative. But we can in fact engage in a slow hurry, we can address the crises while also generating a resurgence. The trick is to remember the neighbourhood is the primary unit of change, within which these dilemmas can be addressed in an ecological rather than a siloed way. Now is not the time to view communities of place, as backwaters of pathology and infection, or to see them by the sum of their needs and risk-levels. Rather, now is the time to see and value what is strong within communities and support them on every street and block to discover, connect and mobilise what is strong, to address the challenges and possibilities ahead.

There is nobody that is surplus to demand in responding to this crisis, or in the

renewal efforts that must also be attended to. Everyone’s contribution is required. My hope therefore is that as well as asking people what their needs are, we can also take time to find out what their gifts and contributions are. Such a process of inventorying everybody’s contributions would enable people to collectively get through this crisis and within the fullness of time and with the space to grieve, be well again post COVID-19. Now is not the time to abandon Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approaches in favor of deficit based relief efforts. Now is the time to accelerate Asset-Based Community Development on every street. Working in this way will involve shifts in mindset and approach. Here (Table 1.1., below) are the first six of 11 such shifts to which I propose we pay close attention.

Deficit-based response	Asset-Based Community response
Focus is on community deficiencies	Focus is on community resources & responses to local priorities
Problem response / Technical solutions. Short-term emergency response	Opportunity orientation / Community resources and local vision are the springboard for preparedness, crisis response and ongoing community-wide renewal

Old charity model / sympathy-based response: professionals & vetted volunteers deliver essentials to the “most needy”, “most hungry”, “most vulnerable”. Supports are “one-size” fits all, needs are identified from outside in.

Investment & rights-based approach grounded in principles of sustainability and community building: communities are supported to organise their capacities to prepare and respond to the crisis and plan for renewal. Professional supports supplement their capacities. Appropriate supports are agreed through collaborative dialogue. We can’t fully know what a community needs, until we first know what a community has. The neighbourhood is the unit of change.

External experts provide solutions in one-way transaction; compliance with rules/directives is the central goal.

Citizens and their associations are recognised as having unique contributions to preparedness, response and renewal efforts which can be powerfully connected and organised to be impactful; and which can be supplemented and extended by unique agency expertise and resources when required.

<p>Criteria for grants are determined centrally by central/local government or large & distant donors.</p>	<p>Funding is used to support citizen-led community-driven responses as defined by local communities with minimum bureaucracy and paternalism. The message from outside institutions/donors to communities is: 'you know what's needed, we are here to support you.' Donors/Funders are "on-tap; not on-top".</p>
<p>Supports needed are determined by outside actors through top-down standardised needs assessments; with scant regard to the resources of those considered in need, or the resources of the people around them (family; social networks; community; local businesses)</p>	<p>Communities determine what supports they need to fulfil community functions including support for (with) people most vulnerable to COVID-19 direct/indirect impacts; with agencies providing subsidiary supports. People who are vulnerable to COVID-19 impacts are supported to self-determine supports that best enable them to be safe and well and to continue to socially/civically participate while remaining well & safe.</p>

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