From Deficit-based to Asset-based Community Driven Responses to COVID-19 (Part 2)

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Tuesday, May 5, 2020 -- Cormac Russell

In my previous blog, I shared the first six of 11 shifts in mindset and approach required to move from a deficit-based to an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) response to COVID-19. I affirmed the view that now isn't the time to abandon ABCD principles and practices in favour of top-down deficit-based relief efforts. Now is the time to accelerate ABCD on every street. This week I will share the next five shifts (Table 1.2.).

Working in citizen space during COVID-19 has reinforced the fact that there can be no independence without interdependence. This principle was highlighted when in the past 10 days, 62 per cent of requests for support to the [Irish charity Alone's Covid-19 helpline](#) were in relation to isolation and loneliness, as a consequence of cocooning. This underscores how essential reciprocal community relations are to wellbeing and the urgent need to include community building to ensure that those relations are animated and mobilised in every street.

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As noted in last week's post, preparedness without a focus on renewal lacks vision and durability, while renewal without preparedness smacks of willful blindness and wishful thinking. Hence the need for a dynamic mix of both. That means that professionals, as well as providing services, will need to figure out new ways to precipitate citizen-led responses at the hyper-local level.

Thankfully there are many people from whom we can draw inspiration and wisdom.

Ernesto Sirollo, is one such person. In his TED talk: "[Want to help? Shut up and listen!](#)" he observes that when most well-intentioned aid workers — working in emergency response or development contexts — hear of a problem they think they can fix, they go to work with gusto. Sirolli thinks this is naïve at best and paternalistic at worst. As an alternative, he proposes that the first step is to listen to the people you're trying to help and tap into their own entrepreneurial spirit.

Aside from thought leaders like Sirollo, we can draw on the tenacity of the [Ballard neighbourhood opera guy in Seattle](#) who lets loose on his lawn every weekday during this pandemic. We can learn from the Japanese neighbourhood associations (chōnaikai) and residents' associations (jichikai) who are endeavouring to organise at street level to connect with their neighbours and promote new civic norms as they transition to a more covid-safety conscious future.

What About Safety and Risk?

Regardless of the inspiration, the question of safety remains. Many professionals will understandably argue that they can't support groups that are not compliant with appropriate safeguarding and general safety standards; while at the same time many associations may equally understandably argue that they wish to be left alone to respond to their neighbours, or simply resist bureaucracy for fear of being stifled or disrespected. Neither position is wrong, but nor do they advance the overall cause. What is needed firstly is an extension from what in some circles is known as a Safety I* mindset, that seeks to minimise risk and maximise compliance, to a Safety II culture that acknowledges that there is risk in every human dynamic and that the challenge is to increase safety behavior across the board.

In Safety II thinking, everyone is a producer of localised ways of managing risk and co-creating safety, hence the emphasis is on creativity and commitment. Instead of simply expecting people to comply with rules, because somebody with certain credentials or status has commanded them to do so. In advancing a Safety II culture, practitioners aim to facilitate processes that enable people to enter into relationships with others where they choose to be accountable for the wellbeing of the whole group/neighbourhood not out of fear but out of commitment. This is a better way of working with communities. When communities are held to account by the state, the best that can be expected is compliance, a sort of work to rule, yet what this public health crisis will ultimately require is commitment to the

community, and creativity in responding to an ever-evolving context. Such commitment to the overall wellbeing of the community will be needed not just during periods of restriction, but more especially when the restrictions are lifted. We will need to trust that our neighbours and our colleagues will self-declare and self-isolate when they feel symptomatic, and that the state will support them to do so.

Deficit Response	Asset-Based Community Response
Aim is to 'save' or 'rescue' defined target groups: those labelled: intrinsically "vulnerable", "hungry", "needy", with no reference to their capacities/contributions. Communities seen as passive recipients.	Aim is: to animate a community-wide response that heightens preparedness and confidence for renewal, while also actively planning to care for the most susceptible. Communities are seen as associations of active citizens.
Safety I Model*: Risk aversion, command and control. Expert define criteria, communities and frontline workers comply with protocols. Emphasis is on compliance and conforming.	Safety II Model*: Accepts all systems are dynamic and always have some element of risk, hence the need is to promote adaptability, agility and learn quickly how to optimise safety in context: promoting a safety culture. Emphasis is on chosen accountability to one's community & solidarity with fellow citizens, especially those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, now & in the future.

Emergency Relief; siloed approach	Resurgence/renewal; ecological approach: the neighbourhood is the primary unit of change. Resurgence includes preparedness and direct response and organising strategies in the face of COVID-19, as well as an emphasis on renewal.
Providing Top-down; Short-term; Done to; Done For solutions in the shape of programmes, services & one-off stimulus packages	Precipitating organised & safe bottom-up efforts; sustaining and sustainable responses "Done with"; "Done by" local citizens and their associations, with appropriate supports.
Success = more dependable services for named target groups	Success = more interdependence at the centre of natural communities with services in reserve as required (subsidiarity)

Table 1.2: Deficit to Asset-Based Community Development Approach

A Matter of Social Justice

COVID-19 is proving that inequity is a comorbidity, and so beyond the niceties of community driven change, Governments and their institutional allies have much to do to reduce economic and social inequity.

Since although we are caught up in the same storm, some with better shelter than others, we know that we are not all in the same boat. Our best hope for a better a social order is not in more relief action, but in more just societies where everyone

can participate fully, and no one is faced with impossible decisions such choosing between their lives and their livelihoods. Creating more just societies will of course demand more than community building and neighbourliness, albeit that these are hugely valueable in their own right; it will also require policies that enable everyone to participate and affirmative social protections that provide people vulnerable to not having their gifts recognized and received, the resources and security to fully participate. Unconditional Universal Basic Income would be at the top of the priority list in this regard but not to the exclusion or at the expense of personal budgets.

Concluding Thought

It strikes me that when all is said and done, the organisations that will be most fondly remembered post this COVID-19 resurgence effort are those that gave credit away to communities; and did not claim it for themselves. Those that took the blame where appropriate but not the fame; that were sidekicks not heroes; that took on the role of Robin not Batman. In other words, the ones that enabled their practitioners to act as alongsiders to communities as appropriate. To begin the exploration of how best professionals can walk alongside local communities, next week Mick Hanratty and I, will share our thoughts on the distinct forms and functions of community associations and Not for Profits.

From Safety I to Safety II White Paper. Hollnagel E., Institute for Regional Health Research (IRS), Denmark Center for Quality, Region of Southern Denmark, https://www.england.nhs.uk/signuptosafety/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2015/10/safety-1-safety-2-whte-papr.pdf

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