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CAPTURING UNPREDICTABLE AND INTANGIBLE CHANGE: EVALUATING AN ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ABCD) APPROACH IN ETHIOPIA

**Coady International Institute
Occasional Paper Series, No. 10**

March 2011

**Brianne Peters, Mengistu Gonsamo,
and Samuel Molla**



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Igniting Leadership

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Biographical Note

Brianne Peters coordinates the Coady Institute's action research in asset-based approaches to community development (ABCD) in East Africa. This initiative is testing how a number of NGOs can stimulate and support community-driven development. Brianne also supports the Coady Institute's asset-based and citizen-led development work in a number of other countries, and teaches in the Coady Institute's overseas and Canada-based educational programs.

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Capturing Unpredictable and Intangible Change: Evaluating an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Approach in Ethiopia

Abstract

This paper reflects on the use of various tools to monitor and evaluate the progress of community groups and NGOs applying an asset-based approach to community development (ABCD) in Ethiopia. Evaluating ABCD presents four major methodological challenges: measuring intangible changes; measuring the unknown; attributing observed changes to specific causes; and satisfying the varying priorities of multiple stakeholders. The authors consider a number of participatory tools used to evaluate community development initiatives: historical trend timelines, physical asset mapping, association and institution mapping, interviews, focus group discussions, the “Most Significant Change” technique, and the “Leaky Bucket.” Each of these tools is appraised with regard to its effectiveness in evaluating change in the context of the four methodological challenges. The paper highlights lessons learned from the application of these tools and the strength of combining them to address the challenges identified.

Introduction

This paper provides a reflection on the various tools used to monitor and evaluate the progress of community groups and NGOs applying an ABCD approach in Ethiopia. It grapples with how to measure and evaluate change when much of it is intangible, unpredictable, or difficult to attribute exclusively to a single cause. These challenges are compounded by the varying expectations of different stakeholders. They have interest in particular information and preferences for particular methods; therefore, this evaluation, like many, had to balance these diverse interests.



Figure 1: Participants of the first ABCD training in Ethiopia (2003)

Background: ABCD in Ethiopia

Beginning in 2003, Oxfam Canada, the Coady International Institute, and three local facilitating NGOs—Kembatti Mentti Gezzima-Tope [Kembatta Women’s Self-Help Centre] (KMG Ethiopia), Hundee, and Agri-Service Ethiopia—initiated the ABCD process in Ethiopia with 21 community groups involving over 11,000 participants from the Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) regions of the country. The relationships between these organizations and the seven communities where the evaluation exercises took place are depicted in Figure 2.

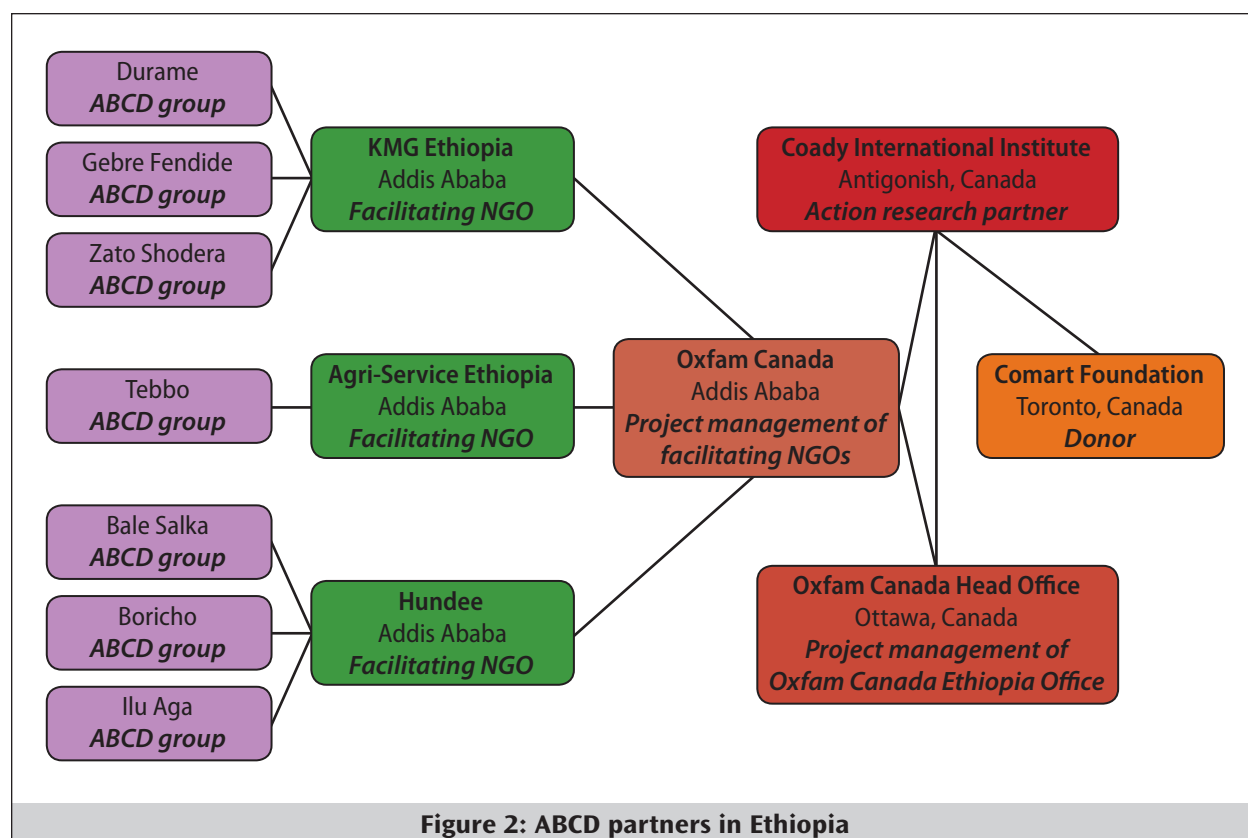


Figure 2: ABCD partners in Ethiopia

In all seven sites, the principal objective of this work has been to examine whether NGOs can stimulate community-driven development through activities at the community level that shift emphasis away from needs and problems to strengths, assets, and opportunities. Often, the recognition of their assets then inspires community groups to mobilize these assets to reach realizable goals with minimal external assistance. In the longer term, assuming such shift in orientation results in successful community-led activities, groups that have organized in this way can achieve recognition as solid investments for external assistance, whether by government agencies, NGOs, or the private sector. The ultimate goal of this approach is to set in motion community-driven development, enabling communities to develop stronger and more sustainable linkages with the private sector and local government. Although the ABCD process does not necessarily confront the core causes of poverty directly, in Ethiopia it has provided an opportunity for rural communities to identify and use the assets they *can* control to improve their lives in ways they consider important. Box 1 presents further details on the ABCD process.

Box 1: The ABCD Process

ABCD, as it has been practiced in Ethiopia, is a process that brings together adults, elders, and youth for a series of meetings held over several days. For the initial training, facilitating NGOs try to be as inclusive as possible by inviting a diverse cross-section of the community to participate. Over time, a core group of highly motivated individuals usually emerges to carry the process forward.

The process begins with appreciative interviewing which involves a series of questions about positive past changes that have occurred in the absence of external assistance. This phase serves a number of purposes. First, it encourages participants to focus on their successes, which builds confidence and gives them an opportunity to highlight individual talents and expertise. This can be particularly important for marginalized populations whose skills have often been overlooked or undervalued. Second, it sets the tone for the rest of the training: focus on assets and opportunities rather than problems and needs. Third, appreciative interviewing presents the facilitator as a genuine inquirer and respectful listener, who is not there to prescribe solutions or answers. Fourth, it helps participants to identify the common trends coming out of their stories and to highlight the factors that contribute to successful initiatives in their communities.

Following the interviews, participants are asked to identify and map various community assets: individual skills, physical infrastructure, natural resources, institutions, and associations. This activity draws attention to the range of resources people have within their own community that can be combined to achieve a desired goal. It is important that asset maps are used to inspire discussions about how people can take action and mobilize their resources together; community mapping is not just an exercise in data gathering. The group then lists its financial inflows and outflows using a simple tool called the “Leaky Bucket” (Cunningham, 2011) as a way of identifying economic opportunities that will increase income or reduce expenditure.

The final—and perhaps the most important—stage is the translation of these assets into action. After revisiting their asset maps, the group envisions a desired change (such as potable water, improved land, or small enterprise development) and devises an action plan to achieve it. This focus on mapping assets *before* articulating ideas for action often leads to the emergence of new and more innovative ideas compared to more traditional needs-based or problem-solving approaches. Using the words of Moses Coady (1939), after whom the Coady Institute is named, an ABCD process leads people to “use what they have to secure what they have not.”

The Complexities of Measuring Change within the Framework of ABCD

In 2006, three years after initiating the ABCD process in communities in Ethiopia, staff from Oxfam Canada and the Coady Institute began assessing the results of this work. This led to a number of fruitful conversations about evaluation that highlighted the methodological challenges of assessing the effectiveness of an ABCD approach. The following paragraphs discuss the most prominent of these challenges.

Measuring intangible changes: An ABCD approach widens the definition of assets to include much fuzzier concepts than infrastructure and income, namely cooperation and networking, capacity to act, confidence, motivation, attitudes, the quality of institutional relationships, the ability to leverage investment, government responsiveness, organizational capacity, participation, learning, innovation, adaptation, and leadership. In other words, the process of organizing and taking action

is part and parcel of the desired result or product. Changes in these areas and how they occur are not immediately apparent, but are equally important outputs of an ABCD approach.

Measuring the unknown: ABCD is a *living process*, not a set of formulas or prescriptions based on linear thinking which attempts to put things in simplified cause-and-effect order. The outcomes of the process are unpredictable in principle. In the Ethiopian case, it was the participants' responsibility to design and implement what they deemed important. Action plans could be abandoned and reformed; groups could be segregated by gender or age or they could even fall by the wayside altogether. These features make identifying predetermined indicators a fairly unrealistic undertaking.

Attributing observed changes to specific causes: An ABCD approach encourages people to build on existing community assets (human, financial, physical, and natural), to create linkages with internal and external actors, and to tap into opportunities to transform these assets into new or strengthened ones. Given the number of actors and assets involved—both initial and emerging, and the intention of an ABCD approach to bring them all together, this tangle of causality and influence is understandably difficult to unravel.

Satisfying multiple stakeholders: The ABCD process in Ethiopia has been the work of many minds over the past seven years. Accordingly, the evaluation of its progress had to be designed in such a way as to ensure that all the actors obtained the information they needed to inform their decision-making:

- **Community groups** were given an opportunity to reflect on the changes they experienced and to use the evaluation as a stimulus to reinvigorate current community activities and plan their future directions.



Figure 3: ABCD group members discuss their progress (Tebbo, Oromia Region, 2008)

- **Local facilitating NGOs** used the evaluation exercises to share the lessons learned about different applications of the ABCD process, to contribute to a larger discussion of its effectiveness, and to refine and expand their work accordingly.
- **Oxfam Canada and the Coady Institute** expected the learning outcomes of the ABCD evaluation exercises to shed light on how to work at the community level most effectively, how to work with local partners sensitively, and how to determine and provide the appropriate level of stimulus for communities when they reach the limits of what they can achieve themselves using their own resources.
- **The Comart Foundation**, as a donor committed to supporting innovative development strategies, was interested in obtaining clear indicators for measuring the results of the ABCD process—both positive and negative, which could be used to guide future efforts to promote sustainable development both in Ethiopia and globally.



Figure 4: Oxfam Canada, Hundee, and Coady Institute staff discuss ABCD process in Ilu Aga (Oromia Region, 2009)

The Research Design

From May 2008 to January 2009, three staff members from Oxfam Canada led seven evaluation exercises involving over 400 persons from 7 of the 21 community groups that were testing an ABCD approach and three facilitating NGOs. The exercises and accompanying discussions (typically translated into English) were designed to offer maximum cross-checking and validation of findings:

- The evaluation team included multiple stakeholders, namely staff from Oxfam Canada and staff from another local NGO applying ABCD in a different area.
- Facilitators used various tools to promote discussion and elicit information:
 - historical trend timelines;
 - the “Most Significant Change” technique, a qualitative monitoring tool that relies on stories to provide insight into what people value (Davies & Dart, 2005);
 - an economic analysis tool called the “Leaky Bucket” (Cunningham, 2011);
 - village maps to show visible changes;
 - individual interviews and focus group discussions targeting particular community segments such as women, youth, and households of different income levels;
 - interviews with government officials (where possible).

- With certain activities, such as the “Most Significant Change” exercise, every effort was being taken to build consensus or to note differences of opinion.

This broad array of tools was intended to capture changes that have occurred since the ABCD training or to establish new baseline information against which to measure changes when the final evaluation takes place in 2011. The tools were participatory in the sense that they allowed group members to reflect on their achievements, challenges, and learning, and to use these reflections to inform their own decision-making. The choice of tools was largely based on a repertoire associated with the Participatory Rural Appraisal approach pioneered by Robert Chambers (1997).

Historical Trend Timelines

Along a horizontal line drawn on flipchart paper, members of the local ABCD committee (or volunteers who had a good understanding of the entire ABCD process) described the state of the community before the ABCD training, indicated what had occurred since the training, and articulated plans for the future. In particular, they highlighted achievements, challenges, and the roles of community-based and external institutions (see Figure 5).

In Ethiopia, attempts to involve group members beyond the ABCD committee in this activity were usually not successful. Most of them simply deferred to the committee because they were not privy to detailed information about significant events such as encounters with government officials or joined the group late and did not have a clear idea of what had occurred previously. While recognizing the importance of providing all group members an opportunity to learn about the history of the ABCD process in their community, the evaluation team felt it was not fair to ask them to devote extra time to this exercise (in addition to the 2.5 days that each community had set aside for evaluations). Facilitators therefore accounted for the bias of involving only key informants by cross-checking the information they provided with the rest of the group.

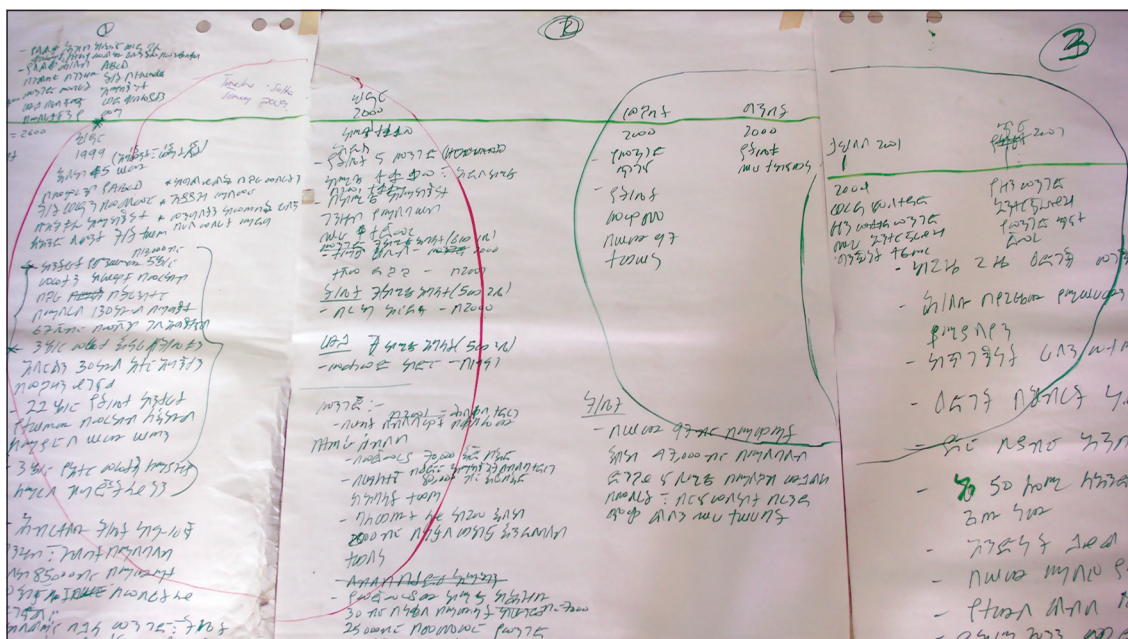


Figure 5: Fragment of a historical trend timeline developed by ABCD group in Bale Salka, Oromia Region (2009). The green circle indicates successes; the red one marks challenges.

“Most Significant Change”

Participants were divided into separate groups of youth, adult women, adult men, and the elderly. Each group was asked to identify the most significant changes that had occurred since the ABCD training start date, to indicate why these changes were of particular importance to the community, and to illustrate each change they had selected with a story. Next, each subgroup ranked these stories in order of importance and presented their top two or three choices to the entire ABCD group which then voted to determine the changes it considered most important overall. Facilitators aggregated all responses of all seven ABCD groups to identify the most common trends (see Box 2 for an example). The evaluation team documented each individual story to identify trends as well.

Box 2: Aggregate Rankings of the “Most Significant Change” by Women (W) and Men (M) Across the Seven Groups Testing an ABCD Approach in Ethiopia

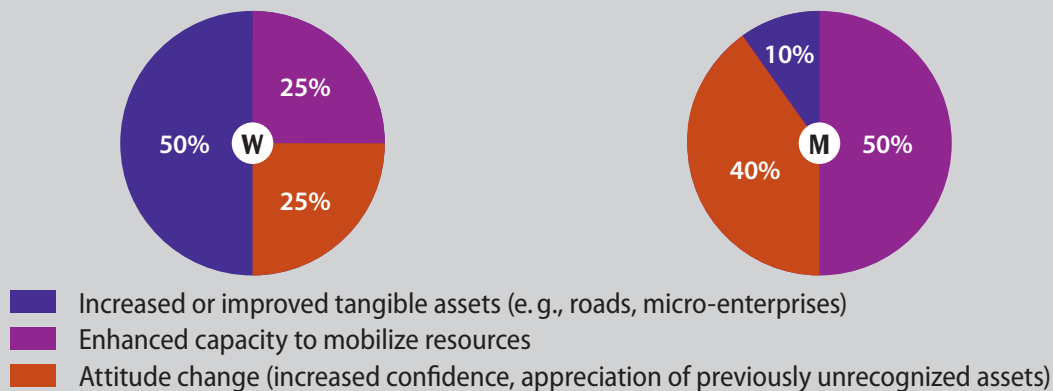


Figure 6: A group member from Tebbo, Oromia Region, indicates improvements in natural resource management as a result of the ABCD process. He states, however, that “although these changes are important, none of them would have occurred had we not changed the way we thought about and used these assets.”

“Leaky Bucket”

The “Leaky Bucket” is a popular education tool that was used during the initial ABCD training and kept for comparison purposes for the mid-term and final evaluations. The tool helped participants better understand their local economy by allowing them to identify and quantify the main flows of money into and out of their community. The idea was to encourage them to think about ways of increasing the level of water in the bucket by way of (a) enhancing existing or creating additional income streams and (b) keeping more money inside the community. The “Leaky Bucket” seemed to be as useful as a household budgeting tool as it was for community economic planning. Many participants commented that they had started using this tool at home to examine their own household income and spending, which prompted them to engage in productive activities, such as creating backyard gardens instead of buying vegetables at the market.

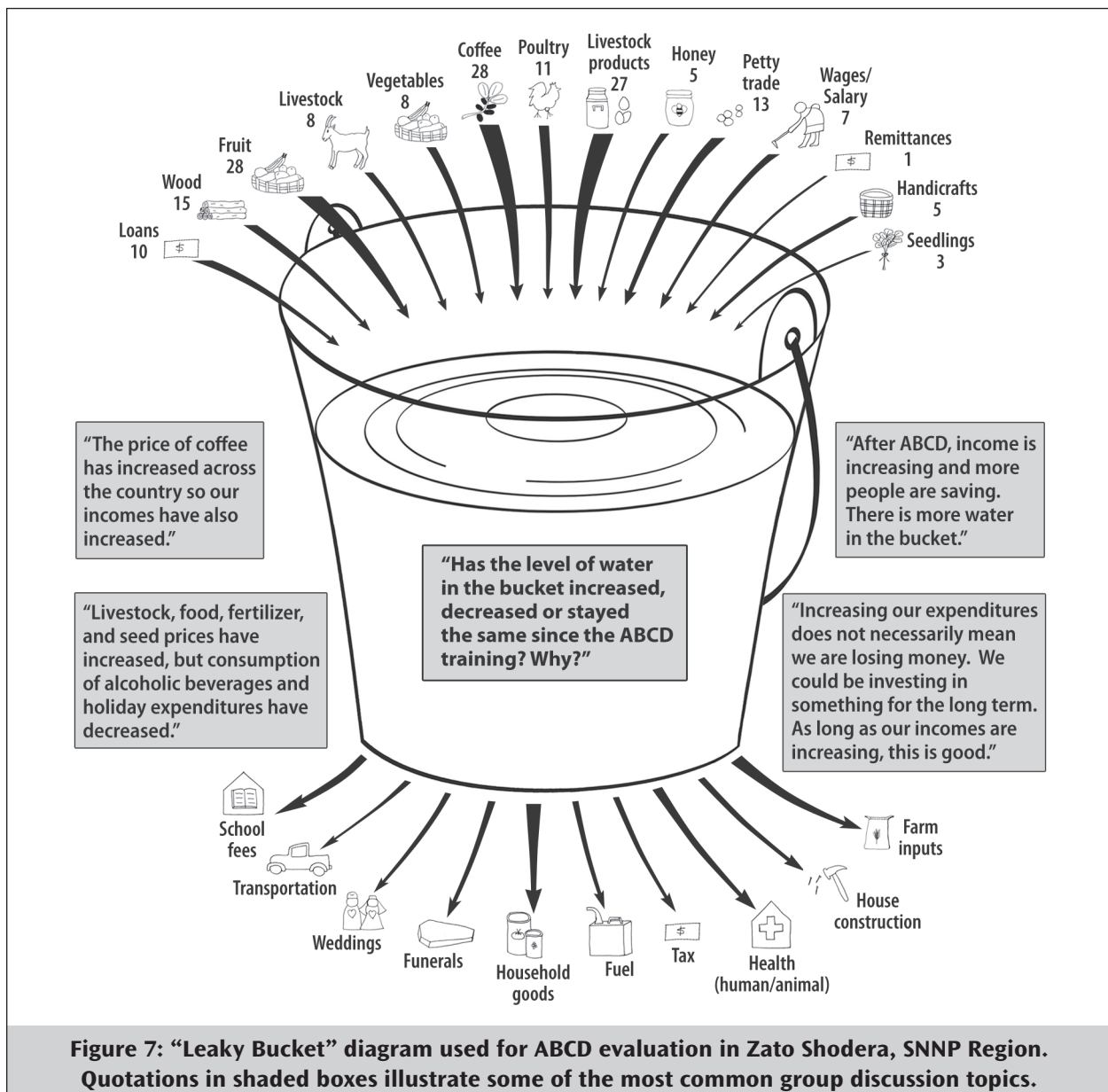


Figure 7: “Leaky Bucket” diagram used for ABCD evaluation in Zato Shodera, SNNP Region. Quotations in shaded boxes illustrate some of the most common group discussion topics.

The “Leaky Bucket” can be used in a number of ways (see Cunningham, 2011). In the Ethiopian case, ABCD group members were asked to imagine their community economy as a bucket with income pouring in from the top and spending spilling out of holes in the bottom. They were then asked to draw a picture of this bucket with arrows indicating specific income sources and expenditures. The thickness of the arrows represented the relative magnitude of particular inflows and outflows of money, and the numbers above each source of income specified how many community members engaged in the activity associated with that inflow (see Figure 7).

The “Leaky Bucket” diagram drawn during the initial ABCD training was kept and then compared to the one produced during evaluations to capture possible changes such as the strengthening of initially identified money inflows or the emergence of new ones. This exercise allowed revealing income diversification or an increase in the number of community members benefiting from these new or expanded income sources. By consulting community action plans and asking probing questions, facilitators helped group members determine if these changes could be meaningfully linked to the ABCD process.

Furthermore, the “Leaky Bucket” was used to determine whether the changes also included decreased expenditures or increased savings as a result of community groups or households starting to produce what they had previously bought from outside the community. Typical examples included replacing chemical fertilizers with compost or reducing expenditures on what people came to view as economically “unproductive” items like alcohol or festivities. To stimulate discussion on these topics, participants were asked if their household or community assets on the whole had increased, decreased, or stayed the same since the ABCD training.

It must be noted that the “Leaky Bucket” was adapted for ABCD groups in Ethiopia. Rather than identifying only the income and expenditure coming from or spent *outside* the community, facilitators also included the earning and spending taking place *inside* its boundaries. Using this adaptation, it was not possible to determine if an increased water level actually indicated that more money was flowing from the outside or if it simply meant that more money was being recirculated within the community. In the final evaluation of ABCD in Ethiopia, facilitators will have to clearly identify inflows and outflows vs. the income and expenditure made within the community to be able to determine whether its overall economic health has improved.

Individual Interviews

Facilitating NGOs selected three to six individuals from each of the seven groups for interviews (Figure 8). Efforts were taken to carry out the selection in a statistically consistent manner in the communities involved (by taking account of, for example, gender or income level). All the interviewed persons were asked to indicate:

- their family size;
- size and quality of their land plots, as well as their land use patterns;
- their livelihood sources such as wages, crops, and livestock sales;
- their education level;
- access to school and level of water availability for their household;
- type of their house (thatch-roofed or covered with corrugated iron sheets);
- changes they had experienced since the start of the ABCD process.



Figure 8: Individual interviews with ABCD group members in Tebbbo, Oromia Region (2009)

Aside from comparing the reported changes with the general trends observed at the group level, the evaluation team will use the data obtained from individual interviews as a baseline against which they can assess ABCD-related changes at the household level when the final evaluation is undertaken in 2011.

Physical Asset Mapping

Sketch maps were used as a tool in the initial ABCD training to visually indicate physical assets within the community (see Figure 9). The aim of asset mapping was to help group members identify those assets that could be used for community activities. Facilitators presented these maps again during evaluations, asking group members to add any changes that took place since the initial drawing. Group members were then asked to circle the changes that could be attributed to the ABCD process and to explain how and why these changes had occurred. The revised maps have been stored and the same exercise will be repeated during the final evaluation in 2011.



Figure 9: Community map showing natural resources and infrastructure, created by an ABCD group in southern Ethiopia

Association and Institution Mapping

During the initial ABCD training, group members were asked to list the informal, voluntary associations in their community and to discuss their relative importance and specific roles. This activity was aimed to pinpoint potential sources of support for the realization of action plans and to establish a baseline against which to measure whether the ABCD group has increased its capacity to organize. By revisiting the lists, facilitators could determine whether group members had established new associations or whether the initially listed associations had acquired more members or expanded their activities.

In a similar vein, a baseline mapping of local institutions was undertaken during the initial training to identify where groups could leverage additional resources or technical assistance for the completion of their action plans (see Figure 9). By repeating this exercise at a later stage, it could be determined whether the ABCD groups had been active in making linkages with external institutions. By asking questions about how these relationships came to be, the evaluation team could also determine to what extent government agencies and NGOs had become more investment-oriented, rather than problem-focused, in their thinking.

It is important to note that there are many NGOs and government programs operating simultaneously in these communities, many of which are following a predominantly top-down, needs-based approach. Therefore, an increase in the number of external actors engaged with a particular community does not necessarily mean that its organizational capacity has improved or that NGOs and governments have become more responsive. It could, in fact, mean the opposite, namely that the community remains dependent on external inputs and does not build on the local resources. Facilitators must therefore probe into every linkage and determine whether it is a case of leverage, networking, or dependency.



Figure 10: ABCD group members from Durame, SNNP Region, list their associations and local institutions and rank them using a Venn diagram (2008)

Interviews with Local Government and NGOs

When possible, interviews were conducted with local government officials and NGO staff to determine whether they perceived the ABCD group as being different from other groups in the area, and in what ways. Did they consider this group as more organized, resourceful, and motivated to act? Were its initiatives more successful, and did it garner more support from the community, compared to other local groups? These were the sorts of questions typically raised in the interviews.

Action Plan and Output Comparisons

During the initial ABCD training, groups designed action plans with specific outputs and divisions of responsibilities. In the course of the evaluations, each group's plans were examined in parallel with what it had actually achieved on the ground to determine the extent to which they had guided the steps this group had taken (see Table 1; Figure 11).

While ABCD groups usually followed their plans closely, they were not bound to fulfil them, so a deviation from the planned course was not necessarily a negative sign. Indeed, the groups that were able to adapt to changing circumstances could be just as organized and resilient as those that followed their plans rigorously. These plans did, however, provide a glimpse into the group's decision-making and problem-solving patterns as well as the level to which it was leading the ABCD process or still depending on others to move its intended activities forward.

Table 1: Action plan of ABCD group in Ilu Aga, Oromia Region (2003)

Future change	Steps required	Local assets to contribute	Outside assistance required
Organic manure production and crop rotation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing associations • Collecting plant and animal waste using pit method • Spreading compost on farm land • Successive planting of different crops on the same fields 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manure • Crop residue • Household tools • Labour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal and logistical assistance (district government, Hundee) • Support of nursery operation (Hundee) • Equipment and materials that are not available locally (district government)
Restoration of native tree cover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying land tracts exposed to erosion • Mobilizing people to do the plantings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seedlings from nursery • Labour 	
Terracing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planting fodder trees along the terrace edges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seedlings; stones • Labour 	
Irrigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing crop farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional knowledge • Stones; sand; soil • Communal land • Labour 	



Figure 11: Making the plan come true: terracing project in Ilu Aga, Oromia Region (2005)

Did the Tools Work?

At the beginning of this paper, we indicated four major challenges encountered in the course of evaluating the effects of the ABCD process in Ethiopia:

- measuring intangible changes;
- measuring the unknown;
- attributing observed changes to specific causes; and
- satisfying multiple stakeholders.

In what follows, we will discuss the extent to which the tools discussed above proved effective in addressing these challenges.

Measuring Intangible Changes

The range of tools employed allowed facilitators to capture intangible changes in the following ways:

Historical trend timelines highlighted changes in relationships of ABCD groups with external actors such as local government agencies or private industry and provided a glimpse into the quality and role of leadership in particular groups. They also shed light on process-oriented changes that occurred within ABCD groups, such as networking and resource mobilization capacity.

Physical asset maps revealed a broadened perception by group members of what constituted an asset. For example, the spectrum of natural resources within the community may not have expanded, but the additions ABCD groups made to maps during evaluations demonstrated that they were now identifying and using resources they had not previously considered as such.

Action plans examined in combination with asset maps served as indicators of increased organizational capacity or motivation. For example, one group’s updated map featured a bridge that had been neither present on its original map nor listed in its action plan. As it turned out, the group’s plan included restoration of a spring, which they carried out—and then took a logical (albeit unplanned) step further and built a bridge across it (see Figure 12).

The “**Most Significant Change**” exercise was critical for understanding changes that could not be measured directly by tangible benefits and that occurred outside the scope of action plans. These changes—as revealed through stories that group members shared in the course of this exercise—often concerned attitudes, particularly self-esteem and confidence.

Association mapping revealed developments in cooperation, motivation, leadership, and inclusion, as evidenced by expanded operations or growing membership of existing community groups. It also allowed facilitators to track the progress of ABCD groups in creating new associations that were able to leverage outside investment.

Institution mapping illustrated changes in ABCD groups’ relationships with outside actors, highlighting new resource mobilization strategies and strengthened leadership and confidence.

The “**Leaky Bucket**” tool helped identify the changes in income and expenditure patterns that had occurred since the initial ABCD training and establish whether the local economy had improved.

Interviews with facilitating NGOs and local government agencies helped gauge whether their perception of the community in question had changed, prompting them to take an investment-oriented approach focusing on its assets rather than needs.

Aside from these tools, using local NGO staff as facilitators of evaluation exercises was also helpful for capturing intangible changes, since they had been involved with the communities participating in the ABCD process for a long enough time to confirm when they perceived the reported changes to have actually occurred.



Figure 12: A tangible evidence of intangible changes: The bridge built by an ABCD group in excess of its action plan (Hobicheqa, SNNP Region, 2003)

Measuring the Unknown

The tools used for evaluating the ABCD process in Ethiopia were specifically chosen to capture changes in a wide range of assets: individual skills, physical infrastructure, natural resources, associations, institutional partnerships, and economic opportunities. This combination of tools appeared to be effective, allowing the evaluation team to identify five distinct categories of changes along with their characteristic examples. These categories (presented in Table 2) will serve as provisional indicators in subsequent evaluations.

Table 2: Changes identified during ABCD evaluation exercises

Category of change	Examples
Organizational capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased value placed on cooperative action • More democratic and inclusive groups • More effective linkages with external actors • Enhanced motivation to mobilize assets • Strengthened leadership
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of previously overlooked assets • Increased confidence
Tangible assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Road construction and clearing • Creation of milk collection centre • Upgrade of school building and facilities • Launch of communal shop • Acquisition of additional land use rights • Land improvement through terracing, irrigation, and composting
Income and production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sale of seedlings, honey, and field crops • Livestock rearing • House rental
Savings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of savings associations • Creation of bank accounts • Reduced spending on “unproductive” items (e.g., festivities and alcohol)

The evaluation methodology was also designed to show whether the ABCD process affected persons of different age, gender, and income level differently by capturing as many perspectives as possible—through individual and household interviews and discussions with small and large focus groups. Breaking into groups was particularly productive when discussing the “Most Significant Change.” While differences in the ways men and women experienced changes were not anticipated, open-ended questions typically asked during this exercise provoked responses that brought gender-related perspectives into the picture. This prompted facilitators to discuss whether future assessments of the ABCD process should involve questions regarding participants’ age, ethnicity, and culture.

Interviews with NGOs also revealed changes in the ways they were perceiving, and working with, communities. Although these changes were not unexpected or unpredictable, the interviews

did signal that tools allowing a more detailed examination of institution-level changes should be incorporated into the final evaluation. Applying the “Most Significant Change” technique at this level would be one way of achieving this.

Attributing Observed Changes to Specific Causes

The evaluation methodology was designed to attribute observed changes to specific causes as accurately as possible by adopting the following procedures:

- Results were not taken into account unless confirmed by three sources.
- Results reported by the group were complemented and cross-checked with those obtained from individual interviews.
- The sample size was large enough (over 400 individuals) to capture overarching trends that occurred in all seven sites subject to evaluation.
- Many of the tools were used purposefully to explore the role of external actors in order to determine their specific contribution to the changes ABCD groups reported:
 - Historical trend timelines and institution maps illustrated the contribution of government agencies and NGOs.
 - Physical asset maps showed investments into infrastructure by government agencies or private actors, which helped determine the broader socioeconomic context. They also shed light on whether it was the ABCD process or outside investment that impacted the asset base of the community.
 - During the “Leaky Bucket” exercise, facilitators inquired into larger-scale economic changes that might have affected the outcomes of the ABCD group’s action plan. For example, a rise in the price of coffee could have increased household incomes throughout the community, exaggerating the impact of the ABCD process. Conversely, the negative effects of a decrease in the price of coffee on the community’s well-being could have been mitigated by ABCD activities.

In addition to these methodological safeguards, certain relationship-based factors built into the ABCD process made attributing changes to particular causes less of an issue. For one thing, the strong relationships that had developed between the communities and local NGOs—most of which had been working in these areas since well before the start of the ABCD process—meant that ABCD groups and the evaluation team could communicate fairly openly. Also, because an ABCD approach involves little direct financial support, there was little reason for group members to either exaggerate or downplay their accomplishments or to attribute changes that had nothing to do with the ABCD process to its impact. They knew that they had little to gain by doing so within the context of an ABCD approach.

Having said that, the subject of attribution did generate some lively debates amongst the evaluation team, with the most burning questions raised over the absence of comparison groups: With no groups chosen to serve as evaluation benchmarks, was there any way of knowing that community groups not involved in the ABCD process weren’t experiencing the same trends as those that were? And how was it possible to credibly distinguish whether a certain achievement was a result of the ABCD process or some other intervention?

In fact, the idea of using comparison groups in the ABCD process was considered at the outset but eventually abandoned for the following reasons. First, facilitators concluded that it would be unethical to introduce the process to some community groups while artificially withholding it from others. Second, it would have been virtually impossible to find comparison groups similar enough to those involved in the ABCD process, unless they were located in the same geographic areas—and likely influenced by the activities of ABCD groups.¹

Nonetheless, the absence of comparison groups led the evaluation team to examine other community development assessments that had taken place in the same areas to see if they revealed any differences between ABCD groups and “non-ABCD” groups. According to a local partner that carried out its own assessment in 2008, there were, indeed, notable differences between the two:

Our data show that ABCD has made a significant difference in many ways. Compared to other income-generating and credit and saving groups, ABCD groups are more self-reliant, having clear vision, action plans, and fundraising strategies; they have creative ways of pooling funds and mobilizing resources and savings, are involved in different income-generating activities individually as well as collectively, and have become models for other community members, which has resulted in the appearance of many new ABCD groups (KMG Ethiopia, personal communication, 2009).

After evaluation exercises, facilitating NGOs were also asked to compare local cereal banks, savings and credit groups, and community-based institutions that had been introduced to an ABCD approach to those that had not. They reported that the approach did make a positive difference as evidenced by its expansion into new sectors and geographic areas.

Nevertheless, concerns over the absence of comparison groups led Oxfam Canada and the Coady Institute staff to think about ways to ensure greater reliability of the final evaluation in 2011. This could be achieved by inviting an external evaluator or by conducting more thorough interviews with external actors.

Satisfying Multiple Stakeholders

ABCD Groups

After applying each tool, the information generated was presented to the group for verification. In addition, at the conclusion of evaluation exercises in each of the seven communities, facilitators and ABCD group members engaged in an overall reflection upon the group’s progress. These activities were extremely important given the length of time it took to translate and consolidate the data from all groups into a final report.

By obtaining direct feedback from ABCD groups at every stage, facilitators ensured that evaluation exercises were as useful for the group members as for the evaluation team. Likewise, by revisiting the same asset maps that were created during the initial ABCD training, the evaluation process prompted group members to think about their untapped human, natural, and material resources that could be harnessed to improve the well-being of their households and communities. A follow-up review of ABCD groups’ activities suggested that the evaluations may have had motivational benefits, as all seven groups appeared to have new initiatives in the works (see Table 3).

¹ For example, following the introduction of an ABCD approach in the Kembatta Zone of the SNNP Region, as many as 15 groups guided by similar ideas spontaneously emerged in this area.

Table 3: Initiatives started by ABCD groups after evaluation

Group	New initiative
Durame	Small-scale trade shop
Gebre Fendide	Grain bank and livestock fattening operation
Zato Shodera	Credit service provision
Tebbo	Grain and seed bank
Bale Salka	Road construction
Boricho	Sheep fattening operation
Ilu Aga	Potato cooperative

Facilitating NGOs

Preliminary results were presented to all facilitating NGOs at a review workshop held one month after the last evaluation exercise. Participants were asked to assess the methodology and the validity of the results. The workshop initiated conversations about whether ABCD added value to their work, which prompted some NGOs to adopt this approach as a set of operating principles to guide their programs.

Discussions were also held to highlight the lessons learned after each evaluation. During these discussions, local partners reiterated that while community groups could undertake a range of activities relying primarily on their own resources, a certain level of external support was necessary to expand these activities to attain lasting results. They also emphasized that some community groups were still largely relying on or expecting outside resources, particularly per diems.

At this point, it is still difficult to establish if and how ABCD evaluation exercises have changed the day-to-day operations of NGOs facilitating this process. Despite their active role in the evaluation process, some local partners felt that more deliberate efforts should have been taken to involve them in the design phase and that more follow-up on the issues raised in the course of evaluation exercises was required, particularly with senior management of facilitating NGOs. These matters will be addressed in the final evaluation.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that a learning process associated with ABCD evaluations is taking place within local NGOs. For example, one NGO initially limited participation in ABCD groups to 35 individuals, perceiving this number as a manageable limit in view of the follow-up time required. During the evaluations, facilitators found that more people had wanted to join ABCD groups but had been turned away, which curtailed the amount of assets to draw upon and thereby destined the existing groups to relatively modest achievements. This issue was highlighted, and the NGO has since encouraged the establishment of new and more inclusive ABCD groups and revised its own programs so as to reach out to wider segments of the community.

Oxfam Canada

In many ways, the evaluation process provided Oxfam Canada with the information required to meaningfully support local NGOs. Based on the discussions of the effectiveness and limitations of an ABCD approach, Oxfam Canada adapted its support strategy to help ABCD groups scale up their activities. For example, local NGOs and community groups consistently underlined the difficulties they faced when approaching external actors for support. In response, Oxfam Canada

established an open competitive funding mechanism for community groups that would help them leverage additional monies from outside. Furthermore, to facilitate the uptake of new ideas suited to local circumstances, Oxfam Canada invited 40 members from the 21 ABCD groups and three partner NGOs to visit and showcase their action plans and learn from each other.

The Coady Institute

The Coady Institute, as an education and research institution, has also been taking lessons from ABCD evaluation exercises and disseminating them through its own or joint publications to feed into larger discussions about development practices in Ethiopia and beyond. In some cases, these efforts have sparked the interest of larger, more conventional donors that had previously shied away from asset-based approaches because they are difficult to evaluate using predetermined indicators. The changes observed within communities and local NGOs also serve as central reference points in the Coady Institute's educational programs reaching development practitioners and policymakers throughout the world.

The Comart Foundation

The Comart Foundation, as a "venture philanthropist," was interested in knowing whether the ABCD process provided fertile ground for local innovations that improved the lives of rural farmers in Ethiopia. The Foundation considers the evaluation results as providing convincing evidence that its money has been put to good use, as indicated by its continued support for local partners to attend ABCD trainings in Canada and elsewhere. Another indication is the expansion of the Foundation's use of an ABCD approach in its other projects throughout Africa. At the same time, the Comart Foundation would like to see more quantitative financial data, including more precise assessments of community income increases. For that purpose, it has hired a business school graduate from South Africa to refine the "Leaky Bucket" and other simple economic analysis tools so that this type of data could be easily captured.

Conclusion

Evaluating an ABCD approach requires a carefully selected range of tools to identify the unknown, unpredictable, and intangible changes occurring alongside the tangible and predictable ones. The evaluation exercises described in this paper revealed trends related to organizational capacity, attitudes, and livelihood sources, which were confirmed for all seven community groups under study. The absence of comparison groups, albeit intentional, raised concerns over whether these findings would have been more reliable if such groups had been included in the evaluation process. These concerns prompted discussions over whether future evaluations should involve more thorough and structured interviews with external actors involved with both ABCD and "non-ABCD" groups to determine if they are perceived to be different from the viewpoint of a "knowledgeable outsider." Inviting an external evaluator may also help alleviate concerns over bias and enhance the validity of results when the final evaluation is undertaken in 2011.

From the viewpoint of some stakeholders, the validity of evaluation results might also be enhanced by way of collecting more quantitative data. While past evaluations did include a range of quantitative indicators related to association membership and the number of new associations,

new or expanded income streams, and new or improved infrastructure, further work will be required if this range is to be expanded.

The time required to engage meaningfully with community members and to reflect upon the ABCD evaluation results and present them in writing for a diverse range of actors led the team to consider additional time- and cost-efficient ways of undertaking evaluations. These considerations prompted the decision to use more intentional and immediate feedback mechanisms, particularly when working with communities and facilitating NGOs.

That said, it appears that community groups, NGOs, research institutions, and donors did get the information they needed to inform their decision-making. Community groups used evaluation exercises as an opportunity to affirm their progress and plan their future activities. NGOs learned about how ABCD worked in different circumstances and how the evaluation results could improve future performance, which led some of them to adopt this approach in other programs and geographic areas. Oxfam Canada and the Coady Institute gained valuable knowledge about the strengths and limitations of an ABCD approach, the pace of change among communities and NGOs, and how outsiders can best support them. The Comart Foundation wanted—and was able—to obtain convincing evidence that the ABCD process did provide fertile ground for home-grown innovations that improved the lives of rural farmers across Ethiopia, and that their investment was effective. The Comart Foundation was equally interested in disseminating the lessons learned from this seven-year-long ABCD experience as broadly as possible to spark debate in development discussions at all levels. This is being achieved through the Coady Institute's educational programs and joint publications with Oxfam Canada.

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