

DAILY MAVERICK - Maverick Citizen

THE MAGIC OF ABCD

Rethinking nonprofits: The power of asset-based citizen-led development in South Africa

With a focus on asset-based citizen-led development, communities can harness their strengths to overcome challenges and redefine the nonprofit landscape in South Africa.



[By Janine Ward](#)

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Dear Daily Maverick editor,

I read [Deon Snyman's op-ed piece](#) about the plight of the nonprofit sector ("When the world turns inward, SA's social fabric begins to fray") with great interest.

I have worked in this sector for 40 years, and my passion and focus are on what I believe is the solution for the current situation that Mr Snyman describes, and the solution he alludes to.

I facilitate and practise the development approach known as ABCD – asset-based citizen-led development – which focuses on enabling citizens to identify and mobilise the assets, strengths and resources that already exist in their communities to create their own solutions for challenges they are facing.

This is not by any means a new approach – in fact I believe it is the innate human response since time began. The term “ABCD” was coined by two men working in Chicago, US, in the early 1980s (when I began my career as a naïve social work student at Wits). It has spread globally and has, since 2011, been actively adopted in South Africa by the civil society sector, as well as academia, the corporate sector and some government departments, notably cooperative governance and traditional affairs in Gauteng.

Even the term “nonprofit” or “non-government sector” speaks to a deficit mentality – why do we refer to our organisations as something that we are NOT? We should be embracing what we ARE – we are FOR IMPACT organisations, or capacity-building organisations.

From the website of the Amathuba Collective: “We believe that each one of us has innate value and worth and that sometimes, we just need a little help discovering our own unique talents and belief in the contribution we are able to make.”

This describes the ethos of the ABCD approach beautifully, and I have seen countless times over the past four decades how the adoption of this approach changes mindsets, changes lives and is a sustainable answer to the plight of organisations currently struggling with funding constraints.

To this end, I and several fellow ABCD enthusiasts recently launched the ABCD Africa Association, a membership-led platform for sharing information, resources, ideas and stories about this approach across Africa.

We will be hosting regular webinars on topics of interest (such as the funding crisis) and will compile a database of ABCD practitioners across South Africa and other African countries for those wishing to engage and learn more. Please visit [our website www.abcdafrika.org](http://www.abcdafrika.org) and feel free to email us on hello@abcdafrika.org

This is the answer – let’s spread the ABCD magic. **DM**

Janine Ward is a seasoned community development professional with 40 years’ experience in southern Africa, focusing particularly on asset-based citizen-led development).