ABCD, Jazz and the Structure of Powerful Communities

By John McKnight, Co-Founder, Asset-Based Community Development Institute
Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation
Reprinted with Permission.

During the first year of the Covid pandemic, many neighborhood organizations and block clubs stopped their traditional face-to-face meetings. Nonetheless, in many locations these groups spontaneously initiated innovative community activities. In many neighborhoods with no community groups, new and unprecedented initiatives were initiated.

One example of these local innovations is a neighborhood of 800 households in the older industrial city of Menasha, Wisconsin. A report on the pandemic responses in that neighborhood indicated that the following creative activities occurred:

- Forty residents responded to a telephone invitation to provide help to neighbors in need.
- An outdoor "jump-around" party on one block evolved into a parade on many blocks where residents were joined by neighbor-owned classic cars.
- Distribution to neighbors of 200 loaves of bread contributed by a food pantry.
- A recognition of the neighbors who were "essential workers" by tying blue ribbons around trees bordering the street.
- A neighborhood Memorial Day parade was created because the city had called off its official parade.
- Built two "mansion-size" outdoor food pantry houses stocked by neighbors.
- Six local businesses agreed to sell fundraising candy bars with the proceeds going to help keep the food pantries stocked.
- The annual Boy Scout Food Drive was cancelled so local Boy Scout families organized a neighborhood food drive that collected contributions from nearly 100 residents.
- On New Year's Eve, there was a party in the local park for all residents. It included bell ringing and neighbors making resolutions for the year ahead.

One active member in the neighborhood noted that all these activities occurred without any face-to-face formal meetings and only one collective Zoom gathering. While meetings are one method for making citizen decisions at the neighborhood level, at this and many other places there have been very few or no meetings in person or virtually. However, as the Menasha report indicates, there were many decisions being made resulting in many forms of citizen mobilization and action. If there were very few meetings of any kind, how can we explain the process by which the decisions were made that preceded countless local initiatives.

Perhaps an analogy can be useful. Consider a jazz club in a big city. It's 2:00 am and the jazz musicians work is done in most clubs. However, some musicians want to keep on

playing so they go to a club that is licensed to be open after 2:00 am – an "after hours" club. Three or four jazz musicians gather at the club and set up their equipment at the front of the room. Some players know some of the others while some don't know any of the others.

Suddenly they begin to play a wonderful jazz piece. They have no music and most don't know some of the other players. How can this happen? They are creating music that is so free, innovative, open ended – and yet perfectly coherent. The musicians play together and play individually with no apparent structure or order. In this they are like the neighbors in Menasha, Wisconsin.

The innovation and improvisation that happens in jazz occurs because there is an invisible structure encompassing the players. The structure has three elements: a melody, a key, and a rhythm. That's why, before they begin, one musician says, "How about 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore' in B-flat" The others nod, and the drummer sets the time. The three-part structure is now manifest, and improvisation can take place within it.

Is there an analogous structure that can help us understand how the invisible innovative decision making occurred in Menasha without decision making meetings or apparent traditional leadership?

A way of understanding the invisible neighborhood structure is to focus on the context where the dispersed decision making occurs. It is a context that creates a structure enabling innovative citizenship to emerge.

The context has three elements:

1. **Communality** The residents in the area have a common affinity. Regardless of other resident differences or disagreements, these place-based common affinities can grow from the desire to enjoy, celebrate, entertain, etc. It can be a crisis such as the pandemic. It can often be a possibility – we want to create a park. It may be a fear such as the threat of gentrification. It can be the love of the place – our place remembered in stories that inspire and capture successful neighborhood activities in the past.

2. **Individual Capacities** Every neighbor has a belief that they have some special and significant gift, talent, skill, or knowledge. This belief is often the core of their sense of self-worth. It is this self-worthiness that residents are willing and often waiting to contribute on behalf of their own particular community. These capacities are the basic community building tools.

3. **Connectivity** The local capacities of most neighbors are latent. There must be some precipitant that brings them to life. That precipitant is connectivity. Through the connection of neighbors' capacities power is created, citizenship emerges, and democracy is lived.

The invisible structure of productive communities where decision making, and leadership are dispersed comes from a neighborhood with unique commonalities, unique capacities,

and common connectivity. In these kinds of places where citizen creativity is visible what is not usually present in any traditional form is a central leader or formal decision making. Nonetheless, a focus on the structure needed for citizen productivity can provide an appropriate framework for understanding the beautiful civic music being played in the Menasha neighborhood and in millions more like it. They are creating leaderful and decisionful democracies.

One reason that the ABCD movement has spread is because it is based upon the community structure that provides the "nest" from which power is born and grows. 4

We share knowledge, experience and stories that make visible the three C's – Commonality, Capacity and Connectivity. This basic ABCD work nurtures the community structure that enables creative, productive, and inclusive neighborhoods.

NOTE: For a detailed account see the full report, A Neighbor-Based Pandemic Response: Jefferson Park Neighborhood, Menasha Wisconsin