

## Letter to Barack #3

OK Barack, this is me again. Here is a question I wanted to ask you: When you were a community organizer in Chicago did you ever run across John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann? They are at Northwestern University. ([www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/](http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/)) According to the media you learned some of Saul Alinsky's organizing methods (as did I, via Cesar Chavez, who was trained by Fred Ross, who was trained by Saul Alinsky) but I wanted to ask whether you ever became familiar with the less confrontational and more communitarian approach of John and Jody. The reason the topic came up is that my last letter sparked interest among readers in Enrique Martinez's vision of food security, primary health care, and housing assured for every Argentine at the neighborhood level, known as ABC (Abastecimiento Básico Comunitario). People asked me where they could learn more about ABC. Unfortunately very little is written about ABC. There is a chapter on it in a book published in 2007 by the Faculty of Agronomy of the University of Buenos Aires (Hacia un Nuevo Pacto Social en el Agro). There is a note on ABC on the INTI website, where there is also a Spanish translation of my paper "Vision of a World without Poverty or Economic Insecurity," which was earlier published in English in Acorn, the Journal of the Gandhi-King Society and included as an appendix to my book *Undersanding the Global Economy* (Peace Education Books 2004) I think my paper expresses INTI's ideas as well as mine since they took the trouble to translate it and upload it to their site. ([www.inti.gov.ar](http://www.inti.gov.ar)) My reference to Enrique's idea of assuring in every barrio food, primary health care, and shelter was not based on any text at all, but rather on what he said at a seminar we did on methodology for social change at the home of our friend Hugo Arce who teaches economics at U. of Buenos Aires. John and Jody (and hundreds of collaborators) have invented ABCD. It is similar to ABC and is extensively documented in English. You can buy their book *Building Communities from the Inside Out: Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* from ATLA publishers in Chicago. Their book comes with videotapes. You can sign up for trainings led by their collaborator Mike Green. ([www.mike-green.org](http://www.mike-green.org)) Several Earlham graduates are using ABCD as we speak. ABCD stands for Asset Based Community Development. It was invented in Chicago as a response to globalization. Industry had moved to low wage sites in the third world. Most of Chicago had become what is known in the USA as an "inner city." As Earlham economics professor Jonathan Diskin once said, an inner city is a place where there is little or no investment. The standard game of civil society has been lost. That is to say, there are no moves left in the standard game of attracting investors to create jobs. The city is checkmated. The residents are left with making a living selling personal services to each other, welfare, retail sales to fewer and fewer customers, government employment, missions and agencies, jail (at least they feed you there), rehab (at least they feed you there), joining the military (ditto), a variety of illegal and semi-legal rackets, and new careers in security and law enforcement spawned by the need to protect everybody from everybody else. In a Chicago devastated by globalization, the members of an inner city church met to deliberate on the questions, Shall we close the church and move to the suburbs? Or shall we stay here and resurrect our neighborhood? They answered the first question NO and the second question YES. ABCD was born. ABCD starts with taking an inventory of (or "mapping") a community's assets. In the adaptation of ABCD we used in the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Los Angeles we called the assets "gifts." We said, "Building community is connecting gifts." Everybody has gifts. Busy professionals who have no time usually have money to give. There are gifts of the heart (like enjoying cooking, enjoying weeding and pruning, enjoying caring for the elderly, enjoying working with children...), gifts of the hands (like repairing TV sets, playing the guitar, fixing roofs...) and gifts of the head (languages, accounting, engineering, law...) Institutions have underutilized assets, like a church building that is vacant every day but Sunday, or a vacant lot belonging to a hospital that could be a community garden.... Sending the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts out to map a community's assets may not seem like a method for changing the world. However, a little reflection will show that ABCD opens the way to a constructive and open-minded rethinking of the basic rules of the economic game. ABCD is different.

- ABCD is not what Fernand Braudel called traditional material life. It is not extended peasant families who raise animals and crops and occasionally sell a pig at the fair and immediately use the proceeds to buy goods they do not produce themselves.

- It is not a money-based exchange society where money is required to obtain the necessities of life, where everybody has to sell goods or services in order to survive. (The type of civil society whose limitations led Hegel to postulate the need for a higher ethic in a public sphere.)

- ABCD is not what (following Karl Marx) is called an "extended" exchange society in which decisions to initiate production depend on the investors' confidence that the products can be sold at cost-covering prices plus a profit. Meeting human needs, if it happens at all, is a by-product of turning money into more money. This type of society is today called "the economy." Governments are now throwing huge sums of money at "the economy" desperately attempting to restore confidence. (The "confidence" analysis is a twist due to Keynes, not Marx.)

- The philosophy of ABCD is not that of a typical welfare state in which there is a needs assessment (showing a need for clean and adequate water, for low cost housing, for safe streets ...) followed by public policies, plans, programs, projects, and missions designed to meet the needs of the target population.

- It is not a centrally planned command economy. ABCD represents a higher form of pragmatism. It is persons-in-community mobilizing resources to meet needs, employing elements of 1 to 5 above, and also elements of 6 to .... n not shown, employing what works, discarding what does not work. As John and Jody say, institutions should be employed to serve communities. Could all of this have started in Chicago, in the same Chicago where Milton Friedman was teaching his theories of free market utopia at another university a few miles to the south of Northwestern, while a young

community organizer, a worshiper in a socially conscious congregation, a law professor, a state representative, and a Senator from the State of Illinois knew nothing about it ? It did not seem likely to me. That was why I wanted to ask you whether you had ever run across John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann. But notice that I put my question in the past tense. I now no longer need to ask the question because I have learned from a little sleuthing on the Internet that you did know John and Jody, John McKnight wrote a letter of recommendation for you when you applied for admission to Harvard Law School. Small world. Howard R. November 10, 2008