

A Buddhist Contribution to Community Empowerment Models

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Abstract

This article proposes a novel integrative framework for community development that synthesizes Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) with the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB). The study responds to two core theoretical critiques of ABCD: its inadequate treatment of intrinsic human motivation and its neglect of structural power dynamics. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, the research maps the conceptual foundations and criticisms of ABCD, explores key teachings of SEB and canonical Pāli texts, and identifies a research gap in integrating these paradigms. The resulting Social-Spiritual-Critical Empowerment Model incorporates Buddhist values such as compassion (karuṇā), interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), and distributive justice into the ABCD methodology. The model offers a multidimensional approach to empowerment, social, spiritual, and critical, that enables communities to mobilize internal assets, cultivate resilience, and engage in structural critique. This framework provides a theoretically grounded, ethically sustainable, and contextually adaptable model for holistic community development.

Keywords: Asset-Based Community Development, Socially Engaged Buddhism, Spiritual Empowerment, Structural Justice, Compassion, Interdependence



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the field of community development has witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift. Post-war dominant models, often characterized by top-down and needs-based approaches, have been increasingly scrutinized for their tendency to portray communities as passive recipients of external interventions. By focusing primarily on deficiencies and needs, these models inadvertently label communities as "clients" or "beneficiaries," which in turn fosters a cycle of psychological and financial dependency on external agents. As a direct counterpoint, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), pioneered by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), proposes an endogenous, inside-out methodology. Rather than mapping problems, ABCD maps assets, including individual skills, informal social networks, and local institutional resources, regardless of how marginalized a community might be. The shift from "clients" to "citizens" or "co-creators" is not merely semantic; it represents an ontological redefinition of community agency, seeking to rebuild the social fabric through trust, reciprocity, and relational strength.

ABCD's rapid adoption across diverse sectors—ranging from community sports development (Bates & Hylton, 2020) to public health (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2021), education (Forrester et al., 2018), and even child-led initiatives (Johnson Butterfield et al., 2016) has often outpaced its theoretical refinement. A systematic literature review (SLR) reveals two primary theoretical shortcomings that threaten the model's long-term sustainability and ethical coherence. First is the issue of motivational depth: ABCD assumes that appreciative processes are sufficient to inspire participation, yet fails to offer a robust theoretical framework explaining why individuals remain engaged once initial enthusiasm wanes. Cunningham et al. (2021) critique this binary and superficial understanding of motivation, advocating for the integration of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to address

psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Second, ABCD's hyper-local focus often neglects broader structural forces, such as neoliberalism, systemic poverty, and internal power dynamics. Critics argue that by ignoring these realities, ABCD risks becoming complicit in neoliberal agendas that shift the burden of welfare from the state to resource-starved communities (Maclure, 2022; Missingham, 2017; Ward, 2023).

In response to these limitations, this study proposes the integration of Buddhist philosophical and ethical values, particularly from Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB) and canonical Pāli texts, as a complementary framework to enhance ABCD. SEB is defined as the active application of core Buddhist teachings, notably compassion (karuṇā), mindfulness (sati), and interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), to analyze and alleviate suffering across social, political, economic, and ecological domains (King, 2009). This tradition has a well-documented history of community engagement, exemplified by movements like Sarvodaya Shramadana in Sri Lanka (Ariyaratne, 1999), Dhammic farming in Thailand, and socially focused Buddhist initiatives in Russia (Dondukov et al., 2021). The core hypothesis is that the relationship between ABCD and SEB is mutually enriching. Where ABCD lacks theoretical robustness in motivation and power analysis, SEB offers philosophical depth and ethical clarity. Conversely, SEB often lacks the secular, structured methodologies that ABCD provides for tangible community development. Therefore, integrating these two paradigms can address the respective deficiencies of each, leading to a more holistic and resilient model of empowerment.

To this end, the objectives of this article are fourfold: (1) to conduct an SLR synthesizing the conceptual domains, mechanisms, and core critiques of ABCD; (2) to perform a secondary SLR of SEB and relevant Pāli canonical texts focusing on empowerment; (3) to identify a clear research gap in the existing literature regarding the systematic integration of these domains; and (4) to propose a novel theoretical framework, the "Social-Spiritual Empowerment Model" which merges the pragmatic social methodologies of ABCD with the motivational and critical dimensions rooted in Buddhist ethics. This integrative model is designed to be theoretically grounded, ethically sustainable, and practically applicable in diverse community contexts, especially those vulnerable to structural inequities and motivational fatigue. In framing this study, we also respond to calls for more spiritually-informed approaches to community development that can withstand the pressures of neoliberal co-optation while nurturing internal resilience. By positioning spiritual assets, such as compassion, resilience, mindfulness, and wisdom, as equally critical to physical and social assets, this article contributes a unique perspective that expands the boundaries of what counts as community capital. Ultimately, this model offers a path toward ethically grounded, structurally aware, and spiritually enriched community empowerment.

RESEARCH METHODS

To ensure a comprehensive and transparent analysis, this study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology. The SLR approach enables the structured identification, evaluation, and synthesis of relevant literature from two distinct yet complementary domains: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) within the field of Social Sciences, and Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB) along with canonical Buddhist texts within Religious and Ethical Studies. The goal is to bridge theoretical and practical gaps through a rigorous, multi-phase research strategy. The SLR protocol was meticulously designed to guide literature collection, analysis, and synthesis. It included the following components:

1. Research Questions:

- a. What are the core principles, mechanisms, and critiques of ABCD as represented in the existing literature?

- b. How does SEB address social empowerment, motivation, and structural justice?
- c. Are there prior attempts at integrating Buddhist philosophy into ABCD or similar models?
- 2. Databases Searched: Scopus, Google Scholar, Sinta (Indonesian Journal Database), Pāli Text Society (PTS), and SuttaCentral.
- 3. Inclusion Criteria: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and canonical texts from 1993 (year of ABCD's introduction) to 2023.
- 4. Exclusion Criteria: Non-scholarly blog posts, opinion pieces, and grey literature.
- 5. Phases of SLR

The review process was conducted in five strategic phases.

1. Phase 1: Mapping the ABCD Domain. This phase identified foundational texts and empirical applications of ABCD. Keywords used included: "Asset-Based Community Development" OR "ABCD" AND "community empowerment" OR "social capital" OR "community development". Articles retrieved were coded for key mechanisms, such as asset mapping, participatory processes, and community agency.
2. Phase 2: Critiques of ABCD. Focusing on literature that challenges ABCD's assumptions, this phase utilized search terms such as: "ABCD" OR "Asset-Based" AND "critique" OR "power" OR "neoliberalism" OR "motivation" OR "evaluation". Selected studies were analyzed for recurring critiques, including shallow motivational theory and neglect of power dynamics.
3. Phase 3: Mapping SEB Literature. To identify literature on Socially Engaged Buddhism, searches employed: "Engaged Buddhism" OR "Buddhist values" OR "applied Buddhism" AND "community development" OR "empowerment" OR "social justice". The review focused on both academic texts and case studies demonstrating SEB's application in social contexts.
4. Phase 4: Canonical Text Analysis. This phase sought primary Buddhist texts relevant to empowerment and justice. Searches within PTS and SuttaCentral used terms like: "Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta" AND "poverty", "Kutadanta Sutta" AND "welfare", and "Sigalovada Sutta" AND "ethics"*. Texts were examined for philosophical grounding in compassion, interdependence, and structural responsibility.
5. Research Gap Verification. To assess novelty, the fifth phase sought existing integrative models combining ABCD and Buddhist philosophy using: "Asset-Based Community Development" OR "ABCD" AND "Buddhism" OR "spirituality" OR "engaged Buddhism". Findings confirmed a significant gap, validating the originality of this study's integrative framework.
6. Data Synthesis and Thematic Coding. A qualitative, thematic synthesis approach was adopted to integrate findings across all phases. Data was coded into three primary themes:
 - a. Empowerment Mechanisms: Social, spiritual, and structural strategies found in ABCD and SEB.
 - b. Motivational Theories: The presence or absence of frameworks explaining intrinsic motivation.
 - c. Power and Justice: Treatment of structural inequality and critique of neoliberalism.
7. Trustworthiness and Limitations. To ensure the trustworthiness of the review:
 - a. Triangulation was used across literature types (empirical studies, theoretical articles, canonical texts).
 - b. Peer debriefing was conducted with two independent reviewers to validate theme categorizations.
 - c. Transparency was maintained through a detailed audit trail of search results and coding logs.

- d. Limitations include: Potential publication bias, as grey literature was excluded and Overrepresentation of Theravāda sources due to reliance on Pāli Canon, potentially omitting Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna perspectives.
- 8. Ethical Considerations. As a literature-based study, no direct human subjects were involved, hence ethical approval was not required. However, intellectual integrity was maintained through accurate attribution and avoidance of interpretive distortion, especially concerning religious texts.

This multi-phase SLR provides a solid foundation for the subsequent proposal of an integrative empowerment model that unites the empirical strengths of ABCD with the ethical and philosophical richness of Buddhist thought.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Conceptual Domain of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). The first thematic cluster of the SLR focused on delineating the conceptual framework of ABCD. Findings affirm that ABCD is rooted in an endogenous development philosophy, shifting the intervention paradigm from problem-mapping to asset-mapping. Core mechanisms identified include participatory processes, appreciative inquiry, and the cultivation of local leadership. Notably, Nel (2020) and Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) underscore ABCD's redefinition of community members from "beneficiaries" to "co-creators," aligning closely with human-centric development approaches. The model's practical tools—such as community asset mapping and relationship-based organizing—were consistently cited across sectors, including education (Forrester et al., 2018), public health (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2021), and tourism (Dolezal & Burns, 2015).
2. Key Critiques of the ABCD Model. While widely adopted, the review confirms several critical gaps in ABCD's theoretical structure. The most pressing concerns include:
 - a. Motivational Deficit: Cunningham et al. (2021) argue that ABCD lacks a robust psychological theory of motivation. The assumption that appreciative processes alone can generate sustained engagement is considered overly simplistic. Without mechanisms to cultivate intrinsic motivation, community initiatives risk burnout and superficial participation.
 - b. Power Blindness: ABCD's focus on internal assets often neglects systemic factors like neoliberal policy shifts, structural poverty, and institutional inequity. Maclure (2022) and Ward (2023) caution that this omission can render ABCD complicit in "responsibilization", a neoliberal tactic that shifts public welfare obligations to resource-deficient communities without sufficient state support.
 - c. Contextual Dependency: Ward (2023) identifies a "tipping point" challenge, suggesting that ABCD's success heavily depends on pre-existing resources or activist networks, which may not be present in all communities.
3. Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB) as Complementary Framework. The second analytical cluster examined SEB and relevant canonical teachings to assess their potential contributions to empowerment frameworks. Three central insights emerged:
 - a. Interdependence as Ontology: The Buddhist doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (interdependent co-arising) refutes the notion of isolated selfhood and affirms the relational nature of all phenomena (King, 2009). This counters the individualism underlying neoliberal development and provides an ethical foundation for collective responsibility.

- b. Compassion as Motivation: The cultivation of Karuṇā (compassion) and the Brahma-vihāra (Four Divine Abodes) emerged as spiritual assets that address ABCD's motivational deficit. Unlike extrinsic facilitation, these qualities are cultivated internally through disciplined practice, fostering resilient and sustained engagement.
- c. Justice as Structural Responsibility: Textual analysis of the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta and Kutadanta Sutta highlights a Buddhist ethic of distributive justice. These texts attribute societal decay to economic inequities and call upon rulers to ensure equitable resource distribution. This perspective fills the gap in ABCD regarding structural critique.

4. Integrative Insights from the SLR. The synthesis of ABCD and SEB literatures confirms their complementary nature. A proposed integrative model, named the Social-Spiritual Empowerment Framework, rests on three pillars:

- a. Social Empowerment (Horizontal Dimension): Strengthening social connectivity, trust, and participatory leadership through ABCD mechanisms.
- b. Spiritual Empowerment (Internal Dimension): Cultivating resilience, mindfulness, and compassion as internal community assets.
- c. Critical Empowerment (Vertical Dimension): Enabling communities to analyze and challenge structural injustices, informed by Buddhist principles of social ethics and justice.

These dimensions interact dynamically. For instance, spiritual cultivation reinforces social cohesion, which in turn strengthens collective agency to demand structural reforms. The model therefore provides a multidimensional response to the critiques identified in ABCD, while grounding community development in both ethical conviction and practical strategy.

5. Validation of the Research Gap. The final phase of the SLR confirmed the originality of the proposed framework. While both ABCD and SEB have independently been explored in academic literature, no systematic attempt has been made to integrate them into a cohesive model. This validates the novelty and relevance of the Social-Spiritual Empowerment Framework as a meaningful contribution to both community development theory and Buddhist studies.

Discussion

The results reaffirm the practical utility of ABCD while simultaneously highlighting critical theoretical voids. Its emphasis on relational capital, community assets, and endogenous leadership has generated impactful practices. However, as critics argue, the lack of depth in motivational theory and absence of structural critique limit its transformative potential. By solely emphasizing what exists within communities, ABCD may inadvertently affirm the very systems that generate marginalization by masking systemic inequities under the veneer of local empowerment. This study proposes a theoretical recalibration through the incorporation of Buddhist values, particularly those found in Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB), to infuse ABCD with ethical and ontological depth. Rather than discarding ABCD, the discussion calls for its augmentation through spiritual and critical dimensions. This marks a shift from utilitarian community engagement to ethically grounded empowerment, where transformation is not only practical but also moral and existential.

Traditional ABCD methods depend heavily on appreciative inquiry and external facilitation to stimulate engagement. While effective in the short term, this dependence can falter under socio-economic stress or community fatigue. The integration of spiritual assets—karuṇā (compassion), mettā (loving-kindness), and sati (mindfulness)—into the ABCD

framework offers a more sustainable source of motivation. Unlike externally driven enthusiasm, these qualities are cultivated internally, allowing communities to draw upon reservoirs of emotional and ethical resilience. This reframing positions motivation not as a variable to be externally manipulated but as an internal capacity to be nurtured. By recognizing compassion as a tangible community asset, the model extends the ABCD paradigm into previously underexplored emotional and moral terrains. This approach not only addresses the motivational critique posed by Cunningham et al. (2021) but also reframes empowerment as a holistic process involving the heart and mind—not merely social structure.

ABCD's reluctance to confront systemic power structures stems from its design as a locally focused model. However, systemic problems such as poverty, disenfranchisement, and policy-induced marginalization are not resolvable through local resources alone. Here, Buddhist teachings on interdependence (*paṭīccasamuppāda*) serve as a corrective lens, asserting that all phenomena—including social issues—arise within complex networks of causality. By embedding this worldview into ABCD, communities are better positioned to see their local struggles as reflections of broader socio-political dynamics. This shift enables what SEB theorists term "engaged awareness": the conscious acknowledgment of structural causes of suffering. Empowerment, then, becomes not merely the mobilization of assets but also the articulation of collective demands for justice. Such a stance directly responds to critiques by Maclare (2022) and Ward (2023), who caution against ABCD's complicity in neoliberal responsibilization. The integrative model proposed, Social-Spiritual-Critical Empowerment, offers a comprehensive response to the limitations identified in ABCD. Each dimension contributes uniquely:

1. Social Empowerment sustains ABCD's original strength in building networks, trust, and local leadership.
2. Spiritual Empowerment infuses the process with emotional intelligence, moral clarity, and sustained agency.
3. Critical Empowerment mobilizes these resources to challenge unjust systems, transforming community development into a site of ethical resistance.

This tripartite framework not only addresses the gaps in ABCD but also aligns with contemporary calls for spiritually-informed, justice-oriented community models. It foregrounds a vision of empowerment that is not merely participatory but also principled and transformative. The model's practical applicability lies in its flexibility. In contexts with high spiritual literacy, Buddhist principles can be explicitly invoked. In more secular settings, compassion and mindfulness can be framed in psychological or humanistic terms. This adaptability ensures the model's relevance across cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts. For instance, a Buddhist temple in Thailand may integrate contemplative practices into asset-mapping, while a public school in Ethiopia may apply mindfulness training to complement child-led ABCD projects.

Moreover, by recognizing spiritual capacities as community assets, the model invites new evaluative metrics for development, such as emotional resilience, ethical discourse, and collective intention. These indicators supplement traditional metrics like participation rates or economic output, offering a richer portrait of community vitality. Despite its promise, the model faces several implementation challenges. First, the translation of spiritual teachings into secular development language must be handled with care to avoid dilution or misrepresentation. Second, training facilitators in both ABCD techniques and contemplative practices demands interdisciplinary competencies that are not commonly found in development professionals. Future research should pursue empirical testing through case studies and action research. Key

questions include: How do communities respond to the integration of spiritual assets into development processes? What measurable outcomes emerge from a three-dimensional empowerment approach? Can this model catalyze policy-level changes when scaled? Ultimately, this discussion affirms the potential of the Social-Spiritual-Critical Empowerment model to transform the practice and philosophy of community development. It reframes empowerment as a moral journey, not just a managerial objective, rooted in compassion, propelled by justice, and sustained by community.

CONCLUSION

This study has proposed an integrative model of community empowerment that synthesizes Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) with the ethical and philosophical foundations of Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB). The findings from the systematic literature review reveal that while ABCD offers a robust methodology for mobilizing internal community assets and fostering participatory leadership, it falls short in addressing the deeper motivational and structural dimensions of empowerment. These shortcomings—particularly its superficial treatment of human motivation and neglect of systemic power structures—risk diminishing the model's transformative capacity. In response, the incorporation of Buddhist values such as karuṇā (compassion), paṭiccasamuppāda (interdependence), and principles of distributive justice presents a promising enhancement to the ABCD framework. By framing spiritual qualities as actionable community assets and emphasizing collective responsibility for structural change, the Social-Spiritual-Critical Empowerment model offers a holistic pathway toward ethically grounded and sustainable development. This conclusion positions empowerment not merely as a social strategy but as a moral imperative, one that recognizes the inherent dignity, resilience, and agency within all communities.

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