

Asset-based community development

Building on a community's assets rather than focusing on its needs for future development is the basic approach of asset-based community development. By focusing on successes and small triumphs instead of looking at what is missing or negative about a place, a positive community outlook and vision for the future can be fostered. This approach also focuses on a sustainable approach to development.

Introduction

Lecture 1 focused on the definition and overall scope of community development and its relationship to economic development. This Lecture discusses community development from the perspective of concentrating and building on community assets rather than focusing on needs and problems. This approach leads to a more sustainable approach to development. The term “community” is used throughout this lecture to refer to a place. A place may be a governmental entity, such as a city, or it may be a neighborhood that has no specific or official boundaries. Finally, this Lecture outlines the major steps in planning for an asset-based community development strategy.

Definitions of community development

As noted in Lecture 1, community development is both a process and an outcome, as seen in the various definitions from the literature. Let us consider yet a few

more definitions, in the context of assets, to further characterize community development.

- “Community building in all of these efforts consists of actions to strengthen the capacity of communities to identify priorities and opportunities and to foster and sustain positive neighborhood change”
- “Community development is asset building that improves the quality of life among residents of low- to moderate-income communities, where communities are defined as neighborhoods or multi-neighborhood areas”
- “Community development is defined as a planned effort to produce assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life”.
- “Community development is a place-based approach: it concentrates on creating assets that benefit people in poor neighborhoods, largely by building and tapping links to external resources”. Critical components of these definitions include:
 - *A place-based focus*- Communities may be thought of as the neighborhoods, towns, villages, suburbs, or cities in which people live. These are places that are rooted in a physical environment. In contrast, communities may also be interest based. Many people identify with groups of Building on a community’s assets rather than focusing on its needs for future development is the basic approach of asset-based community development. By focusing on successes and small triumphs instead of looking at what is missing or negative about a place, a

positive community outlook and vision for the future can be fostered. This approach also focuses on a sustainable approach to development. This Lecture outlines the process and the major steps in identifying individual, organizational, and community asset development like for people who share similar interests, for example, professional associations, sports teams, religious affiliations, service clubs.

- *The building up or creation of assets*

The next section of this lecture will spend time discussing asset-based community development. For now, the definition of an asset is: a resource or advantage within a community (of place).

- *The improvement of quality of life*

Quality of life is a vague notion, and, therefore, each community must define indicators in order to be able to monitor whether or not improvement is occurring. Quality of life can refer to economic, social, psychological, physical, and political aspects of a community. Examples of indicators include: number of violent crimes within a neighborhood; hours of work at the median wage required to support basic needs; percentage of employment concentrated in the top 10 employers; percentage of the population that gardens; and tons of solid waste generated and recycled per person. Also stated in the above definitions of community development are the following aspects:

- *Financial, economic, environmental, and social sustainability*

More and more, the idea behind community development is to build up resources and advantages in a community so that the community and the individuals within it can be sustained over time.

- *The approach, while universally applicable, is particularly relevant to non-wealthy communities*

This is the notion that, unlike wealthy communities which not only have assets but recognize these assets and use them in the formal economy, many lower income communities do not.

Needs-based community development

There are two primary methods of approaching community development. The conventional or traditional approach is to identify the issues, problems, and needs of a community. In many low-income neighborhoods, it is easy to point to problems – vacant and abandoned houses, boarded-up store fronts, empty lots filled with trash, and countless others. By focusing on problems, community residents tend to concentrate only on what is missing in a community. For example, a neighborhood may point to problems such as high unemployment rates or lack of shopping opportunities and identify the need for more jobs and businesses. If community residents focus only on trying to fix the problems that

they see, they may miss or ignore the causes of these problems. Many of the problems identified, like poverty or unemployment, are issues too large for one community to solve by itself. By focusing on the causes of problems, community residents may end up wringing their hands or giving up because of the overwhelming nature of the causes. This approach can create unreasonable expectations that may lead to disappointment and failure over time. In addition, this approach can point to so many problems and needs that people feel overwhelmed, and, therefore, nothing is done. Figure 3.1 provides an example of a community needs map which outlines problems within a community. This map illustrates numerous problems, many of which are difficult to resolve by any one community, neighborhood, or organization.

Asset-based community development

An alternative approach is asset-based community development. One could argue that this approach is the reverse of the conventional approach. The idea is to build capacity within a community – to build and strengthen a community's assets. In contrast to focusing on problems and needs, this alternative approach focuses on a community's strengths and assets.

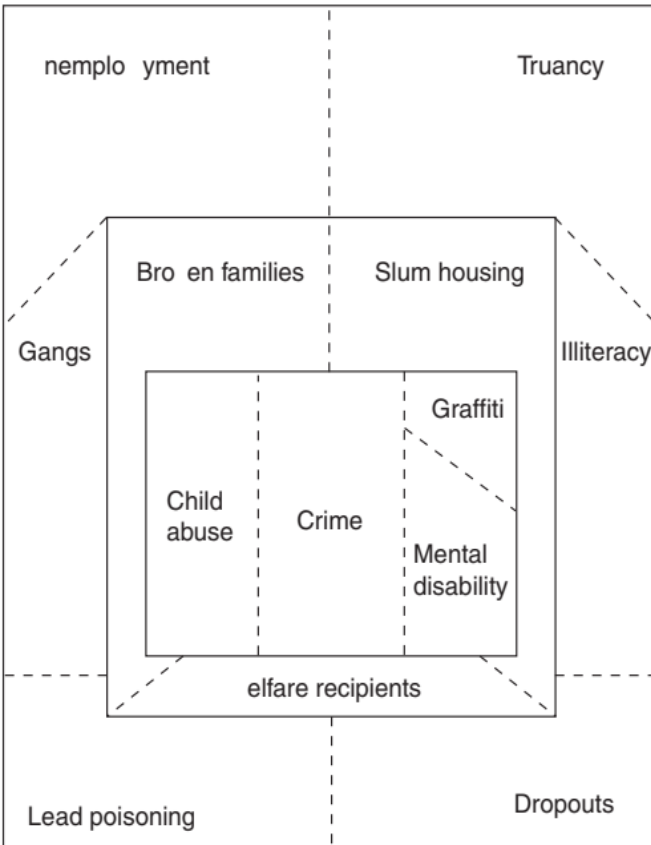


Figure 3.1 Community needs map

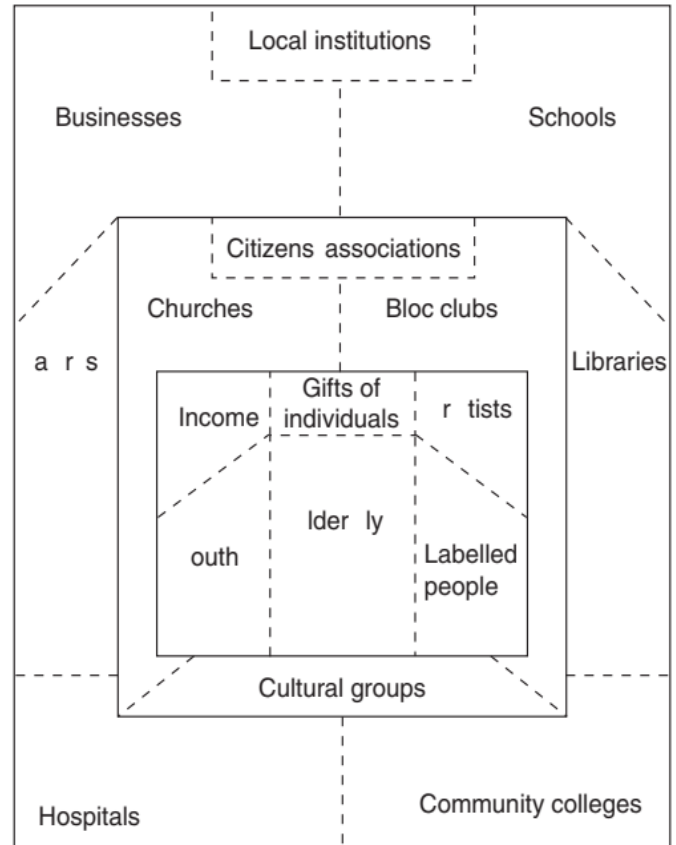


Figure 3.2 Community assets map

This asset-based approach is focused on a community's capacity rather than on its deficits. For instance, rather than focusing on missing small businesses, this approach would focus on existing small businesses and their success. Further, by focusing on its assets, the community as a whole will see its positive aspects (such as community gardens, a mentoring program, and the many skills of its residents) and can then work on developing these assets even more. By implication, concentrating on community assets will create a snowball effect that will influence other areas within a community such as its needs and problems. This alternative

approach does not ignore the problems within a community, but focuses first on its strengths and small triumphs in order to provide a positive perspective of the community rather than a discouraging one. Figure 3.2 shows an example of the “mapped” assets within a community and the capacities of its individuals, associations, and institutions. The assets map underscores the potential for community development because it is starting from a positive base rather than from a base rooted in problems. In Lectures to come, we will provide additional information about the process of asset mapping.

Assets defined

Before moving forward in this discussion, it is critical to define the term assets. Assets are the stock of wealth in a household or other unit. Another definition is that assets are “a useful or valuable quality, person or thing; an advantage or resource” (Dictionary.com). Thus, individuals, associations, local institutions, and organizations are useful and valuable within the asset-based community development framework. Assets can also be defined as the “gifts, skills and capacities” of “individuals, associations and institutions”. While there can be debate about the forms of community capital and which forms are more essential than others, the important point here is that a community can identify its own assets – its own capital. For the purpose of this Lecture, three types of capital – physical, human, and social – will be defined and discussed. Why only

these three forms of capital? These forms of capital may be subdivided into other forms of capital. For example, physical capital may comprise the built environment and natural resources. Thus, environmental capital, which comprises the natural resources within a community, is part of a community's physical characteristics and, thus, its assets. Natural resources may have shaped the community in the past either through its physical shape – constraining where and how a place grew – or by influencing its economy. The built environment – buildings, infrastructure – is a critical component of a community and clearly is part of its physical capital. *Physical capital* comprises the roads, buildings, infrastructure, and natural resources within a community. When thinking about a specific community, what is often considered are its physical attributes and key features. These attributes and features may include roads, rail, water and sewer, a downtown, residential neighborhoods, parks, a riverfront, industrial areas, strip development, schools, government buildings, a university or college, a museum, a prison, and many others. In contrast to the other forms of capital, physical capital is largely immobile. Although redevelopment of buildings and infrastructure occurs, physical capital endures over a long time period and is rooted in place. Another quality of physical capital is the degree of both public and private investment – public investment into infrastructure (roads, sewer, water) and private investment into structures (residential, commercial, and industrial) – with the expectation of a

return on that investment.

Human capital is defined as the skills, talents, and knowledge of community members. It is important to recognize that not only are adult part of the human capital equation, but children and youth also contribute. It may include labor market skills, leadership skills, general education background, artistic development and appreciation, health, and other skills and experience. In contrast to physical capital, human capital is mobile. People move in and out of communities, and, thus, over time, human capital can change. In addition, skills, talents, and knowledge change due to many kinds of cultural, societal, and institutional mechanisms.

Social capital often refers to the social relationships within a community and may refer to the trust, norms, and social networks that are established. “Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible”. In the community development context, the importance of social relationships is critical to mobilizing residents and is often a critical component for the success of a project or program. Social capital comprises the formal and informal institutions and organizations, networks, and ties that bind community members together. There are many forms of social capital – formal and informal, strong and

weak, bonding and bridging – to name the more well-defined types. Formal ties or networks are those ties that are established through organizations, such as service clubs, and are seen as weak ties. Informal ties are those established through personal relationships. Often these ties are strong, and time and energy are involved in maintaining them. Bonding capital refers to bringing together people who already have established relationships or ties. In contrast, bridging capital refers to the idea of widening individuals' networks and ties. By establishing new networks or ties, people will have access to new information and more networks for sharing and using information. In addition, social capital may be subdivided into various forms such as financial, political, and cultural. While these three forms can easily be separated from social capital and each other, social capital is central to these forms of community capital. Financial capital refers to access to credit markets and other sources of funds. Poor and minority communities often lack access to credit markets. Political capital is the capacity of a community to “exert political influence”. There are three categories of the relationship between community-based organizations (CBOs) and local political systems. These categories include elite domination with weak ties to CBOs, a political patronage system, and a more inclusionary system where community and political leaders overlap. Based on these categories, the exertion of political influence would differ between communities and the organizations within those communities. One

important concept to take from this discussion is that all forms of community capital are intricately linked together and are necessary for sustaining communities and achieving a better quality of life.

The process of asset-based community development

Many community development professionals and others have, or are moving toward, an asset-based approach to community development. This next section introduces a general outline of this approach and describes its major steps. Figure 3.3 illustrates a community development process with four main steps. It is shown moving from community organizing to visioning to planning to implementation and evaluation and back to organizing. While the illustration moves from one step to another and creates a feedback loop, community development is far messier and more non-linear in practice. Many of these steps continue throughout the process. In addition, one step may be given more emphasis than the others in specific time periods. Every community is different, and the actual time it takes for each step will differ as well. Some communities may be fairly organized and cohesive and can move through organizing, visioning, and planning in a short amount of time and spend the bulk of their time and effort on implementation. However, other communities may find they are spending a great deal of time on organizing. Another aspect to consider in this illustration is the absence of a time frame. All the steps in the process appear to take a similar amount of time, but, as indicated

above, the amount of time spent on any one step will depend on the community's residents and what they are trying to accomplish. The illustration includes a step for implementation – the action phase from which outcomes will be felt and measured. This step is a crucial part of the process – it is not separate from it. The next lecture will continue the discussion of the community development process, focusing on visioning and strategic planning.

Community organizing

Community organizing focuses on mobilizing people within a specific neighborhood or community. It is distinct from other forms of organizing because of its focus on communities of place rather than communities of interest.

Community organizing does not need to be conceived of as a task for getting everyone in a community mobilized for doing something. In fact, community organizing may be thought of as a way to mobilize small groups of people to accomplish a particular task. Mobilizing community residents involves direct action ranging from writing letters to the editor to organizing a protest outside the offices of the school district. Often community organizing uses a problem-oriented approach rather than an asset-based approach. Community residents are mobilized to “solve” a particular problem recognized in their neighborhood. There are two strategies for mobilizing residents: social action campaigns and the development model. Social action campaigns are those direct actions, like the examples above,

that aim to change decisions, societal structures, and cultural beliefs.

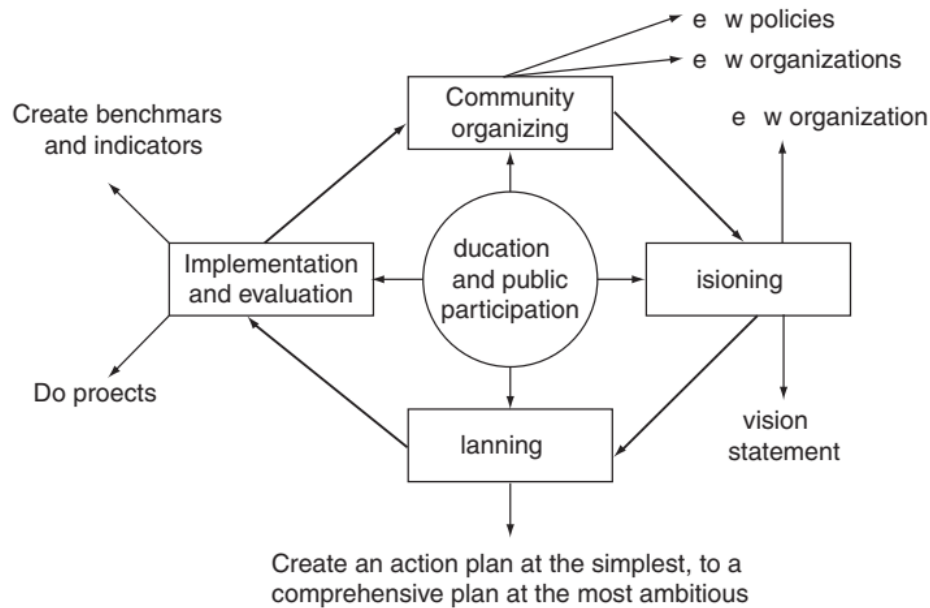


Figure 3.3 A community development process

Another form of organizing occurs through the development model and is more prevalent at the community level. The development model is a way to organize communities of place to accomplish a variety of community goals. There are several different community organizing models. The Alinsky model is probably the most popular and involves a professional organizer. The organizer works with existing organizations in a community to identify common issues. In contrast, the Boston model contacts welfare clients individually at their residences and relies heavily on appeals to the self-interest of each person. The Association of Community Organization for Reform Now (ACORN) has mixed the Alinsky and Boston models. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) model emphasizes the

importance of intensive training of organizers. This model is a direct descendant of the Alinsky model but emphasizes the importance of maintaining close ties with existing community organizations. Community development corporations (CDC) use these development models to achieve community development goals. CDCs often represent the type of organization that provides economic and social services in low-income neighborhoods and communities

Visioning.

Visioning is one method among many, such as future search, to establish a long-range view of a community. The term became popular in the 1990s, and many communities have used the technique to guide their future. While it is often used in the context of community planning, it has also been used to focus on specific topical areas, such as housing, transportation, and education. Many communities have found it useful to create multiple topical visions that can be more detailed and focused rather than creating one broad vision, which many people view as too vague and broad to bring meaning to the necessary actions. The basic idea is to bring together a wide range of individuals, associations, and institutions within a community to arrive at, often through some form of consensus, a written statement – the vision – of the future and to prepare an action plan to move that community toward the vision. There are at least three critical components of a visioning exercise. The first component is inviting a broad

spectrum of the community so that many opinions and perspectives are represented. The second component is preparing a process that is meaningful, effective, and efficient. The process must be meaningful to the participants so that the time they are volunteering will have appropriate and useful results. The process must be effective in that it fulfills the purpose defined for it. Finally, the process must be efficient in terms of people's time, energy, and funds expended. This third component, which is closely related to the second one, involves choosing public participation techniques to accomplish a vision or multiple visions for a community. While visioning is thought of as a public participation technique, it must use techniques such as brainstorming, SWOT analysis, and charrettes to accomplish its purpose.

Planning

During the planning phase there are at least three tasks in preparing an action plan: data collection and analysis, asset mapping, and a community survey. Data collection and analysis is important to understand current circumstances, changes occurring within a community over time, and the implications of the data collected. Asset mapping is a process of learning what resources are available in a community. There should also be provision of the most hands-on and thorough asset mapping process. Their process "maps" or inventories the assets or capacities of:

- individuals including youth, seniors, people with disabilities, local artists, and others;
- local associations and organizations including business organizations, charitable groups, ethnic associations, political organizations, service clubs, sports leagues, veterans' groups, religious institutions, cultural organizations, and many others;
- local institutions for community building including parks, libraries, schools, community colleges, police, hospitals, and any other institution that is part of the fabric of a community. Asset mapping is an ongoing exercise. The purpose is to recognize the skills, knowledge, and resources within a community. It is a good first step in beginning to understand the assets of a community. Community surveys can be useful in identifying issues at the beginning stages of a planning process and/or to refine particular ideas or policies as a community begins to think about its goals or its action plans. A community survey will allow various organizations in a community to:
 - Gather information about public attitudes and opinions regarding precisely defined issues, problems, or opportunities.
 - Determine how the public ranks issues, problems, and opportunities in order of importance and urgency.
 - Give the public a voice in determining policy, goals, and priorities.
 - Determine public support for initiatives.

- Evaluate current programs and policies.
- End speculation about “what people are thinking” or “what people really want.”

(Laboratory of Community and Economic Development (LCED) 2002)

While community surveys can communicate important information about public attitudes and opinions, this public participation technique is focused only on input, not on shared decision making. Nevertheless, if carried out well, this technique allows for a much broader range of residents to participate than many other public participation techniques that call for face-to-face interaction.

Public participation

Determining the future of a community and how that community will get from Point A to Point B are important endeavors. Often residents leave community goals and decisions to others – a consultant, a local government, a state or federal agency, a private developer, a business owner, or corporation. However, residents of a community need to participate in and get actively involved in determining the future course of their community. If they do not, others will determine their future for them. Thus, public participation is critical to the entire community development process. Figure 3.3 illustrates its importance by situating it at the center of the process. Using public participation effectively and meaningfully is a difficult task for individuals, groups, or organizations that are trying to determine which techniques are most appropriate to use, when to use them, and who should be

involved. Effective public participation needs to be both functional for the specific goal and meaningful to the public. Participation is functional when it helps to create better decisions and a more thoughtful community plan or some other document that can help organizations, institutions, and individuals understand how their community is moving forward. Participation is meaningful when it creates opportunities for the public to exercise influence over decisions and feel a sense of ownership toward the product.

Implementation and evaluation

Actions in community development are where change occurs and where people can see tangible results. This phase in the community development process is the point at which the rubber meets the road. It is the phase where individuals, groups, and organizations are active rather than passive participants in their community. Up until the implementation phase of a community development process, individuals and organizations have made a concerted effort to understand their assets, community attitudes, and opinions; have arrived at a shared understanding of the future; and have agreed upon initial actions, and possibly broader strategies to take that will lead to specific actions in the future. Action plans generally identify specific projects, deadlines, responsible parties, funding mechanisms, and other tasks that will accomplish specific goals. An action plan describes a set of activities that need to be accomplished to move the community toward its future

vision and/or goals. Another part of implementation is to consider the regulatory context within which development occurs, in particular the physical capital of a community. It is likely the action plan has identified areas that need changes through local government, such as zoning changes. It is important for the regulations to integrate with the plan. An often overlooked but important component to community development is monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring is the act of assessing the community development process as it is taking place. Monitoring functions as a way to take the pulse of a community effort. It allows for adjustments to be made in the process rather than letting issues or situations get beyond the control of facilitators, a steering committee, and/or a project team to manage the process. Evaluation, in contrast, usually occurs after a project or a plan is considered completed. At least two types of accomplishments can be measured: outputs – the direct and short-term results of a project or plan such as the number of people trained, the number of affordable houses built, or the number of jobs created; and outcomes – the long-term results of a project or plan. Outcomes are much more difficult to measure and to link directly to a specific action. Outcomes that many community development plans aim for are long-term goals such as decreased levels of poverty, a better quality of life in a community, or increased levels of personal income (ibid.). By establishing benchmarks and indicators to more easily track the accomplishments of specific actions, communities are able to

more usefully conduct monitoring and evaluation. “Sustainable Seattle” offers a good example of a nonprofit organization that has used regional and neighborhood indicators to monitor the environmental health of the Seattle region in addition to using public participation to accomplish their goals (Sustainable Seattle 2004).

Challenges of the community development process

An important caveat to any community development process is that they can be difficult, time-consuming, and costly. The difficulty can occur, for example, when many diverse interests cannot or will not find common ground about either specific actions or even the general direction the community should take.

Thus, finding consensus and making compromises is not only difficult but can be time-consuming as well. Nevertheless, creating a forum where diverse interests can discuss issues is critical for improvement of a community. In addition to stumbling blocks and obstacles, the process itself may take time, which can be frustrating for those individuals and organizations that like taking action. It is difficult to maintain interest and commitment to the effort if participants cannot point to successes. It is important for motivation and trust to create a balance between initial actions and completing the process that was set out so that residents can see that something is occurring. The cost of the process depends on the amount and types of public participation that are used within a process in addition to the amount and types of data collected and analyzed. While some forms of public participation are

inexpensive, such as developing a website, they may only act to inform residents rather than provide a way to gather input and create partnerships. Forms of public participation that call for facilitators may be more expensive; however, residents can be trained as facilitators to reduce costs. Creating a process that is manageable, fits the community, and fits the budget is imperative; the process of community development can be as important and as valuable as its products. While there continues to be a debate over the importance of process versus outcomes in community development, it is clear that the ultimate goal is to improve the quality of life for the residents in the community. In the long run, both process and outcomes are essential parts of community development.

Conclusion

Asset-based community development is a promising approach to achieving a better quality of life and sustaining communities not only over time or in an economic sense, but through the development of all forms of capital that are necessary for a community to thrive. The key to community revitalization is “to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes”.

This Lecture has defined asset-based community development in contrast to a needs-based approach and has touched upon the steps in a community development process.