

Community development assessments

Before a community develops a strategic plan, before it develops a marketing plan to attract new jobs, before it develops action steps to address community problems – in short, before it does anything – it should complete a community development assessment. A good assessment forms the foundation for a successful community and economic development effort. Without a good assessment, communities are usually “driving blind” with regard to the feasibility of their strategic planning and marketing programs.

Introduction

Community leaders often approach the community development process with a “let’s get started” mentality. “We know what’s wrong. Why delay getting started? We have talked about this for years; that’s all we do is talk.” They believe that an assessment is not needed to decide when to begin implementing changes in their community. They are anxious to get started and usually want to begin by creating a strategic plan or implementing some very specific initiatives. These often address the most visible of problems: to improve the community. While they may be correct, sometimes they may not be. Whether or not their actions will result in positive change is another matter.

Why conduct an assessment?

Before beginning a community development effort or creating a strategic plan, an assessment should be performed to determine what assets are present for development and what liabilities exist that need to be addressed in order for desired improvements to occur. This assessment will identify the strengths on which planned development can be built and identify the weaknesses that need to be eliminated or mitigated as much as possible to give the community the best probabilities for success. The community development assessment process is directed toward supporting the creation of a strategic plan that will guide a comprehensive development effort and involve other citizens in the process. This assessment also provides specific information that helps leaders identify opportunities to be exploited and threats that need to be considered when creating and implementing a strategic plan. Beginning a community development process without conducting an assessment is like a doctor prescribing prescription medicines without first giving a patient a thorough examination in order to get a correct diagnosis. He or she could be treating symptoms rather than root causes of problems, and the treatments may interact with other conditions to cause additional problems. In the same way, community leaders who act without conducting an assessment can spend valuable time and scarce resources treating only the symptoms. They may not see the long-term improvements they desire if

they do not identify and work on root causes of problems. Their efforts could simply become another failed community effort, added to those that preceded it. A common goal in many communities, for example, is the creation of new, high-quality jobs. Before a community develops a strategic plan, before it develops a marketing plan to attract new jobs, before it develops action steps to address community problems – in short, before it does anything – it should complete a community development assessment. A good assessment forms the foundation for a successful community and economic development effort.

Other benefits of assessment

In addition to the data produced for decision making, a formal and comprehensive community development assessment can provide major secondary benefits in support of the community development process. It can help initiate a community dialogue in which citizens discuss problems and issues and agree on the future direction of their community. Many citizens are often surprised to find that they share similar values with others who they had perceived to be quite different from them. This realization helps citizens focus on problem solving versus focusing blame within the community. This initial dialogue feeds directly into the production of a vision statement toward which all citizens can identify and work. Many citizens may not even be aware of their community's problems or how poorly their community compares to others. Feelings of frustration and

dissatisfaction are often focused inward, and this disunity can dissuade outside investors and new residents from investing in or moving into the community. Community forums held in support of the assessment help identify problems and help citizens understand what is wrong with the status quo. This awareness creates additional momentum for planned change when it is properly focused on problem solving rather than on personal attacks or hidden agendas. Further, the final assessment report also serves as a data source for creating a marketing plan or a community profile for responding to inquiries for information.

Project planning vs. strategic planning

Assessments are performed in communities for many reasons. Some are performed by internal groups in support of a particular community project, program, or initiative such as a Main Street program. Others are performed by individuals from outside the community such as business representatives seeking sites for relocation or expansion. These external assessments, usually performed by site selection specialists, are likely to be very specific, examining the economics of a specific building or greenfield location and the area labor force. It may involve a general overview of all community factors related to a company's operations such as workforce availability, prevailing wage rates, transportation infrastructure, utility capacities and costs, business development incentives, and tax rates. The assessor attempts to answer specific questions related to that one project or

initiative. Community development assessments, however, are comprehensive reviews of the community aimed at supporting a host of initiatives, programs, and projects. They are normally performed for (and possibly by) community leaders to help guide the creation of a comprehensive community development plan. That plan usually includes several goals and a multitude of objectives (the programs, projects, and initiatives that support the plan). This lecture will provide an overview of a community development assessment and provide some guidance as to how one might be performed.

Quantitative and qualitative data

Traditional economic development assessments focus primarily on quantitative data. They include population demographics (e.g., education and income levels), tax rates, wage rates, and other objective data on which business decisions can be made. These focus on such business-related topics as cost–benefit ratios, return on investment, cost of operations, and profitability of operations. However, many business location decisions toward a community’s successful development are also influenced by more subjective or qualitative factors. Because they are subjective, however, does not necessarily mean that they cannot be measured. Citizen opinions, for example, can be measured and tracked over time. Community spirit and a progressive “can-do” attitude can also be observed and measured. Qualitative factors include the underlying attitudes in a community, the way

citizens feel about themselves and their community, and how those feelings are interpreted into visual expressions of pride, cleanliness, friendliness, pro-business attitudes, and can-do spirit. Many times, qualitative factors are what drive a business decision about locations with similar quantitative benefits. The location selected may be chosen because it is perceived to be a quaint, historic, and safe community. It could be that the community has wonderful curb appeal due to its cleanliness, well and scraped public places, and private property. It may offer a variety of recreational and cultural activities that make it a great place for leisure activities. Often, a community's qualitative factors can tell an assessor far more than the objective data alone.

Defining the community

So what is a community? It is important to define the community before beginning the assessment. At first, many communities performing assessments or conducting strategic planning define themselves by legal boundaries. However, that is usually not an accurate description of their community. It defines the community too narrowly and results in artificially excluding resources and allies that have a vital stake in the community's success. A community is as large as the area it impacts or from which it draws its existence.

Comprehensive assessment

Assessment is basically a process of asking and answering questions about key

factors that influence the community's potential for planned growth and development. A community development assessment is a broad assessment, since many factors within a community are interrelated and influence each other. If a community seeks new residents, for example, it must consider such development factors as housing availability, construction time for new housing, price, and quality. If it is seeking families with school-age children, it must consider the quality of local schools, since housing location decisions are often driven by school districts and their perceived performance. When retirees are sought as new residents, other factors such as health care facilities and recreational alternatives become more important. The existence of such resources as retirement homes, assisted living facilities, organized leisure activities, physical therapists, waterways and lakes, and golf courses can also influence retirees' location decisions.

If a community is seeking new business or expansion of existing businesses, community leaders must consider the availability of labor and their skills, since these skills relate to the type of work required by the industries being sought. In addition to the current skills possessed by the workforce, communities planning to attract business must consider workforce training capabilities. Are there educational institutions that can provide specialized training to support the industry types being sought? Will local educational institutions work with business to develop and deliver new training courses?

Data-collection methods

Community development assessments use a variety of methods for collecting and analyzing data. Any data-collection technique can result in misinformation and errors. It is not the author's intent to provide details of all scientific data-collection methods but to provide an overview of some of the more common ones. For most community development activities, qualitative data collection does not need to meet strict scientific research standards. What is usually being sought is information that provides general direction and that identifies broad categories of community advantages or problem areas. To minimize the chances of collecting incorrect information, it is suggested that multiple methods of qualitative data collection be used and the information collected by one method be verified through another method. Whenever data are collected from individuals, respondents should be told that their identities will be protected. They can be told that while some of their comments or suggestions may appear in the final assessment report, their identity will not be associated with the comments. In that way, the assessor can provide a safe environment for the respondent to share candid opinions. Specific quotes and comments that represent the general feelings and opinions found in the community may also be included in the report on an anonymous basis. Some data collection methods are listed and described below.

Research and read

The Internet provides a huge amount of information that supports the community assessment process. It puts the power of professional research in the hands of volunteer community leaders. A professional community developer can use the Internet to glean a great deal of information about a community before he or she even visits it. Most countries census sites provide a vast array of demographic data on housing, income, race, education, and a variety of other areas. When compared with past census data, the information can provide trends that also help identify strengths and weaknesses.

Observe and listen

This author often drives into and all around a community on a “windshield tour” the afternoon before the day he is expected. He visits local coffee shops and stores. By politely eavesdropping on conversations and asking a few questions during the visit, a great deal of information is collected. These methods often produce many qualitative insights about a community’s strengths and weaknesses. If “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then a drive around all areas of the town can be an eye-opening experience. Be certain to travel not only the main streets but back streets as well. Later, you will likely find that even some locals do not know all that may be found in their own town’s back streets.

Use a camera

Digital and 35mm cameras are valuable tools to record support for visual observations. Later, when making public presentations or when compiling reports, it is possible to use pictures to reinforce major findings. Photographic images give residents the ability to visually visit all areas of the community including areas that most citizens do not visit or see. The images provide them with a more comprehensive understanding of their community's strengths and weaknesses.

One-on-one interviews

The benefit of one-on-one interviews is that interviewees often feel free to be open and honest, especially if they do not have to be concerned about their identity being compromised. Usually there are a number of key informants in a community who are extremely knowledgeable. This usually includes the school superintendent, school board members, the mayor, council members, the police chief, the fire chief, the city engineer, major property owners, Chamber of Commerce executives, economic development executives, ministers and priests, public housing officials, neighborhood and civic organization leaders, major business owners/managers, long-term residents, bankers, and leaders of minority groups. Before beginning the interviews, it is best to develop a structured interview form. This provides the interviewer with a consistent set of questions for all respondents. Asking these same questions often produces different answers and

perceptions that can be explored further. Usually, one or two responses to questions will lead the interviewer to ask follow-on questions. On the structured interview form, list some open-ended questions that allow respondents to tell you what they want you to know. Leave some blank spaces to record comments and notes. Comparing responses when tabulating the results also helps corroborate qualitative data. Some interviewees don't like to just respond to questions from your interview form; they have several key issues they want to "vent" about. You can usually tell from body language and clipped responses when they are chomping at the bit to talk about their issues. In these situations, it is usually better to let the interviewee lead the discussion. Let him address his major issues (he will appreciate the fact that someone is listening) and try to get answers from him on some other areas of interest from your survey form if you have time. Often these one- or two-issue interviews will give you a wealth of in-depth knowledge about the community.

Community meetings

Community meetings open to all interested citizens can be held to gather information, opinions, and ideas. These meetings need to be planned and managed very carefully so as to avoid their becoming divisive and disruptive. At the very beginning, an agenda and topics of discussion need to be laid out as well as ground rules that govern the meeting. An announcement can be made that a

major community revitalization effort is being launched and that the citizens' ideas and opinions are being solicited so that the most important issues may be addressed.

Focus group meetings

Focus group meetings are similar to community meetings but are directed toward one topic or a few related topics such as job creation and economic development, tourism and recreation, or education and workforce development. Citizens who attend these meetings usually have sincere and deep feelings about the importance of the topics being discussed. Many may be experts in these fields. They also have ideas and suggestions for what needs to be done to solve the problems related to the topic. The strategy for these meetings should be similar to that of community meetings. The leader needs to have a specific agenda and objectives for the meetings. This should be shared with the group along with any ground rules for managing the meeting, such as “no personalizing any comments or attacking any individuals.” Focus group meetings need to be problem identification- and solution-oriented. The agenda should involve a set of questions or topic areas in which participants can give their opinions about problems, and offer observations about and solutions to problems. These meetings also help identify individuals who may later work on strategic planning committees, provide information or services to strategic planning committees, or volunteer to help work

on projects, programs, and initiatives developed during a strategic planning process that follows the assessment.

Questionnaires and opinion surveys

Questionnaires and opinion surveys are another data collection method that may be used to collect qualitative information from citizens. While there are data-collection problems associated with these types of methods, they still provide another way to collect data and involve citizens. These methods may also appeal to those who would not normally attend a meeting or participate in an interview.

Distribution and collection of questionnaires and opinion surveys should be planned carefully so as not to exclude any particular group of citizens and to ensure a good cross-section of community representation. It is sometimes possible to distribute them through prominent citizens who bring them to civic organization and club meetings where they are completed, collected, and returned. The local newspaper may even publish the survey so that it can be mailed in by respondents for tabulation. Pastors may distribute them at churches. Thanks to modern technology, these can also be posted on the Internet at very low cost.

Community assessment topics

As previously mentioned, assessment is a comprehensive process that involves a review of all major sectors of a community. The process attempts to involve a broad cross-section of stakeholders in identifying the factors to be considered in

planned growth and development. It examines four broad areas: physical infrastructure, social infrastructure, economic development infrastructure, and human infrastructure. Within each of those major categories, many factors are considered. Each of these factors can be reported as chapters in the assessment report, and include both the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the many methods described above.

Physical infrastructure

When considering the physical infrastructure, community leaders need to examine the factors that will influence a business's operations in their area. Shown below are the areas that are evaluated and a sample of the types of questions that might be asked about each factor.

Transportation system for moving goods *Highways* – Are the highways to and from town in good condition and well maintained on a regular basis? Are they two lanes or four lanes? Are they primary or secondary roads? Do they have shoulders on which disabled trucks may pull over? Are any future improvements planned? How far is the community from the nearest interstate highway?

Rail – Is there rail? Is it a main or secondary line? Is there a siding on which cars may be stored? Are the rail rates competitive?

Airfreight – Is there a local general aviation facility or international airport? Is local airfreight available at that facility (other than from FedEx, DHL,

and UPS)? Are their rates competitive? What are the heaviest items that service providers can take?

Weather and geography

Geography and weather often drive location decisions. Many northern companies have chosen southern locations over the past 30 years. The Sunbelt, particularly the southeast, is the leading growth region in the United States. When moving to new locations, residents and businesses alike often look for areas with sunny weather and weather that lacks extreme snow and rain events. Businesses in particular often seek sites with land that is well suited for development and that does not require large sums of site preparation money. They also usually seek locations in or near major metropolitan centers so that they can access the amenities and workforce skill found in these areas. Therefore, geographic and weather conditions can play a major role in relocations and expansions. Community leaders would do well to ask the following types of questions about their areas:

Is the community isolated or near other towns? Is the area prone to flooding? Are there other hazards to structures in the area such as earthquakes, forest and grass fires? Does the area have relatively flat land that can be easily developed? What is the average rainfall and snowfall for the area? What are the average high and low temperatures? How many days a year, on average, does the temperature fall below freezing? Etc.

Social infrastructure

Listed below are some of the key social infrastructure factors influencing the development of communities.

- 1. Availability of quality health care*
- 2. Safety of investment*
- 3. Quality of school systems*
- 4. Parks, recreational, and cultural opportunities*
- 5. Availability, affordability, and quality of housing*
- 6. Quality college/university nearby*

Economic development infrastructure

Low cost of living

The cost of living in all countries varies greatly from region to region. Housing, taxes, food, insurance, and other expenses are significantly higher in places some places more than others. Communities with a lower cost of living have an advantage when recruiting new residents and businesses from areas with higher living costs. Community leaders working for planned development need to ask and answer questions similar to those that follow:

What is the cost of living in the community?

Will those moving into the region experience much higher living expenses than the area from which they are moving?

How does the cost of living here compare to similarly situated communities in the regions from which we hope to draw businesses and residents?

Quality and competitiveness of public utilities

Energy is becoming a major concern for most businesses. It is often less expensive to operate in foreign countries where energy costs can be lower, particularly when oil, coal, or natural gas are needed for production processes. In spite of recent major outages, the United States still has an advantage over the rest of the world with regard to reliability of electric and gas distribution systems. In time, however, that reliability advantage may also decline.

Availability of water and waste systems

Many fast-growing communities have outpaced their community's public water and wastewater system's ability to expand. As in many older communities, their systems may not be in compliance with recent EPA standards and may soon require major upgrades that will result in rate increases. Similarly, solid waste processors and facilities are raising their rates, and some landfills are closing because they have either reached the end of their useful life or can no longer operate due to environmental regulations. It is not uncommon for many communities to export their solid waste many miles for disposal. Listed below are

some of the questions leaders should ask about their community's water and waste systems:

What are the current capacities of the water and waste water system and, if they are not operating at capacity, how much surplus capacity do they have? Is the current water, sewer, and solid waste disposal rates competitive? If the community owns its systems, are they subsidized by taxes or operating on their own at a "profit"? If they are operating at a "profit," are the funds being wisely managed? Are the rates being charged reflective of fair market value or are they artificially low? What are the longterm operating outlooks for the systems (replacement, major renovations, or closure)?

Telecommunications

From hardline (fiber-optic and copper) telephone and cable systems to Internet service providers and wireless broadband, telecommunications are becoming increasingly important for both business operations and personal convenience. Businesses use these systems to transfer electronic data and to maintain contact with other offices and customers. Communities with a variety of telecommunications services and providers are more competitive as sites for business relocation and expansion than those with limited services. Listed below are the types of questions that business leaders should ask about their community's

telecommunications capabilities:

Is cell phone coverage and service good in the community?

Does the community have a cable provider? Is broadband (high-speed) access to the Internet available in most areas of the community through cable, DSL, or perhaps satellite? Is the community served by fiber-optic cable services? Are rates for these services competitive? Is there a loop network supporting these systems?

Available commercial buildings

It has long been recognized that communities with available commercial buildings are much more likely to locate a new or expanding business than those with greenfield sites. Many businesses seeking relocation or expansion want to make the move quickly and find greater value in existing buildings that can be quickly refitted to their needs. Here are some of the questions that leaders should ask about the available buildings in their community:

How many commercial buildings are available in the community? What size are they? What are the features of each (e.g., office space, warehouse space, truck bays, ceiling height, floor load, utility capacities)? Who is the current owner? What is the asking price? Is the price negotiable? Will the owner enter into a right of first refusal? Will the owner sell or lease? Is owner financing available?

Lack of governmental “red tape”

Complicated building permits, compliance with local zoning and other ordinances can make attracting new businesses and residents difficult. Local leaders should carefully examine the process for setting up new businesses, building new commercial buildings, and building new residences. The following are some of the useful questions that will provide insight about the process:

Who needs to be contacted to apply for permits, approvals, and licenses? Is there a one-stop shop that can guide an applicant through the process? Is there one document that clearly walks an applicant through all requirements and provides contact names and numbers? What is the cost of each? Are the forms easy to understand? What support needs to be provided in addition to the forms? How long do the forms take to process? Once approved, can they be revoked or amended? In the event of a mistake on the part of a governmental agency, who will pay the cost of bringing the project into compliance? Are kickbacks and payoffs a hidden part of the system? Are government clerks and officials “customer-focused” or “process-focused?” (Do they seek to help the applicant comply with the law or seek themselves to comply with the law?)

Tax rates on business

When considering a location for an expansion or relocation site, business managers look at the total cost of doing business at the prospective location. While the location may have all that is needed with regard to location, utilities, building, and

workforce, the tax structure may be such that it makes a particular business unfeasible. Some taxes originate at the state level. However, others, such as local sales and franchise taxes, are under local control. Local leaders need to examine the impact of their tax structure on the types of businesses that are the best fit for their location by asking questions such as the following:

Do businesses pay a grossly inequitable share of taxes compared to other taxpayers? Do the public services and infrastructure supported by business taxes run efficiently, using the tax income specifically for services delivered? Does the local tax structure have a chilling effect on the location of companies for whom the community would otherwise be an excellent location? Is the current business tax structure competitive compared to other locations?

First-rate scientific community in area

As the United States transitions from an industrial to an information service and high-technology environment, more emphasis will fall on emerging technology and scientific research that supports business competitiveness and opportunities. An assessment should consider what resources are available to a community to support its businesses research and scientific needs. Questions similar to those which follow should be asked during the assessment:

Are high-tech businesses or scientific research facilities nearby? Are there any

high-tech or scientific companies that are seeking partners for testing or marketing the work in which they are involved? Is there a technology transfer center that can assist businesses in adopting new technologies that will lower operating costs and increase competitiveness? What fields of excellence are available at local universities and major hospitals? Are these facilities willing to partner with businesses to bring new technology to the marketplace?

Availability of fully developed sites

Communities with a fully developed industrial or business park have a distinct advantage over those without. That advantage can increase when the park is owned or managed by a government or quasigovernmental organization responsible for economic development. Where necessary, rather than relying on private property owners to market and develop their commercial property, local leaders can take the lead in developing a site ready for development that can be marketed to existing and new businesses. If a community has an industrial or business park, all utility, lot, and building information should be included in the assessment. Shown below are the types of additional questions that should be answered about the park:

Is the property available for lease or sale? Can speculative buildings be constructed? Is there a revolving loan fund resulting from park revenues that is available for new businesses? What incentives can the park offer for businesses locating there? What is the cost of lots and buildings? Are those prices competitive

with other buildings and sites? Is the property governed by a restricted covenant? What types of businesses are being sought for the park? What types of businesses are not of interest to the community?

Strong existing businesses

A healthy local economy and tax base are heavily dependent on existing local businesses. While existing business owners and operators may be concerned about new businesses coming in and competing for their employees, they can also provide support for and benefit from the building of new or expansion of existing businesses in the community. Local retailers, for example, often fear the competition from major retailers such as Wal-Mart. However, the savvy retailers realize that they can benefit from the increased traffic to the community if they can realign their operations to take advantage of the change. Having knowledge of a community's businesses can also help identify the types of businesses that should be recruited. A community assessor should examine local businesses, make judgments about their strengths, and include his or her findings in the assessment report. Are they competitive and successful? Has there been a lot of turnover in local businesses (i.e., a lot of openings and closings) or have many of the local businesses been in business for a long time? Is there a large inventory of commercial buildings due to the many closed businesses? What is affecting the health of local businesses (e.g., population decline)? What types of businesses can

use the services and products delivered or made by local businesses?

Human infrastructure

Broad-based “can-do spirit”

Many times the prevailing local attitudes can poison the development well.

Communities that have a history of failed development activities or ill-conceived projects often see themselves as helpless. One of the most important things that a professional community developer can do is help instill the belief that citizens are not helpless and that by conducting an assessment and carefully planning and working together, they can see positive change in their community. Positive attitudes are a powerful force for planned change. Community leaders and citizens who believe that they can make things happen, and see opportunities and possibilities rather than problems and threats, often help separate their community from those that fail. A community assessor should ask questions about the community’s past projects, programs, and initiatives to determine what citizens and leaders believe. When citizens offer ideas about what can be done or discuss the history of past events, what are their responses? Is there a history of failed events? Has there been a lack of action to address community problems? Are local leaders hesitant to try new things or do they lack the political will to make hard and sometimes controversial decisions? If comments such as the following are heard, in all likelihood the community has a poor “can-do spirit”:

“That will never happen here.”

“We discontinued the town festival because of lack of support.”

“We have tried to get organized several times in the past.”

“We had an assessment and developed a plan once but I don’t really know what happened to it.”

“We don’t have the local leadership to get that done.”

“We tried that once and...”

“We just don’t have the resources like other small towns.”

Conversely, if comments such as the following are heard, in all likelihood citizens and their leaders have the confidence needed to bring about positive change:

“We have a very successful local festival every year.”

“We were able to leverage public and private money to improve the local community center and playgrounds.”

“Our bankers and government officials can work together to put a financial and incentive package together for a major new business.”

“We know that grants and funding are available for developing our business park.”

“Our local government is well run and efficient. Not only do we have a surplus, but our utility rates and fees are among the lowest in the area.”

“Our elected officials, business and civic leaders have a history of working

together on projects. We have...”

Desire for development

It is important for a professional community developer to remember that his or her mission is not to direct the community development process or tell citizens what their community should become. The professional developer's role is an advisory one. Professional developers listen to and reflect back the values and desires of the community; they provide options, ideas, alternatives. It is also appropriate to describe strategies and projects that have worked well for other communities. However, in the end, citizens have to decide for themselves what they want their community to become and the actions they will take. There is often an interesting paradox found in quaint and attractive rural communities. Many citizens want the amenities and conveniences associated with larger communities, but they do not want to do what is needed in order to have them or deal with the side-effects that come as a result.

Competitive wage rate/salary rates

Wages and personnel costs usually represent a significant portion of most manufactured goods and services. Regardless of all the political rhetoric, it is a simple economic fact that, in order for businesses to stay competitive in a world marketplace, they must seek locations with the lowest possible operating costs for a given labor force availability. This economic principle not only applies to

businesses but to consumers. Given a choice between buying the same quality goods in their community or in another location, consumers will make their purchases where they get the most value for their money. Not only do communities compete against those in other states or regions of a country for business investments, but they compete against the labor force in other nations. The wage rates paid in a local market should not be so great that they discourage new businesses from relocating or opening a new venture there.

Labor availability

Not only must labor be affordable, but it must be available in order to attract new businesses. Not only must the unemployment rates be identified, but an estimate of those in the workforce who are underemployed (having skills greater than those required for their current positions) should be made. When researching the labor force available, a community assessor should consider the community's own citizens, and those in nearby communities and counties from which workers might realistically be drawn in support of business operations. As discussed above, the state's labor department and local job service offices can provide a great deal of data.

Quality of workforce

“Cheap labor” is not always the answer to successful business expansion and attraction. Workforces in developed countries cannot compete with the wage

rates offered in developing countries such as those in South and Central America, and Asia. Over the past several decades, the developed countries have lost many low and semi-skilled jobs (such as cut-and-sew operations and unskilled manufacturing assembly) to developing nations whose wage rates are less than US\$1 per hour (100 Kshs.).

Labor climate

Most enlightened business managers and labor leaders realize the need for a team environment rather than a combative one that adds to the cost of operations. For labor, management, and shareholders to benefit, they must work together. This not only makes them competitive with other domestic and international operations, but makes them likely candidates for reinvestment, expansion, and continued operations. When conducting the assessment, local leaders should be asked questions about work stoppages, sabotage, strikes, and other labor unrest. Is this a location where production and services can be reliably provided? Or is this a location that will consume valuable management time and corporate resources, continually distracting attention from the primary function of business operations?

SWOT analysis

For many years, business leaders have used the “SWOT analysis” as a method of identifying the *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities*, and *threats* impacting their commercial ventures. The SWOT process provides them with a systematic

approach for analyzing options and making decisions. By researching and laying out the SWOT factors, they can prioritize their actions and focus their efforts for the greatest impact. The same process can be used in support of the community development assessment. Strengths and weaknesses are the direct factors impacting a community, those that can be directly controlled or influenced by the local leadership. The condition of local streets, water, and wastewater systems, fire protection, and emergency services are all within the control of local leaders. Strengths describe the assets that are already present and upon which development may be built. What do we have here in abundance? Who needs it? For example, a community may have a bountiful supply of fresh water that requires very little processing before distribution. It may also have excess capacity in its municipal wastewater system. With regard to solid waste disposal, it may have a large, well-managed sanitary landfill with many years of capacity. Such communities are an attractive location for businesses in need of fresh water supplies and whose operations result in considerable solid waste, such as those of food and beverage processors. Weaknesses are also factors that influence business location decisions. Will the assets mentioned above be countered by major community weaknesses such as poor housing; a declining and aging population; high tax rates; unreliable utilities; badly deteriorated streets; a lack of land-use planning and zoning; and poor local elected leadership? Strengths and weaknesses are primarily under the

control of local leaders. Once identified, strategies can be implemented to build on existing strengths, to turn weaknesses into strengths, and to minimize if not eliminate weaknesses. Opportunities and threats tend to be factors outside the control of local leaders but that can impact the community's development efforts. Geopolitical events and economic trends, national political events, environmental factors, and corporate realignments tend to present opportunities and threats outside of the control and possibly the influence of communities. However, once such factors are identified, communities can create new strategies, or adapt their existing strategies, to manage threats to the extent that the negative impacts either do not occur or are minimized when they do. If, for example, a town is a "company town" with one major employer providing most of the local jobs and supporting most of the local service businesses, this presents a threat. The community does not have control over the corporate management's decisions. If the plant becomes less cost-effective to operate, management may decide to close the facility. Prior to that threat becoming a reality, local leadership might have regular meetings with plant and corporate managers to identify potential problems so that they could be mitigated. For example, they might seek state incentives and tax abatements to help the facility expand or modernize.

The assessment report

The product of a community assessment is usually a written report. This report

generally consists of four parts. First, it provides an analysis of each of the development factors listed and described above and possibly others that are specific to the assessment location. This section is a blend of objective data, observations and subjective findings, and may include pictures supporting the findings. Second, the report should include a SWOT analysis that describes the strengths and weaknesses identified during the assessment and the opportunities and threats identified by local leaders. Third, the report provides a section on “possibilities.” This is a compilation of wants and desires as expressed by citizens (what they would like to see happen in the future) and possible courses of action (programs, projects, and initiatives) to help the community reach its full potential. In addition to describing possibilities, it may also include pictures of projects from other communities, so that citizens and leaders can see what similarly situated communities have accomplished. Finally, the report would include appendices of statistical data that support the findings including opinion surveys, demographic data, and other evidence on which the findings are based. It has been this author’s experience that community leaders and citizens also want a summary of the findings. They seek a quick reference and a numerical rating that they can use to make comparisons between themselves and other communities. Often, statistical data are used to compare a community with other similar or sometimes “competing” communities in the SWOT analysis. Communities also want a

benchmark from which to measure improvements.

Conclusion

Starting economic development and community development initiatives without an assessment can often lead to addressing problems' symptoms rather than root problems, misidentifying strengths and weaknesses or failing to identify opportunities and threats. Assessments are an important precursor to strategic planning and can help start the community dialogue that fosters planned change.

They may be performed by community leaders themselves, allies such as state and federal agencies, and professional developers. The objectives of community development assessments are:

- To support a community dialogue that involves citizens in determining how they would like to see their community develop.
- To identify the factors that influence the potential development of the community.
- To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that are or can influence the community's development.
- To provide information for those leading a strategic planning process so that a workable and focused set of goals and objectives may be created to help the community achieve its potential as well as help citizens realize their shared vision of the community.

Community asset mapping and surveys

Although a variety of approaches may be used to begin the community development process, those used most often are either a needs assessment or an asset-mapping study. This Lecture focuses on several techniques for mapping community resources/assets such as asset inventories, identifying potential partners and collaborators, and various survey instruments and data-collection methods. Much of the discussion is also appropriate for conducting needs assessment studies and covers some issues organizers may want to consider in conducting surveys of individuals, organizations, and institutions. This lecture provides details on how to design and conduct mapping and surveys and is an instrumental component of the community development process described in previous lectures.

Introduction

The community development process is often initiated with some form of needs assessment or asset mapping. Needs assessment is a method for identifying local problems or issues. These “needs” in turn become the basis for a strategic action plan. Community organizers mobilize residents around the specific issue in order to seek new resources, obtain information and expertise, or to pressure local officials to solve the problem. It is assumed that residents will act to address the

perceived deficiencies in their neighborhood or community. Organizers hope that residents will gain a sense of efficacy by ameliorating problems, which in turn will help them to build the confidence to address other issues as well.

This lecture focuses on several techniques for mapping community assets. Much of the discussion is also appropriate for conducting needs assessment and covers some of the issues organizers may want to consider in conducting surveys of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Although a variety of approaches may be used to begin the community development process, those used most often are either a needs assessment or an asset-mapping study. This lecture focuses on several techniques for mapping community resources/assets such as asset inventories, identifying potential partners and collaborators, and various survey instruments and data-collection methods. Much of the discussion is also appropriate for conducting needs assessment studies and covers some issues organizers may want to consider in conducting surveys of individuals, organizations, and institutions. This lecture provides details on how to design and conduct mapping and surveys and is an instrumental component of the community development process described in previous lectures

Asset mobilization

There are several steps in mobilizing community assets. First, it is important to map the capacities of individuals, organizations, and institutions within the

community. This process helps identify the resources that are available for development. Not only are these assets frequently overlooked, but residents have a tendency to focus more on how external resources can address local deficiencies. Second, organizers build relationships across the community in order to generate support. Most often community organizers work through existing organizations and associations. The goal is to identify common values and concerns that can form the basis of strategic action. Third, the community develops a vision and an action plan for achieving its goals. The vision should be based on the values of local residents and the resources available to them. Finally, communities can leverage their resources to gain outside support. Although the asset-building approach relies on mobilizing local resources, it does not ignore the importance of tapping into external resources and sources of information. However, the focus is on how community action can build on the expertise, experiences, and resources that are already available. A core premise of asset-based development is that local resources are often overlooked in community development. Rather than working to start new organizations, it is possible to build on existing ones. This strategy is typically used by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which relies heavily on mobilizing churches, unions, and community-based organizations.

Methods for mapping assets

Communities can use several different methods for mapping assets. The purpose of

the project should guide the decisions about which method to use and what specific information should be collected. The goals may range from promoting local economic development or community health to supporting youth programs. The community and/or organizations need to clearly state the purpose of the project. Next, it is important to define the territory of the neighborhood or community. This decision will affect almost everything else that is done and should specify which individuals, organizations, or institutions should be included in the project as well as what issues face the community. In most cases there will not be a consensus regarding the boundaries of the community or neighborhood. Natural barriers, such as rivers or lakes, often serve as a boundary. Major streets or highways can help define a neighborhood. Many people will define neighborhoods by key institutions such as schools and churches. School districts provide a useful way to define a community because the population is often fairly homogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status and home ownership. Schools generate interaction among residents which can facilitate the community development process. They also have the advantage of having clearly demarcated boundaries. However, boundaries are chosen, they should reflect residents' perception of the community and promote interaction on issues of common interest. After identifying the purpose and the geographic boundaries of the asset-building community development project, it is important to consider the appropriate method(s) for

conducting the project. There are several issues to consider including the available resources, timing, geographic area, and so on. Weighing different factors can be difficult, and there is no easy way to balance the various considerations. One of the most difficult tradeoffs is between cost and quality. For example, how much will the increased cost of a second wave of surveys improve the quality of the data? Each community needs to decide how it wants to balance this tradeoff. Most communities rely on surveys to document local assets. However, it may be more appropriate to use other methods such as focus groups. Focus groups have the advantage of being relatively inexpensive and can be conducted more quickly than surveys. They can also provide more in-depth information on why people feel the way they do on various issues. On the other hand, focus groups do not give most residents an opportunity to participate in the process, and the findings may not be very representative of the larger population. Regardless, it is not necessary to choose between surveys and focus groups. In fact, it might be useful to use both focus groups and surveys. Some communities may initially use focus groups to identify what types of experiences and skills may be available locally. Alternatively, conducting focus groups after a survey may permit organizers to ask follow-up questions about issues and questions raised through the findings of the survey. Surveys can be administered face-to-face, in group settings, over the phone, or through the mail. Conducting a survey requires time and a financial

commitment from community members. They need to ask themselves several questions before embarking on such a project: Do we want to conduct a survey or use some other technique for obtaining public participation? What is the best way to obtain the information that is needed? What do we want to know? How will this information be used? Is there sufficient time and financial commitment on the part of residents to conduct a survey? Does the information already exist through bureaucratic records, census data, or some other survey that has recently been collected?

When is a survey appropriate?

Most communities use surveys to map community assets. If the goal is strictly to obtain public participation on a policy issue, there may be a variety of other techniques that may be more appropriate or cost-efficient. For example, it may be quicker and easier to hold public meetings or to conduct focus groups. Focus groups may be more appropriate in a situation where it is necessary to understand why people feel they way they do about particular issues. Public meetings provide an opportunity for residents to voice their opinions about issues and listen to the perspectives of their neighbors. A survey instrument may not provide the type of information obtained from these two other techniques. Communities also need to consider whether they have sufficient resources for conducting a survey. There is always a tradeoff between the cost and quality of conducting surveys. By

conducting a survey as cheaply as possible, communities may end up with a low response rate, results that are nonrepresentative, or poor data. As discussed below, there are several low-cost strategies that can significantly improve the quality of data that are collected.

What is the best technique for conducting a survey?

There is no single “best” technique for conducting surveys. The appropriate technique depends on the resources available, the type of information that is desired, and the sampling strategies.

Face-to-face interviews generally provide the best response rate (usually more than 70 percent) among the four survey techniques considered, and permit the interviewer to use visual aids and/or complex questions. This technique is often used with very long or complex questionnaires. Face-to-face interviews are also used to obtain information from groups that would not likely respond to other methods. For example, it may be easier to contact low-income residents through this method than a mail survey or some other technique. In addition, when interviewing employers, it may be preferable to use face-to-face interviews rather than mail surveys. In all cases, interviewers can follow up on responses to get a better understanding of why a given response is provided. However, face-to-face interviews are the most expensive of the four techniques, and there may be problems with “interviewer bias.” Interviewers will need training, and there is

often more coordination of those involved in face-to-face interviews than with other techniques. *Mail surveys* are probably the most frequently used and the cheapest method for conducting community surveys. Mail surveys are usually shorter in length than face-to-face surveys and may include maps and other visual aids, but the instructions need to be concise and understandable. The response rate for mail surveys will vary depending on several factors such as how many follow-up letters are sent, the extent to which the material is personalized, the length of the survey, and whether or not incentives are provided.

Telephone surveys can be completed quickly and generally have a higher response rate than mail surveys. The cost may vary depending upon whether or not respondents are randomly sampled. The response rate among telephone surveys is not as good as face-to-face interviews, but they have the advantage of possible follow-up by interviewers. One of the chief disadvantages is that the interviewer cannot use any visual materials or complex questions. Phone surveys can be difficult to organize when using volunteers to conduct the surveys, and it is more difficult to manage interviewer bias with this survey technique.

Group-administered surveys may be used in situations where the targeted population is likely to attend a meeting where the survey could be administered. For example, a survey could be administered at a neighborhood meeting of residents. The chief advantage is that a large number of respondents can

be reached quickly with very little cost. This approach to administering the survey can introduce several problems in terms of the representativeness of the results. For example, the people attending the meeting may not be representative of all members of the association or organization. Similarly, if the goal is to provide information on residents, members of a group or association in the area may not be representative of all residents. However, group-administered surveys can be a cost-effective way to conduct a survey under certain conditions. It is also possible to provide complex instructions and to use visual aids, such as maps, with this method. These methods of conducting surveys should not be considered mutually exclusive. In many cases it may make sense to mix methods. For example, it may be possible to conduct a mail survey of neighborhood residents and then supplement it with either a phone survey or face-to-face interview with people who have not responded to the mail survey. This strategy of combining survey techniques usually improves the response rate and enables communities to collect information from various groups that may not respond to one particular survey approach.

What is the best way to draw a sample for a survey?

Often communities struggle with developing a random sample of residents for their survey. The problem is that there is no easy way of identifying the population in a neighborhood or community. Using telephone books or even random digit dialing

is becoming a major problem for survey research. Many low-income residents do not have telephones. A growing number of households use cell phones and/or have unlisted numbers. Caller ID makes it more difficult to complete telephone interviews since many residents can screen their calls. These issues make it increasingly problematic to obtain random samples from telephone surveys. And for the purposes of neighborhood organizations, it is somewhat difficult to use this method to interview residents. Property tax records are inadequate in settings where there are a large number of renters. It often takes a lot of work to get the lists in a useable form because business and absentee owners will be included in the list. There may also be multiple entries with the same names (i.e., individuals who own several properties). Since almost everyone has a utility hookup, utility company records are probably one of the best sources for drawing a sample of households. However, these records can be difficult to obtain, and, in some multifamily units there will only be one name for the entire housing unit. But almost everyone has electricity, and this source can be supplemented with others to provide a good list of the population. So, what is the best strategy for developing a sample of households? One approach is to combine lists or methods to draw the sample. For example, many communities rely on property tax records to identify property owners, supplement these lists by locating rental units in the neighborhood/community, and then conduct face-to-face or drop-off surveys

among these households. Finally, in some circumstances it is appropriate to draw what is referred to as a purposive sample. For example, it may be possible to conduct interviews with residents at a neighborhood event. It must be recognized that this is not a random sample and may not be representative of the community at large, but it may be sufficient in many cases. How large should a sample be? The main goal should be to develop a sample that is sufficiently large to provide an adequate number of responses for each group in the community that need to be considered in the analysis. For example, in order to compare the responses of youth and adults, it is necessary to have a sufficient number of responses from both categories of respondents. Depending on the types of comparisons that will be made, the sample should be larger. The larger the sample size, the smaller the margin of error in the results. Sometimes it may be advantageous not to use a random sample at all. If, for example, one of the goals are to look at the assets of the working poor, a random sample may not pick up enough residents in this category. If this is the case, it may be useful to develop a stratified sample that has a disproportionate number of residents in the groups under consideration. This approach can work if it is known where the working-class residents are most likely to live in the neighborhood and then target that area. It may be more difficult to use a stratified sample using other characteristics. One important issue that is often neglected by communities is the *unit of analysis* of the survey. Is the focus of the

study on individuals, families, or households? If the goal is to obtain an accurate random sample of individuals, it may be necessary to conduct a random sample of adults in the household/family. One method of obtaining a random sample is to conduct the interview with the person in the household/family who has had the most recent birthday. Although this strategy reduces the problem of gender bias in responses, when conducting a phone survey, it will increase survey cost because it may be necessary to make several calls before reaching the person who is to be interviewed. Decisions about the best way to develop a sample of households in a neighborhood or a community are intimately tied to the resources available for the project. Clearly, the best method for sampling households and conducting a survey would be to identify each household and conduct face-to-face interviews with a random sample of individuals. This strategy would be very expensive and impractical for most community organizations. In most cases, there is a need to balance competing demands of cost, data quality, and resident participation. The quality of community surveys can be significantly improved with some preparatory work. One of the most important things to do in advance is to set up an advisory committee to help construct the survey and build support for it in the community. Advisory board can help raise funds as well as possibly recruit volunteers for the survey. Another role for the advisory committee is working with the media to publicize the survey. The advisory committee can also help plan the feedback

sessions to residents. Pre-tests are essential to a successful survey. Typically, volunteers can administer this survey face-to-face. It is important to do this face-to-face in order to assess whether the respondents are confused about the meaning of any of the questions. Pre-tests can help communities avoid the embarrassing situation of collecting data that has limited usefulness. Marketing the survey improves the response rate and helps residents understand how the survey information will be used. One strategy is to place an advertisement in local newspapers that explains the purpose of the survey. A cover letter should accompany the survey and explain the objectives of the survey and identify supporting organizations and/or institutions. This letter should also identify a contact person if residents have any questions about the survey. Contacting local organizations – such as churches, schools, and civic organizations – may be another way of explaining the purpose of the survey and gaining support for the effort in the community. Providing feedback to the neighborhood or community can be a useful way to gain some additional insights into the results of the survey and to reward residents for participating in the survey. It is preferable to provide residents with a written report of the results. Some discussion of feedback in the cover letter may improve the response to the survey.

Mapping capacities: Individuals

A central premise of the asset-based community development approach is that all individuals have a capacity to contribute to community well-being. However, assets of youth, seniors, and people with disabilities are frequently ignored. The most obvious assets are formal labor market skills such as work experience, leadership, and organizational skills. Other assets include experiences that individuals may have had outside the formal labor market such as care-giving skills, construction skills, or repair skills. Abilities also include “art, story-telling, crafts, gardening, teaching, sports, political interest, organizing, volunteering and more”. Another component of individual capacity is interest in participating in various community organizations and working on local issues. All of these capacities need to be documented and analyzed for their potential contribution to the community.

Associations

Associations and organizations can facilitate community mobilization. Many efforts to mobilize communities begin with existing organizations because they have established relationships, trust, and resources that can be used in the asset-based community development effort. Although formal organizations are often visible and well established, there are many more organizations without paid staff that are not as easily identified. Some examples of these informal

organizations are block clubs, neighborhood watches, garden clubs, baby-sitting cooperatives, youth peer groups, recreation clubs, and building tenant associations. How are these informal associations mapped? Most local organizations and associations do not show up on any official lists of nonprofit organizations because they are not incorporated or have any paid staff. Probably the best way to identify these associations is to conduct a survey among residents to identify any associations/groups they have heard of or belong to in the community. This method not only enables communities to identify nonprofit organizations but also the interorganizational networks that exist. For example, it may be useful to understand how organizations are linked through overlapping membership as a means of creating potential partnerships and collaborations. Another reason why it is useful to map organizational resources is to help identify who should/could be mobilized in the asset-based community development project. One of the keys to the success of community development projects is inclusion of a wide range of residents. It may be possible to use a list of organizations and associations as a means of checking which community groups and interests are represented in the project. Obviously, it would be impossible to invite representatives from all organizations and associations to participate, but it may be useful to at least ensure that individuals from various areas, such as environmental, health care, economic development, or other areas, are selected. What type of information should be

collected about associations and organizations? The most important issue is identifying individual participation. Individuals should be asked what associations and organizations they belong to inside and outside of the community. This exercise should produce a relatively comprehensive list of organizations and associations. It is also important to identify an individual's leadership role (e.g., served as an officer) and level of participation. Based on the list that is generated from the surveys of individuals, it is also possible to collect information from these organizations and associations. A list of board members and officers is useful to identify potential leadership in the community. It is helpful to collect information on the issues and concerns the organization has and what types of programs they have developed or implemented. Finally, some basic information on the resources of the organization will be helpful in order to identify assets that can be mobilized.

Community institutions

Community institutions hold important resources that could potentially contribute to asset-based development projects. Institutions that are typically most important include parks, libraries, schools, community colleges, police, and hospitals. For example, each of these institutions purchases goods and services that could be directed at local businesses to improve the economy. They may have facilities and equipment that could be used by residents for community events. These institutions

could adjust their employment practices so as to benefit local residents. Or, they could offer programs that could be redirected toward local residents. The main goal of mapping local institutions is to identify their resources and mobilize them in a way to benefit the community. The first step in mapping community institutions is to develop an inventory of the institutions in the community. In most cases this is fairly straightforward, but it needs to be done systematically so that nothing is overlooked. In a small neighborhood this can be done quickly; but it may take more work and time in a larger region. The next step is to identify institutional assets. Depending on the goals, this may involve identifying the spending patterns of the institution (i.e., where goods and services are purchased). This typically involves conducting surveys of these institutions and identifying key underutilized resources. One example of this would be the school-to-farm programs that have developed across the country. Community groups are assessing where schools are purchasing food and whether this food could be purchased locally through farms in the region. School to-farm programs improve the markets for local farms and the quality of food in the schools. However, there can be institutional obstacles such as cost, scale, and price to use locally produced goods in the schools.

Conclusion

Asset-based development differs from traditional community development strategies in several key ways. Local assets drive the community's plan for

development and mobilization rather than problems or needs. It relies heavily on building relationships and local leadership. The beginning points for the asset-based approach is a map of the community's assets. This mapping effort requires residents to go beyond their preconceived notions of what they believe exists in the community and asks them to identify resources that could be used to achieve their vision for the future of their community. Developing an accurate assessment of resources is critical to the success of asset building. This also shifts the focus from the problems to the opportunities that face the community. It should be stressed that mobilizing communities around assets can be a difficult process. Most residents want to move quickly to identifying solutions without adequately assessing the issues, understanding the resources that are available to them, or developing a vision of what the community should be in the future. While organizing communities around issues and problems often works in the short term, it is difficult to maintain in the long run. Mobilizing communities around partnerships and developing new leadership should provide a basis for long-term community action. A final note regarding the quality of community surveys. One of the surest ways to halt a community development project is to start with questionable data. Because everything that follows is based on an accurate assessment of community resources, it is essential to conduct a survey that residents can trust. Many communities outsource the survey to professional or

support staff. This has the advantage of improving the perception that the survey will be neutral. Yet the survey is never actually value-free, and residents may still feel that the process is biased. By contracting outside of the community for the survey, residents are missing out on an opportunity to build interest and support for their neighborhood. Residents may gain more insights into how they might promote asset-based development by creating their own questionnaire and conducting some of the interviews and/or pre-tests.