

HANDBOOK OF APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE

VOLUME 1

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Traditional approaches to community development often involve top-down or outside-in approaches. A consequence of using these approaches is the support of "needs-based" solutions to community problems that emphasize policies and programs that focus on the perceived deficiencies of residents and their families. An alternative to top-down or outside-in approaches involves pinpointing available local individual and associational resources, or assets, connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and engaging local institutions for local development purposes (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McKnight, 1995). Called asset-based community development (ABCD), this approach assumes that social and economic **revitalization begins with rediscovering and mobilizing the assets already present in every community**, including,

- The skills and resources of its individuals;
- The power of voluntary associations, achieved through building relationships;
- The assets present in the array of local institutions;
- The physical infrastructure of the community; and
- The local economy.

Another way of saying this is: **Successful community development focuses on the community itself, is based on strengths, and is grounded in relationship.** Although some resources from outside the community may be needed as development progresses, the key to lasting solutions comes from within. No plan, solution, or organization from outside the community can duplicate, nor should it supplant, what is already there.

While all of these assets are critical resources for community development, one of these assets—local associations—is particularly important.

Composed of citizens working together, associations are amplifiers of the gifts, talents, and skills of individual community members. Residents in all communities, regardless of income, continually form new associations. Churches, mosques, temples, block clubs, local chapters of national organizations, and informally organized special-interest groups constantly emerge and reshape themselves as individuals link with others around their interests and common purposes. These associations are the basic units through which citizens empower one another and mobilize each other's capacities to improve their lives and the lives of their neighbors.

More than 160 years ago, **Alexis de Tocqueville** documented the experiences of American communities and claimed that associations were at the center of local civic and community building processes. In his travels, he found that local citizens who came together in small groups to solve their problems were making the crucial decisions about politics and the economy. He concluded that healthy associational life explained the unique vitality of political and economic life in U.S. communities and had resulted in a new form of democracy.

A neighborhood association can be defined as a group of two or more neighborhood residents joined together around a common activity, often sharing a common vision and purpose. Some associations are temples, churches, or mosques created by people of common faith. Some are organized around pressing social issues, such as a neighborhood crime watch group, a political empowerment group, or a group to preserve some aspect of the local environment. Other associations are organized around athletics, gender, arts, culture, age, or special skills. Finally, some associations are organized on the basis of physical proximity, such as block clubs and neighborhood improvement groups. Associations may be formal, with elected officers and members who pay dues, or informal, without a name and without any officers or official memberships. While some associations may have a small staff to help members reach their goals (e.g., a pastor, organizer, or secretary), members always create the vision and engage in the basic work to solve the problem or achieve the goal.

Local associations contribute to building community in three ways. **First**, local associations can reach and involve many more people in local action than institutions can. Because their combined members can represent a majority of people in the neighborhood, they can greatly magnify the number of people reached with new information or the number who get involved in community action. **Second**, associations are seen as significant vehicles for positively changing both the attitudes and behavior of people. They set norms and provide incentives for new forms of action and are critical forums for shaping community attitudes. **Third**, while most associations are focused on one particular goal or interest, they take on additional functions that reach beyond their members' primary purpose. For example, a baseball league may take on the maintenance of a local ball park, a women's social organization may raise money for cancer research, a veteran's organization may "Adopt a Highway" and clean the right of way, a youth recreation group may visit homebound seniors, and a faith-based group may create a fitness club. In many neighborhoods, a great deal of community improvement is the result of the primary and secondary activities of local associations. For these reasons, associations represent a vital local vehicle for achieving positive community change, along with the other local assets.

But local assets – including associations -- need to be discovered before they can be mobilized. Over time, some simple but powerful tools have been developed to aid this rediscovery and mobilization, tools that have emerged from practical experience. The ABCD approach suggests the mapping of local assets using an inventory process to identify local resources at the individual and associational levels. Individual capacity inventories or associational inventories effectively serve as the launch pad for activities dedicated to whole community development. Through the use of such mapping tools, communities gain awareness of and access to the rich array of local assets available for mobilization toward increased community well-being. All kinds of community groups have used the asset-mapping process to begin to identify the assets with which they can build. Faith-based groups have inventoried their parishioners, block clubs have inventoried their neighbors, and development organizations have

inventoried their local associations. In ABCD, every group using an inventory designs it according to a simple set of principles:

- **Targeted asset mapping** to identify skills, capacities, or resources to mobilize toward a specific project or goal (discovering what is needed to complete a project).
- **Visionary asset mapping** to identify skills, capacities, or resources out of which to define a new project or goal (discovering what is available for designing a new project).

So, if the goal of one group is to develop and support new micro-enterprises in the community, its inventory might assess the interest of local people in starting new businesses. If another group has yet to define a specific goal, it might inventory local associations to identify what kinds of activities they are most interested in and what skills and resources they could bring to any effort.

Once the discovery process has occurred, asset-based community developers move on to the creation of new connections between local assets. Making these connections – or building relationships – is at the heart of asset-based community development. New relationships can be promoted among any of the five kinds of community assets, but asset-based community development emphasizes connecting individuals to one another in order to create new associations, and then connecting local associations to the other community assets in ways that amplify the power of these citizen groups. Associations may connect to local institutions – parks, schools, and libraries, for example – that are able to provide support for their efforts. Associations may become active in building the local economy by recognizing local business opportunities not yet capitalized on. Associations may identify unused space or buildings in the community and use it as a way of bringing people together.

Thus, the practice of asset-based community development is not rigidly defined, and there is no one model for carrying it out. Mapping and mobilizing local assets are tools that each community designs for itself and implements according to the ABCD guiding principles that state that successful community development is **asset based, internally focused, and relationship driven**.