

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Start Here

How you perceive the neighborhood that you live or work in is going to profoundly influence the way that you act. Typically a neighborhood is seen from the perspective of its largest deficits. “That is a dangerous neighborhood”, “That neighborhood looks trashy”, “There is a lot of poverty in that community.” How many times have you heard that as a first description of a neighborhood? We all know about the negative things that are a part of our community, but, at the other side of every deficit, is an asset begging for some attention. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is intentional about keeping our focus on those assets and celebrating what is right with our community. You will notice that as people begin to talk about the positive things in the community, when they are encouraged to talk about what is working, when they learn of all the great resources that are in their neighborhood (and in some cases have always been available in their neighborhood), the energy level will increase exponentially.

What's Covered

- Glass Half Empty or Half Full
- The Asset Map





WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THIS GLASS?

Asset-Based Community Development is not something that you whip out of your “tool bag” when you cannot seem to solve the problem with which you are faced. It is a complete shift in the way you approach the work you do, the people with whom you are working, and the communities that you are trying to organize. At its most basic level, it is like the old lesson of the half-full/half-empty glass. When you look at the glass, what do you see? The normal “answer” to that question is that if you say half-full you are a positive thinking person and if you said half-empty, you are a negative thinking person.

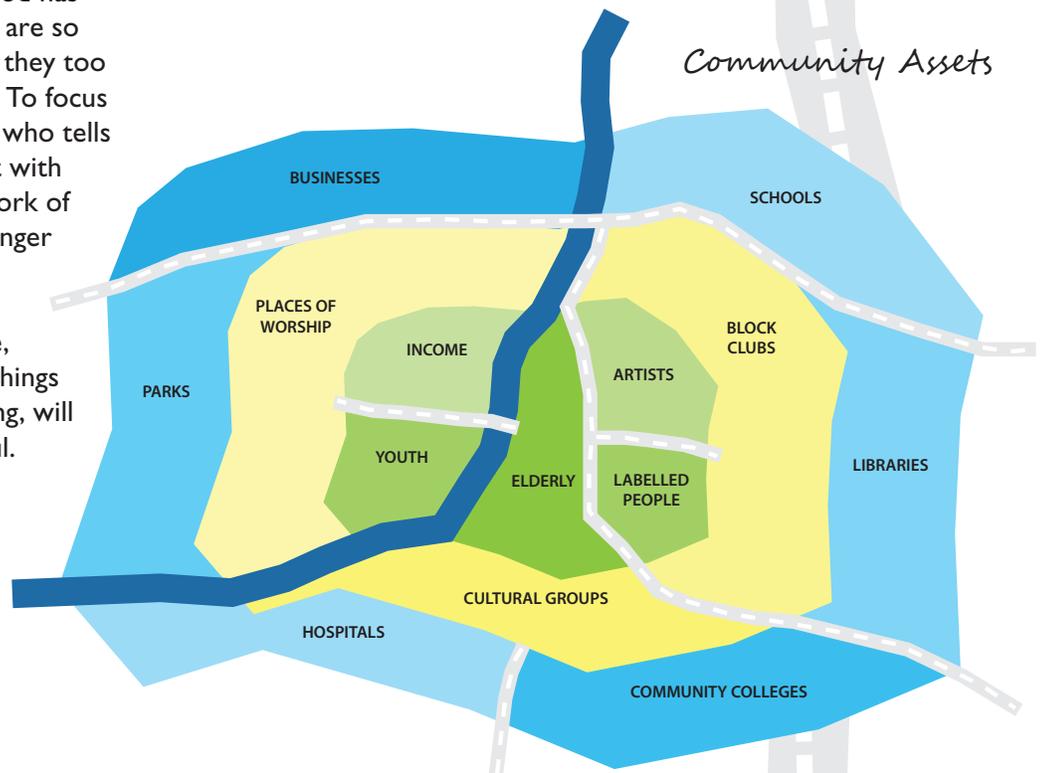
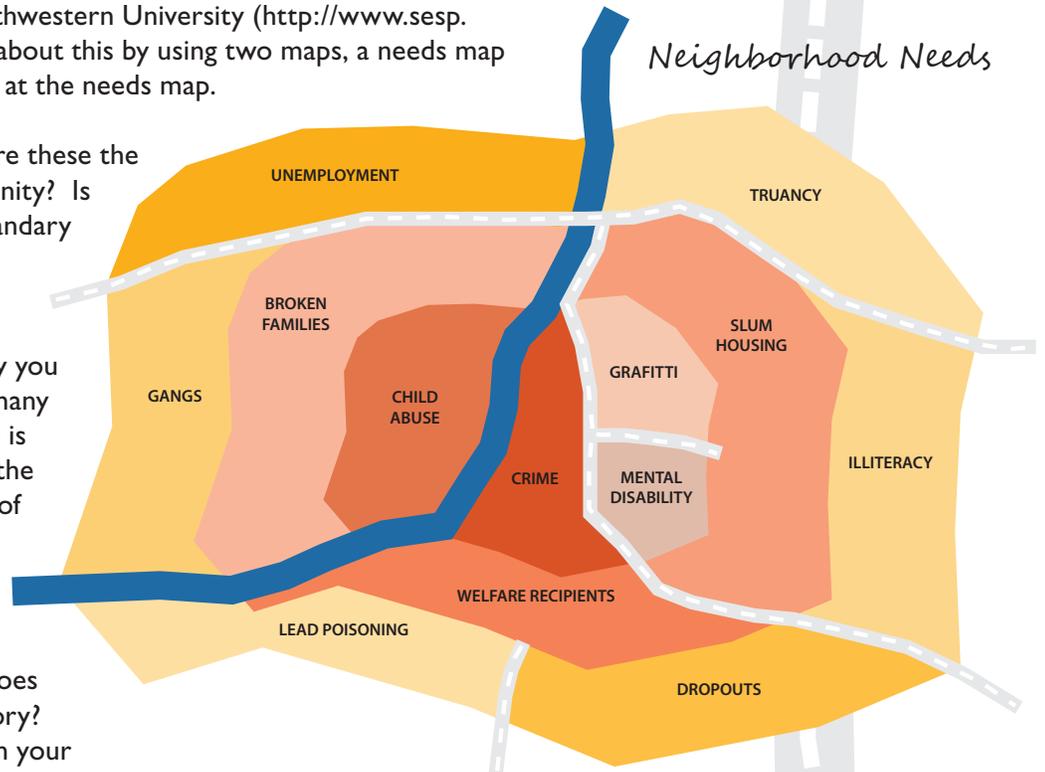


There is probably some truth in that, but the real answer is that it is both. The glass is both half-full and half-empty. This is a simple yet dynamic way to think about all of us. We all have a half-full side: our gifts, skills, passions and talents. But we also all have our half-empty side: our deficiencies, problems and bad habits. Imagine for a moment that you were asked to write down on a note card the thing about yourself that you hate the most... that one thing that you are even embarrassed to talk about with family. For most people it would be difficult to even write it down. Now what if you were asked to tape it to your chest and walk around with it there for the rest of the day. Not interested? Why? Probably because you understand, that one thing does not define who you are. There are just as many things about yourself that would tell a much better story about who you are. How many times have you judged somebody for that one bad trait? We have all done it. We are trained to do it. Should a single mom be defined by her “single momness”? Should you define someone who is blind by their blindness? Is that all that they are? Of course not.

Our communities fall into this same category. In every community there are problems and issues. These tend to be well-documented by the media, universities, and the social service industry. A neighborhood's problems are well-defined: crime, drugs, low graduation rates, broken families, etc. The list is seemingly endless depending on the community you live in. But is that it? Is that the only thing that defines your community? Of course not. John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann of the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University (<http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/>) talk about this by using two maps, a needs map and an asset map. Take a look at the needs map.

Is that your neighborhood? Are these the things that define your community? Is that the whole story? The quandary that exists is that all or most of those things exist in our neighborhoods, but it is not the whole story. It is the story you hear on the news, or even at many neighborhood meetings. Who is going to tell the other part of the story? What is the other half of the story... the full half of the glass? Now take a look at the asset map.

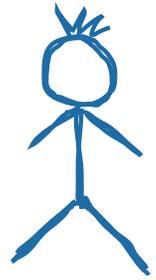
Is that your neighborhood? Does this map help complete the story? These are the assets that are in your community. Every neighborhood has them. The problem is that we are so focused on what is wrong that they too easily become overshadowed. To focus on these assets, to be the one who tells the story of what is going right with your community, is the true work of the organizer. Exploiting the anger in somebody is an effective way to organize them for the short-term. Giving them hope, showing them all of the great things that neighbors are already doing, will organize them for the long haul.





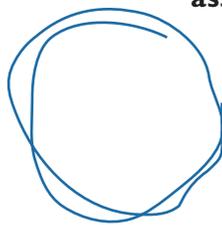
THE ASSET MAP

If you will notice, the asset map is broken into 5 areas. It is very important to start at the center. The center of every community is the people that live there. **Individuals** should be the focus of anything that is done. It was mentioned before that each person has a full half and an empty half. The full half is what we are concerned with. Every person has skills, talents, gifts and passions that can be used for the community if they were known and the person was asked if s/he would be willing to use them. How can we find out what these gifts and talents are? We ask of course. This has been done in a number of ways. The most effective way is that people simply get to know their neighbors. As these relationships form it will become evident what skills and talents exist. Other ways that this has been done are skills inventories. People are asked to complete a questionnaire that begins the process of inventorying what they are good at, what they would be willing to teach and what they would be willing to learn.



Another way to find out about your neighbor's gifts, skills, and talents is to designate someone as the collector of this kind of information. In the Mapleton Fall Creek neighborhood, the folks at Broadway United Methodist church designated De'Amon Harges as the "Roving Listener". As you'll read more about in the section on Communication, his task is to roam throughout the neighborhood talking and, more importantly, listening to what neighbor's interests and skills are. He then works to connect people in the neighborhood based on those interests and skills. This is a way to not only find the information that you are looking for, but also to build the network of connections in the neighborhood.

The second area of the asset map that you should focus on is the **associations** that exist in every single community. What are these associations? Typically within ABCD, a circle is used to symbolize associations. An association is any group of people that come together because of a shared interest or because of a common cause. What are some of the associations in your community?



The use of associations for organizing a community can be traced back to the beginning of the United States. But, it was Saul Alinsky, in his organizing of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood in Chicago, where this idea was demonstrated. His insight was that the residents of this community were already very organized through the churches, labor unions, social athletic clubs, political parties, or fraternal organizations. These associations of people already exist.



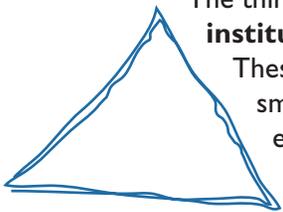
Your neighbors are already organized in various ways. You do not have to recreate the wheel. You may think that your community does not have these organized associations. They are there. You may have to dig deep to find them. A study conducted by the ABCD Institute showed that even in one of the poorest areas of Chicago, the Grand Boulevard Neighborhood, there were over 200 associations that were actively meeting (Kretzmann, McKnight, & Turner, 1996). The work of connecting some of these 200+ associations displays endless possibilities of improving the community.

How do you begin to identify all of the associations in your community? Start with yours! Take a few minutes and jot down all of the groups that you are involved with. What about the ones that your friends and family are involved in? Your list will grow very fast (refer to INRC's website at www.inrc.org for help identifying existing associations). You've begun to develop a good list, but now what? If that is as far as you go your list is almost worthless. Go out and talk to them. Why do they exist? What are they doing currently? What are they willing to do if asked? Begin to connect groups that seem to have similar missions or interests. Begin to communicate all that is going on in the community with these groups and see if they fit in somewhere. How can a gardening club or a senior citizens group be a resource to the local little league? How could a knitting circle or a church choir be a resource to the local elementary school? The connections and the possibilities that arise are endless ... but, someone or some group of people needs to help weave those relationships.



The third area that is important to a community is the **institutions** that support or call your community home.

These could be businesses, local government, large and small non-profit organizations, schools, hospitals, libraries, etc. All of these institutions could have space, expertise, buying power, employment opportunities and many more great things that are a strong asset to your community.



On the east side of Indianapolis, Community East Hospital is not only home to many of the neighborhood meetings that take place in their community, but they have stepped in to help address community development issues that have arisen in their community. They are not only devoting space, but staff time and money to help support neighborhood-driven initiatives like the Emerson Avenue Gateway Project. The Community Hospital Foundation is providing the \$250,000 match of a one million dollar Transportation Enhancement grant to improve this corridor. This is a great example of how a local institution can support the residents and associations to improve the quality of life of a community.

The fourth area of our map is the Physical Space or **Land** that is so important to any community. It could be the obvious, like the parks or greenways, or the less-than-obvious assets like parking lots or abandoned houses. All of these are tremendous assets and opportunities for communities. In keeping with our theme, all of the negative issues that exist with our land are well-documented; your job is to look at the potential and the opportunities that exist in these spaces. To find a block with 5 or 6 abandoned homes could be looked at as a deficiency, a severe crime problem, or just more examples of disinvestment. It could also be looked at as a wonderful opportunity for large scale development or an opportunity for a community development corporation to develop affordable housing. This applies to all of the land that you have in your community, whether it be turning vacant lots into community gardens or meditation parks like ReImagine Neighborhoods did on Indianapolis's Near East Side, or turning a greenspace owned by a neighborhood business into a Farmers Market every Saturday during the summer, like the residents of the BRAG neighborhood did on the Northeast side of town.

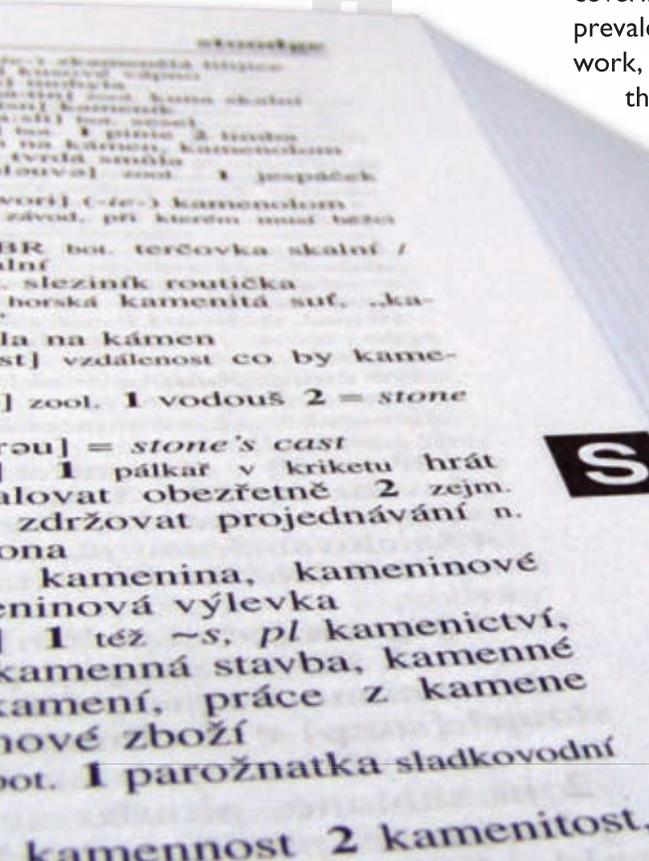
“How can you possibly know what you need until you figure out what you have?”

John McKnight

The final area that makes up our asset map is the **exchange** that happens in our community. One way to explain this is the number of times a dollar can circulate through your community without escaping. Think about the money you spend on a weekly basis. How much of it is spent in the neighborhood? Does it stay in the community longer if it is spent at a local independent business or a franchise of a national retailer? Do your local businesses hire and buy locally? Many communities throughout the country are working on these issues of exchange. “Buy Local” campaigns and co-operatives are gaining momentum. Your community will be a lot healthier if the money that comes in every week does not leave just as fast.

THE BATTLE FOR LANGUAGE

Be aware that, just because the language of assets is used, it may be covering up the same old needs-based work. Something that has become prevalent in recent years is the co-opting of the language of asset-based work, or strengths-based, as some fields call it, while not integrating the entire philosophy upon which the work is based. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is not one tool of many that one can try for a specific project. As you will see, the ABCD philosophy is one which informs all aspects of a neighborhood's work.



As you have been going through this section you have been introduced to the idea of Asset Mapping. Asset Mapping is pulling together of your community's assets into a usable format. The important thing to remember is that the data collection that is involved in the mapping process is only the start. If you do not do anything else it will not organize your community; it is just words on paper. The real work of Asset Mapping occurs when you begin to make those connections. Linking the Senior Citizens group to the Little League is where the magic begins to happen.

Putting together a good Asset Map will require a knowledgeable group of neighbors that can help you identify everything. As a group, begin to fill out the blank form provided as best as possible. Remember that an Asset Map is never finished. You will continue to add and subtract things from the map as time goes on. Let's begin to construct an asset map for your community.

TRY IT!

OUR COMMUNITY'S ASSET MAP

Associations

List the Community Organizations
(i.e. Neighborhood Associations, Block Clubs, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

List the Social and Civic Clubs

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Institutions

List all of the Faith-Based Organizations, Schools, etc.

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 1. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 2. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 3. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 4. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 5. _____ |

List the other Institutions in your community
(i.e. Hospitals, Businesses, Non-Profits, Government, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now the real work can start. Talk about what each of these groups can contribute. Begin to experiment with ways that these groups can connect.



REAL LIFE SCENARIO



Oasis of Hope moved into their new church in June of 1989. In their new home in the Martindale Brightwood Neighborhood, it became apparent that the apartment complex just east of their new building was going to be an issue. This apartment complex was in miserable shape and at the time showed no promise. If one were to look at it through the half empty glass all they would see was a run down apartment complex, full of crime, full of poverty and a real challenge to Oasis of Hope's new home feeling like a safe place for members to be. Maybe the rational response would have been to go after the owners or HUD who was subsidizing many of the units. To argue that it should be torn down would have been much easier. Reverend Frank Alexander always looked at it a little differently. He saw this old dilapidated apartment complex as a tremendous asset and, when the opportunity came about, formed a Community Development Corporation out of the church and purchased what was to be New Bridges Apartments. After a tremendous amount of work and millions of dollars, New Bridges stands as an example of what local institutions can do when they view their community and all the assets that fill it from the half full perspective.

TIPS

- *When thinking about your community, always be thinking about the connections that are possible.*
- *Find the people in the neighborhood that are connected to a number of different groups. Pull them in and have them help you brainstorm possible connections.*
- *Have an entrepreneurial spirit when it comes to community possibilities. Do not discard something that seems like a "crazy" idea.*