

Asset-Based Community Development - An Overview

By Gord Cunningham and Alison Mathie, Coady International Institute
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Here is an approach that clearly illustrates developmental thinking applied to practice in community development contexts.

What Is ABCD?

It is an approach to community-based development, based on the principles of:

Appreciating and mobilising individual and community talents, skills and assets (rather than focusing on problems and needs)

Community-driven development rather than development driven by external agencies

It builds on:

Appreciative inquiry which identifies and analyses the community's past successes. This strengthens people's confidence in their own capacities and inspires them to take action

The recognition of *social capital* and its importance as an asset. This is why ABCD focuses on the power of associations and informal linkages within the community, and the relationships built over time between community associations and external institutions

Participatory approaches to development, which are based on principles of empowerment and ownership of the development process

Community economic development models that place priority on collaborative efforts for economic development that makes best use of its own resource base

Efforts to strengthen *civil society*. These efforts have focused on how to engage people as citizens (rather than clients) in development, and how to make local governance more effective and responsive.

How Is ABCD Facilitated?

ABCD is a process of self-mobilisation and organising for change. This process has happened spontaneously in many communities. The challenge for an external agency, such as an NGO, is to stimulate this process in other communities without having the opposite effect of creating dependency. There are a set of methods that can be used, but it is important not to consider this a blue-print, but more as guidelines for achieving community-driven development. We are already seeing variations in how ABCD is facilitated by different NGOs.

Collecting stories

Organising a core group

Mapping the capacities and assets of individuals, associations and local institutions

Building a community vision and plan

Mobilising and linking assets for economic development

Leveraging activities, investments and resources from outside the community

1. Collecting Stories

To begin building confidence in the community, informal discussions and interviews that draw out people's experience of successful activities and projects will help to uncover the gifts, skills, talents and assets people have. Not only does this uncover assets that people have not recognised before, but it also strengthens people's pride in their achievements. This celebration of achievement and realisation of what they have to contribute builds confidence in their abilities to be producers, not recipients, of development.

2. Organising a Core Group

In the process of collecting stories, particular people will emerge as leaders in the community -- people who have shown commitment and leadership in the past or who are currently taking a leadership role. The next step is to organise a group of such committed individuals who are interested in exploring further the community's assets and acting on the opportunities identified. Each of these individuals will have a network of relationships inside the community whom they can draw in to the process. Each of these individuals will have a personal interest -- something that motivates him or her to act.

3. Mapping Completely the Capacities and Assets of Individuals, Associations, and Local Institutions

Mapping is more than gathering data. It is very important that citizens and their associations do the asset mapping themselves so that they themselves build new relationships, learn more about the contributions and talents of community members, and identify potential linkages between different assets.

Identifying associations

The starting point of this exercise is to identify associations in the community. These relationships are the engines of community action, and are therefore essential (and often unrecognised) as assets. One way to do this is to start with the core group and ask them what associations and informal groups they belong to. Once these have been listed, ask the core group to expand the list to include associations they know about. This longer list of associations can then be clustered by type and those associations most likely to participate in working together for a common purpose can be identified. In the process of identifying associations, the list of leaders in the community also expands.

Identifying individual gifts, skills, and capacities

There are many ways of trying to elicit individual gifts, skills and capacities. The important thing is to ensure that this is not just a data gathering exercise, but a way in which people feel that their abilities and contributions are appreciated. Eventually a "capacity inventory" is developed, listing these capacities in categories such as "community-building skills", "enterprise skills", "teaching skills", "artistic skills". A simpler approach might be to divide them into skills of the heart, head, and hand.

Identifying the assets of local institutions

This would include government agencies, non government agencies and private sector businesses. The assets of these institutions could be the services and programmes they provide, the meeting places they offer, the equipment and other supplies they may have, or the communications links they may have. They also have paid or unpaid staff who may be important links in the community.

Identifying physical assets and natural resources

Assets such as land, water, mineral or other resources can be listed here, identifying those which are communally owned and managed and those which are individually owned and managed.

Mapping the local economy

This exercise helps people in the community understand how the local economy works, showing how well local resources are maximised for local economic benefit. Are products and services imported that could be produced locally?

4. Convening a Broad Representative Group to Build a Community Vision and Plan

During this part of the process, assets are matched with opportunities around an "organising theme" -- a vision for community development. An activity is selected within that organising theme for the community to begin working on right away. It needs to be concrete (people know what to do to succeed, and what success will look like), immediate, achievable with community resources, unifying (it brings people together), and strengthening (people's skills are used and valued). How is this process managed? It is important that the representative group that is convened reflects the energy that has been identified at the associational level. Institutions take a back seat role, leaving decision-making to those who have been identified as leaders in the community with key links to associational networks.

5. Mobilising Assets for Community Development

The process continues as an ongoing mobilisation of community assets for economic development and information sharing purposes, initiated by the associational base. Associations are encouraged to engage by appealing to their interests, finding common ground and ensuring that they are contributing on their own terms. Eventually, an "association of associations" emerges.

6. Leveraging Activities, Investments and Resources from Outside the Community to Support Asset-Based, Locally Defined Development

The process of realising the community vision begins with associations asking themselves "What can we do to make this vision happen?" External resources are not tapped until local resources have been utilised. This puts the community in a position of strength in dealing with outside institutions.

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A HYPERLINK "http://www.stfx.ca/institutes/coady/text/about_publications_occasional_citizens.html" [more detailed discussion of ABCD](#) by the authors is available from the Coady International Institute.

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