



Building a New Perspective: Asset-Based Development

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When we approach community and economic development, we tend to think of what our needs are or what gaps need to be filled. However, this approach focuses our attention on what is missing, so often causing us to overlook opportunities to build on what already exists. Today, there is an alternative called an asset-based approach. This approach represents a shift in our outlook. It moves us from thinking about community and economic development as a way to fill a gap to thinking about the assets in our communities as the keys for building our future.

IF WE TRY TO BUILD OUR FUTURES BASED ON WHAT WE DON'T HAVE,
ALL WE DO HAVE ARE EMPTY HANDS.

Needs-Based Thinking

Have we been looking at communities the wrong way? Have we been focusing too much on deficiencies and problems and not enough on opportunities and strengths? And, has this approach kept us from achieving the most that we can?

How we frame an issue affects how we understand its nature. This is important because it in turn affects how we conceive solutions or responses. In other words, how we frame an issue comes from our outlook. When we talk about our outlook, Einstein put it this way: "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

Needs-based approaches are a way of thinking common in the worlds of community and economic development. In this approach, the focus first is on determining areas of need and then seeking ways to address them.

Needs-based thinking is heavily embedded in our conceptual frameworks and our common ways of thinking. It is embedded in our every

day life. Given this, it is a tempting way of thinking, easy to fall into, and can be difficult to see beyond. For example, when we think of a needs-based approach, especially as it relates to funding, a metaphor that we can invoke is one of going shopping.

When we go shopping, we usually stop, take stock of what is missing, and then leave our homes in search of filling those gaps. After all, we don't go shopping in order to purchase what we already have. We go to obtain items we don't have and cannot fill with our existing store of household items.

This metaphor can also reflect how many

The significant problems we face
cannot be solved
at the same level of thinking we were at
when we created them.

~ Albert Einstein

approach community and economic development. We take stock of where our gaps

are, identify what is missing and then go looking for opportunities in order to fill them.

A Paralyzing Approach

A needs-based approach may be useful in some situations, but since it focuses attention on what is missing, or what we have not been able to achieve, this approach can also be paralyzing for communities.

The greatest challenge to any thinker
is stating the problem
in a way that will allow a solution.
~BERTRAND RUSSELL

At times it can result in what seem like endless needs assessments. And, these laundry lists of deficiencies or problem inventories can often become overwhelming. After all, with so many needs, which one do we address first? By focusing on our shortcoming, we can also fall victim to the blame game – putting our focus on who's to blame instead of on how to work together.

Such an approach can also impact how we see ourselves. By focusing on inadequacies and failings, a sense of defeat can emerge as we internalize this negative self image of deficiencies, and we come to believe that the answers and solutions always seem to lie beyond our community.

While a needs based approach may be common, and it is one often pursued, it need not determine how we pursue our futures. There is another approach. After all, if we try to build our futures based on what we don't have, all we do have are empty hands.

Asset-Based Alternative

An alternative is an asset-based approach. An asset-based approach requires a shift in our outlook, how we frame issues, and moves us from thinking about community and economic development as a way to fill a gap to community and economic development as an opportunity for building a future.

Just as needs-based action is embedded in our language and everyday life, so to is asset-based action -- though we rarely recognize it.

A participant in an asset mapping workshop recently made the distinction beautifully when she said: "An asset based approach is like cooking dinner. After all, I don't decide what I will make for dinner based upon what I DON'T have in my cupboards."

The philosopher Bertrand Russell captures this well when he said: "The greatest challenge to any thinker is stating the problem in a way that will allow a solution."

And that's the key, stating issues in ways that allow us to think in terms of solutions, or at least what can be done -- however grand or small. Instead of listing our deficiencies or problems, this approach takes stock of the broad array of actors and assets in a community, identifying how they can be mobilized.

An Asset-Based Approach

Kretzman and McKnight have been central figures in promoting and popularizing this approach to community development. They call it an Opportunity Based Philosophy where the focus is not on solving a problem, but taking stock of what a community first has to offer, its assets.

According to Kretzman and McKnight, activities that are based on an asset approach share three characteristics: they are asset-based, internally focused, and relationship driven.

Assets are the strengths that already exist in a community. They come in all sizes and types; from an individual's talents to an organization's networks.

The starting place of asset-based development is first and foremost to identify and build on the strengths that exist. For Kretzman and McKnight, while communities vary in size, place, and endowments, they all already have the two most important ingredients: their people and their institutions and associations. All people have abilities,

talents, and knowledge. And, as individuals organize themselves into institutions and associations, these too have talents and abilities and strengths.

Characteristics of an Asset Based Approach

Asset-based.

Efforts begin with an understanding (or begin by developing an understanding) of what exists in the local community.

Internally-focused.

Planning or priority setting is linked to these local assets

Relationship-driven.

Local community members make decisions and work together to achieve locally determined goals.

In this approach, the first step is to take stock of the richness held in the people of a community. Kretzman and McKnight, for example, first focused on individual level assets using a technique called "asset mapping" where you tally the skills and abilities of community members.

More recently, asset mapping has expanded, focusing on institutional assets and taking stock of the broad array of institutional actors and assets in a community.

Impact of an Asset-Based Approach

There are many different asset-based techniques and strategies sharing the elements of being asset-based, internally focused, and relationship driven. While the approaches may differ, they all hold to the same underlying assumption that communities have assets to bring to bear on community development.

But in the end, these requirements and strategies are only tools. Alone, they do not ensure a new approach, a new outlook.

Without a different outlook, asset maps can be just another laundry list. This is particularly true if the interrelationships are not seen and built upon, by linking those assets to achieving a common goal. And, while seeing interrelationships among people or among institutions is important, this outlook is also about seeing the interrelationships among the diverse aspects or sectors of our communities.

One impact of using an asset-based approach is that we begin to ask different questions. We begin to move from asking "what's missing?" to asking "what do we have?" and "how do we use it to get to where we what to go?"

Starting from an asset-based approach can also influence how we approach working together. It can influence who among the diverse actors in our community we bring together in collaborations. It can influence our motivation to join a collaborative effort. It can also shift our vision of the future and what the road there looks like.

Asking Different Questions

- Where do we want to go?
- What assets do our community members and institutions possess?
- What can we achieve by better combining and recombining those resources?
- How can we use our existing store of resources to complement or leverage additional resources?
- How do we use our available institutional and people assets to gain a better understanding of available opportunities?
- How do available community and economic development opportunities fit into our vision for the future of our community?

Conclusion

Asset-based action is no more a silver bullet than need-based or any other approach. And, an asset approach does not mean that needs, gaps, and deficiencies do not exist. The key difference lies in our outlook: seeing these gaps and needs exclusively, or seeing them in conjunction with the strengths and assets that exist right along side of them.

The Definition of Insanity
~ ~ ~
Doing what you've always done and
believing that you will get
something different.

In other words, it's not just about identifying assets, and it's not just about working together. It's about doing both. It's about working together to mobilize those assets and using opportunities in order to enhance those assets.

Just because a community has high unemployment, doesn't mean that there are no jobs. And just because a community has high

levels of high school dropouts, doesn't mean that there are no high school graduates. Even the most impoverished, distressed, and disadvantaged communities have strengths and assets to bring to the table. The first step is to recognize them. The next step is to mobilize them.

But being able to do this also means a change in perspective -- a change in how we relate to our communities and a change in how we relate to the opportunities to enhance our communities. Rather than shopping to fill gaps, community and economic development can be seen in terms of cooking -- building on what is already in the cupboards, putting together ingredients in new ways, in order to build our community's future.

This publication was developed from the talk "Joining Needs-Based Funding with Asset-Based Action" by Julie N. Zimmerman delivered at the 25th National Institute on Human Services in Rural Areas. Pre-Institute by Maine Rural Development Council and the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Building Vibrant Rural Communities: How to Cultivate and Leverage Public and Private Sector Resources. July 19, 2000. Presque Isle, ME.

For More Information:

"Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets," by John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight.

<http://www.northwestern.edu/IPR/publications/buildingblurb.html>

Asset Based Community Development

<http://www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html>

"Innovations in Community Development." Cornelia Butler Flora. Rural Development News. North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Iowa State University.

<http://www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/rdev/newsletter/sept97/innov.com.dev.html>

"From Assets to Action." Cornelia Butler Flora. Rural Development News. North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Iowa State University.

<http://www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/rdev/newsletter/Spring99/from%20the%20director.html>

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