



The following document was contributed to the Toolkit by the Collaborative For Neighborhood Transformation.

What is Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

Collaborative for Neighborhood Transformation
<http://www.neighborhoodtransformation.net/>

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Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a *strategy* for sustainable community-driven development. Beyond the mobilization of a particular community, ABCD is concerned with how to link micro-assets to the macro-environment. The appeal of ABCD lies in its premise that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing, but often unrecognized assets, and thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity.

ABCD builds on the assets that are already found in the community and mobilizes individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to build on their assets-- not concentrate on their needs. An extensive period of time is spent in identifying the assets of individuals, associations, and then institutions before they are mobilized to work together to build on the identified assets of all involved. Then the identified assets from an individual are matched with people or groups who have an interest or need in that asset. The key is to begin to use what is already in the community.

In the past when a person had a need they went to their neighborhood for assistance. But this has shifted today to the belief that the neighbor does not have the skills to help them, therefore we must go to a professional for assistance.

The Welfare system today works in such a way that professionals have made clients and recipients of the poor, robbing them of the support from their neighbors who now think that they are not skilled enough to help. This leads to isolation of the individuals. The poor begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders, but this can be changed through the ABCD process.

A second power of ABCD is found in the local associations who should drive the community development process and leverage additional support and entitlements. These associations are the vehicles through which all a community's assets can be identified and then connected to another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Users of the ABCD approach are deliberate in their intentions to lead by stepping back. Existing associations and networks (whether formal or informal) are assumed to be the source of constructive energy in the community. Community-driven development is done rather than development driven by external agencies.

ABCD draws out strengths and successes in a community's shared history as its starting point for change. Among all the assets that exist in the community, ABCD pays particular attention to the assets inherent in social relationships, as evident in formal and informal associations and networks.

ABCD's community-driven approach is in keeping with the principles and practice of *participatory approaches development*, where active participation and empowerment (and the prevention of disempowerment) are the basis of practice. It is a strategy directed towards sustainable, economic development that is community-driven.

Guiding Principles for ABCD

Most communities address social and economic problems with only a small amount of their total capacity. Much of the community capacity is not used and is needed! This is the challenge and opportunity of community engagement. Everyone in a community has something to offer. There is no one we don't need.

- Everyone Has Gifts with rare exception; people can contribute and want to contribute. Gifts must be discovered.
- Relationships Build a Community see them, make them, and utilize them. An intentional effort to build and nourish relationships is the core of ABCD and of all community building.
- Citizens at the Center, it is essential to engage the wider community as actors (citizens) not just as recipients of services (clients).
- Leaders Involve Others as Active Members of the Community. Leaders from the wider community of voluntary associations, congregations, neighborhoods, and local business, can engage others from their sector. This “following” is based on trust, influence, and relationship.
- People Care About Something agencies and neighborhood groups often complain about apathy. Apathy is a sign of bad listening. People in communities are motivated to act. The challenge is to discover what their motivation is.
- Motivation to Act must be identified. People act on certain themes they feel strongly about, such as; concerns to address, dreams to realize, and personal talents to contribute. Every community is filled with invisible “motivation for action”. Listen for it.
- Listening Conversation – one-on-one dialogue or small group conversations are ways of discovering motivation and invite participation. Forms, surveys and asset maps can be useful to guide intentional listening and relationship building.
- Ask, Ask, Ask – asking and inviting are key community-building actions. “Join us. We need you.” This is the song of community.
- Asking Questions Rather Than Giving Answers Invites Stronger Participation. People in communities are usually asked to follow outside expert’s answers for their community problems. A more powerful way to engage people is to invite communities to address ‘questions’ and finding their own answer-- with agencies following up to help.
- A Citizen-Centered “Inside-Out” Organization is the Key to Community Engagement
A “citizen-centered” organization is one where local people control the organization and set the organization’s agenda.
- Institutions Have Reached Their Limits in Problem-Solving all institutions such as government, non-profits, and businesses are stretched thin in their ability to solve community problems. They can not be successful without engaging the rest of the community in solutions.
- Institutions as Servants *people* are better than programs in engaging the wider community. Leaders in institutions have an essential role in community-building as they lead by “stepping back,” creating opportunities for citizenship, care, and real democracy.

Five Key Assets in ABCD

Communities can no longer be thought of as complex masses of needs and problems, but rather diverse and potent webs of gifts and assets. Each community has a unique set of skills and capacities to channel for community development. ABCD categorizes asset inventories into five groups:

- Individuals: At the center of ABCD are residents of the community that have gifts and skills. Everyone has assets and gifts. Individual gifts and assets need to be recognized and identified. In community development you cannot do anything with people’s needs, only their assets. Deficits or needs are only useful to institutions.
- Associations: Small informal groups of people, such as clubs, working with a common interest as volunteers are called associations in ABCD and are critical to community mobilization. They don’t control anything; they are just coming together around a common interest by their individual choice.

- Institutions: Paid groups of people who generally are professionals who are structurally organized are called institutions. They include government agencies and private business, as well as schools, etc. They can all be valuable resources. The assets of these institutions help the community capture valuable resources and establish a sense of civic responsibility.
- Physical Assets: Physical assets such as land, buildings, space, and funds are other assets that can be used.
- Connections: There must be an exchange between people sharing their assets by bartering, etc. These connections are made by people who are connectors. It takes time to find out about individuals; this is normally done through building relationships with individual by individual.

Comparison of Associations and Institutions

While institutions are both important to ABCD, they are different. Consider the following comparison of the characteristics of institutions and associations:

	Associations	Institutions
How Governed	Power by consent	Controlled environment
How Decisions Made	Choice of members	Involuntary; powered by \$
Who Designed	Designed for and by each other	Designed for production
Who Decides What To Do	Members	Needs a client or customer
Who Runs	Citizen volunteers	Service/not a servant
Who Are Beneficiaries	Citizen members	Consumer/client
Function	Freedom	Produces services
What drives	Capacity of members	Drive to meet needs
Amount of Control	Very little, I would not want to fly an airplane built by this	Tight hierarchical control

The gifts of institutions are important, but they must be steered in support of what the citizens want and need, not what the institution wants and needs. Typically poor communities are inundated with social service organizations that exist to do a particular job or provide a particular service, but they need a client.

What is Social Capital?

Social Capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and trust which increase a society's productive potential. It is built on a web of relationships that exist within any given community that allows people to succeed or advance through associating together. Social capital is present in the networks, norms, and social trust inherent in associations whose members work together in concerted collaborative action. In a literal sense, social capital is the store of good-will and obligations generated by social relations.

At the core of ABCD is its focus on social relationships. Formal and informal associations, networks, and extended families are treated as assets and also as the means to mobilize other assets of the community. By treating relationships as assets, ABCD is a practical application of the concept of social capital.