

Understanding the Asset-based Approach to Community Development

Julie Wilke

2/9/06

CRP 381: Participatory Methods

Executive Summary

In recent years, Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) has caught the attention of numerous community development practitioners. As an alternative to the more commonly practiced needs-based approach, ABCD shifts the focus of community development from “problem solving” to “asset building”. The ABCD approach involves identifying and tapping all of the potential assets in a neighborhood. Neighborhood assets include the talents and skills of individuals, organizational capacities, political connections, buildings and facilities, and financial resources. (Page-Adams and Sherraden 1997) Regarding neighborhood planning, ABCD shifts the responsibility for developing neighborhood plans from a city-led to neighborhood-led effort.

Leading the ABCD movement are John Kretzmann and John McNight of the Northwestern University Asset-based Community Development Institute. The Institute’s numerous publications on the topic have received attention both nationally and abroad. In Austin, an asset-based approach has been introduced in the East Cesar Chavez (ECC). Efforts there involved an asset mapping workshop – an important initial step in the ABCD process. As a result, resident involvement in neighborhood planning increased from a dozen residents to now more than sixty. However, ABCD remains unfulfilled in the ECC neighborhood as the neighborhood planning process continues to be a city-led effort.

Understanding the Asset-based Approach to Community Development

I. Introduction

In recent years, Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) has caught the attention of numerous community development practitioners. As an alternative to the more commonly practiced needs-based approach, ABCD shifts the focus of community development from “problem solving” to “asset building”. ABCD takes a “grassroots” approach to community development, drawing upon the best of what a neighborhood has to offer. As American cities continue to struggle with massive economic shifts that have depleted the employment opportunities of many low-income neighborhoods, the asset-based approach provides an example of how to create sustainable neighborhoods across the country.

This paper provides an understanding of the asset-based approach to community development. First, the needs-based approach and concerns with this approach that have led to the asset-based approach is discussed. Next, the asset-based approach is defined and explained. Examples of ABCD initiatives are presented. Finally, the focus of this paper shifts to ABCD and its potential application to Austin, followed by concluding remarks.

II. From a Needs-based to Asset-based Approach

For a majority of Americans, the locales “East St. Louis” or “South Central Los Angeles” conjure up thoughts of crime, unemployment, dependency, hardship, and hopelessness. Under the needs-based approach, agencies external to the struggling neighborhoods survey needs, analyze problems, and identify solutions to meet those needs. (Mathie and Cunningham 2003) External financial resources and programs are administered by these agencies to meet a struggling neighborhood’s needs. Proponents of the ABCD approach contend that the needs-based approach has numerous detrimental effects.

The main concern with the needs-based approach is a fostering of leadership that denigrates the neighborhood. (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996) In order to attract the necessary resources for the neighborhood, leaders are forced to exaggerate the severity of the problems. Rather than looking inward for solutions to neighborhood problems, leaders are measured by their ability to attract outside resources. Focusing on what the neighborhood lacks also takes a psychological toll on neighborhood pride. Citizens begin to believe what their leaders are saying and view themselves as unable to take charge of their neighborhood, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this situation, citizens no longer view themselves as capable producers, but rather consumers of services. The negative results associated with the needs-based approach have led to the recent development of other approaches.

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, asset building became an emerging theme in neighborhood revitalization. The work of Sherraden (1988, 1990, 1991) suggested that households and neighborhoods develop not by income alone (the dominant theme of the

welfare state), but also by savings and asset building. (Page-Adams and Sherraden 1997) Under this framework, the term “asset” is restricted to the concept of wealth, including both property and financial holdings. Expanding on the work of Sherraden, Kretzmann and McKnight took a broader view on the concept of asset building in their 1993 book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

III. The Asset-Based Approach Defined

Asset building following the ABCD approach involves identifying and tapping all of the potential assets in a neighborhood. Neighborhood assets include the talents and skills of individuals, organizational capacities, political connections, buildings and facilities, and financial resources. (Page-Adams and Sherraden 1997) According to Mathie and Cunningham (2005), Kretzmann and McKnight’s ABCD approach operates under the premise that neighborhoods can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing (but often unrecognized) assets, thereby responding to and creating local opportunity for positive changes. Such unrealized assets include not only personal attributes and skills, but also the relationships among people that fuel local associations and informal networks. Mobilizing social assets can activate more formal institutional resources such as local government, formal community-based organizations, and private enterprise. In this way, the neighborhood development process is sustained and scaled up while it continues to recognize local associations as the driving force – the vehicles through which all the neighborhood’s assets can be identified and then connected to one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness.

Accompanying the ABCD approach is a set of methods for mobilizing community members including (Mathie and Cunningham 2003):

- Collecting stories of community successes and analyzing the reasons for success;
- Mapping community assets;
- Forming a core steering group;
- Building relationships among local assets for mutually beneficial problem solving within the community;
- Convening a representative planning group;
- Leveraging activities, resources, and investment from the outside community.

IV. Examples of Asset-based Approach Implementation

At the center of the ABCD movement is the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, a northern suburban of Chicago. In 1996, the Institutes co-directors John Kretzmann and John McKnight visited Chicago's Grand Boulevard Neighborhood. The neighborhood holds the dubious distinction of being the fourth-poorest neighborhood in the United States, where 82% of the children live below the poverty level. (Marshall 1997) During their visit, Kretzmann and McKnight identified 319 active groups ranging from church choirs to political clubs. (Marshall 1997) They discovered that a majority of these groups were willing to work on projects such as attracting new business to the community and creating job-training programs. Kretzmann and McKnight have since continued to work with the neighborhood applying ABCD strategies.

Another example from Chicago comes from the city's West Side. There, a church-based community group, Bethel New Life Inc., helped twenty-four women convert vacant lots into homes and day-care centers. Since a number of the women were single-mothers, the day-care centers applied their experience with raising children. The women were able to raise their own children while earning a steady income. Additionally, many of the women lease the homes that are used for day-care services, with the option to buy. According to Bethel New Life's president Mary Nelson, "It's turning the negatives into opportunities. When you discover the assets of a community, it gives energy." (Marshall 1997)

V. An Asset-based Approach for Austin?

Like most cities across the country, the City of Austin has traditionally embraced the needs-based approach to neighborhood development. However, an asset-based approach was once undertaken in Austin's East Cesar Chavez (ECC) neighborhood. In 1997, residents in the ECC neighborhood participated in an asset mapping workshop conducted by Kretzmann and McKnight as a part of the Health Partnership 2000 Project. The workshop called for neighborhood members to identify different community-based groups that would commit to implementing asset mapping. Also, neighborhood members were responsible for identifying a team of resource people who would be trained to support the community-based asset mapping teams. During the workshop, the resource team worked with the community-based groups to identify local assets – an important initial step in the ABCD process (refer back to ABCD methods).

The initial step towards ABCD in the ECC neighborhood remains unfulfilled. According to neighborhood leader Lori Renteria, the asset mapping workshop increased resident involvement from a dozen to more than sixty in various facets of neighborhood planning including crime, transportation, and affordable housing. However, despite these gains, the neighborhood planning process remains a city-led effort and the neighborhood remains dependant upon outside resources.

VI. Conclusion

The ABCD approach provides an alternative to the more commonly practiced needs-based approach. Rather than focusing on what neighborhoods lack, ABCD uncovers what each neighborhood has to offer. ABCD creates an opportunity for residents to not only take part in, but also lead the neighborhood planning process. In Austin, an asset-based approach has been introduced in the ECC neighborhood. The asset-based approach was successful at increasing resident involvement in the neighborhood planning process of ECC. However, the ABCD effort remains unfulfilled in the neighborhood and is not a part of current neighborhood planning practice in the city.

References

- Arefi, Mahyar. *Revisiting the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative*. Journal of Planning Education and Research. 2005.
- Cameron, Jenny and Gibson, Kathy. *Alternative Pathways to Community and Economic Development: The Latrobe Valley Community Partnering Project*. September 2005.
- Cameron, Jenny and Gibson, Kathy. *Participatory Action Research in a Poststructuralist Vein*. May 23, 2004.
- Felkins, Patricia K. *Community at Work: Creating and Celebrating Community in Organizational Life*. Hampton Press Inc. Cresskill, NJ. 2002.
- Hutchinson, Judy and Loukaitou-Sideris. *Choosing Confrontation or Consensus in the Inner City: Lessons from a Community-University Partnership*. Planning Theory & Practice. Volume 2, Number 3. 2001.
- Kretzmann, John and McKnight, John P. *Asset-based Community Development*. National Civic Review. Volume 85, Issue 4. Winter 1996.
- Kretzmann, John and McKnight, John P. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. Evanston, IL. 1993.
- Lovely, Sylvia. *LTI Seminar Topic: Creating the Intentional City*. Nation's Cities Weekly. January 17, 2005.
- Marshall, John. *Renewing Hope in Urban Areas*. Christian Science Monitor. Volume 90, Issue 24. December 30, 1997.
- Mathie, Alison and Cunningham, Gord. *From Clients to citizens: Asset-based Community Development as a Strategy for Community-driven Development*. Development in Practice. Volume 13, Number 5. November 2003.
- Mathie, Alison and Cunningham, Gord. *Who is Driving Development? Reflections on the Transformative Potential of Asset-based Community Development*. Canadian Journal of Development Studies. Volume 26, Number 1. 2005.
- Page-Adams, Deborah and Sherraden, Michael. *Asset-Building as a Community Revitalization Strategy*. Social Work. Volume 42, Number 5. September 1997.
- Sherraden, Michael. *Assets and the Poor: A New American Welfare Policy*. 1991.
- Sherraden, Michael. *Rethinking Social Welfare: Toward Assets*. Social Policy. Volume 18, Number 3. 1988.

Sherraden, Michael. *Stakeholding: Notes on a Theory of Welfare Based on Assets*. Social Service Review. Volume 64. 1990.

Suratt, Colleen. *Asset Ownership in Neighborhood Revitalization*. Professional Report. The University of Texas-Austin. 2002.

The Austin Community Survey Results. Courtesy of Lori Renteria. Results dated 4/19/95.

United Methodist Ministries. *L.A. for Kids: Pico-Union Shalom Community Center*. 1997.

Walkenhorst, Peter. *Building Philanthropic and Social Capital: The Work of Community Foundations*. Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers. Gutersloh, Germany. 2001.