

# Building from Strength

## *Asset-Based Community Development*

by John E. Walker  
Northeast Assets Leadership Project

**T**oo often when approaching community improvement, people focus on what is wrong and requires fixing. Now there is a better way. Instead of occupying themselves with a community's deficits, forward-thinking organizations are identifying and building on local assets. After all, even the most troubled community has strengths. Once people's eyes are opened to community assets, a positive energy for change takes over.

A growing community-organizing movement, asset-based community development (ABCD), posits that the glass is half full rather than half empty. Rather than focus on community deficits like crime, vandalism, unemployment, or drugs, ABCD aims to identify and mobilize the positive attributes inherent in local government, businesses, nonprofits, voluntary associations, and individuals.

### **Common-Sense ABCD Comes to New England**

Asset-based community development evolved from 1970s research and organizing in Chicago communities. Working up from the block to the regional level, ABCD leveraged community assets to address poverty, public health, human services, education, and criminal justice.

John McKnight and John (Jody) Kretzmann, leaders of the approach, presented their findings in a 1993 book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Then in 1995, they became co-directors of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, a research project of Northwestern University's Institute of Policy Research, which was established to "conduct research, produce materials, and otherwise support community-based efforts to rediscover local capacities and to mobilize citizens' resources to solve problems."<sup>1</sup>

The year 2003 saw the launching of the Northeast Assets Leadership Project, which helps leaders in New York and New England to implement strengths-based strategies for community and youth development. The egalitarian nature of its ABCD approach is a natural fit with the Yankee heritage of town government and community stewardship. As people learn about ABCD, they warm to its practicality and the way it elicits the voices of diverse constituencies.

## The Glass Is Half Full

Because ABCD concentrates on a community's upside, people do not assess *needs*, or deficits, first but assets. Although needs-based data may accurately profile an area, they generally undervalue potential building blocks and hence may discourage civic action. Consider the following ABCD advice.

### Use an Asset Lens

Instead of looking through a *needs lens*, look through an *assets lens* to profile a community; look for strengths that can be employed for progress.

For example, a church may have vibrant social-action clubs, facilities it is willing to share, and seasoned volunteers to recruit for community projects. A police officer who loves hiking may be approached to lead a youth field trip. An immigrant family may have unique farming knowledge that could support a town's sustainable-agriculture goals. A walking group may have insights on

neighborhood improvements that would make residents feel safer.

Identifying strengths and inviting individuals to share their gifts energizes other community members.

### Be Inclusive

The next step is to challenge everyone to be a leader in the development process. Welcoming all citizens creates productive matches between individuals and groups. For example, in Hartford, librarians' outreach in economically diverse community settings is creating synergies. The community is seeing librarians in a new light, and the librarians are getting fresh insight into residents' learning goals.

### Map the Assets

Assessing a community's potential is called *asset mapping*. An asset map can be a detailed inventory of strengths or just a preliminary scan. New software tools are adapting the process to specific needs and are improving the usefulness of the data

**Instead of looking through a needs lens, look through an assets lens to profile a community.**

for the end user, whether an individual, a civic group, a public entity, or a private organization.<sup>2</sup>

The mapping method is as important as what gets mapped. A good process aims to build trust and gain recruits. People can tell if the mapping exercise is just a token nod to get them on board. They need to be sure they will be part of implementing the plans.

### Be Action-Oriented

The ideal ABCD initiative channels the interest generated by the mapping into immediate improvement efforts, such as cleaning an abandoned lot, beau-

tifying a corner, creating a microenterprise loan bank, or negotiating municipal bonds for targeted neighborhood goals. Because most improvements will not reap a bountiful harvest for years, ABCD organizers plant some seeds that will bear immediate fruit. In Fall River, Massachusetts, a communitywide program to enhance the city's quality of life involves hundreds of citizens on dozens of projects. Quarterly updates are published, and a web site was launched to keep to everyone current.<sup>3</sup>

### Let Citizens Direct the Spending

Too often, the plans started by community groups are not realized because actual investment remains in the hands of major developers or city departments. If ABCD is done right, citizens also have a say in financing.

When money is available for miniprojects and when major capital-improvement projects reflect the goals set by the neighborhoods, broad support for the long haul is much more likely.

### Lead by Stepping Back

Successful asset-based community development entails coordinated, spirited, multiparty, bottom-up deliberations. Any experts who join the deliberations should play a supportive—not a leadership—role.

### Nurture a Sense of Ownership

A sense of ownership inevitably leads to accountability. People work harder at goals and are more willing to commit time, money, and personal influence to ensure that projects are completed well.

One good approach is to give citizens credit after each milestone. In Vermont, Wyndham County's Alliance for Building Community (ABC) has an annual, sold-out celebration that supports "an ongoing community forum where participants mobilize community strengths and resources to address community needs."<sup>4</sup> In Connecticut, the Connecticut Assets Network has a web-based reference tool for documenting citizen action in communities.<sup>5</sup>

## Choosing Geographic Focus

ABCD works well at both micro and macro levels. Whether it is used for a housing project or a multicounty region, the principles are similar.

### The Neighborhood

A good ABCD initiative will focus on the strengths and aspirations of each resident and family. Organizers map not only skills, education, job experience, and avocations, but dreams. Detailed surveys can lead to microloans for aspiring entrepreneurs or improved matching of job-training services to real needs. They can ensure that after-school programs address student interests and that adult mentors are thoughtfully matched with those seeking advice.

In Bridgeport, Connecticut, a program known as RYASAP (Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project) works at the block level to address root causes of youth difficulties. Hundreds of citizens and dozens of businesses are involved in neighborhood and citywide coalitions to provide expanded opportunities for young people. Minigrants of up to \$500 take the ideas of youths and adults for, say, an improved playground or an after-school homework club, and make them reality. An annual celebration of each neighborhood's work on the city's youth-development goal draws media interest and hundreds of supporters.

### The Business District

A capacity assessment should be undertaken to spark business collaboration and promote the long-term benefits of a diverse economic base. Then when loans or grants become available, investment should be directed to group-defined goals and be available to all. If major revitalization grants become available, microloans and job training should be part of the package.<sup>6</sup>

### The Community

The next level of focus involves both residential and business districts. Thoroughly understanding the attributes of the whole municipality is critical—the labor force, the strongest market seg-

ments, the most practical business and neighborhood goals, and the quality of civic institutions' community investments.

Illustrating the community level of ABCD is Maine's Strategies for a Stronger Sanford. In January, the group launched a youth-development initiative using a strengths-based process. The process links an economic-renewal-investment plan with the goal of reducing juvenile crime. Young people, adults, nonprofits, businesses, and government are mapping assets and designing investment plans together. The upbeat asset focus is building support for projects of varying sizes and durations.

### The Region

Promoting a sustainable, healthy community and identifying competitive assets may span a whole region. All local governments work to maximize regional potential—for example, port development, agriculture, tourism, technology, or traditional manufacturing.

Once a geographic area has begun to demonstrate focused action, investor interest increases. Bank consortia may form loan pools for microenterprise; town and state government may discover ways to match capital-improvement-project bonds with regional priorities; nonprofit and university programs may start linking budget items to citizen priorities; and ABCD-inspired coalitions may sponsor citizen leadership development. Positive energy is self-reinforcing. One caveat: As at the neighborhood level, leaders in a regional effort must be inclusive, share responsibility, have staying power, and recognize and act on the potential. Focus and tenacity are key.

Maine's Western Mountain Alliance, which serves seven rural counties, offers a regional example of asset-based community development.<sup>7</sup> Since its founding in 1987, WMA has emphasized strengths-based planning and grassroots leadership. In one success story, six competing banks formed a joint low-interest loan bank to support small farms, the region's greatest competitive advantage.

For ABDC to succeed, whether

undertaken at the neighborhood, business-district, community, or regional level, it is important to understand that the approach is more a philosophy than a rigid formula. Techniques and organizing steps can be as creative and as simple or complex as people wish. Those who have tried the method have found that all fields can be fertile and will flourish when seeds of progress—community assets—are planted and nurtured.

---

*John E. Walker is the director of the Northeast Assets Leadership Project. He is based in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See John Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, Illinois: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> For examples and workbooks, see the Asset-Based Community Development Institute web site, <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd/abcdbackground.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.gfrpartners.com/healthycity.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.rovers.net/~abcwahle/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.ctassets.org>.

<sup>6</sup> L. K. Snow et al., *Community Transformation: Turning Threats into Opportunities* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 2000) <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd/snowflyer.html>. For a step-by-step approach on organizing a business district, see John P. Kretzmann, John L. McKnight, and Deborah Puntunney, *A Guide to Mapping Local Business Assets and Mobilizing Local Business Capacities* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 1996), <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/businesswb.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.westernmountainsalliance.org>.