

## Asset-Based Community Development

Asset-based community development is an updated version of a time honored concept for building community capacity. The premise is similar to an old fashion barn raising. On the day of the barn raising the community would join together to share the work. But, they didn't just share work, they would share their knowledge, their resources, and they would build friendships and collaborations. More importantly, they understood that together they were stronger and could accomplish larger goals than any one individual.

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) considers local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development. For nearly three decades, Institute founders John Kretzmann and John McKnight gathered the stories of residents who built stronger neighborhoods in much the same way as the early pioneers, by focusing on their strengths. (*The Asset-Based Community Development Institute: <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>*)

This is a radical change from the conventional methods. Kretzman and Mcknight refer to the conventional approach as the deficit model. This model focuses on the problems, issues and deficits. The process often begins with a "needs assessment". Once the needs or problems have been identified, the community leaders will look for strategies to fix the problems. There are several downsides to this approach.

- First, isolating a problem under a microscope will provide a clear picture of the problem but nothing about the answer.

*For example: A county in NC had a 10 percent failure rate of its septic systems. It spent significant time and money doing a study of the systems that were failing. It learned a lot about the problem, but had obtained no information on the 90 percent of systems that were working. If it wanted to help people maintain their septic systems, it needed to study what factors were in place that supported 90 percent of the systems being properly maintained and working.*

- Second, if a community focuses on only problems they will find more problems, which leaves community members feeling overwhelmed and helpless

However, if a community focuses on strengths, they will find the capacity to build a stronger more resilient community. Asset-base community development begins by collecting an inventory of community assets and resources; a process known as Asset Mapping.

### What is an asset?

"Assets are what we want to keep, build upon and sustain for future generations. Assets can be physical things like a building, a local swimming pool or a 150-year-old tree in the town square; assets can also be intangible, like the work that volunteer groups do to beautify the main street or raise funds for the food bank." (Asset Mapping a Handbook)

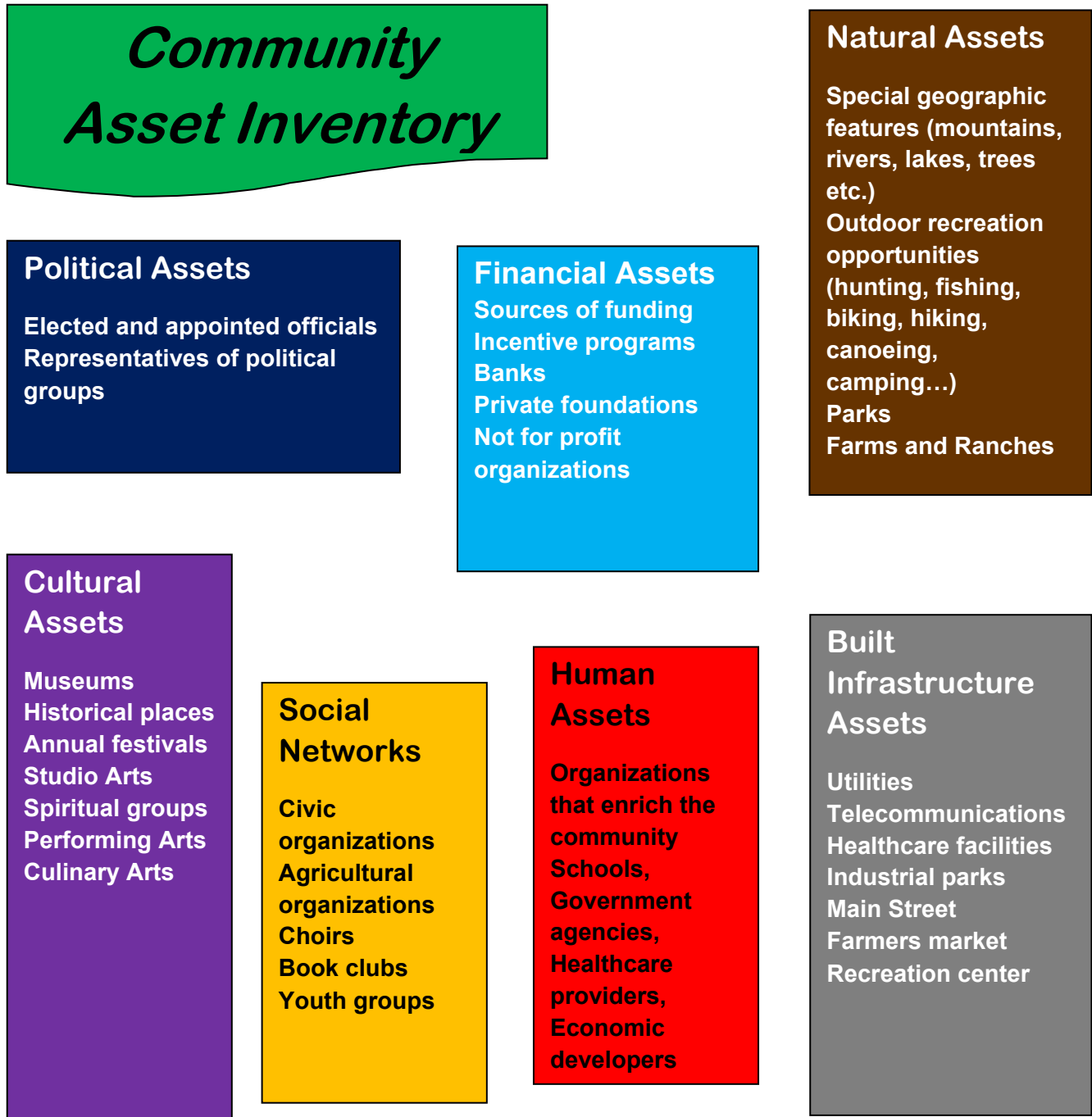
[http://rural.gc.ca/conference/documents/mapping\\_e.phtml](http://rural.gc.ca/conference/documents/mapping_e.phtml)

Most communities have never taken an inventory of their assets. When they do, residents are often surprised to discover how rich their communities are in assets and resources. It's not that they are unfamiliar with local assets; they are just not accustomed to thinking about them as resources that can be leveraged and linked to help the community grow and prosper. By focusing on their strengths, community members:

- develop a renewed sense of pride in their community
- they grow more confident in their own abilities
- are more willing to invest themselves and their resources into capacity building

This is why Asset Mapping has become an important tool in the field of community development. See the diagram on the next page.

This diagram separates community assets into seven categories. These represent what you have to work with to rebuild community capacity



*This framework, developed by Cornelia and Jan Flora along with Susan Fey, provides a tool for analyzing how communities work. "These researchers found that the communities that were most successful in supporting healthy, sustainable community and economic development were considering seven types of assets, which they designated as natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and*

*built. In addition to identifying the assets and the role each plays in community economic development, this approach also focuses on the interaction among these seven assets as well as how investments in one asset can build assets in other. (Flora, J.L., Flora, C. B. (2008). Community Capitals. Iowa State University, Department of Sociology. [<http://www.soc.iastate.edu/staff/cflora/ncrcrd/capitals.html>])*

### ***Developing an Unusual Asset in Cummins, South Australia***

*Cummins, South Australia (population 600) was a town in crisis in the mid to late 1990s, as young people were leaving the area to find jobs, and the rural downtown was diminishing. They had little to no social capital in town, and negativity was at an all time high. They were categorized as “dying” by the state newspaper, The Advertiser. Banks and shops had closed their doors and the future was looking bleak.*

*Two local leaders decided that their town needed a future; they were not willing to give up the fight. They also knew they had to get the locals to believe in the cause as well. Cummins had to look into their local assets which were not clear at the beginning. An Enterprise Committee formed and soon recognized something in town that could be developed further: the old Kalamazoo Railway that ran through town and was no longer used. A local campaign was initiated by the committee: “Cummins on Track.”*

*Activities planned by the committee were funded in part by a pledge campaign. Through this campaign, the committee suggested the event “The Kalamazoo” to get local pride going, now called “The Kalamazoo Classic.” This running race event is held on and around the Kalamazoo Railway with several different types of races and tests of strength. This event has generated a lot of attention and interest inside and outside the town because of its “wackiness.”*

*The campaign made townspeople excited about Cummins again, and people began working together for the town’s future. Now, there is a new bank in town, shops have opened up, and the school is doing well again, with graduating students either going on to college or finding employment locally. Cummins found that the key to their redevelopment was to first look at possible assets in the community, get local people enthused and organized, and then work on activities and economic development together.*

*(Flora, C. B., Fey, S., Bregendahl, C., Friel, J. Using Community Capitals to Develop Assets for Positive Community Change, PDF format (1,081 kb)*

*<http://www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/rdev/projects/benedum/casestudysummaries.pdf>*

### **Asset Inventory**

Asset-based community development can be used in large regional initiatives, neighborhood projects or with target populations. The process for collecting this data presents a good opportunity to get a youth group or volunteer group engaged in local community development. Ask them to become the “researchers.”

Most of the data can found on the internet, or the local library. In some cases a door-to-door survey will be the best source of information. The data should be documented on a spreadsheet. Below is a sample inventory spreadsheet. You could incorporate additional data columns to fit the needs of your projects or goals.

Asset category	Name of business, organization, institution or association	Name of Owner, Director or Manager	Mailing Address or P.O. Box	Email Address for Owner or Manager	Phone for Owner or Manager	Description of Asset	Source
Human	High School	Principal John Doe	123 Main St., NC, 00000	Email for John Doe	999-999-9999	Education	School Website
Built	Farmers Market	Market manager John Doe	123 Main St., NC 00000	Email for manager	999-999-9999	Food or retail	Community website
Financial	Community Bank	John Doe, Branch Manager	123 Main St., NC 00000	Email for manager	999-999-9999	Financial planning	Business Directory
Natural	Park Rangers	Park Director, John Doe	123 Main Rd, NC 00000	Email for director	999-999-9999	Outdoor recreation	Visitors center
Cultural	Strawberry Festival	Ms. Jane Doe	123 Main St. , NC 00000	Email for Ms. Doe	999-999-9999	Local food, arts and crafts	Newspaper
Social Network	Community Choir	Director Jane Doe	123 Main St., NC 00000	Email for Jane Doe	999-999-9999	Music and entertainment	Church bulletin board
Political	Community Mayor	Mayor Doe	123 Main St., NC 00000	Email for Mayor	999-999-9999	Political affiliate	Chamber of Commerce

In some community projects, the researchers or community development specialists will create a *map* which identifies the community assets and where they are located. This can be helpful in building collaborations and future partnerships to work on community issues. A map can be created in GIS or it can be made with poster paper, markers and sticky dots.

Once you have developed your inventory spreadsheet, the next step will involve some creative thinking. Assets are only “assets” if they are being used. In the story above, they converted an old unused railroad line into an entertainment venue which in turn stimulated growth to other parts of the community. The next example illustrates how another community development specialist used asset mapping to build economic and community capacity.

Mary Nelson knew the best ideas for economic development would be found in the community. She went door-to-door and talked to community members. She asked two questions:

- What are the needs of the community?
- How can you help?

She learned that there were many elderly residents in the community, some of them needed in-home quality care, and others needed work. The Community Specialist linked the asset of the local community college with the asset of a local assistance program to pay for in-home care. The residents

needing work completed a training program at the college and became certified as home care providers. They not only had a job, but met a critical need in the community by providing care to those who could not afford residential nursing care. This was just one of several programs that were developed from that initial door-to-door survey. *Mary Nelson is on the faculty of the Northwestern University's Asset Based Community Development Institute* ([http://www.abundantcommunity.com/home/stories/parms/1/story/20130222\\_meet\\_mary\\_nelson.html](http://www.abundantcommunity.com/home/stories/parms/1/story/20130222_meet_mary_nelson.html)).

## **The Value of Asset Mapping**

An asset inventory can be a valuable development tool for Extension agents, community leaders, economic developers, neighborhood associations and any type of community planning workshop. An asset inventory:

1. identifies community resources
2. builds a foundation for strategic planning and implementation
3. deepens understanding of key regional systems and networks
4. becomes a catalyst for developing partnerships between community organizations

However, the real magic happens when you start to link and leverage the assets together. In Mary Nelson's neighborhood story she used three assets. Can you name them?

1. Community College
2. Government Funding Resource
3. Community residents

By linking these assets Mary Nelson was able to provide quality home care for neighborhood residents, support the local community college, AND create jobs for local seniors.

## **References**

For nearly three decades, ABCD founders John Kretzmann and John McKnight gathered the stories of residents who built stronger neighborhoods by focusing on their strengths. Those stories were published in a book titled, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Kretzmann, J.P. & Mcknight, J. L. (1993).

To learn more about asset mapping visit the School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University (<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>)

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<http://www.soc.iastate.edu/staff/cflora/ncrcrd/capitals.html>

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