

---

## 4. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD): core principles

*Ivis García*

---

### INTRODUCTION

In *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing Community Assets* (1993), John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight noticed that universities and other institutions focused exclusively on the needs, deficiencies and problems of neighborhoods. In 1969, when they started their work, deindustrialization had caused massive shifts in US cities—leaving people unemployed and communities economically devastated. Instead of focusing on needs, John and Jody, as part of an Urban Research Center at Northwestern University, conducted a four-year research project that focused on residents and their gifts, talents, capacities and creativity. The basic idea was that concentrating on what was working as opposed to what was not working could help promote community development. By focusing on success stories, as told by community residents, institutions like universities, nonprofit organizations and philanthropic foundations could identify how they could support residents instead of providing them with the services they thought that residents needed. They named this way of thinking “Asset-Based Community Development.”

Kretzmann and McKnight conceptualized two options, paths or dilemmas available to community leaders, institutions and others involved in neighborhood work. The first path emphasized the needs of the community addressing its deficiencies. In other words, concentrating on the half-empty glass (see Figure 4.1). Another path is committed to exploring new opportunities and discovering individuals—and by proxy communities—capabilities and assets. This path concentrated on the half-full glass. They saw this as a dilemma that institutions like Northwestern University faced, where John and Jody worked. Focusing on the deficits, however, is the more traditional path.



Figure 4.1 “Is the glass half-empty or half-full?”

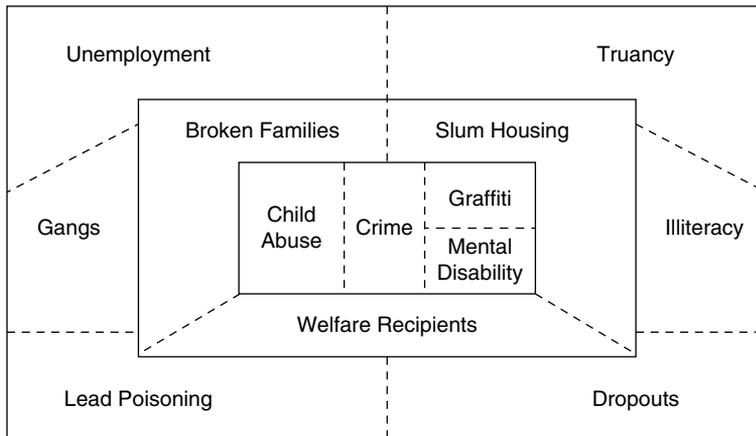
## THE TRADITIONAL PATH: NEEDS-BASED APPROACH

Images of South Bronx in New York City, South Central in Los Angeles and the South Side of Chicago have negative impressions on most Americans. This is because these spaces are depicted as criminal, violent, and are found to be largely associated with drugs and criminal activities. Negative conceptual images are a clear depiction of a troubled community. With the rationale of deficiency oriented policies and programs, the needs of the community act as a basic fundamental principle to discuss problems among outside decision-makers. University research and funding has contributed to study the problem in detail by using funding to study community problems without offering solutions. When solutions are offered, they do not come from the residents either in terms of their voice or their capacity to make their own communities better. The value of services and policies coming from the outside becomes the only resource to solve community problems. Because of this paternalistic relationship between social service providers and residents, people have started to see themselves as clients whose needs can only be satisfied by outsiders. For example, welfare recipient's forms ask people about all of their problems such as: Are you a dropout? Are you about to be evicted? Have you abused illegal substances, and so on? These surveys make people feel worthless, that they have many problems, and cannot see their positive contributions to society.

In this way, institutions, including universities, create labeled people, where residents are identified by their deficits. Some of the labels might include school dropout, single-mother, at youth-risk, welfare recipient, among many others. Social service organizations in particular use some of these labels for their clients. In fact, one of the mistakes social service organizations made is that they treat people like clients, instead of treating people like citizens—we do not refer to legal status, but those who live, are part of, or claim their right to the city. The government has emulated human service agencies that supply funding to communities, and all this is controlled based on problem-oriented data. These problem-oriented data are evaluated as a result of surveys conducted regarding needs of communities. Residents have begun to consider themselves as being dependent, and may think of themselves as not being capable enough to possess control over their own lives. This approach breeds hopelessness. People start saying to themselves: we are deficient, we are a poor community, we are hopeless.

The needs-based or deficit-based approach to community development has become institutionalized across government, nonprofits and universities. For example, foundations request proposals with a needs statement. In a nutshell, they are asking what is wrong with the community. At times, the more deficits in a community, the more the likelihood of receiving funding. Programs usually concentrate on community needs such as poverty, crime, unemployment, poor health, slum housing and so on. Foundations tend to request a neighborhood needs map, while institutions tend to create them to obtain funding. A neighborhood needs map might include unemployment, truancy, illiteracy and a whole host of community problems (see Figure 4.2).

The community is viewed as being associated with a large number of problems and deficiencies which need to be addressed not by them but by outside institutions with power and money. There are a number of consequences of favoring neighborhood needs-based maps conceptually. For example, residents internalize that solutions come from the outside. Not only that, but that outside resources are required to cope with the identified



Source: Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, p. 3).

Figure 4.2 Needs-based map

needs. Since people are merely the recipients of services, the problem-solving capacities of the individual are ignored and discouraged. Resources are targeted to provide the necessary funding to service providers and professionals rather than the residents.

Moreover, the leadership of the local community is profoundly affected negatively by the availability of resources which lays its foundation on the needs map. In other words, community leaders need to speak of the community needs to advocate for resources in their communities. This is a contradiction to community organizing which presumes that people are empowered to create social change. Meanwhile, the funds provided relying on the needs map have depicted that only outside help could offer the necessary solution to the identified problem. The renewal of funding must assure that the problem should decrease in comparison to previous years. Institutions have to prove that their intervention results in less dropouts, unemployment and teenage pregnancies, for example. This survival strategy, both from the dependency of funding from institutions and the dependency of residents for services, can only work based on a needs map focusing on an individual client rather than a plan that is developed for the entire community. An approach based on the needs map may never benefit individuals and their communities over the long run. This is because this way of thinking cannot bring about positive social changes at large. When institutions do not find funding for programs, efforts dwindle and may not achieve sustainability. Given the many negative consequences of favoring a needs-based map, a paradigm shift is needed.

## THE ALTERNATIVE PATH: ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) emphasizes the creation of policies and activities involving the capacities and skills of neighborhood residents. ABCD comes

from the recognition that development of an entire community can only take place if residents are able to invest their gifts and themselves in the process. Instead of depending entirely on outside resources and charity, it is better to start the process of development from within the community—that is, from the inside out. This truth has been recognized much earlier by neighborhood leaders than by researchers and social service providers. The efforts dedicated to the development of the community will be successful only if there is a clear understanding of the internal assets and capabilities of the community. Connecting all local assets of the neighborhood is one step towards rebuilding communities. This does not imply that nonprofits, foundations and universities should abandon communities, and residents need to do everything themselves. What it does say is that, if we are intentional in building communities from the inside out, power will multiply.

Before writing the green book as many community development practitioners refer to *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, Kretzmann and McKnight conducted extensive fieldwork. They visited about 20 cities and had conversations with more than 2,000 residents. Instead of asking, “What does this community need?,” they asked, “Can you tell us what people who live on this block or neighborhood have done together that made things better?” After listening to thousands of stories John and Jody came up with a list of resources. They decided to call these resources assets. Initially, they identified five community assets, and about ten years later they recognize a sixth asset. A community asset map is then composed of: (1) individuals, (2) associations, (3) institutions, (4) land and the physical environment, (5) exchange and (6) culture and stories (see Figure 4.3).

The assets are the basic building blocks of a thriving neighborhood. The capacities of the individual (his or her gifts) are appropriately at the center of the asset map. There are three forms of gifts:

1. Gifts of the head (subjects residents know, e.g., law, mathematics, medicine and so on),
2. Gifts of the hands (practical skills that residents know, e.g., playing a musical instrument, fixing a car, taking care of children, videography, writing and so on) and
3. Gifts of the heart (issues residents care deeply about, e.g., childhood education, healthy eating, biking infrastructure and so on).

Associations of individuals, whether formal or informal such as block clubs, youth or older adults groups, are critical to solve problems. Groups of residents form associations because they are passionate about an everyday activity, interest or care. These associations might have no staff or staff with low pay, but what matters is that they always create the vision and engage in work with volunteers to achieve goals. Residents are found to be primarily associated with many types of religious, cultural and recreational activities. These associations act as an essential tool to offer solutions to the existing problems in neighborhoods. ABCD conceptualizes association visually as a circle (see Figure 4.3) because people come together in an organic manner. Associations usually make decisions based on consensus. There is an excellent power in associations, which often goes unrecognized. Associations can be very useful in action—they are an amplifier of gifts, creative and can reach large numbers of residents.

Private institutions such as businesses, nonprofits, hospitals, along with public institutions such as libraries, colleges and human services play a significant role in community



*Figure 4.3 Six community assets*

development. The distinction of an institution is that they are hierarchical in nature. A nonprofit, for example, might have an executive director, directors of different programs and employees. Decision-making is usually from the top down. Because of this, ABCD conceptualizes institutions, the second asset, in the form of a triangle or a hierarchy (see Figure 4.4).

It is worth noting the differences between associations and institutions (refer to Figure 4.4). Associations are about choice because people can come and go freely. People or citizens join associations by choice because they care about a particular issue, topic or activity. Associations thrive from individual capacities and residents collectivizing. On the other hand, institutions are about control (budgets, personnel, and so on); employees at institutions produce goods and services for consumers or clients according to their needs. However, there is power in institutions as well. They can provide resources for projects that residents have identified. With their funding, they can compensate residents for their work. They can amplify the voices of residents by recognizing their gifts and allowing them to reciprocate.

The fourth asset is physical space—that is, land, buildings, rivers, roads, and so on. Communities need to recognize local physical assets in order to mobilize them for their

	
CONTROL	CHOICE
PRODUCTION GOODS SERVICES	CARE
CLIENTS CONSUMER	CITIZEN
NEEDS	CAPACITY

Source: Adapted from basic training slides, <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute> (accessed 9 November 2019).

*Figure 4.4 Differences between associations and institutions*

benefit. For example, a vacant lot could be an excellent opportunity for a community garden. There might be other new and unexpected uses for buildings and land. What seemed a glass half-empty (or unused space) can become a glass half-full, just by changing one’s perspective.

The fifth asset is exchange, which could be conceptualized as the local economy and how money flows through a neighborhood. Economic development is mainly targeted here as a way to promote the success of the entire community. The development process is entirely asset-based whereby the skills and capabilities are also evaluated. An asset-based strategy is a path created to promote the development of the community. In terms of economic-based theory, it is essential to maintain the dollars of a community within its boundaries, so there is a multiplier effect of those dollars (reiterative spending with the local economy). Large corporations tend to take profits out of the area and invest them somewhere else. In that way, money is leaked out of the community, profiting outsiders but not residents. But exchange can also happen without money. For example, in “Buy Nothing” groups neighbors can borrow a lawn mower or offer free furniture. A community garden where people exchange produce can be another great way of strengthening the community.

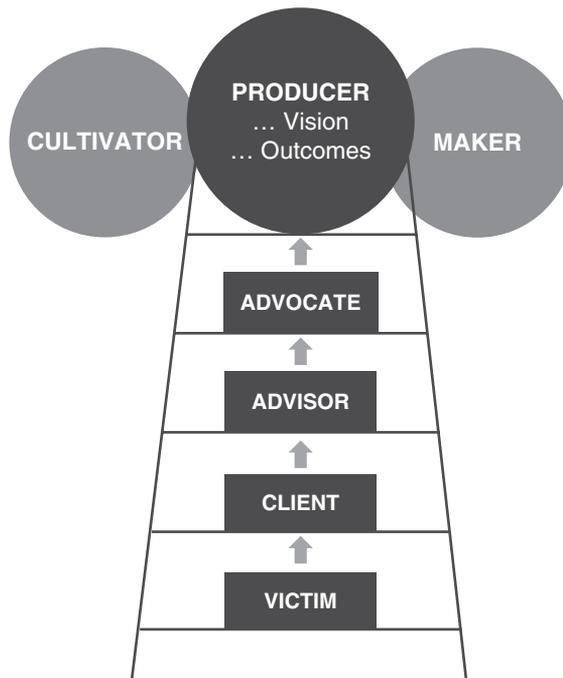
Finally, the sixth asset is culture and stories. This asset was identified about ten years after the green book was written. By listening to many different stories of successful community building over many years, it became apparent that stories in themselves were assets. John and Jody did not come up with this list of assets themselves. Residents were aware of their local assets, and they told stories about how they mobilized these assets. Identifying assets is the first step for neighborhood action. The second step is to connect or mobilize assets. To connect assets, there must be a “connector,” that is, usually an individual that knows other individuals or that recognize an associations or local institutions that can help other individuals, associations or institutions to achieve a goal. There are some characteristics of connectors:

(1) they are gift centered, (2) well connected, (3) trusted by others and (4) believe that community is welcoming.

Using an ABCD approach, neighbors can ask three questions: (1) what can we achieve by using our own assets? (2) what can we achieve with our own assets if we get some outside help? and (3) what can we not do with our assets that must be done by outsiders? Institutions cannot do what communities can do, and communities cannot do what institutions can. This goes back to the idea that institutions can have their own role to play in community development. One of the roles of institutions is to empower residents. The “Citizen Power Progression” also known as the “Power Ladder” is a way to conceptualize how residents can move from being victims, full of needs, to producers and when in partnership with institutions to co-producers. When residents are producers or co-producers, they have control of resources for community problem-solving.

## CONCLUSION

In order to give citizen power, institutions do not look at neighborhoods that are poor and need to be fixed (refer to Figure 4.5). Instead, they understand that communities have assets that can be leveraged for development. Institutions that follow the more



Source: Adapted from basic training slides, <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute> (accessed 9 November 2019).

Figure 4.5 Citizen Power Progression

traditional path of a needs-based approach often ask what is wrong with a community. Meanwhile, an asset-based approach considers what works already and how assets could be mobilized. While a needs-based map shows unemployment, truancy, illiteracy and other deficiencies, an asset map will show individuals, associations, institutions, land and the physical environment, exchange, culture and stories. A needs-based approach would argue that human capital emanates from the outside from institutions while an asset-based approach would argue that it comes from within the community. On the one hand, people are identified by their deficiencies and on the other hand, by their gifts. In a service mindset, individuals are clients while in the asset-based mindset they are citizens. In one paradigm, change is achieved by providing more resources and services. In another paradigm, change is achieved by engaging the community in their own self-determination.

Funding is spent on paying administrators and professional community developers in the needs-based approach. In the ABCD approach, we might also pay professionals, but we recognize that most of the funding should go to community residents for their work and the community projects that they envision. The model of development in a needs-based approach sadly creates dependence, as opposed to empowering people by recognizing their gifts and capacities. One leadership model is based on professional staff while the alternative is about institutions facilitating processes that are citizen-led. The most valuable resource under a needs paradigm is financial resources while ABCD is about connecting people and creating relationships. ABCD recognizes that money is not the answer but people and relationships are. Money comes after recognition and awareness of this.

ABCD tries to identify community connectors—people who connect individuals to individuals, associations and institutions. Connectors invite others to bring their gifts and they encourage others to create a solution. When people create things themselves, they own them (and are vested in them). There is a great potential to have a multiplier effect using an ABCD approach. Service-oriented thinking is not sustainable because the effort often dwindles when funding ends. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the differences between the needs-based and asset-based approaches.

ABCD is a straightforward idea: focus on what is strong and not on what is wrong. John and Jody did not expect that the green book would have sold more than 125,000 copies, used as a framework in more than 80 books and cited in more than 10,000 scholarly articles. As of 2019, there were 52 ABCD faculty and 22 fellows in the ABCD Institute at DePaul University. There are a number of regular conferences in the United States, Canada, Australia, India, the United Kingdom, to mention a few. ABCD 101 trainings are conducted twice a year in Chicago and other cities in the United States to raise funds for the Institute. A quote that faculty and fellows at the ABCD Institute frequently use to conclude their ABCD 101 training is from Lao Tzu titled “On Going to the People” and it goes like this:

Go to the people. Live among them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build on what they have. But of the best leaders when their task is done the people will remark “We have done it ourselves.”

This is the ABCD way. We invite you to join our movement.

Table 4.1 Needs- versus asset-based: a paradigm shift

	Needs approach	Assets approach
What institutions generally think	This community is poor and it needs to be fixed	This community has assets that can be leveraged
The data shows	What is wrong with a community	What is great already and what can be improved
Map shows	Unemployment, truancy, illiteracy and so on	Assets (individuals, associations, institutions and so on)
Human capital	Comes from the outside from institutions	Comes from within the community
People are identified	By their deficiencies	By their gifts
Individuals are	Clients	Citizens
Change is achieved	By providing more resources and services	By engaging the community in their own self-determination
Model of development	Dependence	Empowerment
Leadership model	Professional staff	Facilitated by institutions but citizen-led
The most valuable resource	Financial resources	People and relationships, but in particular “connectors”
In the long term	Dwindles	Snowballs

Source: Created by the author.

## REFERENCE

Kretzmann, J. P., and McKnight, J. (1993). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Evanston, Ill: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.