

# PAS QUICKNOTES

## Asset-Based Community Development

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach that uses the existing resources of a community to support its development. Rather than focusing on challenges or resources that are lacking, ABCD seeks to identify often unrecognized assets produced by local individuals, associations, and institutions, and then works to build on those assets to sustain a community and support its growth. Planners can use ABCD to inform solution-oriented and conscious practices in all aspects of the planning process. ABCD can enhance planning work in many ways and serves as a useful framework to advance equitable and restorative planning.

### BACKGROUND

Since its inception in the 1990s, ABCD has generated an influential **body of literature** for many social science disciplines and professional fields. Asset-based approaches such as ABCD encourage researchers and practitioners to see the people they engage with and serve as capable of making positive contributions to their community.

Planners can use an asset-based lens to uncover the natural ways that communities thrive despite disadvantage or disinvestment, which can then inform their planning decisions. Each community has a unique set of assets that are place based and steeped in local history and culture, and planners may not have the perspective or knowledge needed to identify those assets. ABCD offers planners a process for learning directly from community members what they find meaningful and what is necessary for their community to prosper.

Once a community's assets are identified and recognized through the ABCD approach, planners can then leverage formal governmental and organizational planning resources to build on these assets, while also ensuring their actions do not undermine them. Official acknowledgement of local peoples' capacities, talents, creativity, and imaginations can begin to reverse the effects of a history of misunderstanding, stigmatizing, or disrupting local assets—whether intentional or not.

### ELEMENTS OF ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The four essential elements of ABCD are resources, methods, functions, and evaluation (McKnight and Russell 2018). Practitioners can address the elements in any order.

The **resources** element describes six types of assets that communities can use to prosper. Three of these are community actors: *residents*, *associations*, and *institutions*. The fourth is *local places*, or bounded areas shared by community actors that feature the built and natural environment. The fifth resource is *exchange*, a core community activity. It can be monetary, but many nonmonetary forms of exchange exist and are more significant to ABCD. The final resource is *stories*, which is how community members share knowledge from the past and create visions for the future.

The **methods** element describes how communities use resources. When determining appropriate methods, ABCD calls for first starting with those that recognize what the community is already doing for itself, such as discovery through asset mapping; then, those that identify small opportunities for external support, such as co-creating solutions through charettes; and finally, those for leveraging outside aid and resources for major needs, such as local comprehensive or hazard mitigation planning.

The **functions** element describes seven community functions that are necessary for local success and well-being: *health*, *security*, *ecology*, *economies*, *food production*, *childrearing*, and *community care*.

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The four essential elements of an Asset-Based Community Development process. Credit: Adapted from McKnight and Russell 2018 (CC BY-NC 4.0).



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The final element is **evaluation**. This element measures the level of local engagement in the first three elements. Practitioners should take this as an opportunity to take stock of what is working and what they can improve or correct in the ABCD process.

## USING ABCD TO ENHANCE PLANNING

Planners can use the ABCD process and related tools to enhance planning activities. Whereas a deficit-based approach assumes planners must complete their work *before* a community can participate in community functions, ABCD asserts that the role of planners is what they can do *after* a community performs functions to the best of their abilities—in light of any external constraints and systematic disadvantages.

ABCD is especially valuable for community engagement. Planners often see themselves as problem-solvers, which typically relies on a deficit-based mindset. In contrast, ABCD facilitates engagement techniques that are solution-oriented and rooted in seeing residents as empowered and knowledgeable (Garcia 2019).

Asset mapping is a tool that can help community members visually identify local resources. The goal is to produce more than a list of resources; it should increase the number of community members who are actively involved in decision making for land-use, capital improvements, or infrastructure services (Duncan 2016). Asset mapping can inform development strategies that minimize displacement, strengthen sense of place, and embrace local histories.

Finally, planners can use ABCD to develop asset-based language in plans, policies, and communications. A common pitfall is describing places in terms of deficits. Phrases such as “crime-ridden neighborhood” or “high-poverty area” stigmatize the community and its people and obscures the role planning and policy may have had in creating these conditions.

Using asset-based language can empower residents instead of making them feel deficient and powerless. This can strengthen the connection between planning work and community members. Note that asset-based language should not ignore or underestimate serious problems that communities want to fix. Instead, it should highlight the specific systemic forces that cause disadvantage and disinvestment and promote the implementation of systemic solutions.

## BEYOND POWER AND PLACE

Communities with many assets—such as resilient practices and strong senses of place—may still face social, economic, or environmental challenges. Through its focus on restoring community control and enabling authentic collaboration with and respect for residents, ABCD can help planners reckon with this fact.

By recognizing that communities already have assets, ABCD forces planners to reflect on the current or historic impacts of institutional barriers and systemic harm. It draws attention to the policies and practices that destabilized the economic, social, and physical foundations of many communities. Planning policies that come out of ABCD should, in the end, restore relationships, remove barriers, and provide formal support for community success.

In line with conventional narratives that focus on challenges, not strengths, residents of such communities might default to deficit-based mindsets. Using ABCD to integrate the asset-based lens in planning work can affirm that residents have control over their personal and collective well-being, despite decades of being told otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

ABCD can be an effective strategy for translating planning activities to the unique context of a community. It can promote planning that is conscious of local culture and the impacts of planning history when tailoring solutions for community restoration or growth. By becoming familiar with the elements of ABCD, planners can use it as a framework for integrating an asset-based approach in all aspects of their work.

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## FURTHER READING

### Published by the American Planning Association

American Planning Association. 2021. **Creative Placemaking**. APA Research KnowledgeBase.

García, Ivis, Andrea Garfinkel-Castro, and Deirdre Pfeiffer. 2019. *Planning With Diverse Communities*. PAS Report 593. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Vazquez, Leonardo. 2016. “Creative Placemaking.” *PAS Memo*, November-December.

### Other Resources

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at DePaul University. 2021. **Publications**.

Duncan, Dan. 2016. **Asset-Mapping Toolkit**. Clear Impact.

Garcia, Ivis (editor). 2019. “Community Engagement Techniques.” *ABCD Practitioner Series*. University of Utah and ABCD Institute at DePaul University.

McKnight, John, and Cormac Russell. 2018. “The Four Essential Elements of an Asset-Based Community Development Process.” ABCD Institute at DePaul University.