ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the principles of asset-based community development and provides an assessment of it as a more relevant alternative than traditional methods of community development. The characteristics of asset-based community development and the requirements for new structures and roles in community capacity-building are explained, and critical barriers are identified. The article encourages volunteer administrators to apply what they already know to the larger context of asset-based community development.

Fundamental Principles of Asset-Based Community Development

Adrian Bohach

INTRODUCTION

Community development has become a hot topic. Citizens across a broad spectrum of society have begun to examine critically the *institutional* or *consumer* model of community development currently in place throughout North America. Within this model, community needs and services are determined and provided mostly by professionals, institutions, and government agencies. For many, the examination produces a failing grade. In addition, reduced government funding and reductions in government involvement in service delivery have led to a recent resurgence of interest in examining and defining community.

In the past, governments almost entirely set the agenda for the service initiatives in our Canadian communities. Not only did they set the agenda, often they funded, provided, and evaluated the services resulting from this agenda. Costly human services delivered by outside experts and bureaucracies tend to focus on clients with endless lists of problems and needs in a *system*. Although designed with the best of intentions, the system inevitably causes people with special needs to become consumers of services. Often the consumer is surrounded by staff who are paid to deal with problems and have control over the consumer's life. As in the case of developmentally disabled adults who are institutionalized, consumers often are labeled by their deficiency and become isolated from the mainstream of community. Unfortunately, as they become defined by their deficiency they can lose the ability to develop relationships in their lives that allow them to express their positive skills, talents, and capacities. We have seen this countless times in the way we treat our sick, the elderly, and persons with disabilities: large groups of people who may live in isolation, hidden behind the walls of government-funded institutions and services.

The institutional or consumer model of community development creates many problems for individuals, organizations, and communities. The individual has little incentive to become productive since a great deal of creativity is spent maintaining eligibility for benefits. For organizations involved in the system, creativity often is focused on maintaining the lifeline of the "fix" of grant money to fund the insatiable need to address perceived community problems and deficiencies.

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Society as a whole is held responsible for dealing with the "victims" of the problems and deficiencies. Typically, the response has been to bring in professionals to do a needs assessment. Once the problem is diagnosed, solutions are prescribed that usually take the form of a standardized program run by professionals. Communities become passive and silent as the important roles they played in the past are methodically stripped away and taken over by special interest groups, government agencies, institutions, and outside experts. For communities, the game is to learn how to respond to whatever is on the government's agenda.

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The desire for new models and a fresh approach has brought to the forefront *asset-based community development* championed by John McKnight and others.[1] This concept sets forth the idea that there exists within individuals, groups, and communities the capacity and strength to deal with their own issues. To work, asset-based community development should be ongoing, have no end point, and be locally controlled. This concept often is difficult to accept by those who have become accustomed to demanding evidence of results from, for example, short-term funded programs.

Asset-based community development strategy starts with a community's *gifts* and *assets*. Gifts are the skills, talents, and capacities of people within a community, while assets are the community's formal or informal networks and tangible resources. Both always have existed, but have not always been valued or identified as a basis for community development.

These community resources simply have gone dormant and atrophied in the face of the massive build-up of the social service system. Whether championed or reviled, asset-based community development forms the basis for an important discussion on the need to change the way community development occurs.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The essential elements and sometimes unique characteristics that are the foundation for asset-based community development are identified below.

Gifts

The recognition that everyone has a gift is the basic building block and foundation for creating community. Every community, no matter how deprived and disadvantaged it may feel it is or be perceived to be, is comprised of citizens who have an endless supply of unique, positive, and valuable abilities that are their gifts. Communities that provide opportunities for citizens to connect so that the strength and effectiveness of their gifts are increased lay the rich foundation upon which communities can develop themselves. Using their gifts, a community's citizens can focus on areas of strength (the positive) rather than only focusing on areas of need (the negative).

Citizenship

When citizens actively participate in community and create new roles for its governance, important tangible benefits accrue. By shaping the values and vision of a community, citizens create self-governed programs that respond to the uniqueness of that community. Often "unofficial" and outside the mainstream, this independent action draws individuals from diverse backgrounds into decision-making to tackle issues of common community concern.

Individual Attention

This feature builds into any process of community development the notion that each person is uniquely valued and that each will be dealt with individually. Interactions are face-to-face and very personal. Individual attention creates the community connections through which people who are isolated or "on the fringes" may be brought into the very center of the community. This includes

the people who are labeled elderly, persons with disabilities, immigrants, and the unemployed. Individual talents and productive skills are identified and connections made to the mainstream of community activity. In this way, community is built one citizen at a time.

The concept of individual attention often disturbs those who are used to the system. The system likes to put people into categories, slots, and programs with broad characteristics. It is hoped no one will fall through the cracks. But each person has his or her own gifts. Trying to fit each one's uniqueness into the assembly-line programming of the consumer model not only dehumanizes people who use these services, but also cuts them off from what they can contribute to their community.

Relationships

Strong ties between people are the foundation for community-based activity, planning, and problem-solving. Communities are driven by relationships. Decades of focusing on the weaknesses and needs of "the disadvantaged" have left communities in a fractured condition. People who are different from those in the mainstream are dealt with by a system where educated professionals are charged with the responsibility of handling them on behalf of the rest of the community. Neighbor no longer needs to count on neighbor.

Community-building based on the growth of personal relationships and the strengths and capacities of citizens bridges distances that can exist between individuals. Community is built by expanding membership beyond the relatively small group of traditional leaders to include many willing to deal with issues of common concern to all residents regardless of perceived differences among them.

Grassroots

Asset-based community development is bottom-up, or as John McKnight might say, "inside-out work" (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). It presumes that local citizens are better equipped to create a vision for their community and to plan for its fulfillment than outside experts. Therefore, local and independent ownership and control of the gifts and assets within the community must be fiercely guarded. Links are strengthened between citizens and existing community networks and associations. These community infrastructures and activities offer opportunities to create the relationships and bonds between citizens so necessary for this type of community development to work. The institutional infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, become valued as resources, assets that can be utilized to fulfill local agendas rather than serve as vehicles for outside control. Outside experts and government-run programs are held firmly accountable to local residents.

Community building within the context of an asset-based model usually does not rely on existing structures such as government programs, non-profit agencies, or political systems. Citizens start the new structures. Spinning a web of citizen relationships within a community, new structures are developed that operate outside the existing institutions and often will function independently of them.

New Role for the
Professional and Institution

Recent research shows a growing distrust of professionals and institutions as well as an interest in self-direction, growth, and dignity.[2] This backlash often has put professionals and their institutions on the defensive. Professionals sometimes feel they are being attacked unfairly and made responsible for all the problems associated with the system. It is not necessary to attribute blame or justify prior actions. The important debate must focus on the roles that professionals and their institutions should play in the new order. Professionals must relinquish power and become community resources. They have many of the gifts of skills,

knowledge, and experience that communities may need to move forward. Focusing on their gifts will unlock the wonderful resources they have to offer. To gain the trust and support of the community, professionals and their institutions will have to become comfortable in new roles that do not rely on power and control.

COMMUNITY IS A CO-CREATIVE ACT

As mentioned before, many important functions have been stripped away from communities and given to professional service delivery institutions in the institutional model of community development. As a result, the significance of community in our lives has diminished. There is a price to be paid for weak community: isolation, growing violence, dysfunctional families, reductions in our standards of living, and expensive health care.

To move forward and become co-creators of community rather than only recipients of services requires new conversations taking place and new relationships created. Old assumptions will have to be discarded in favor of new, constructive ideas of self-determination. These include:

- Seeing the gifts, strengths, and assets in our communities and citizens.
- Creating a process that connects these gifts, strengths, and assets.
- Empowering citizens and their associations to make decisions that affect their lives and the welfare of their communities. With real power, citizens will have reasons to talk to each other.
- Working toward cooperation rather than competition; breaking down fences around functional sectors such as health, education, non-profit organizations, and government agencies to assist citizens in forming joint initiatives with them.
- Recognizing that communities still will need assistance from the outside. However, outside experts no longer will direct a process, but will shift their role to support.

- Changing the roles of professionals, government agencies, and institutions so they become assets, tools, catalysts, and resources to communities.
- Giving citizen organizations and/or citizens with special needs direct access to public funds.
- Forming coalitions, associations, networks, and forums for citizens to find their own voices and solutions.
- Nurturing leadership at the community level.

BARRIERS AND LIMITATIONS

Let there be no illusion that moving from a service delivery/institutional model to an asset-based model can be done with ease. Some of the major barriers to asset-based community development include lack of process, lack of time, resistant non-profits and government agencies, negative attitudes and fear, short-term focus, and inappropriate funding patterns. Each of these barriers is discussed below.

Lack of Process

Communities often are unwilling or unable to take on the major role of directing themselves by defining their own vision and need for services. This leadership role has been given away to government agencies and institutions for so long that communities often are unable to assume the responsibility on their own. Like muscles, the skills, structures, and relationships necessary to create and support the internal conversations required for defining a local agenda atrophy due to inactivity. Many citizens want to take on this new role and not have it involuntarily thrust upon them through government downloading, but do not have any idea how to start.

Lack of Time

As the economy restructures, and those who still have jobs are required to work longer and harder, often there is little energy or time left over to invest into the community. Citizens may like and sup-

port the idea of asset-based community development, but because it is not placed high enough on their list of priorities, they fail to "walk the talk."

Resistant Non-profits
or Government Agencies

Professionals within the system are extremely resourceful and effective at making the case for why they should exist and are needed. Some professionals genuinely distrust the community's ability to shoulder its own responsibilities. They believe their "clients" would be put at risk if not under their care, custody, or control. Others are fearful that shrinking involvement or fewer caseloads will translate into a loss of jobs. Fear of a loss of funds, turf, control, or relevance sometimes causes the organizations for which they work to respond by giving the illusion they have transformed themselves to fit the new model. Magically, and virtually overnight, whole government departments, programs, or institutions become "community"-based. To be fair, there have been genuine changes within some of these organizations. But very often, unfortunately, the change is not one of substance, but only of image.

Negative Attitudes and Fear

Many citizens, and especially those who have been labeled by their need, problem, or disability, and who are on the margins of society, believe they are alone, isolated and powerless to take on a challenge they perceive to be too enormous. In addition, some may not grasp the value and benefit afforded to them personally by a strong community and will have little motivation to get involved. Still others believe it is not their job and that "they" (meaning, others) should do something about it.

Focus on the Short-term

We have a bias in our culture toward valuing only short-term outcomes. Programs supported by traditional funding sources often are evaluated on short-term outcomes and impacts. This is inconsistent with the requirement of a long-term outlook for community development. Building community is a lifetime process that may not be supported by those who wish to see a "quick fix."

Funding Patterns

The vast majority of funding from all sources currently flows to the formal service delivery system. Most of these funds pay for the administration and delivery of programs that address problems, needs, or crises that continually arise. Very little money is used for community development, to expand opportunities, or for prevention. The result is that we continue to address problems at great cost, but with too little effect. Unfortunately, sponsoring locally-controlled initiatives is considered unsophisticated and risky. As a result, communities have trouble attracting funds.

IDENTIFYING THE RANGE OF COMMUNITY ASSETS

A well-known Chinese proverb states that, "a 10,000 mile journey begins with the first step." The first step in asset-based community development, not surprisingly, is to begin a conversation within a community to survey and identify its strengths and assets. Citizens themselves can do this or hire a professional to work under their direction. The strengths and assets then can be categorized into lists, or further developed into maps by plotting them across a community's space. This can be done over a fairly short period of time. Sometimes, however, the research required for a comprehensive community capacity study can take as long as several months or years.

The goal of this first step is to discover assets that can be used successfully as action planning tools to achieve the community's vision. Through this process, the community will discover its assets and capacities; create lists and asset maps that graphically identify community supports and their connections in order to develop a central resource base that can be built

upon and used for future work; begin the actual "doing" work of community development; and mobilize citizen activity toward community action planning.

Examples of lists or maps that may be used in the process of identifying the range of community assets are listed below.[3]

- An inventory of the gifts, skills, and capacities of the community's residents.
- An inventory of the informal, volunteer, or grassroots organizations such as clubs, religious, and athletic groups within a community.
- An inventory of the formal institutions such as businesses, public institutions, and non-profits visible within a community.
- An association map: A list of all of the associations or organizations that interact, neighbor, or are resident within a community.
- What Once Was Here, But Is Not Here Any More: An historical listing of assets.
- Treasures: Anything a community treasures such as geographic, cultural, or economic advantages that a community may have.
- Not-So-Hot's: The negative, obsolete, decayed aspects of a community that possibly could be turned into an advantage.

A STORY: COMMUNITY-BASED ASSET MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

Stories often are used in asset-based community development work to illustrate ideas and possibilities. Stories capture the imagination and stimulate creative thinking. We find stories in books and articles, in meetings, and at conferences. Most importantly, we find they reinforce the one-to-one conversations among citizens in communities. Without these conversations, asset-based community development will not work. Stories show us how personal this work is. They also reinforce and affirm community ownership in the resolution of a problem.

McGrath is a small town in southern Alberta near the city of Lethbridge. Its roots and history are based on the pioneer spirit common to many rural communities. When something was needed in the community, citizens got together and created it. In the early years of this century, a growing population and poor roads to the nearest hospital some 40 miles away resulted in the community's desire for a local hospital. The community organized itself around the issue and proceeded to build and pay for its own hospital. The hospital was community-owned and governed by a local board until the 1960s when the provincial Medicare plan took over the hospital administration and operation. Although a local board remained in place, the effective control of the hospital was vested in the Department of Health in the province's capital, Edmonton.

The situation changed dramatically when recent provincial government budget cutbacks resulted in a proposal that the hospital be closed down because it was underutilized. The irony of the timing was amazing! The announcement came not long after significant renovations had been completed. An expensive new surgical suite had been built and improvements to the food preparation and ward areas had been made. However average occupancy rates for beds and number of surgeries were well below capacity. With modern-day improvements in roads and vehicles, a trip of 30 to 40 miles to a full service hospital in Lethbridge was not that significant and many local people preferred to travel the distance.

However, it was recognized that the loss of the hospital would be devastating to the community. Lost hospital jobs and fewer people visiting McGrath would create severe economic impact and might cause the community to wither away as many others had done before. The situation called for immediate action.

After much painful soul searching, rather than responding either in a passive

or confrontational manner, community members mobilized and chose to take matters into their own hands and employ some of the strategies referred to previously in this article. Theirs was a Not-So-Hot situation. They began to look at how the community's negative circumstances could be turned around to its benefit and save the facility. They began to regard the hospital as "theirs" again. As a community asset, what was its best function? After doing a community inventory, the answers to this question produced some surprising results, including the following:

• Community members realized that there was no caterer in the community. Catering for weddings, anniversaries, and other events was done by out-of-town businesses. It made perfect sense to turn the hospital's kitchen area into a full service catering operation as well as a bakery.
• There was no day care facility that would accept children who were ill. Parents had to take off time from work to be with their sick youngsters. For a modest cost the surgical suite was renovated into a "sniffles" day care center where children could be dropped off as needed.
• A long-standing problem in the community had been the absence of a facility for senior citizens requiring a higher level of care. These elderly persons were uprooted from their community, family, and friends and sent to a facility in Lethbridge. At modest cost, the active treatment rooms were renovated to accommodate these people. The renovation allowed these elderly individuals to stay in a facility that was well equipped for medical emergencies and support, and was near friends and loved ones.

Yes, the community lost its active treatment hospital. But its citizens changed the hospital's functions to address more pressing community priorities resulting in a higher utilization of the asset. Moreover, the community's citizens now control and govern the facility and its future. Community members kept their asset alive, viable, and intact.

CONCLUSION

Volunteer administrators need to be aware of the changes taking place in community-building and how they will be impacted. They should reflect on how they can make new connections with the community and rethink traditional roles. For example, many volunteer administrators may not see themselves as directly involved in building their communities. However, volunteer administrators should recognize they are in a powerful position to influence the future of their communities by facilitating involvement and providing opportunities for citizens to express their desires for a better community. This implies a change of focus from the single organization to the larger context of the community.

Many of the concepts in this article will not be new to volunteer administrators. For example, it is not unusual for them to identify, harness, and sustain community assets such as volunteer resources. They also facilitate community connections and partnerships. Far more than their peers in the non-profit sector, these skills place them on the "cutting edge" of asset-based community development thinking. What may be new, however, is the opportunity they have to take a leadership role in this process. It is hoped that many will be encouraged to take on that role.

ENDNOTES
[1]Other thinkers, writers and practitioners in this area include: Jack Pearpoint and Judith Snow (Canada), Paul Martin Du Bois, Leland Kaiser, Frances Moore Lappé, and John O'Brien (United States), Ivan Illich (Mexico), and Paulo Freire (Brazil).
[2]See, for example, Kanter, D. and Mirvis, P. (1994). *The Cynical Americans*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See also the *Market Vision 2000 Study* published annually by the Market Vision Group, Toronto.