

# Identifying Community Assets

MODULE TWO INTRODUCES PARTICIPANTS to the theory and practice of asset-based community development pioneered by John Kretzmann and John McKnight of Northwestern University. The *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* embraces an asset orientation to community change. This emphasis on the assets of neighborhoods and communities and people is quite different from the many community-development strategies that focus on the deficits of communities. Rather than concentrating on the needs of individuals and communities, Kretzmann and McKnight advocate for a fundamental change of mindset that identifies the talents of individuals and the assets of communities, such as associations and civic organizations, and mobilizes these positive forces to improve communities.

A key objective of the *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* is equipping participants to identify their own gifts and the assets in their communities and to mobilize these capacities to solve tough problems. The following description of asset-based community development is excerpted from the introduction to *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, by Kretzmann and McKnight. The asset-based approach was initially envisioned as a strategy to strengthen urban neighborhoods, and that is the emphasis of the following excerpt. However, although Kretzmann and McKnight's original research examined problem solving in urban neighborhoods, successive work has demonstrated how the asset-based approach to community development is creating innovative solutions in smaller cities and rural areas. (Visit, for example, the small town revitalization program in western North Carolina spearheaded by HandMade in America; [www.wnc.org](http://www.wnc.org).) The "plenty" in *LeadershipPlenty* reflects the wealth of capacities that can be mobilized in communities to address complex issues and build a better future for all citizens.

The following description of asset-based community development is reprinted with permission from John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993).

Web site: [www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd.html)

### **THE PROBLEM: DEVASTATED COMMUNITIES**

No one can doubt that most American cities these days are deeply troubled places. At the root of the problems are the massive economic shifts that have marked the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs have either disappeared or moved away from the central city and its neighborhoods. And while many downtown areas have experienced a “renaissance,” the jobs created there are different from those that once sustained neighborhoods. Either these new jobs are highly professionalized, and require elaborate education and credentials for entry, or they are routine, low-paying service jobs without much of a future. In effect, these shifts in the economy, and particularly the disappearance of decent employment possibilities from low-income neighborhoods, have removed the bottom rung from the fabled American “ladder of opportunity.” For many people in older city neighborhoods, new approaches to rebuilding their lives and communities, new openings toward opportunity, are a vital necessity.

### **TWO SOLUTIONS, TWO PATHS**

In response to this desperate situation, well-intentioned people are seeking solutions by taking one of two divergent paths. The first, which begins by focusing on a community’s needs, deficiencies, and problems, is still by far the most traveled, and commands the vast majority of our financial and human resources. By comparison with the second path, which insists on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community’s

capacities and assets, and which is the direction this guide recommends, the first and more traditional path is more like an eight-lane superhighway.

### **THE TRADITIONAL PATH— A NEEDS-DRIVEN DEAD END**

For most Americans, the names “South Bronx,” or “South Central Los Angeles,” or even “Public Housing” call forth a rush of images. It is not surprising that these images are overwhelmingly negative. They are images of crime and violence, of joblessness and welfare dependency, of gangs and drugs and homelessness, of vacant and abandoned land and buildings. They are images of needy and problematic and deficient neighborhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people.

Once accepted as the whole truth about troubled neighborhoods, this “needs” map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and non-profit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower income urban neighborhoods are now environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services with no incentive to be producers. Consumers of services

focus vast amounts of creativity and intelligence on the survival-motivated challenge of outwitting the “system,” or on finding ways—in the informal or even illegal economy—to bypass the system entirely.

The fact that the deficit orientation represented by the needs map constitutes our only guide to lower income neighborhoods has devastating consequences for residents. We have already noted one of the most tragic—that is, residents themselves begin to accept that map as the only guide to the reality of their lives. They think of themselves and their neighbors as fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community’s future.

### **THE ALTERNATIVE PATH: CAPACITY-FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT**

Because of the negative consequences of a total reliance on the needs or deficit-based approach to community development, an alternative asset-based approach becomes imperative. That alternative path, very simply, leads toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of lower income people and their neighborhoods.

In addition to the problems associated with the dominant deficiency model, at least two more factors argue for shifting to a capacity-oriented emphasis. First, all of the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. This observation explains why communities are never built from the top

down, or from the outside in. (Clearly, however, valuable outside assistance can be provided to communities that are actively developing their own assets.)

The second reason for emphasizing the development of the internal assets of local urban neighborhoods is that the prospect for outside help is bleak indeed. Even in areas designated as Enterprise Zones, the odds are long that large-scale, job-providing industrial or service corporations will be locating in these neighborhoods. Nor is it likely in the light of continuing budget constraints, that significant new inputs of federal money will be forthcoming soon. It is increasingly futile to wait for significant help to arrive from outside the community. The hard truth is that development must start from within the community and, in most of our urban neighborhoods, there is no other choice.

Creative neighborhood leaders across the country have begun to recognize this hard truth, and have shifted their practices accordingly. They are discovering that wherever there are effective community development efforts, those efforts are based upon an understanding, or map, of the community’s assets, capacities and abilities. For it is clear that even the poorest neighborhood is a place where individuals and organizations represent resources upon which to rebuild. The key to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes.

The entire process begins with the construction of a new “map,” a new mind set that focuses on community assets, rather than community needs. Once this guide to capacities has replaced the old one containing only needs and deficiencies, the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production.

### **THE ASSETS OF A COMMUNITY: INDIVIDUALS, ASSOCIATIONS, INSTITUTIONS**

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community’s residents. Household by household, building by building, block by block, the capacity mapmakers will discover a vast and often surprising array of individual talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilized for community-building purposes. This basic truth about the “giftedness” of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized by communities. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labeled mentally handicapped or disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, these people too will be part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process. In addition to map-

ping the gifts and skills of individuals, and of households and families, the committed community builder will compile an inventory of citizens’ associations. These associations, less formal and much less dependent upon paid staff than are formal institutions, are the vehicles through which citizens in the U.S. assemble to solve problems, or to share common interests and activities. It is usually the case that the depth and extent of associational life in any community is vastly underestimated. This is particularly true of lower income communities. In fact, however, though some parts of associational life may have dwindled in very low-income neighborhoods, most communities continue to harbor significant numbers of associations with religious, cultural, athletic, recreational and other purposes. Community builders soon recognize that these groups are indispensable tools for development, and that many of them can in fact be stretched beyond their original purposes and intentions to become full contributors to the development process.

Beyond the individuals and local associations that make up the asset base of communities are all of the more formal institutions, which are located in the community. Private businesses; public institutions such as schools, libraries, parks, police and fire stations; non-profit institutions such as hospitals and social service agencies—these organizations make up the most visible and formal part of a community’s fabric. Accounting for them in full, and enlisting them in the process of community development, is essential to the success of the process. For community builders, the process of mapping the institutional assets of

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the community will often be much simpler than that of making an inventory involving individuals and associations. But establishing within each institution a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some

aspects of the institution's relationships with its local neighborhood, can prove much more difficult. Nevertheless, a community that has located and mobilized its entire base of assets will clearly feature heavily involved and invested local institutions.

Individuals, associations, and institutions—these three major categories contain within them much of the asset base of every community. Module Two focuses on helping participants shift from a needs mindset to an asset mindset and introduces them to the tools of identifying or “mapping” the assets in their community.

