

Five Steps Toward a Strengths-Based Approach in Your Community

Across the country, community builders are refocusing attention on capacities and assets, and are inventing new methods for mobilizing communities. Often these efforts concentrate on one or two local assets, but the following steps help in the development of a comprehensive asset-based strategy:

Step 1. Mapping Assets

The commitment to mapping an entire community's assets is the place where this path begins. Once begun, however, the process of locating and making inventories of the gifts and capacities of individuals, of citizens' associations and of local institutions must be ongoing. Because the fully mobilized community is one which always begins to address its agendas and challenges with the question, "What resources do we have to solve this problem ourselves?" community builders need a continually updated "map" of those resources.

Step 2. Building Relationships

Building strong relationships among the community's assets constitutes the second step down the community building path. The community becomes stronger and more self-reliant every time local residents are linked with others for problem-solving purposes, every time an association of citizens connects with a local school or park to take on tasks together, every time a local business builds ties with the youth of the community. Communities discover that a new set of expectations begins to take root in the neighborhood, that people come to believe that they are capable of acting as effective problem solvers, and that their community is filled with much greater capacity for self-direction than they had ever suspected. And, gradually, as the web of ties among assets inside the community is rebuilt, and as the demonstrations of local competence multiply, residents cease to look first toward the outside for help addressing the most important local concerns.

Step 3. Mobilizing for Economic Development and Information Sharing

Beyond locating and beginning to build relationships among the basic categories of community assets, the path toward rebuilding the entire community involves mobilizing all of the community's assets for two important purposes, developing the local economy and strengthening the neighborhood's capacity to shape and exchange information.

A community which has fully mobilized the economic power which it already possesses is in a good position to grow its local economy even more vigorously. This challenge involves first, locating and mobilizing all of the skills of individual residents which can be used for economic development purposes. Then each local citizens' association and institution must be urged to begin making its own set of contributions to the neighborhood economy.

The capacity to exchange information is central to the success of the community building project. So it is very important that community builders first locate all of these places and circumstances within the community where communication of at least a semi-public nature

already takes place. Who are the communications leaders? How might the current places of information exchange—beauty parlors and barbershops, churches and clubs, even taverns and street corners—be validated, strengthened and expanded?

Step 4. Convening the Community to Develop a Vision and a Plan

Who are we in this community? What do we value most? Where would we like our community to go in the next five, ten, twenty years? Without a commonly held identity and a broadly shared vision, the hard work of regenerating community is very difficult to sustain. In many communities, a process of community based planning provides the vehicle for defining and developing a local vision, and for attaching that vision to strategies which begin to move toward making the vision a reality.

Step 5. Leveraging Outside Resources to Support Locally Driven Development

What is important about this step is that it comes last in the asset-based community development process. A community is ready to begin to consider leveraging when:

- All of the capacities of local individuals, associations and institutions have been inventoried thoroughly
- These local assets have begun to look first to their relationships with each other for solving problems
- Local economic development potentials have been released and information is flowing freely
- A broadly representative group of citizens have begun to solve problems together, and to hammer out a shared vision and set of strategies

Only then should the community begin to consider leveraging resources from the outside.