1 Community Assets

Building the Capacity for Development

Gary Paul Green

Communities are facing new and more powerful challenges to their survival. Globalization threatens the economic base of many of them. International markets create new competition among localities for capital investments and generate pressures to lower labor costs. Globalization also makes it more difficult for communities to plan for the future because of the mobility of capital and labor. In many respects, globalization reflects a new stage in the process by which communities have become integrated into the larger society and economy over the past century (Warren 1978).

Other social and economic changes also make it more challenging for communities to tackle their problems. Urban sprawl undermines the uniqueness of place and promotes class and racial segregation. Sprawl and segregation combine to weaken democracy and civic participation (Oliver 2001). Gentrification makes it more difficult for the poor to obtain affordable housing. Low-income residents are driven out of their neighborhoods because they cannot afford to pay the higher tax assessments. The high rate of immigration during the past two decades has expanded the demand for social services and generates challenges to civic participation (Putnam 2007).

Many communities continue to be burdened by concentrated poverty (Wilson 1996). High rates of poverty create numerous obstacles for residents in these neighborhoods. Inhabitants of poor communities have limited access to basic services such as banking and shopping. Poor communities tend to have a disproportionate number of environmental problems. Youth often lack good role models in poor neighborhoods because the middle class has moved to areas that are safer and that provide better education and housing. Without these role models, they often lack the aspirations for and understanding of a wider range of opportunities. Limited social networks in poor neighborhoods tend to restrict the available job information and contacts that provide employment opportunities for the poor (Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998).

As these forces present new challenges to communities, political changes place more responsibilities for social and economic welfare at the local level. Federal and state governments are devolving many of their responsibilities onto local governments and community-based organizations, which are increasingly becoming responsible for providing social services, addressing housing needs, and implementing welfare programs. In addition, because of the fiscal pressures on local governments, localities are now making a more intensive effort to promote economic growth (Fleischmann, Green, and Kwong 1992). Do community-based organizations have sufficient resources to address these issues? Can they overcome the powerful influence of the local elites? How can organizations effectively build public participation in their programs? Is it possible for communities to effectively overcome the broader social and economic forces affecting them? In this book, we explore how effectively community-based organizations are responding to these challenges.

Interest in community-based development has grown over the past two decades, primarily because of interest in devolving government authority. Devolution requires that residents design and implement programs on a wide variety of issues, such as welfare reform, housing, health care, and environmental protection. Cuts in the federal budget have shifted the responsibilities for funding and implementing many programs to the states and localities. Yet concerns remain that most communities do not have the capacity to take on these responsibilities. Some critics charge that community-based development is often coopted by local elites (Logan and Molotch 1987). Others contend that it is difficult for community-based development efforts to maintain control because they must rely on outside resources, especially for financial and technical assistance (Stone 1982).

Many communities look to external resources to address these challenges. These resources might include financial assistance, investments by businesses, or technical expertise. Outside resources are attractive because they offer the potential of a "quick fix" or address a perceived local deficiency. Dependence on external resources, however, raises numerous problems for community development. One such problem is that it may inhibit communities from cultivating the capacity to address their own needs. In his book *The Careless Society*, John McKnight (1995) argues that technical assistance from professionals creates dependency. Technical assistance is premised on the assumption that the community has a problem and the professional has the answer. Professionalized service creates clients who are in need of continued care. This relationship, McKnight argues, works against community capacity building.

Looking outside for resources and assistance can create additional problems. Technical assistance may not match the need in the local setting. Providers of technical assistance frequently have a generic response to community issues. They have little, if any, knowledge or understanding of the local context. Professional training and experience is based on general processes and issues that need to be interpreted and translated at the local level. It takes time to understand the community context and the social dynamics that might influence the success of community interventions.

And just as important, technical-assistance providers seldom are able to offer follow-up support. Continued support is critical to the success of community development (Pulver and Dodson 1992). The professional model of technical assistance typically lacks this element. Technical assistance is usually characterized by delivery of a product or service that is limited in time. Most community projects take much more time and commitment than outside experts are able to provide. Typically, experts do not live in the community and spend little time on implementing and monitoring interventions.

During the 1990s, an alternative model of community development emerged that emphasized the importance of building on community assets rather than focusing on needs and problems. John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) are credited with being the architects of this new approach. Their work in the inner city of Chicago as well as in numerous other communities suggested that most neighborhoods, even the poorest ones, have important resources that can serve as the springboard for community action. Many other foundations, organizations, and institutions have adopted the asset-based development approach. For example, the Ford Foundation established "Asset Building and Community Development" as one of three core programs. The Search Institute and others have identified asset-based development as the key foundation of their work. Numerous books and workbooks have been written on asset-based development (Fisher 2003; Green and Haines 2007).

Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) define assets as the gifts, skills, and capacities of individuals, associations, and institutions within a community. Many times these resources are overlooked and ignored by residents as they attempt to improve the quality of life. Asset-based development involves a process of identifying and mobilizing these resources to achieve collective goals.

This book provides several case studies of community-based asset development in several different contexts. Although the asset model has been widely adopted, there is very little research evaluating its effectiveness. The goal of this book is to provide insights into how these asset-based development efforts can work more effectively. We review these asset-based development approaches and summarize some of the lessons learned from these experiences in different contexts and with different foci.

Community Assets

Emphasizing assets—rather than needs—represents a transformation in how community development practitioners have approached their work over the past two decades. Community needs usually include issues such as unemployment, poverty, crime, and lack of affordable housing. Organizing residents around these needs can be a powerful way to address inequities and powerlessness. In many respects, the history of community development is premised on the idea that it is possible to build communities by acting collectively to address local needs. Identifying needs can provide a strong motivation for residents to gain a more powerful voice through collective action. Saul Alinsky's (1969) approach to community development was to begin with small problems and organize residents around the issues in order to demonstrate the power in community mobilization. Needs assessment, then, has been a valued element of the community development toolbox among practitioners (Johnson et al. 1987).

Needs assessment as a model for community development, however, has several drawbacks. Focusing on problems may make it difficult to establish long-term partnerships and coalitions to improve the quality of life in the community. Collective action focusing on problems is usually not based on a clear vision of the goals of community residents. This disconnect can lead to episodic efforts rather than sustained collective action. Once the issue is addressed, it is difficult to continue to energize residents and focus on new projects and issues. Partnerships and coalitions established for a specific issue may erode if organizers shift to new needs. Establishing a formal community organization can be difficult to do on a needs basis as well.

Needs assessment can often lead to a sense of powerlessness or alienation, or both, as residents become overwhelmed by the complexity and difficulty of community problems. This is especially the case when residents diagnose the causes of their problems as structural forces that operate outside their community. If unemployment is defined as a result of corporate decision making in response to global market opportunities, it is easy for residents to become alienated and focus on individual responses. Even when the local power structure and public officials are considered the source of the community problems, it may be overwhelming for residents to see how they can bring about the necessary political change.

Finally, needs assessment often lends itself to relying on outsiders to help solve community problems. In many cases, communities even turn to outsiders to conduct the needs assessment to tell them what their most serious concerns and problems are. As McKnight (1995) suggests, it is in the interests of professionals and technical-assistance providers to promote this dependency. Communities frequently turn to outside assistance because they believe the issues or problems are too complex for local residents. This type of assistance does very little to help build community capacity (Chaskin et al. 2001). It is possible, however, for professionals and technical-assistance providers to empower local residents. This might mean helping residents develop the research skills, substantive knowledge, or both, to address community issues.

Asset-based development begins with a much different premise. It is initiated by mapping the key strengths or available resources in the community. Individuals, organizations, and institutions have resources that can be used to enhance the quality of life for residents. Another way of thinking about assets is to consider them as different forms of community capital, including financial, social, physical, environmental, human, political, and cultural capital (Green and Haines 2007). These assets are considered capital because investments in them generate additional resources or benefits for the community. This is most clearly the case with financial capital. Wealth in the community can be used to create additional wealth for residents. Investments in other forms of community capital also generate benefits for residents. The key, however, is that these investment are made locally. This does not mean that the profit motive is removed from the process. Instead, social objectives are added to the profit motive.

This concept of community capital is not limited to finance. Investments in other forms of community capital can also yield collective benefits. Efforts to protect and manage natural resources can produce important community benefits. Similarly, public investments in housing, cultural amenities, and education generate important community-wide benefits.

In many cases, the focus of asset building is on how organizations and institutions can better serve residents. Rather than providing training for jobs that workers must take elsewhere, training is matched to jobs that can be created locally. Similarly, if an absentee-owned firm processes natural resources, many of the benefits often flow outside the community. The same thing may occur if families place their savings in banks and other financial institutions that invest these resources in other localities. When assets are owned and controlled by residents and invested in local projects, they are more likely to generate benefits for the community.

Asset building addresses many institutional obstacles to the development of places that cannot be adequately addressed through individual action. Community-based organizations can overcome many of the collective-action problems associated with community development. For example, while individual employers in a community may lack skilled workers, they may be reluctant to invest in training because they fear they may lose these workers after they receive the training. Similarly, individual employers may not have the resources to provide the necessary training programs. Groups of employers who have common needs, however, may build collective programs that address these issues. Community development offers collective solutions to these problems by building on the existing resources within the community.

Mobilizing Assets

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) identify several steps in mobilizing community assets. The first stage is identifying the capacities of residents, organizations, and institutions. The idea that all individuals have the capacity to contribute to their community is fundamental to this approach. We often overlook the potential contributions of youth, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. In addition to standard labor-market skills and experiences, we need to know about volunteer activities, hobbies, and care-giving experiences. One of the obstacles is that residents often do not think of many of their interests and experiences as an asset that can contribute to their community's well-being.

Community development practitioners obtain much of this information on individuals through a variety of methods, including one-on-one and peer-to-peer interviews, group interviews, self-administered inventories, and community events (Kretzmann, McKnight, and Sheehan 1997). This capacity inventory needs to identify the gifts and potential contributions of all residents and to focus on solutions, not problems.

Associations and organizations are composed of important social relationships or social capital that can be valuable to community development. Asset-based development usually involves mapping both formal and informal organizations in the community. Formal organizations are usually visible, and there are directories that help identify them. Informal organizations—such as block clubs, neighborhood watches, or garden clubs—however, usually do not show up on any formal lists because they are not incorporated or they do not have any paid staff. Identifying these networks and social relationships can help organize residents to build coalitions and power in the community.

Information on informal networks and organizations is typically collected through the same methods used to identify individual assets.

Community institutions—such as schools, hospitals, and libraries—are potentially important resources for community development. These institutions purchase goods and services that could contribute to the local economy. They have facilities that can be used for community events. Many local institutions could potentially hire workers in the area. Mapping these institutions involves assessing the institutional assets with the goal of identifying resources that could contribute to community building.

After mapping the assets, community organizers build relationships across the community that will help implement the goals and vision of the project. Mobilizing assets requires broad support. The asset-based development approach relies on leveraging local resources to gain outside support as well. Although it is important to build from local resources, it is also important to tap into existing outside resources that will enhance those assets.

Asset-based development is not without its critics. It has been accused of ignoring power relations within communities. It may be the case that asset-building approaches tend to be less conflict oriented than many other community-organizing approaches. Asset-based development emphasizes common interests and values that can serve as a basis for mobilizing residents to address the critical issues facing their communities. This often means that organizers are setting aside some of the issues that may divide the community. There is nothing inherent in the approach, however, that averts conflict with the power elite. Nor does the emphasis on common interests ignore conflict. But asset-based development does seek to overcome racial, gender, and class differences that frequently constrain community development projects.

Another possible criticism is that it is more difficult to mobilize communities around assets than it might be around needs and problems. It probably is easier to bring residents together around a problem or need, but it may be more difficult to sustain that effort. Also, residents typically want to jump to solutions before adequately understanding the nature of the problem or issue. In the long run, mobilizing communities to understand their local resources can be a more effective strategy for improving their quality of life.

The Case Studies

The chapters solicited for this volume identify factors influencing the success of community-based asset development. Literally hundreds of community-based organizations are using the asset-based development approach, and this book provides both a conceptual framework and practical guidance to community development practitioners. We brought together a unique set of practitioners and academics in the community development field. We have solicited case studies from a wide variety of geographical settings. In addition, we have included case studies of asset-based development among different racial and ethnic groups. Each author was asked to address some common issues and questions:

1. What is the context or setting for the case study?
2. What factors contributed to the initiation of the project?
3. How successful was the asset-based approach in promoting public participation in the project?
4. How were the key assets identified?
5. Were local assets leveraged for outside resources? If so, how?
6. What role did the local government and other public institutions play in the project?
7. What were the outcomes and impacts of the projects?
8. What are the chief lessons to be learned from this experience?

Not all the case studies included in this volume involved a formal asset-mapping process. A formal process might entail a community-wide effort to map assets, develop a set of goals, and mobilize residents to implement programs. All the cases, however, do include communities that recognize the importance of local assets and develop strategies to enhance the quality of life by using these resources.

Sarah Dewees and Stewart Sarkozy-Banoczy (Chapter 2) provide a look at community development financial institutions (CDFIs) on three Indian reservations: the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in Shawnee, Oklahoma; the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Band on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Hayward, Wisconsin; and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe on the Cheyenne River Reservation in Eagle Butte, South

Dakota. There has been a rapid expansion of CDFIs; currently there are forty-four Native CDFIs and another sixty-six emerging ones. These institutions not only focus on access to credit, but they play a critical role in building the financial skills required to manage small businesses and to expand existing businesses. Their analysis of three different CDFIs suggests that "right" sized credit needs to be supplemented with training, technical assistance, and financial education.

Emily Blejwas (Chapter 3) examines the role of the arts in asset-based development in the rural South. There is a growing recognition that the arts can play an important role in community and economic development. In her case study of a Black Belt community, Blejwas points to some obstacles, especially race, involved in mobilizing assets in this region. Segregation prompts a lack of trust and communication in implementing asset-based development. By consciously promoting inclusive participation in the community, this arts-based project attempted to overcome some of the racial barriers that have existed for decades in the community. Blejwas provides a specific set of recommendations for mobilizing assets in a racially segregated community.

Michael Dougherty and Rocio Peralta (Chapter 4) analyze a community-based effort in Guatemala that focused on the community's environmental capital. Their case study of the failed attempt to designate the Laguna Chichoj region as a protected area demonstrates some of the obstacles unique to mobilizing assets in developing countries. In particular, the weakness of civil society in these contexts makes it extremely difficult for communities to benefit from amenity-based development. They conclude that the multifunctionality of environmental capital in rural communities undermines genuine community initiatives in a developing economy. A strong institutional context is required to benefit local residents effectively. Without this strong institutional context, it is difficult for community initiatives to manage and control these development projects. The case study also involves indigenous groups that lacked sufficient political power in this context.

Rhonda Phillips and Gordon Shockley (Chapter 5) explore cultural capital as a community asset. Building on David Throsby's work, they define cultural capital as comprising both tangible and intangible manifestations of culture. Tangible goods might include buildings, paintings, sculptures, or other products that have cultural significance.

Intangible cultural capital typically includes cultural practices and traditions that help bind individuals to a group. Phillips and Shockley discuss an arts-based economic-development project in Bellows Falls, Vermont that adopted various strategies for promoting the arts in the region. They argue that arts-based development projects are most successful when they are combined with efforts to build other assets in the community.

John Kretzmann and Deborah Puntenney (Chapter 6) review two successful asset-building cases in the City of Chicago. The Westside Health Authority (WHA) and Bethel New Life (BNL) are two of the more effective groups working in the city. BNL began in a small Lutheran church in West Garfield Park in the early 1980s and has evolved into a comprehensive community development corporation. WHA also was created in the 1980s and has evolved into a community organization with a budget of more than $3 million. Both of these organizations operate in communities that have experienced significant losses in population and businesses and have seen growth in unemployment and crime rates. Part of the success of these organizations has been their ability to identify and train local leaders, who have been effective at engaging marginalized residents in neighborhood-revitalization efforts.

In a case of amenity-based development, Gary Paul Green (Chapter 7) focuses on some of the tensions between growth and development in a rural context. Petoskey, Michigan is a community that historically has had an economy based on extracting natural resources. As its economy becomes based more on tourism and recreation, it experiences the types of pressures that threaten the small-town atmosphere and the natural amenities that make it an attractive place to live and work. Managing growth can be challenging because of the conflicting interests between full-time and seasonal residents in the community. The community has successfully avoided some of the traps associated with a tourism economy by promoting year-round employment and diversifying its economic base.

Mark Harvey and Lionel Beaulieu (Chapter 8) discuss the role of resident participation in two community development initiatives in the Mississippi Delta. Their comparative analysis demonstrates how community participation can be enhanced through strong leadership and organizational support. This study challenges some of the previous work on asset-based development that downplays the importance of professionalization and leadership in grassroots efforts. Their analysis does suggest, however, that it is possible to meld strong organizational development and participatory development.

In the last chapter (Chapter 9), Gary Paul Green identifies some of the conceptual themes in the case studies and examines some of the implications for the practice of community development. Key themes include the difficulty of mobilizing across racial and ethnic lines, the multifunctionality of and interrelationships among community assets, and the significance of professionalization and organizational capacity. He also discusses the implications of these case studies for practitioners and the need for future research on this topic.

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