

Developing Community Connections with Asset Mapping

OVERVIEW

Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) is a specific path for identifying and connecting a community's assets so that they use and grow their capacity to change on their own terms. "Community" can refer to a neighborhood, a village or district, a residential development or a town—an area that residents recognize as "theirs."

Asset mapping is used in ABCD in a facilitated, participatory and inclusive process through which a group of residents identify the individual, associational and institutional assets in their neighborhood or community, then use them in envisioning and taking practical steps toward community improvement. The group usually produces a map (that locates assets geographically) or an inventory (that lists assets in a document or database). Either of these should be a "living document"—periodically updated to include new people, associations and institutions and their assets.

What Do Community Assets Look Like?

Community assets are usually identified according to the following three categories because each type has different kinds of assets, all of which are important.

- ▶ *Individual* assets are skills (machine repair, emergency response or bookkeeping), talents (music, baking, note-taking) and abilities (listening, physical strength, inclusivity).
- ▶ *Associations* are any informal, voluntary group of residents. Their assets might include local knowledge and traditions, communication and networking, and event organization.
- ▶ *Institutions* are formal organizations with employees and buildings. Their assets might include professional contacts, meeting space, employment opportunities and equipment.

How Do You Start?

Telling stories in a small group is a good place to begin. Ask questions like these—"What are good community experiences that we have had in the past? What do we already have that works well? Why does it work well?"—and notice the people, places and organizations that come up. The fun and meaningful work of identifying the assets you already know of, and engaging with others to discover their assets, leads to exploring potential interconnections. Connecting assets creates excitement and new possibilities, opening opportunities for new relationships and new action.

Five Asset Mapping Principles

1 In every community, there are **people of good will** who are looking for opportunities to work with others on behalf of their community.

2 A **community builds capacity from within** by employing its existing strengths (assets) to address its needs (deficits).

3 **Communities are made up of individuals with assets:** their personal skills, abilities and gifts. Community members associate in informal organizations (like clubs) and formal institutions (like businesses) that also have assets: specific resources and exchange relationships. People can mobilize the assets of individuals, organizations and institutions within their community to make community improvements.

4 Outside resources are best used **in service to a community's internally initiated vision and goals.** At the same time, communities extend their capacity by seeking relevant knowledge and expertise to meet their goals and realize their vision.

5 Look to **increase enjoyment:** the pleasure of sharing stories, of using natural talents and abilities, of honing valued skills, of giving and receiving resources, of acknowledging even small successes, of building trust through honesty and transparency, of getting to know and understand new people and becoming known and understood.

An Asset-Based Development Process for Helping Communities Adapt to Fire

We are testing asset mapping in rural northern California as a way of facilitating community engagement in wildfire readiness. Each community embarking on asset mapping will progress according to its particular strengths and unique vision for its future, but the steps below describe the general process we are following:



1 Situation Assessment

If you are not very familiar with the community in which you will propose asset-mapping, it is helpful to start with informational interviews, site observation and internet research to discover assets to use as examples and to determine the level and character of interest in collaborating on living well with fire.



2 Asset Mapping with “Connectors”

A situation assessment is likely to reveal certain individuals who are “connectors”—those who know the community well, listen to understand, and genuinely enjoy collaboration. As a small group, they pool their knowledge of the community’s assets through sharing stories at a local restaurant or around a kitchen table. Drawing on their connections to find additional assets sets the stage for new opportunities.



3 Facilitating Local Visioning

With facilitation, the connectors construct a realistic yet inspiring vision for the community’s fire-adapted future. This vision is built upon the community’s demonstrated strengths and responds creatively to its challenges while expressing values held in common.



4 Identifying Action Steps

The group then plans and implements action steps that bring together community assets in new and inclusive ways to address community needs. Rather than depending on outside funding, these initial actions are based on sharing existing community resources: time, money, experience, imagination, networking, locations or space, skills, connections, youth energy, equipment and so forth.



5 Widening the Circle

Successful, self-reliant action may bring further interest and ideas from others in the community. The focus remains local, centering action on inclusion, common values, utilization of internal assets, and learning exchange within the community until the vision for living with fire is ambitious enough to require outside resources.



6 Bridging for Support

The availability of outside resources—like grant funding or agency programs—can drive the perception of what’s possible for a community, risking dependency. However, a community that uses its own assets in service to a shared vision may decide that it needs outside resources to expand, improve or realize that vision. It then may seek further knowledge, technical expertise, funding, equipment and so forth.



7 Becoming Collaborative Partners

Over time, a community that becomes more and more active and engaged in adapting itself to fire develops knowledge and expertise—its capacity. Further, mobilization of community assets is a naturally collaborative practice. Such communities can produce members who have the basis of knowledge and experience from which they can effectively interact with agencies and organizations that need local perspectives to fulfill their mandates.

This is the first in a series of guides that will familiarize FAC practitioners with the hows and whys of the community-led asset mapping process. Together they lay out some best practices and lessons learned by communities as they use this process to become better adapted to fire.

Another good introduction to Asset-Based Community Development can be found at <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/what-is-abcd/>.

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The Fire Learning Network and Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network are part of *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about PERFACT, contact Lynn Decker: ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.
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