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The Four Essential Elements of an Asset-Based Community Development Process

What Is Distinctive about an Asset-Based Community Development Process?

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Four Essential Elements of an Asset-Based Community Development Process

The primary goal of an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) process is to enhance collective citizen visioning and production through a process that combines four essential elements:

1. Resources
2. Methods
3. Functions
4. Evaluation

This paper discusses each of these elements in detail in an effort to answer the following question: "what is distinctive about an Asset-Based Community Development process?"

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1 Resources

Given the importance of the goal underpinning Asset-Based Community Development, the first question to consider is what can citizens use to realize this goal? The answer is local resources, by which we mean six assets or resources which are used to enhance local wellbeing in every sense of the term: associational, cultural, environmental etc. These assets are abundant (there is enough/sufficient amount for everyone and when productively shared they do not run out), universally available (every community has them without exception), and extremely useful to communities eager to get things done to enhance community wellbeing. The six assets are:

1 **Contributions of Residents**: The gifts, skills and passions and knowledge of residents, which are contributed towards the collective wellbeing of their community. Gifts are innate; people are born with them. Skills are what people practice, learn and can teach or share with others. While passions are what people care about enough to take action on. We are particularly interested in civic passions. Passions need not necessarily be rooted in either a given person's gift or skill, but simply a deeply held care, concern or interest. When a person contributes a gift, skill, passion, or knowledge, or a combination of all four, to a neighbor they are engaging in a foundational form of citizenship.

2 **Associations** are clubs, groups, and networks of unpaid citizens, who create the vision and implement the actions required to make their vision, visible, and of consequence. They can be formal, like a Chamber of Commerce, or informal, like a book reading club. An association is the collective word for citizen. As a bird is to a flock, citizen is to an association, and it is within this domain that an individual's gifts, skills, passions and knowledge, when joined with their neighbors, can be amplified and multiplied, so that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

3 **Local Institutions**, whether for profit, non-profit/non-governmental organization (NGOs) or governmental show up in the civic realm in one of two ways: institutionally or community oriented. The nature of an institution that is community oriented is that it acts as a resource toward community wellbeing and aims to be supportive not directive. The goal of such supportive institutions is to enable citizenship and interdependence at the center of community life. Supportive institutions consider citizens to be the primary inventors of community wellbeing in a democracy, and see their role as cheering on that inventiveness and serving while walking backwards.

   Initiatives can precipitate collective vision-making and citizen production.
   They do so by:

   a. organizing their supports the way people organize their lives: small and local;

   b. by putting institutional assets at the service of community building efforts and investing in community alternatives to their traditional ways of working;

   c. being clear about what they are not going to do to/for/with communities, because to do so would be to take power from the people they serve;

   d. in the case of government institutions, they create a dome of protection against outside forces that could harm community life.

4 **Local Places**: The main stage on which the above three human resources are revealed, connected and brought into productive collective action, is the built and natural environment. Small, local, bounded places, that people relate to as their shared place: neighborhood, village, town and so on, provide an optimal threshold within which these resources, can be brought into right relationship with each other to become connected and mobilized. As well as providing an ideal context for gift exchange, hospitality and revealing abundance, local bounded places are replete with all manner of practical resources that are essential to community life. From the air we breathe to the community gardens we tend, to the places we casually bump into our neighbors or gather in deep fellowship, our shared places root our community experiences.

5 **Exchange**: In the non-monetary world, there are three forms of exchange: 1) the exchange of intangibles, 2) the exchange of tangibles, and 3) use of alternative currencies. In the commercial world 4) there is a fourth form of exchange in the shape of money.

Exchanging intangibles: Through the long history of human exchange between kin, clan, and neighbors, exchanges have primarily been about the circulation of gifts. It is said that a gift is not a gift until it is given; it is also true to say it is not a gift until it is received. Hence why abundant communities nurture a culture of giving and receiving, such exchanges tend to be entered into in a relational, rather than a transactional way.

Exchanging tangibles: involves the bartering or swapping of tangible resources, for example a pig for five chickens, or sharing one lawnmower between six households on a street.

Alternative currencies: like the previous two forms of exchange enable local choice and control. During the Great Depression for instance, many small towns created alternative ways of paying their debt by introducing their own local currencies as an alternative to the beleaguered US dollar. A popular modern example of this is Time Banking, where members of a timebank use their time as a form of currency, each hour of contribution is equal to all others regardless of what is contributed. All three types of exchanges occur within and strengthen the commons (shared civic space) in that they increase gift exchange, they deepen associational life, and encourage hospitality.

The final form of exchange is **money-based**, and while it is an important feature of community life, we consider it to be the least useful of the four exchanges in producing collective wellbeing, because it operates on the basis of scarcity, not abundance. Money is seen as a scarce resource because it is about debt; in effect it is a promissory note or an IOU. It also tends to operate outside the commons (civic realm) in the realm of private property, in that it does not promote gift exchange, associational life, or hospitality in the way the other three forms of exchange do. Money can often undermine them.

That said, money exchanges, when kept local, can play a powerful hand in nurturing community wellbeing, Credit Union schemes, worker-owned cooperatives, and shop local initiatives are all good examples of this. We also know - based on what we've learned from our friend and faculty member Judith Snow and others vulnerable to not having their gifts recognized and received - that when people have income in place of services and programs (e.g. personal budgets) they can use that resource to enable them to become more

interdependent at the center of their communities and have more choice and control over their own lives.

6 **Stories**: Local culture, or 'the community way' often finds expression within stories of the people and the 'ways' they have learned through time to survive and thrive within their home places. Hence the sixth resource that enables shared visioning and productivity are community stories. We are all creatures of narrative and when we cooperate with our neighbors in creating and exchanging stories of a more compelling future that respects our traditions, we ensure our culture (our way) prevails. Stories further enable us to pass on important life lessons and traditions to the further generations.

Stories also act as powerful connection points between older and younger generations within a community. Local stories therefore, are treasure maps that help us discover the hidden bounty that weaves our cultural assets together, like a tapestry: our cuisines, spiritual beliefs, ways of raising our children, local dialects, and arts are the threads that combine to form this community tapestry. Each tapestry is unique and particular to the place that created it, and to that place alone. And, as strangers become friends it takes the shape of a mosaic reflecting beauty in diversity.

2 Methods

Having addressed the question of what communities use to co-create their own wellbeing the second question we wish to consider here is: "How do communities go about making those resources productive in a communal sense?"

In answer to this question we note that abundant communities use **methods** that involve identifying and productively connecting unconnected local resources:

1. Starting with what residents can do themselves as an association of citizens, without any outside help.

2. Then looking at what they can do with a little outside help.

3. Finally, once these local assets have been fully connected and mobilized, citizens decide collectively on what they want outside agents to do for them.

The order is critical. When we start with the third, as often is the case in traditional helping endeavours, we preclude citizen power. The methods that are used vary widely but at their heart they are focused on bringing resources that were previously disconnected together, and supporting them to become mobilized through collective citizen action.

There are countless methods by which communities can connect and mobilize their resources. Suffice to say, Asset-Based Community Development approaches are iterative and emergent. While there are no methods that we can prescribe, there are a number of practices that communities around the world have found helpful. These include:

1. **Discover**: Discovering local resident connectors who naturally weave their community together through neighbor to neighbor and associational relationship building. Convening a table of connectors that represent the diversity of an entire neighborhood can be a powerful means of building community throughout that neighborhood.

2. **Welcome**: Actively welcoming neighbors and those who are pushed to the margins, through inclusive learning conversations and listening campaigns. Learning conversations and listening campaigns surface what people care about enough act to upon with their neighbors. Some communities find it helpful to have a Community Organizer (called Community Builders/Animators in Europe) to support these processes. It is important to remember that if a paid practitioner is supporting a community that this is a back-seat role. Local citizens must remain in the lead. Community Organizers can be helpful when it comes to figuring out tactics for deep inclusion and addressing issues of conflict and power imbalance alongside a range of other important functions. They can help build the ship, but they must never become the ship's captain.

3. **Portray**: As people discover what they care about enough to take collective action, creating dynamic portraits of the local resources that they can use, is a helpful way of making assets visible to everyone. No one person can hold a full picture of all the resources that a community has, so creating a shared and evolving portrait (what some call an asset map) is a powerful method of enabling citizens to discover what resources they already have and to figure out how best to connect unconnected resources.

4. **Share**: Intentionally doing things together, from breaking bread to tending a community garden, brings us into a radical presence with our neighbors. Sometimes we also create 'shareable moments', where we intentionally create the conditions for neighbors to become friends. Such shareable moments can include skills exchanges, seed swaps, repair cafes. They create a community on-ramp for people who may be unsure about how to get into community life. The more these moments enable gift exchange, hospitality and association the more likely they will become part of a community's way.

5. **Celebrate**: Celebrating neighborliness and community life, through food, fun, songs and dance is one of the best and most natural ways to honor our past achievements and dream up new community possibilities.

6. **Vision**: Creating a collective vision that both sets down the priorities and reveals the possibilities for the shared future of a community is a powerful community building method, which ensures that the community own the process and are the primary producers of it and the actions that flow from it. For some practical guidance on how to facilitate such a process visit: A Basic Guide to ABCD Community Organizing (*https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/A Basic Guide to ABCD Community Organizing(3).pdf*)

3 Functions: The Seven Community Functions.

The third question to consider is; having used methods to discover, connect and productively mobilize local resources, "what essential functions are citizens able to collectively perform that create greater community wellbeing?" The use of the six assets and the methods that reveal, connect and mobilize them enables seven irreplaceable community functions to be performed, namely:

1. ENABLING HEALTH
2. ASSURING SECURITY
3. STEWARDING ECOLOGY
4. SHAPING LOCAL ECONOMIES
5. CONTRIBUTING TO LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION
6. RAISING OUR CHILDREN
7. CO-CREATING CARE

These seven functions are a critical features of all home-based natural communities. They are also common features of social movements across history, in that they are bottom up, disaggregated, hyper-local and citizen-led. Indeed we believe that whenever a community is engaged in all four essential elements of an asset-based community development process they are acting as members of a powerful and democratic social movement.

No matter how hard they try, our very best institutions cannot do many things that only we can do; and what only we can do is vital to a decent, good, democratic life. Traditional approaches to change making tend towards reform of institutions and a focus on an individual's supposed deficits. Underlying that approach is the assumption that the role of communities is defined as what happens after the important work of professionals and institutions has been completed. The ABCD approach inverts that, highlighting that in a vibrant democracy the opposite is true: the role of professionals is defined as what happens after the community functions are performed.

The following is a description of each of the seven foundational democratic community functions:

☑ **First**, our neighborhoods and other such small hyperlocal places, when transformed into communities are the primary source of our health. How long we live and how often we are sick is determined by our personal behaviors, our social relationships, our physical environment, and our income. As neighbors, we are the people who can change these things. Medical systems and doctors cannot. Therefore, many epidemiologists find that medical care counts for less than 15% of what will allow us to be healthy. Indeed, most informed medical leaders advocate for non-medical community health initiatives because they recognize their medical systems have reached the limits of their health-giving power.

☑ **Second**, whether we are safe and secure in our neighborhood is largely within our domain. Many studies show that there are two major determinants of our local safety. One is how many neighbors we know by name, and the second is how often we are present and associated in public – outside our houses. Police activity is a secondary protection compared to these two community actions. Therefore, most informed police leaders advocate for block watch and community policing. They know their limits and call to our community development movement.

☑ **Third**, the future of our earth – the environment – is a major local responsibility. The "energy problem" is our local domain because how we transport ourselves, how we heat and light our homes and how much waste we create are major factors in saving our earth. That is why our movement is a major force in calling us and our neighbors to be citizens of the earth and not just consumers of the natural wealth.

☑ **Fourth**, in our villages and neighborhoods, we have the power to build a resilient economy – less dependent on the mega-systems of finance and production that have proven to be so unreliable. Most enterprise begins locally, in garages, basements, and dining rooms. As neighbors, we have the local power to nurture and support these businesses so that they have a viable market. And we have the local power to capture our own savings, through cooperative groups, credit unions, and land trusts, so that we are not captives of our notoriously large financial institutions. We are also the most reliable sources of jobs, for in many communities word-of-mouth among neighbors is still the most important access to employment. The future of our economic security is now clearly a responsibility, possibility and necessity for local people.

☑ **Fifth**, we are coming to see that a part of our domain is the production of the food we eat. So, we are allied with the local food movement, supporting local producers and markets. In this way, we will be doing our part to solve the energy problem caused by transportation of food from continents far away. We will be doing our part to solve our economic problems by circulating our dollars locally. And we will be improving our health by eating food free of poisons and petroleum. Our backyards and community gardens are therefore primary sites for the production of our health and wellbeing, as well as our local economic renewal and environmental sustainability.

☑ **Sixth**, we are local people who must raise our children. We all say that it takes a village to raise a child. And yet, in modernized societies, this is rarely true. Instead, we pay systems

to raise our children - teachers, counselors, coaches, youth workers, nutritionists, doctors, McDonalds, and YouTube. We are often reduced as families to being responsible for paying others to raise our children and transporting them to their paid child raisers. Our villages have often become useless, often being responsible neither for our children nor our neighbors'. As a result, we talk about the local "youth problem" everywhere. There is no "youth problem". There is a village problem where adults have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbors in sharing their abundant knowledge with our children. And receiving their wisdom in return. This reconnection and exchange is our greatest challenge and our most hopeful possibility.

☑ **Seventh**, we are the site of care locally. Our institutions can only offer service, not care. We cannot purchase care. Care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another. As neighbors, we care for each other. We care for our children. We care for our elders. And it is this care that is the basic power of a community of citizens. Care cannot be provided, managed or purchased from systems. Our way is made possible by the power to care. Democracy is the way we care for our freedom and responsibility. So, it is the new connections and relationships we create locally that build community because in joining each other together, we manifest our care for the children, neighbors and the earth.

Health, safety, economy, environment, food, children and care are the seven responsibilities of our neighborhoods. They are the necessities that only we can fulfill. And when we fail, no institution or government can succeed – because we are the veritable foundation of a productive society.

Fortunately, at the heart of our movement are three universal and abundant powers that enable us to fulfill our community functions. The three basics of our calling are:

1. The giving of gifts – the gifts of the people in our neighborhood are boundless. Our movement calls forth those gifts so that they can reciprocated.

2. Second, the power of association – in association we join our gifts together and they become amplified, magnified, productive, and celebrated.

3. Third, hospitality – we welcome strangers because we value their gifts and need to share our own. Our doors are open. There are no strangers here. Just friends we have not met.

Ours is the movement of abundance. There is no limit to our gifts, our associations, and our hospitality. When these three powers are combined, what becomes manifest is a culture of community. A culture can be understood as the way people have learned to survive and thrive in a place over time. That 'way' creates a boundary within which the hidden rules that make a community effective and powerful can be cradled and passed onto future generations, much like 'songlines' among indigenous Australians.

Within a culture of collective visioning and production, as well as having a way to be, health producing; safety creating; good stewards of our ecologies and economies, inclusive of food production; nurturing our own and our neighbor's children; and caring for each other without exception, two other (cultural) capacities are evident:

- The capacity to accept and embrace human limitations, death, and suffering. Life is a terminal condition, we exist within limits, hence our lives are bookended by birth and death. Abundant communities' welcome people's limitations (humanity), accept death and ritualize grief. In so doing they make individual and group suffering not only bearable, but often redemptive and in doing so they recapture death from the medical system and return it to its rightful place at the center of community life.

- Communities make meaning in the face of mystery. Some people take a utopian approach to the mysteries of life. They believe life is a problem to be solved. Yet, by contrast all indigenous cultures have produced ways to live creatively with mystery, and in the face of the unsolvable have created art forms from poetry to dance, all to share what is perceived sensually, but cannot nor should not be explained logically.

4 Evaluation

The fourth question to consider relates to how we evaluate an ABCD process. The authenticity of everything we do in such a process is evaluated against the primary goal: enhance collective citizen visioning and production. In the preceding three elements we have detailed what is used, how it is done and the functions that are enabled, noting that in general communities use six assets to perform seven functions, using methods that support the discovery, connection and mobilizing of these resources. The fourth essential element of an ABCD process considers how communities take stock of their journey together. They do so by evaluating the extent to which they are engaged with the first three essential elements. This process of engagement is not about auditing, it is about learning, and making midcourse corrections that allow us to stay committed to our cultural calling.

Evaluating an ABCD process therefore requires a move away from traditional top down summative and formative evaluation processes that are features of traditional ways of evaluating community initiatives. Instead an ABCD approach moves towards a developmental and emancipatory learning process.

Here are four ABCD evaluation principles. An effective evaluation:

1. It identifies the maximization of gift exchange.

2. It identifies the maximization and deepening of associational life.

3. It attends to the maximization in the number of participating and co-producing residents and the increase in their citizen power. It places a particular emphasis on the inclusion of those who have been marginalized.

4. Sponsors of ABCD processes ensure that associated evaluations actively conform to the preceding three principles.

1 **Principle #1**: **Identify the maximization of gift exchange.** The more citizens contribute their gifts to the wellbeing of their neighbors and their community, the healthier, safer and more prosperous all will be. Hence evaluating such reciprocal exchanges offers keen insight into the extent to which a given community is getting stronger.

2 **Principle #2: Associations broaden and deepen:** Abundant communities are made up of associations that a) welcome the gifts of all, b) while allowing sufficient space for diverse associational life to form, and c) facilitating an association of associations to seek a shared vision and work together to produce that vision.

Fig. 1.1 below is a chart that presents the diverse categories of associations that we have encountered in community life around the world. Creating a portrait of the community you live or serve in using this framework will help you create a baseline against which you can see the extent to which associational life is deepening and broadening as a result of your community building efforts.

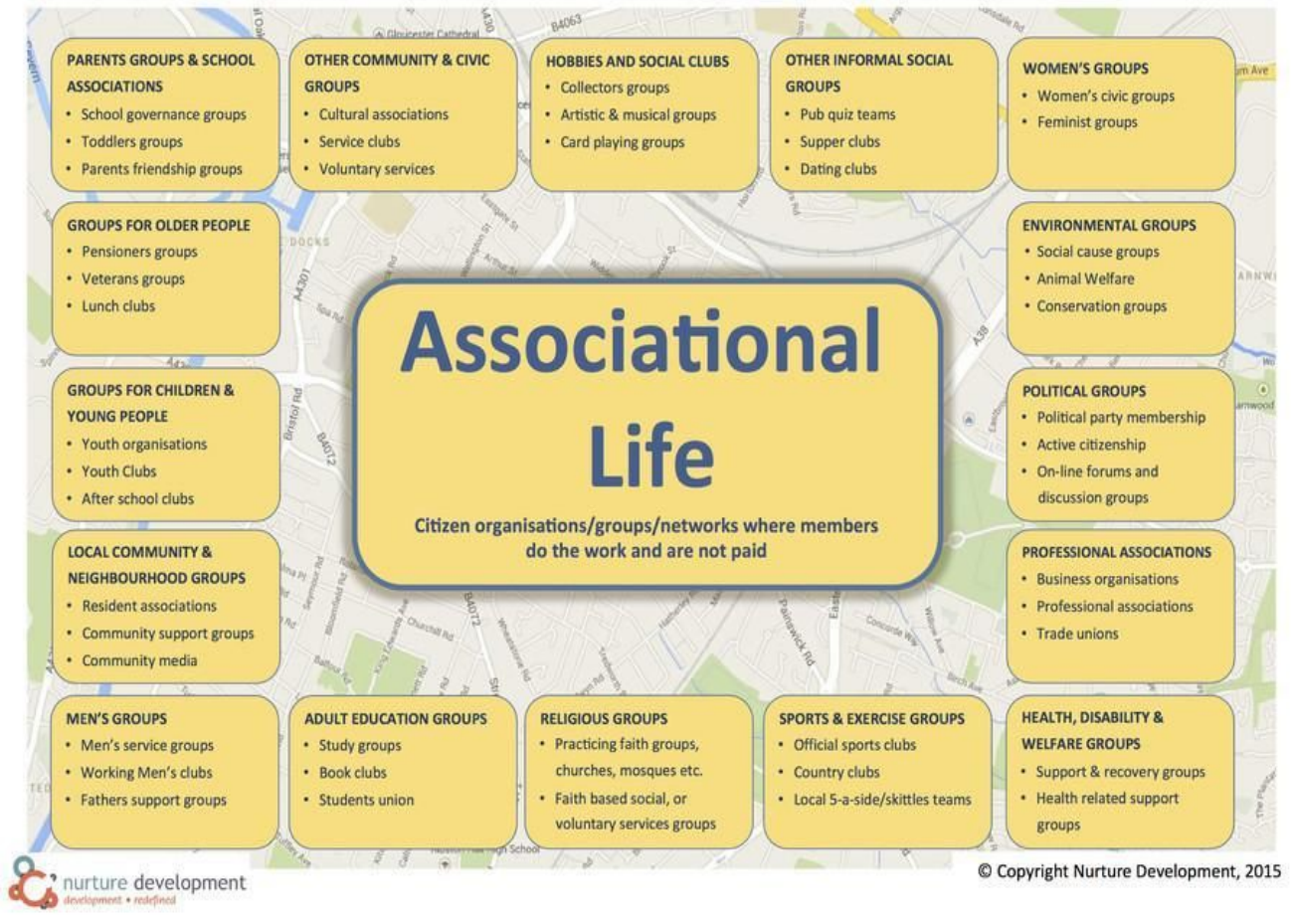


Fig. 1.1

3 **Principle #3: Evaluate strengthening citizenship.** We can evaluate the quickening of community life by regularly asking, 'are we seeing neighbors whose gifts were not previously received, participating and contributing more?' 'Are we seeing collectives of citizens driving change and feeling more powerful?' 'Are associations in the neighborhood, coming together to talk about what they can do together, that they can't do alone, and then taking productive action?'

4 **Principle #4: Sponsors of ABCD processes affirm the preceding principles** and ensure they are built into all evaluations. If you are a community worker facilitating an ABCD process or a sponsor agreeing to an evaluation process, ensure that the impacts that are being evaluated are what people in the community say they want to learn from and enable them to do that in a way that is fun and useful to them, and creates a compelling community owned story.

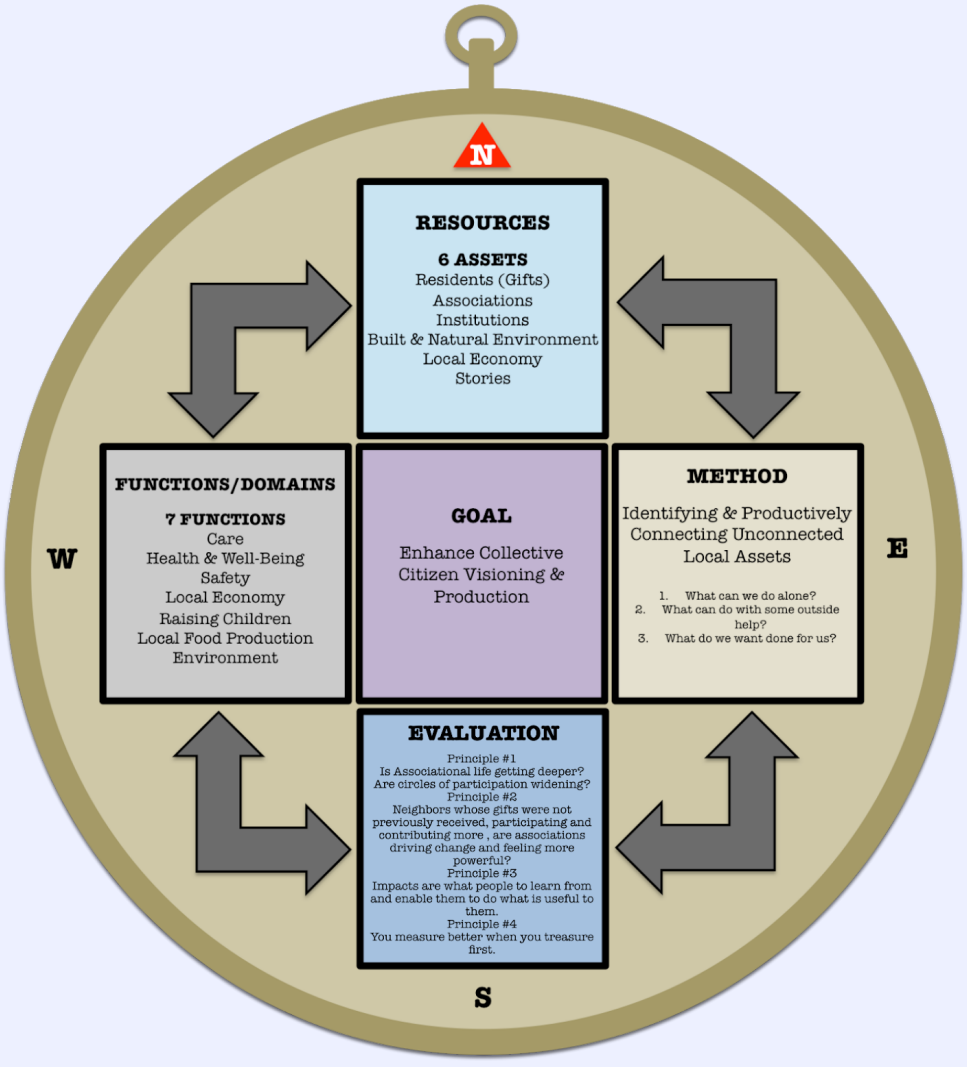
Relationships are the primary currency of community work, not data or money. Hence the preferred learning process is one that values what goes on between people, not what goes on within them as disaggregated individuals. It is not therefore about counting numbers of people who show up, but about cheering on the participation and contributions that deepen community life. Most of the things that matter in life are meant to be treasured, not measured. Hence the accent must remain on learning and sharing not on auditing and counting.

5 What Makes ABCD Distinctive

The central question that we address in this paper is: what makes an ABCD process distinctive from other community support approaches? Our answer is: other forms of community work, often possess one or more, but not all four essential elements (as described above). What makes an ABCD process distinctive then, is the combination of:

1. Resources
2. Methods
3. Functions
4. Evaluation

The diagram below illustrates the relationship between the four essential elements of an asset-based community development process, which is neither hierarchical or sequential. In other words, the elements exist in relation to each other simultaneously and dynamically, so you can start with any one or a combination of the four elements, as long as ultimately you engage with all four. Hence it is only when all four elements are a feature of your community building effort, that it can be said to be an Asset-based Community Development process.



This is not a map, but a compass. Start with any element, but go to every element.