



FIELD NOTES | NINE WAYS TO CREATE AN ASSET-BASED RECOVERY PLAN

The pandemic has affected our jobs, families, and changed the way our communities' function. Organizations and groups across the globe are trying to find the right way to move into the recovery phase of the pandemic. Since these are unprecedented times there are no templates or formulas on how we can work through recovery.

In July 2020, we hosted a conversation with over 80 participants from around the world to talk about how organizations might alter the traditional recovery methods of top-down approaches to thinking about recovery with community at the center. We used a design thinking process to prototype what community-led, asset-based recovery might look like. During the discussion, seven themes dominated the conversations and nine asset-based recovery ideas were created.

Role of Governments

Municipalities need to be involved and take ownership to make sure that they develop a community recovery model that has citizens at the center. Recovery plans need to have both an economic and social focus that cannot be done separately (community recovery will not move on an economic schedule). We need to educate politicians around bottom-up vs. top-down planning and the benefits of involving community voice and engagement in the process. At the beginning of the pandemic many of the federal and provincial government supports came too late because many local communities had already come together and were already doing the needed work.

Role of Citizens

Community/Grassroots organizations generally respond better than governments. So, how do we help citizens to not look to government to do for them? How do citizens help others discover that they have what it takes to make change? There needs to be a paradigm shift. Community recovery is typically "owned" by municipalities and focuses on economics. So how do we shift the recovery to be "owned" by community? We need to elevate the voices/perspectives of people with lived/living experience/expertise and recognize these voices as on par with decision-makers. Looking from an outsider lens allows you to see their assets in a different way. There needs to be a mindset shift. How do we shift the mindset, so the citizens move beyond a deficit-based conversation to one based on recovery and growth (asset-based)?

Reduce Barriers

There needs to be built trust with decision-makers and residents so that there are representatives of the communities are at the table. How do we reduce or alter barriers to make it easier for people to naturally help their community within the new reality (e.g. police checks, needing to be registered or trained, public health requirements)? How do local councils work 'with' instead of preventing community groups from helping (i.e. distributing food, providing PPE to the most vulnerable)?

Asset Mapping

Recovery planning is usually done without understanding what people on the ground have already been building and how these might be interconnected (e.g. new food deserts post-COVID – organizations are organizing food distribution without recognizing that community is already doing mutual aid). Asset Mapping is needed to identify new assets that have been created since COVID (i.e. care-mongering), document what activities/programs happened in local communities, and show the interconnected pieces. Finding organization/individuals that would not normally work together and sharing resources/skills.

Investment

Invest in social capital, build social communities, and make it a priority with municipal government. Invest in community participatory experiences (i.e. a mural project to reflect on the experience and vision of the community moving forward). Invest in capacity to bring small businesses together to leverage them to move forward in recovery. Invest in funding models that focus on community decision-making/action planning. Working to connect and collaborate all stakeholders for a more holistic approach.

Reveal

Reveal the importance of social infrastructures such as outdoor less populated spaces. Government systems kicked in without conversations, and solutions were found quickly without consulting communities. How can we engage citizens on the topic of recovery while focusing on assets and strength during a time that has perhaps fostered different perspectives and feelings (fear, needism, etc.)? To create possibility, we need to speak from a citizen point of view and demonstrate that we want a different recovery plan. In past disasters (i.e. the Black-out in Ontario and New York) communities came together and did amazing things to help each other. How do we help communities to understand that this change is not temporary and that we need to take what we learn and put it into future plans?

NINE ASSETS-BASED COMMUNITY RECOVERY IDEAS

These nine ideas are the result of a design thinking workshop to help citizens, organizations and government to think about how they look at the assets that came from the pandemic and how to build them back better.

Idea #1: Listening and Hearing Events (outdoors and smaller scale)

Opportunity: Part of the healing process is having an opportunity to hear the vision of recovery from community members (assets, strengths). For example, use a phone tree or photos to tell stories and descriptions of their experiences, which is then made into an exhibit or possibility to use video.

Future opportunity:

- Use systems and organizations who are already in contact with the community to reach out to individuals.
- Have conversations about policy and impacts (meaningful and impactful conversations).

Challenges:

- Inability to meet face-to-face in large groups.
- Be sure not to use only online format as it can exclude a large portion of the population.
- How do organizations step back but still harvest the sharing that can be useful?

Idea #2: GAB Sessions, virtual and or in-person. Talking circles that are facilitated conversations.

Opportunity:

- Online conversations and citizen sharing.
- Creating public space for comfortable, safe sharing of ideas, experiences, and stories.
- Virtual conversation circles that provide a space for sharing, planning, and developing relationships.
- Easy to promote through community networks, neighbourhoods and specific groups that are already organized (i.e. newcomers, Indigenous communities, youth, women, LGBTQ2S+).

Challenges:

- Engaging citizens
- Who will do this?
- Time to build community and find champions
- Challenges to find to space (physical space)
- Government, as they are most focused on the economics

Idea #3: Building Trust

Future Opportunities:

- Better use of existing resources - less duplication, less waste. For example, bigger organizations made their staff available (with pay) to support smaller, voluntary groups that were already doing the work and responding to the pandemic. It was a long overdue redistribution of power.

Challenges:

- Wait to be invited into the community rather than inviting people to join initiatives and processes.
- Who trusts whom? Who is it that needs to have trust?
- Value driven: Actions and behaviors of agencies show a lack of trust of the community grassroots response. Lack of recognition of what communities have been doing, not only during COVID-19.

Idea #4: Relationship Focused Audit and Community Plan

Future Opportunity: Increased inclusive, connected communities that celebrate together and each other (Welcoming to all!).

Community - street connectors reach neighbours and plan get-togethers, share resident voices and have their say! Listening to each other, emerging leadership, sharing passions, caring and kindness, sharing gifts with each other, empowering residents to do and participate in their own wellbeing.

Organizations - animators + activators + network weavers, collaborators: provide tech assistance, WIFI, solutions, resources - financial support (receive City funds to distribute to neighbours for their plans), share physical spaces, engage groups and work alongside community, review systems and structural challenges.

City - Map out street connectors and connect volunteers across a City, listen to voices of everyone - share stories and experiences, spaces for residents to congregate and get together.

Challenges:

- Resistance to change, desire to return to default action so comfortable.

- Work @Home +Vulnerable residents may stay separate because of pandemic - people desire to be close to each other.
- Time - not enough, did we learn, reflect and change?
- Focused on economics and not the human focus – what is the impact?

Idea #5: Harness the agility and nimbleness and resilience of communities - which is missing in government - underfunded, red tape, risk to go back to normal.

Future Opportunity:

- Discuss - how do we work together?
- Somehow out of this we got hope - where we see we can do better, look at solutions that had to be put in place and do not get them to get lost.
- Reimagining our assets - hotels, motels not being used.
- Ways to ask the right question at the right time - go back to community.
- Capacity building of nonprofits by local governments.
- Provide support to give energy to people.

Challenges:

- Red tape

Idea #6: Community Asset mapping - what has changed due to COVID?

Future opportunities:

- Reach out to untraditional leaders (e.g. Facebook group creators, IT tech folks who have emerged).
- Individual (gifts, assets e.g. sewers at home during COVID); associations (e.g. Facebook care mongering groups); organizations, physical environments (COVID-sidewalks, driveways).
- Reset rather than recover.
- Large organizations came in during COVID to offer help or assistance and the small organizations and informal groups were already doing the work (last four weeks, where have you been?).

Challenges:

- Not being face to face
- Finding and connecting the new groups that formed

Idea #7 Community Conversations

Future opportunity: Setting a new vision, we will not go back to the way things were, dismantle the assumed “reliance” on institutions, noting assets, generating ideas and increasing connection in community

Challenges:

- Reaching all community members with urgency of topic - how can we remain inclusive of all voices while also allowing time for change to happen naturally?
- Recovery typically owned by municipalities with focus on the economic not social - how can we shift this and allow city/local governments to walk alongside this?

Idea #8: We need to reimagine - rather than recover

Future Opportunities: What community might want to keep, reimagine, stop. There needs to be the right space and people to have conversations, recognizing that not everyone will want to be involved and that is okay.

- Zoom Room - book through the library website, share the link 2 days before and then connect.
- Opportunity to leverage the community and what they are doing – help around bigger things.

Challenge:

- Zoom is great but many cannot use it forever - how do we use things that are easier, and more accessible like Facebook.

Idea #9: What is the crisis revealing about people's needs and how do we address them?

Future opportunity: A network of boundary spanners who have a foot in both bureaucracy and citizen groups (between the institutional and citizen level to translate between bureaucracy (shield) and lay language).

Challenges:

- Formal organizations can get in the way (e.g. council preventing community from distributing food; volunteers needing to be registered; people diving in without understanding what folks have already been building).
- We must build understanding/articulate the interface between community and institutions.
- Need to educate politicians.
- Overcome assumptions about who has knowledge/ideas and who doesn't.

RESOURCES TO DIVE DEEPER

- Read [Asset-Based Community Development at a Glance](#)
- Read [Asset-Based Community Recovery Framework](#)
- Listen [Asset-Based Recovery: How to Put Community at the Center webinar](#)
- Read [the Learnings of John McKnight](#)
- View the [ABCD Canada website](#)