

Asset-Based Rural Development Part I: What is Asset-Based Rural Development?

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF



INTRODUCTION

Many rural communities have discovered a new way of mobilizing people and resources to create more vibrant and sustainable communities. Instead of allowing a community's problems to define what development and services it needs, this new approach **begins with what is already strong and successful** – the community's assets. Asset-based rural development (ABRD) is a rural focused framework for organizing community development initiatives, policy, and research that has had positive outcomes in numerous places.

What makes ABRD different from other rural development strategies? How can communities in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region use it to address key challenges like attracting new residents and diversifying the economy? This Knowledge Brief answers these questions and offers practical resources that local leaders in government, economic development, non-profits, and other sectors can use to inform their efforts.

BASICS OF ASSET-BASED RURAL DEVELOPMENT

ABRD is centred around the idea that communities should design development around their strengths instead of their weaknesses. Too many rural development initiatives, whether led by provincial or federal government, non-profits, or the private sector, start from the assumption that rural communities are essentially in need – in need of new residents, industry, services, infrastructure, and ideas to solve their problems.¹ Media portrayals of rural Canada often echo this message, characterizing rural communities as over-dependent on services from provincial or federal agencies and economically uncompetitive.² Similarly, economic development efforts in rural communities often search for gaps in the local economy and focus efforts on attracting external investment to fill them.³ The resulting development projects often fail to draw on the strengths and successes of rural communities and, as a result, these efforts are often unsuccessful.

Asset-based community development (ABCD), from which asset-based rural development was derived, offers a different way forward for our rural communities. ABCD proposes that new developments should not be based primarily on a community's deficiencies, but on its strengths – or assets – and offers tools to mobilize local residents and leaders to maximize those assets.⁴ Community assets are "*what we want to keep, build upon, and sustain for future generations*"⁵; in other words, they are

all the good things in our communities. An asset can be anything from an individual to an organization or local institution, as well as buildings, natural features, or more intangible things like stories, traditions, or values.⁶

Originating in the early 1990s from the work of John McKnight and John Kretzmann at Northwestern University, ABCD has since developed into one of the most widely used community development frameworks.⁷ Their seminal book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, introduced the concept of ABCD and provided practical tools and resources for community development practitioners.⁸ This and other early work in ABCD was based mostly in inner-city America, showing how neighbourhoods that are normally defined by their needs can rediscover the capabilities, talents, and value of the people and places within them.⁹ Falling under the broader ABCD umbrella, the ABRD framework has taken these insights that were originally found in urban neighbourhoods and adapted them to the unique context of rural communities.

ABCD also borrowed from an international development framework known as the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, which had been used extensively by foreign aid agencies in low-income countries.¹⁰ For example, an analysis of community assets in rural Andean villages exposed the resources, capacities, and, ultimately, the sustainability of communities that had been labelled “*non-viable*”.¹¹ ABCD has also been influenced by community development practice. The Coady International Institute in Antigonish, NS uses ABCD in its development training programs, teaching NGO staff from around the world to use ABCD and publishing academic research on their experiences in rural Nova Scotia.¹² Perhaps the greatest testament to ABCD is the countless number of local initiatives that have used it to revitalize their communities.

A “GLASS-HALF-FULL” MINDSET

The most striking difference between ABCD and mainstream community development is its focus on the positive aspects of a community. Early practitioners of ABCD working in inner city America observed that the neighbourhoods they worked with were often defined by their problems. When government agencies or the media discussed people in these communities, they used terms like “at risk”, “unemployed”, and “welfare recipients”, singling out needs and deficiencies while ignoring the capabilities of these people and their neighbourhoods.¹³ While rural Canada faces very different challenges (e.g., demographic decline and economic restructuring¹⁴), there is often a similar emphasis on needs and problems. Four institutions have been “messengers of need and deficiency” in communities: universities, charitable institutions, government human service and health programs, and the media.¹⁵

In contrast, ABCD takes a “glass-half-full” approach, identifying and building on the positive aspects of communities. Instead of designing development projects around what is missing or not working in a community, ABCD seeks to build on what is already working and finds ways to support, promote, and amplify those existing assets.¹⁶ This approach not only boosts the confidence of residents, but also leads to more sound community development initiatives that build on existing capacity and skills.¹⁷ This does not mean that the legitimate challenges facing a community should be ignored or that communities should downplay their problems. Instead, ABCD suggests that these challenges can be better addressed by identifying and measuring the assets present in a community and designing new development that better mobilizes these assets.

The most underutilized asset in many communities is the residents themselves. It is argued that the mainstream needs-based model leads to this problem by creating a culture of “*clienthood*”, in which people are made dependent on different service providers for meeting the community’s needs.¹⁸ Major institutions classify residents into groups of *clients* who need their services – healthcare, education, family services, or otherwise – and community members come to depend on these agencies to meet these needs.¹⁹ ABCD, on the other hand, seeks to help people shift from outwardly defined clients to internally driven citizens with the power to participate meaningfully in community development. This shift from clienthood to citizenship does not mean that communities should have a reduction in public services like hospitals, schools, and other institutions, but instead that residents must become empowered to effect change in their communities while retaining vital public services.

HOW DO YOU DO ABCD/ABRD?

There is **no set formula** for how a community or region can undertake an asset-based development initiative. The framework is perhaps best known for asset mapping, which can be done in a number of ways but ultimately aims to identify and/or measure community assets.²⁰ However, asset mapping is only the first step in a process of community mobilization and planning. Five steps have been identified in this larger process:²¹

1. Mapping capacities and assets of the community
2. Building relationships and trust among local stakeholders
3. Mobilizing community assets for economic development and information sharing
4. Convening a broad representative group of community stakeholders to build an inclusive vision and plan
5. Leveraging external resources to support locally-defined development priorities

This process may seem very ambitious for communities that may not have the experience or resources to do in-depth stakeholder engagement and planning, or to entice external investment. However, there are many examples of communities that have gained experience and resources through this process. Rather than a linear series of stages, the components of ABCD listed above are much more iterative and can occur simultaneously. For example, mapping local assets can often help to mobilize residents for later planning processes, while building individual and group capacity in terms of knowledge and experience, confidence, and improved communication and trust between participants. Typically, the best way to ensure the greatest impact is to engage the widest range of local stakeholders possible, with key representatives included from local government, the business community, non-profits, and other important local institutions. The case studies described in the **ABRD Knowledge Brief Part II: Measuring & Evaluating Community Assets** includes examples of how ABRD can incorporate stakeholder engagement in different ways.

The first step in ABCD/ABRD is usually identifying the community's assets and capacities.²² But how exactly is this done? There is no set formula for identifying local assets and capacities, but there are a couple of key ideas that communities often use to categorize assets. One of these is to focus on three different levels of capacity: i) the level of individuals, who have skills, capabilities, and goals; ii) the level of community associations, which are informal or formal groups of community members organized around a common cause or objective; and iii)

the level of institutions, which are the public and private entities that provide key services to rural communities.²³ Another common set of categories is the different types of "*community capital*" (i.e., forms of capacity and resources that are essential to community well-being) present in a town or region, ranging from financial capital – what is traditionally thought of as capital – to natural capital (the integrity of ecosystems and natural resources), to social capital – the bonds and relationships that are perhaps the most critical resource needed to sustain community development efforts.²⁴ These forms of capital can be represented through indicators of community well-being that can be identified and measured as part of the asset identification process.

When used in rural communities and regions ABRD has specific strengths and limitations that community practitioners should take into account. In rural communities that are often labelled by their needs, community members can become inspired by the simple act of recognizing that their communities have assets and strengths to build on. However, since human capacity is a challenge in many rural communities, finding the people to lead an ABRD initiative and ensuring that they have both the skills and local trust to facilitate the process can be challenging. Paradoxically, this challenge is also linked to one of the biggest ways that ABRD can contribute to the sustainability of rural communities – by **supporting the retention and attraction of residents**. New residents can enhance the capacity of rural communities in a number of ways, such as bringing new skills and talents to the community, increasing the local tax base, fostering new business growth, and reducing demographic decline. By finding novel ways to promote and market existing community assets, such as low-cost housing, medical facilities, schools, recreation opportunities, low tax rates, and other amenities, rural communities can catch the eye of potential new residents and help locals identify new economic opportunities that allow them to stay in the community. The Columbia Basin-Boundary region has identified promising fields, such as information and communications technology (ICT) and other knowledge-based sectors, where currently unidentified assets could be documented and harnessed for the attraction of skilled workers. **ABRD Knowledge Brief Part III: Identifying Assets for the Knowledge Economy** describes identifying assets for the knowledge-based economy in detail.

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The Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute, at Selkirk College, is a regional research centre with a mandate to support informed decision-making by Columbia Basin-Boundary communities through the provision of information, applied research and related outreach and extension support.