

Asset-Based Rural Development Part II: Measuring & Evaluating Community Assets

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF



INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest questions facing those interested in Asset-Based Rural Development (ABRD) is how to identify and measure the community's assets. While the **ABRD Knowledge Brief Part I : What is Asset-Based Rural Development** discussed asset identification, **the asset mapping stage is only the beginning** of a larger process that many communities have used to coordinate and support sustainable rural development. The tools employed in ABRD can be used not only to identify local assets, but also to evaluate those assets against a locally defined vision of community well-being. Locally developed indicators allow us to evaluate how well we are protecting and promoting the community's assets and ensuring well-being for all residents. This Knowledge Brief describes how rural communities can engage residents in the shared evaluation of community assets through an ongoing ABRD process.

USING INDICATORS TO MEASURE COMMUNITY ASSETS

ABRD can benefit from the use of locally defined indicators of well-being. Many communities and regions around the world have measured the health of the community's assets through the use of

sustainability indicators. **Sustainability indicators (SIs) are any measurable piece of information that can be used to represent the status of a more abstract community value or priority; in other words, they indicate how something is doing that is difficult to measure.**¹ An indicator of community sustainability cannot tell us everything about the more abstract thing we are trying to measure, but when a handful of different indicators are viewed together they can paint a portrait of how the community is doing.²

In this way, SIs are one of many ways to represent the community assets that are identified in asset mapping. Much like asset identification methods, indicator initiatives often make use of the concept of community capital to identify and organize key priorities for enhancing social, cultural, economic, human, and ecological capital and to represent those priorities with measurable data points (i.e., indicators).³ For example, if community leaders have the goal of building up human capital by attracting new knowledge-based workers, they can track progress towards this goal with indicators such as the annual number of tech-based startups, the average years of education of incoming new residents, or the number of entrepreneurs using the services of a local co-working space.

There are a few key differences between asset mapping and the identification of sustainability indicators. One of the foremost of these is the portrayal of positive and negative aspects of community life. While ABRD takes a “glass-half-full” approach to identifying local assets, SIs draw equal attention to both the indicators in the community that are doing well and those that are doing badly.⁴ However, in order to determine what it means for a particular indicator to be doing well, local values and expectations must be taken account so that the assessment is accepted by residents.⁵ Another big difference is that SIs often rely on more quantitative data from national or provincial statistics agencies⁶, and this information about the community (e.g., education rate, unemployment rate, or number of protected areas) must be tempered with local perspectives so that the assessment remains true to the sentiments of community members.⁷ Community-based data collection methods often used during asset mapping can help to ensure that indicators provide an accurate and locally appropriate assessment of the community’s well-being.⁸

MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SHARED MONITORING

In many ways, **sustainability indicators can be seen as part of a broader process of ABRD.** The goal of most locally-based indicator initiatives is to allow a community or region to track, or monitor, its own progress and development over time.⁹ They have often been used in natural resource-based communities faced with a large-scale development that could impact local well-being and whose leaders want to have a baseline assessment of local well-being before potentially harmful impacts are felt.¹⁰ This way, local government and other community leaders can tell whether development projects such as mining, forestry, or hydro expansion are adversely affecting local assets and the information collected can be used to decide whether the community wants to accept proposals for new development. Asset mapping methods can be used to identify the most appropriate indicators for such a baseline, and community members can prioritize certain types of assets that should be tracked over time by assigning indicators and revisiting them on a regular basis.¹¹

Asset mapping and sustainability indicator development also both have the potential to mobilize a wide range of community members in measuring and evaluating local well-being. Both require the use of public engagement to ensure that the assets, and indicators identified to measure those assets, are reflective of community realities.¹² This stakeholder engagement, whether done using interviews, focus groups, workshops, or other methods, can ensure that local knowledge and experience is incorporated into the way that well-being is defined and measured. This is especially important in Aboriginal communities, where the use of traditional knowledge is often more culturally appropriate than data derived from Western science (e.g., quantitative measures).¹³ For examples of stakeholder engagement in community-based sustainability indicators, refer to the **ABRD Resource Table: Measuring Assets** (pages 4-7).

The inclusion of a wide range of community members in identifying assets and indicators also helps to increase the buy-in of residents to future efforts to use this information to inform community planning or project development. Hopefully, if a local agency or organization decides to revisit a set of indicators several years after the baseline study, community members will be more receptive to participate in monitoring the progress of the community in future iterations. Ultimately, sustainability indicators can support ABRD most meaningfully by creating a space for the shared measurement and monitoring of key assets which is open to all members of the community. The Columbia Basin-Boundary region has created an indicator-based tool that provides an excellent example of this shared effort. The *State of the Basin* report has been produced regularly since 2008 and which uses a variety of quantitative data (e.g., census data) and local resident poll data to report on the region’s well-being using a holistic set of indicators.¹⁴ The *State of the Basin* is a vital resource for sustainable development in the region that can guide regional planning and efforts to mobilize existing assets in the region.

EXAMPLES OF ASSET MAPPING & SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS

The **ABRD Resource Table: Measuring Assets** (pages 4-7) shows a number of examples of communities and regions that have used different methods to measure and evaluate local assets. These case studies come from across Canada and the United States and represent both settler and Aboriginal communities. Each case study took a unique approach to stakeholder engagement to involve community members in the asset mapping or indicator development process.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

1. Bell, S. and Morse, S., *Sustainability Indicators: Measuring the Immeasurable?* (second edition), New York: Earthscan.
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9. Hermans et al., 2011.
10. Robert Klinck, Ben Bradshaw, and the Naskapi Nation, "Enabling Community Well-being Self-Monitoring in the Context of Mining: The Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach," *Engaged Scholar Journal* 1, no. 2, (2015): 114-130.
11. Reed et al., 2006; Fuller et al.
12. Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Hermans et al., 2011.
13. Natcher, D. C., & Hickey, C. G., "Putting the Community Back into Community-Based Resource Management: A Criteria and Indicators Approach to Sustainability," *Human Organization* 61, no. 4 (2002):350-363.
14. Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute, "2015 State of the Basin Snapshot Report," (Selkirk College, 2015).

Community/ Region	Type of Initiative	Description
Elliston, NL	Asset mapping initiative	Elliston, NL was hit very hard by the 1992 Northern Cod moratorium. The community of about 330 residents had lost more than half of its population and experienced extreme economic hardship. In 1994, after the municipality decided to turn off the street lights to save money, Elliston made national news. In the years following, residents began searching for a local asset to use as an attraction for tourism and place-based branding, and they chose root cellars. The community has 135 root cellars, many of which are over 100 years old, representing a significant heritage asset for Elliston. Local residents compiled an inventory of all of Elliston's root cellars and created a database of the findings. Shortly thereafter, Elliston proclaimed itself "Root Cellar Capital of the World", and now the root cellar features in community events, marketing, and festivals such as the Roots, Rants, and Roars festival, which has won multiple provincial and national awards.
Fraser Basin Region, BC	Sustainability indicator suite	The Fraser Basin Council is a research and advocacy organization comprised of representatives of government, civil society, First Nations, and the private sector. The organization coordinates research and regional planning in the Fraser River basin, which is Canada's fifth largest watershed and covers 25% of the province of British Columbia. Since 2003, the Council has authored a series of "sustainability snapshot reports" which report on indicators representing the region's environmental social, and economic well-being. These snapshot reports focus on key topics such as agriculture and food, consumption and waste, land use, population and health, and transportation.
Little Red River Cree Nation	Sustainability indicator suite	The Little Red River Cree Nation of remote Northern Alberta developed a set of sustainability indicators to evaluate land management decisions and potential forestry development. The nation, faced with pressure to adopt federal forest management indicators from the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers, decided instead to design their own indicators based on traditional ecological knowledge and a holistic Cree worldview. These indicators, created as part of a "Sustainability Matrix" to aid in Band decision-making, used community perspectives on topics such as caribou populations, forest biodiversity, and timber harvesting. This "Sustainability Matrix" was eventually used by Band leaders to evaluate management decisions and fostered social learning among different members of the community.
Naskapi Nation	Sustainability indicator suite	The Naskapi Nation lives in a remote community of 1000 members in the sub-arctic region of Northern Quebec. The community has seen decades of boom and bust in the mining sector and is facing the possibility of renewed mine development. In order to understand the potential impacts of mining expansion, the Nation entered into a partnership with researchers from the University of Guelph to create a baseline set of indicators for the community. The Nation formed a Steering Committee to guide the research process and was involved in all phases of the study. The research team used semi-structured interviews, focus groups with community leaders, and participant observation to collect information about the values, hopes, and concerns of community members. This information was used to form a set of well-being indicators that informed a community survey given to measure those indicators. Results were displayed using art created by a local artist, and the Nation now has a baseline assessment of community well-being so that the impacts of mining can be tracked over time.

Stakeholder Engagement Method	Reference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community leaders formed committee to do root cellar inventory Community involvement in inventory and database creation 	<p>Tourism Elliston. (2016). "Elliston NL: Root cellar capital of the world". Retrieved from http://www.rootcellars.ca</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representation of multiple sectors Community consultations and publications of findings 	<p>Fraser Basin Council (2010). <i>Sustainability snapshot 2010: Working together in the Lower Mainland</i>. Retrieved from http://www.fraserbasin.bc.ca/resources_indicators.html</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training of community researchers Interviews and surveys with community members to design indicators 	<p>Natcher, D. C., & Hickey, C. G. (2002). Putting the community back into community-based resource management: A criteria and indicators approach to sustainability. <i>Human Organization</i>, 61(4), 350-363.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nation created a steering committee to guide research Residents' values, hopes, and concerns formed basis for indicators Survey of households to measure indicators 	<p>Klinck, R., Bradshaw, B., & The Naskapi Nation (2015). Enabling community well-being self-monitoring in the context of mining: The Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach. <i>Engaged Scholar Journal</i>, 1(2), 114-130.</p>

Community/ Region	Type of Initiative	Description
Phillips County, Arkansas, USA	Community-based visioning process	Phillips County is a rural county in Arkansas with 21K residents. In 2003 a group of about 300 residents began a community-based visioning process to develop new alternatives for regional economic development. The 10-month process led to the creation of a Strategic Community Plan for the county, which adopted an asset-based “strengths-opportunities” approach that highlighted five planning areas for the county. The planning team developed a metrics program that measures the success of supported projects through key indicators (i.e., employment rate, poverty rate, and educational attainment of at least associate’s degree). There is interest in developing a broader set of indicators in the future. As a result of the Plan, the project has leveraged \$105M in outside investment into the county.
St. Andrews, NS	Asset mapping initiative	St. Andrews is a rural Nova Scotian community of about 1,100 residents with Irish, Scottish, and Dutch heritage. In 2006 residents of St. Andrews were introduced to ABCD by the Coady International Institute. Following this, the community conducted an asset mapping process to identify local and external associations operating in the community. The leaders of the ABCD initiative decided to draw young people and other community members into the process by screening the documentary <i>By Their Own Hands</i> , which documented St. Andrews as a case study of the Coady Institute’s community development work. The documentary screening, as well as other public engagement methods, sparked discussion among residents about how to build on the asset mapping project in future community development. One outcome of this work was the St. Andrews Community Partnership, an “association of associations” aimed at fostering cooperation between different groups in the community.
Tilting, Fogo Island, NL	Asset mapping initiative	The Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage Inventory project is a heritage-based asset mapping framework adapted from a guide to cultural heritage planning used by the Government of Ontario. It has been applied in two communities in Newfoundland to date, one of which is the community of Tilting on Fogo Island. Tilting is an Irish fishing village and one of the larger communities on Fogo Island, which includes 11 communities with a combined population of about 2,500 people. Communities on Fogo Island, like many rural coastal communities in the province, have been trying to find economic alternatives to fishing in sectors such as cultural tourism and crafts. In 2014, residents of Tilting partnered with Memorial University researchers to create a cultural heritage inventory for the community. Relying on multiple forms of community engagement and capacity building, this process has led to the cataloguing of a wide variety of local cultural knowledge such as stories, poems, songs, recipes, and other heritage assets. Local stakeholders on Fogo Island in particular are interested in building on this process by expanding the scope out to all 11 communities on the island and/or broadening the scope of the assets included to other social, ecological, and economic factors to guide local governance and planning.

Stakeholder Engagement Method	Reference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement of 300 residents in visioning process for Strategic Community Plan 	<p>Read, A. (2012). "Part 1: Industry and industry clusters". In <i>Asset-based economic development: Building small and rural communities. A briefing paper from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities</i>. Washington, DC: International city/country management association.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community members exposed to ABRD framework Public involvement in asset mapping Public discussions at documentary screening and other events 	<p>Van den Heuvel, M. (no date). <i>ABCD in St. Andrews: Building on the 200-year legacy of citizen-led development</i>. Canadian Community Economic Development Network. Retrieved from http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/resources/publications/Stories_of_abcd/ABCD%20in%20St%20Andrews.pdf</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity building and training of community researchers Use of local knowledge and values in asset identification and cataloguing Community ownership of asset inventory 	<p>Newfoundland & Labrador Cultural Heritage Inventory (2015). <i>Newfoundland & Labrador Cultural Heritage Inventory: A systematic approach to organizing a community's cultural resources</i>. Retrieved from http://www.culturalheritageresources.ca/</p>

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.