

Building the Road as You Walk It

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

Mike Green



Our local communities have many serious problems. How do people leave poverty? What do we do about violence? How do we help our young people find a good future? What can we do to increase literacy? How do we make our communities safe and healthy? What do we do about drug abuse? What about housing homeless people? How can people with disabilities become real community members? How do we develop our local economy and create new jobs?

In North America, as in many places, professional helpers have the principal responsibility, power, and control of resources for community problem solving. We expect teachers to educate our children, doctors to heal us, the police to make us safe, human services to help us, public health organizations to protect us, city government to develop strong neighborhoods, development agencies to create jobs, and on and on. When problems arise in communities, we tend to see helping agencies with their programs and services as the solution.

But, increasingly, helping agencies are overextended, without adequate resources to address the problems they face. The limited results of overstretched professional help disturb investors of both public taxpayer money and private foundation money. Awareness of the need for a new approach grows. More and more agency leaders, researchers, and policy planners recognize that social and economic problems can only be addressed effectively by involving a larger part of the *whole* community.

Many community problems can only be addressed if a wider partnership of local people work together. Schools cannot succeed by the efforts of teachers and administrators alone, but only when parents, students, and neighbors work with them. City government cannot create safe communities unless police, city officials, and neighborhood groups all work together. People can best leave poverty when local businesses, human services, residents, and congregations create partnerships that build a bridge to real economic opportunities.

Human services can't help people with disabilities unless residents, local associations, and businesses welcome people with disabilities as real members of their communities. Public health agencies cannot address aids without common effort that includes schools, congregations, residents, and local agencies. Youth have the best job prospects when they are productively connected to their community's adults.

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Strong communities know that they need everyone to give their gifts if the community is to thrive. It is true: there is no one we don't need.

Asset Based Community Development
*We may have all come on different ships,
 but we are in the same boat now.*
 —Dr. Martin Luther King

How does a community develop a wider circle of people working together to address important problems and realize ambitious goals? **Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)** is a powerful approach focused on discovering and mobilizing the resources that are *already present* in a community. The ABCD point of view encourages people to recognize that their community is a glass half full of assets, not a glass half empty with needs. Community assets are resources that become valuable when they are brought together and made productive. The ABCD approach provides a way for citizens to find and mobilize what they have in order to build a stronger community.

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John McKnight, whose research with Jody Kretzmann defined the ABCD approach, once said, “ABCD is like a closet organizer to make sense of the messiness of community life.” After listening to many different stories of successful community building over many years, Jody and John asked themselves what was common to all these unique stories. It was like they had asked people about their favorite cake, heard a thousand different recipes, and then asked themselves, “What do all those cakes have in common, whether chocolate, carrot, or lemon?” In the case of cakes, the four most common ingredients are flour, eggs, sugar, and butter. In the case of successful community building, there are three fundamental qualities of development efforts that successfully connect and mobilize the building blocks of community.

Effective community development has three qualities. It is asset based, internally focused, and relationship driven. **Asset based** means that the focus is on discovering what can be productive in a community. What do we already have that will allow us to do something worthwhile? **Internally focused** recognizes that the best starting place is what can be found inside a community. The people who live in a community are the key contributors to community development that works. **Relationship driven** reminds us that communities only get strong through connections among people that permit people to give their gifts. Relationship building is the fundamental action of community building. Relationships reveal a community's assets and the possibilities for generating productive connections among the five building blocks of community. These building blocks are...

- **Individuals** with gifts, talents, and skills to contribute. People's gifts are the most fundamental building block of community. Every person has many gifts to contribute if given the invitation and the opportunity.
- **Local voluntary associations** in which groups of people act together out of care; for example: neighborhood groups, congregations, self-help groups, fraternal organizations, choirs, book clubs, garden clubs.
- **Institutions** of business, government, and nonprofit organizations: for example, local businesses, parks, libraries, schools, hospitals, nonprofit

agencies, churches, and religious institutions. Every institution can support local individuals and their associations.

- **The local economy.** Economic exchange circulates money, goods, and services through a community as people buy, sell, hire, and invest.
- **The physical world,** both natural and constructed: rivers, landscapes, buildings, fields, streets, and the transportation infrastructure.

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ABCD makes visible and concrete the basic structure for building a strong community. Strength comes from three interconnected activities: **discovering** local assets, **connecting** these assets to work together, and then **creating opportunities** for these assets to be productive and powerful together. When a group of people discover what they have, they find power. When people join together in new connections and relationships, they build power. When people become more productive together, they exercise their power to address problems and realize dreams. Together we are better.

What to Do on Monday Morning?

Six years ago Henry Moore and I led a five-day workshop on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) in the New Mexico mountains. On the fifth morning a pediatrician from Ohio said, “I love ABCD, but I have one question. What on earth do I actually do on Monday morning?” We realized that this was our question, the question that guides our work. Since the doctor from Ohio challenged us to be relevant to his Monday morning, Henry and I have worked to create learning structures for people who love the ABCD perspective and need some help to work out how to act on ABCD in practical ways. We apply and refine these structures through consultation with community leaders and in workshops, and now in this book and its companion DVD.

Our approach builds on a foundation of proven community organizing principles, principles that guide collective action on issues that people care enough to act on. One distinctive feature of our work is our focus on discovering ways that governments and service agencies can effectively engage their communities as partners to strengthen citizens. Our *ABCD Training Group*, which is associated with *The ABCD Institute* of Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight, links Henry’s long experience in transforming city government to support citizens with my experience in community organizing and social work to connect citizens for action. Our aim is to produce practical ways to energize growing circles of community groups to work together in partnership and make their communities stronger, safer, healthier, and more productive. Three key themes define our framework for action:

- Assets focus
- Applying community organizing principles
- Agencies that lead by stepping back

Assets: There is More There Than Anyone Knows

Practical action starts with the understanding that every community has more potential resources than any one person knows. Your community has a wide variety of assets that can be identified, connected, and made productive, if you find these resources and organize them to work together for the benefit of the

community. There are residents, local associations, congregations, businesses, nonprofit agencies, and government agencies. Seeing all the assets of a community is like looking through a kaleidoscope: many colored chips of glass fit together in many different ways as you turn the scope. Community assets fit together in many different and unexpected ways to create new possibilities. The presence of hidden assets and unrealized connections means that communities can have very serious problems and still have capacity to join in solving them.

“As what people care about becomes audible and visible, a widening circle of people can recognize common ground and unite to take action.”

There is an old saying, “The difference between heaven and hell is just a new pair of glasses”. You find what you are looking for: emptiness or capacity. This workbook uses ABCD’s lenses as a way to discover community resources and then to develop actions that use and strengthen them.

Community Organizing: Connecting Groups of People to Act on What They Care About

Care is woven throughout all the groups in any community. There are people in every part of every community who care enough to act on issues that matter to their common life. What people care about enough to do something about is the key asset in every community. As what people care about becomes audible and visible, a widening circle of people can recognize common ground and unite to take action. Community organizing is a proven way to find care in a community and to develop ways that people can act on what they care about. Ever since the 1940s, when Saul Alinsky worked in poor neighborhoods in Chicago, community organizing has focused on how people can come together to become an engine for developing their community. For community organizing, the center of development work is the agenda and action of people who live, work, and worship in a community. Community organizing principles are a practical foundation for building successful community partnerships.

Strong People and Effective Programs—It Takes Both

Building strong communities requires both effective helping programs and strong groups of people. An important part of our framework for community development is clarifying and differentiating the best roles for agencies and their programs and the best roles for community groups of people. People and their community groups have to step forward –growing in responsibility, power, and authority– for community problem solving to be successful. Agencies and their programs can offer good services while also helping citizens do what only strong citizens can do: mobilize the wider community to work together. Agencies are more effective when they **lead by stepping back** and offer their agency’s assets for citizens to use, find and connect community assets, and support citizens to organize their communities.

Building the Road as You Walk It: Guiding Principles, Not Recipes

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.

–Old saying among musicians

Each community development group has to find its own unique path to success. There is no one model or recipe. People often want specific formulas, recipes, and models for community development that they can replicate. The desire to build from other’s blueprints is understandable, but that approach does not work very well because each situation is unique. Guiding principles about how things work in communities are much more useful than a specific recipe. Principles can help you decide what is worth doing in your particular situation. Good community building is

an art, not a technology. People learn best how to build community partnership from experience, by having clear principles of practice, and by getting guidance from other successful community builders.

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Mike Green has worked for 25 years as a community organizer to help groups of people come together for collective action. Mike has experience developing neighborhood resident organizations, congregation-based organizations, and community partnerships to address social and economic issues. He was the training director of the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Neighborhood Circle, which was a learning organization of over twenty community organizations across North America to learn “what works” and “what does not work” to use ABCD community organizing. He helped start a small public school in Denver where students, parents, neighbors, teachers, and principal were all partners. Founder of three small businesses, Mike has also worked as a social worker and as a family therapist.