Understanding Community Capacity and Assets

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Key Words

Asset Mapping, Capacity Building, Community Development

Problem

Over the past several decades, rural communities have been impacted by economic and demographic trends such as youth migration, aging populations, population shifts toward urban centers, and aging infrastructure. Communities trying to evolve and mitigate the impacts of these issues often realize that jump-starting an economy, finding grants and start-up funds, and attracting businesses and tourism are especially difficult when a multitude of communities face similar challenges and compete for similar resources.[1] Many communities rely on outside programs and sources to assist them in addressing the impacts of these trends.[2] This approach focuses on problems and needs while simultaneously discouraging community participation and capacity building.[1,2,3,4,5,6]

When communities focus solely on what they need and want and rely on outside sources for solutions without understanding their capacity and assets, they tend to engage in planning, economic development, use of resources, or growth without understanding if the solution capitalizes on local assets, is sustainable, and provides local benefits.[3] For example, some communities will attract a new business that creates jobs the local citizens are not qualified for, or create low-income, part-time work without opportunities for advancements.[1] Other communities engage in efforts led by outside sources that over time exploit local resources. These communities are left with the problem while the outside source has already moved on. Essentially, many communities address needs, or wait for needs to be addressed, without understanding capacities and assets and without self-mobilizing the community.

Background

"Asset mapping is a process of learning what resources are available in your community."[3] The process mobilizes citizens and forms community relationships so that communities solve problems and create activities for themselves. Asset mapping helps communities identify and mobilize local resources to reach community goals.[2] The asset approach focuses on local strengths and capacities and is a continual process that evolves simultaneously with a community's goals and accomplishments.[4]

Asset mapping is based on understanding and inventorying community capital. Community Capital is defined as "any asset in the community that has the potential to produce even more assets."[5] Inventory processes vary but usually catalog the community's built, cultural, financial, human, natural, social and political assets.[5] Which areas a community chooses to inventory should be relative to the community's goal. An example framework

includes:[5]

- Human Capital: Skills, education, health
- Cultural Capital: Language, rituals, traditional, crops, dress
- Natural Capital: Air, soils, water (quality and quantity), landscape, biodiversity
- Financial Capital: Income, wealth, security, credit, investment
- Built Capital: Water systems, sewers, utilities, health systems
- Political Capital: Inclusion, voice, power
- Social Capital: Leadership, groups, bridging networks, bonding networks, trust, reciprocity

Inventories can be compiled using photographs, maps, surveys, and interviews.[5] For example, communities first identify the talents of local individuals. Next, leaders complete an inventory of which associations exist within the community including formal groups, such as the Lions Club, and non-formal groups, such as recreational groups. Lastly, communities inventory local institutions such as hospital and school systems to determine how the previous two can be coordinated with these existing efforts.[5]

Identifying community capacities can help local leaders determine which goals can be accomplished within a community and if such activities are environmentally, financially, and socially sustainable. The key is that community strengths are recognized, inventoried, and mobilized.[1] The process works best when capacities are mapped and synergized dynamically so that they multiply their impact.[2] For the process to evolve with the community and its goals, efforts have to be made to consistently update asset maps continually build relationships among identified social capacities. [1,3,5]

What Communities Can Do

- Communities can engage in a local asset mapping process relevant to a current community goal.
- Communities can inventory and build on previously unidentified or overlooked strengths of their local citizens.
- Communities can identify what existing community assets can be connected to multiply their impact by creating new efforts with unique approaches.

Relevant Extension Resources

For information or assistance in engaging in a community asset mapping process, contact your local county agent or a CRED specialist.

For reading resources visit the AgriLife Extension Bookstore at: https://agrilifebookstore.org/

- L-5453: The Community Activeness/ Consciousness Matrix
- D-1449: What is Community Development
- E-182: Is Your Community Ready for Economic Development

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