

Identifying Community Assets

Guidelines, Worksheet, and Resources for Learning More

Identifying and building on community assets motivates people to act, steers climate solutions to community concerns, and can result in innovative, culturally tailored approaches to climate change adaptation and mitigation. For example, in the Mexican community of Pilsen in Chicago, a native plant garden focused on milkweed and Monarch butterflies engages community members with landscaping skills, reinforces Mexican traditions of outdoor socializing, and serves as a space for both educating people about adaptation and habitat and engaging them in work related to immigration rights—since the Monarch freely crosses U.S. borders and has become a symbol of the immigration rights movement. These types of benefits are often overlooked when planners, ecologists, or climate change educators focus solely on the ecological benefits of absorbing rainwater, providing habitat, etc.

Any climate action project that wants to be community-based should start by identifying community assets. Assets are community strengths that can serve as a springboard for engaging residents and organizations in climate initiatives—like energy efficiency, climate-friendly gardening, stewardship and habitat creation, and recycling—that will simultaneously address community and climate concerns. There are many different types of assets, as demonstrated by this graphic (also included as a full page at the end of this tool, in case you want to print it out and enlarge it to use during a workshop or while reaching out to stakeholders).

Some assets are tangible, such as organizations (nonprofit, for profit, municipal), infrastructure (boulevards, rivers, parks), and people’s skills (informal/formal leadership, gardening, fundraising, art). Others are intangible, such as values (frugality, a sense of global citizenship), traditions (seasonal festivals celebrating nature, conserving water), practices (growing your own food, sharing with neighbors), ideas, and dreams. Assets serve as particularly strong foundations for climate action projects if they are either central to community life—which means you want your project to be connected to them—or somehow related to stewardship broadly defined: conserving, caring for, monitoring, advocating for, or educating others about issues related to nature and the environment (including water, land, air, waste, toxics, and energy issues).

Objective: Identify community assets and brainstorm climate action projects

Audience: Middle school and up

Materials: Community Assets graphic (included), Brainstorming Community Assets worksheet (included), pencils, Internet access to watch videos (optional)

Time Needed: 2 workshop sessions of 1-2 hours; 1-2 hours in between to reach out to stakeholders

An unmistakable example of a climate-related asset is a park or a river, while a more subtle example could be a school, library, or place of worship that is active in the community—whether or not it is involved in environment or climate-related work already.



Identify Assets in Your Community

- Recruit strong community organizations, groups, or leaders to put together your asset list; otherwise, your list will be limited.
- Bring people together for one to two hours to brainstorm an initial list of your community’s greatest assets, using the assets graphic and worksheet at the end of this guide. Gather as diverse a group of people as you can put together. Show them the assets graphic (perhaps print it out as a poster and hang on the wall), and consider watching one of the videos below together (watch them ahead of time and see if there’s one you think would resonate with your specific group of people). Encourage everyone to think broadly about what can be considered an asset. For example, many groups are working on transforming vacant lots, often thought of as a deficit or an eyesore, into beautiful green spaces. It is also important to think more broadly about our human capital assets: individuals and

groups of people to reach out to, especially those who are often marginalized from community, or not thought about as assets, such as youth or elderly, homeless, or disabled people. . Reaching out to and including them in your work has the potential not only to benefit them but to bring in new, broader perspectives.

- Take additional time to identify assets. This can't be done in one workshop session. Go out and talk to people, or at the least, call people by phone. Ask everyone in the workshop to reach out to a few people. Give them copies of the graphic and worksheet to take with them to show people and use to start a conversation.
- Consider working with your initial group of people to develop some additional visual tools tailored to your community to use as you talk to people. Visual tools that depict familiar people and communities often help people understand climate change as something that has to do with their particular histories and lives. They can help people recognize different ways they are already taking climate action, even if they do not realize it, and begin to envision themselves as a key part of climate change solutions. Visual collages of climate-friendly practices are one such tool. You can make your own collages based on your regional or local climate action strategies, featuring your communities, or use existing collages from other places. See the Connect Make Your Own Visual Collages.
- Convene again to share what you've uncovered and finalize your worksheet.
- Note that during this process, you will likely also identify community concerns along the way, including general concerns that communities are trying to address, such as youth development, economic development, or passing down cultural traditions, and concerns specifically related to climate action, such as tangible barriers like gang activity in parks, and intangible barriers like perceptions of climate action or "going green" as a luxury. Make note of these concerns because these are what you want to use your assets to address.
- Once you have completed your worksheet, see the Connect Project Planning Guide tool for some guidance in coming up with project ideas that build on community assets to take climate action—and also address community concerns.

Want to Map Your Assets?

There are a number of programs you can use to plot your assets on an online map, adding descriptions and photos. At Green Map (<http://www.greenmap.org/>), you can add your assets to a green map that spans the globe. You can create a map just for your community through Google Maps (<http://www.maps.google.com>) or Community Walk (<http://www.communitywalk.com/>). Or you can make a map the old-fashioned way, on a big community map printed on paper. To map intangible assets—such as a cultural tradition of frugality—you have a few options. If the asset applies to a particular part of town, you can plot it in the general vicinity. For example, if someone said that the Latino community constantly shares and repurposes goods, and there is a large Latino community living in one section of the community, you can plot the asset in that area. Additionally or alternatively, you can make a list of intangible assets and represent them in other ways if you choose to display the map, such as through photos.

Resources for Learning More about Asset-Based Community Development

This tool draws from the field of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which recognizes that people and communities everywhere have knowledge and gifts and invites them to contribute these to efforts to improve their communities. ABCD methods help people identify assets, connect and align them for leverage, and mobilize them for action. It arose in contrast to traditional community development that views communities, especially low-income communities, as places full of problems and deficits and focuses on bringing in "help" from the outside. Here are resources for learning more:

General Resources for Learning about ABCD

- The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University: (<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>): The graphic in this tool was adapted partly from ideas and materials developed by this institute. Their most famous publication is *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993).
- *Growing Community Capacity* (<https://vimeo.com/70704961>): This 13-minute video features Cormac Russell, director of ABCD Europe, giving a keynote conference presentation on ABCD principles to the North West Employers Annual Conference. Russell explains that ABCD focuses on “what’s strong” rather than “what’s wrong,” engaging people as citizens rather than clients, to co-produce ideas and create community change. He says: “When the people who are defined as the problem secure the power to redefine the problem, we will transform society because everybody knows, at the end of the day, you cannot possibly know what a community needs until they first know what they have.”
- “Using Community Capitals to Develop Assets for Positive Community Change” (<http://tinyurl.com/communitycapitals>): Once you start to uncover your assets, they can be applied in many ways. This article helps you understand how assets can be "invested" in forming project teams/committees, convincing people of the value of a project, or setting up a framework to learn more about your community.
- Using an asset-based approach to work with marginalized populations: ABCD has been especially concerned with engaging marginalized populations as community assets. Here is a helpful resource: “Gifts and Assets that People Who are Vulnerable to Rejection Commonly Bring to Community”: (<http://tinyurl.com/giftsassets>).

Resources Presenting ABCD Approaches to Climate and Sustainability Engagement

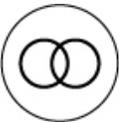
- *What's Culture Got to Do With It? Engaging Chicago Communities in Climate Action* (<http://tinyurl.com/hirschcultureclimate>): This 13-minute video features Jennifer Hirsch, Ph.D., project manager of Connect, presenting an asset-based approach to climate change engagement in Chicago. The presentation took place at the Climate, Mind, and Behavior Conference at the Garrison Institute in Garrison, NY, in February 2012.
- *Putting the CAP [Climate Action Plan] into Action: An Asset-Based Approach to Neighborhood Engagement* (<http://www.sustainablecleveland.org/resources/climatetoolkit/>): This 13-minute video features Dr. Hirsch presenting an asset-based approach to climate change engagement in Cleveland. The presentation took place at the 2013 Sustainable Cleveland Summit.

Worksheet: Brainstorm Community Assets



Culture and Traditions

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Traditional Practices and Values (family, community, cultural)	Strong sense of family, caring about the outdoors, gardening knowledge going back generations, frugality, sharing	
Events	Parades, festivals	
Modes of Communication	Yahoo groups, listservs, message boards, newsletters, bulletin boards	
Multilingual Populations		
Other		



Voluntary Associations (grassroots, community-based; generally have small budget and are volunteer-based)

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Community Groups	Garden clubs, farmers' markets, neighborhood clubs, local historical societies, daycare centers, youth groups, theater groups	
Other		



Institutions and Organizations (big, formal, staffed, often regional or national, generally well-funded)

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Libraries	School, public, and university libraries	
Religious Institutions	Churches, synagogues, and mosques	
Government Agencies	Public transit, city council, park district	
Cultural Institutions	Museums, zoos	
Schools/Colleges/Universities	Elementary schools, community colleges	
Hospital Networks	Hospitals, clinics	
Large Nonprofits	United Way, YMCA, Arts Council	
Meeting Spaces	Any place that has good space for meeting and makes it available to the public	
Other		



Economy

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Locally Engaged Businesses	Repair shops, bike shops, recycling centers, healthfood stores, fair trade stores, grocery stores that regularly support community efforts (such as Whole Foods), businesses that are key gathering places like cafés or markets	
Other		



Physical Assets

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Parks and Green Space	Public parks, pocket parks, ponds, other green space	
Gardens	Private yards, community or corporate gardens	
Natural Areas	Forest preserves, waterways, trails, beaches, bird nesting areas, native landscapes	
Public Art/Public Space	Murals, town centers, meeting halls, boulevards	
Outdoor Play Areas	Bike trails, walking trails, skateboard parks	
Other		



Individuals

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Formal Leaders	Elected officials: city council members, alderman, state senators; neighborhood club leaders; clergy/religious leaders	
Informal Leaders	Residents active in and respected by the community, active PTAs, active student groups	
People with New Perspectives	Youth, elderly, artists, immigrants, homeless people, people with disabilities	
Other	Master gardeners, beekeepers, plant experts	

Other Assets

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS