

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY ASSETS: GUIDELINES, WORKSHEET, & 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 etc. 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, recycling, etc.—that will simultaneously address community and climate concerns. There are many different types of assets, as demonstrated by this graphic.



CONNECT: Community + Climate + Action

Some assets are tangible, such as organizations (nonprofit, for profit, municipal), infrastructure (e.g., boulevards, rivers, parks), and people's skills (e.g., informal/formal leadership, gardening, fundraising, art). Others are intangible, such as values (e.g., frugality, sense of global citizenship), traditions (e.g., seasonal festivals celebrating nature, conserving water), practices (e.g., growing your own food, sharing with neighbors), ideas, and dreams. Assets serve as particularly strong foundations for climate action projects if they are either 1) central to community life—which means you want your project to be connected to them, and/or 2) 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).

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 church that is active in the community but may or may not be involved in environment or climate-related work already.

To Identify Assets in Your Community:

1. Recruit strong community organizations, groups, or leaders to put together your asset list. Otherwise your list will be limited.
2. Brainstorm an initial list of your community's greatest assets, using the worksheet at the end of this guide. Do this with as diverse a group of people as you can put together. 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, elderly, homeless people, or people with disabilities. Reaching out to and including them in your work has the potential not only to benefit them, but to bring in new, broader perspectives, leading to new ideas and solutions that will improve quality of life for everyone. Additionally, they can help reach other people who are often left out.
3. Take additional time to identify assets. This can't be done in one workshop session. Go out and talk to people.
4. Consider working with your initial group of people to develop some visual tools to use as you talk to people. Climate change can sometimes feel distant and less than urgent. 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 "Make Your Own Visual Collages" (<http://www.chicagobotanic.org/climateeducation/C3I/tools>).
5. Throughout the process, 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. Craft your climate action projects to address some of these concerns.

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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—e.g., 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 re-purposes 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, for example through photos.

Learn More about Asset-Based Community Development:

Asset-Based Community Development, or ABCD, 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:

Growing Community Capacity (<https://vimeo.com/70704961>): This 13 min. video features Cormac Russell, Director of ABCD Europe, giving a keynote conference presentation to the North West Employers Annual Conference, on ABCD principles. 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.”

What’s Culture Got to Do With It? Engaging Chicago Communities in Climate Action

(<http://www.garrisoninstitute.org/climate-mind-behavior-project/cmb-video-presentations/cmb-video-2012/1172-jenny-hirsch>): This 13 min. video features Dr. Jennifer Hirsch, Project Manager of C3I: Connecting Climate to Communities, 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 (Garrison, NY) in February 2012.

Putting the CAP [Cleveland Climate Action Plan] into Action: An Asset-Based Approach to Neighborhood

Engagement (<http://www.sustainablecleveland.org/resources/climatetoolkit/>): This 13 min. video features Dr. Jennifer Hirsch presenting an asset-based approach to climate change engagement in Cleveland. The presentation took place at the 2013 Sustainable Cleveland Summit.

Want to learn more about working with marginalized people using an asset-based approach?

Here is a helpful resource: “Gifts and Assets that People Who are Vulnerable to Rejection Commonly Bring to Community” ([http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/Gifts%20and%20Assets%20That%20People%20who%20Are%20Vulnerable%20to%20Rejection%20Commonly%20Bring%20to%20Community\(1\).pdf](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/Gifts%20and%20Assets%20That%20People%20who%20Are%20Vulnerable%20to%20Rejection%20Commonly%20Bring%20to%20Community(1).pdf))

WORKSHEET: BRAINSTORM COMMUNITY ASSETS



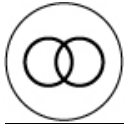
Culture & Traditions

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	
Other		



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

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Libraries	School, public, university	
Religious Institutions	Church, synagogue, mosque, or religious leader	
Government Agencies	Public transit, city council, park district	
Cultural Institutions	Museums, zoos	
Schools/Colleges/Universities	Elementary school, community college, active PTA, active student groups	
Hospital Networks	Hospital, clinics	
Large Nonprofits	United Way, YMCA, Arts Council	
Other		



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

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Community Groups	Garden club, farmers’ market, block club, local historical society, daycare center, youth group, theatre group	
Other		



Physical Assets

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Parks & Green Space	Public parks, pocket parks, ponds, other green space	
Gardens	Private yard, community or corporate garden, master gardeners, beekeepers, plant experts	
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		



Economy

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Businesses	Locally engaged businesses, repair shop, bike shop, recycling center, health food store, fair trade store	
Other		



Individuals

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS
Formal Leaders	City council members, elected officials, block club leaders	
Informal Leaders	Residents active in and respected by the community	
People who bring new perspectives	Youth, elderly, artists, immigrants, homeless people, people with disabilities	
Other		

Other Assets:

TYPE OF ASSET	EXAMPLES	YOUR COMMUNITY ASSETS