This is a guide about rebuilding troubled communities. It is meant to be simple, basic and usable. Whatever wisdom it contains flows directly out of the experience of courageous and creative neighborhood leaders from across the country.

Most of this guide is devoted to spreading community-building success stories. These stories are organized into a step-by-step introduction to a coherent strategy that we have learned about from neighborhood leaders. We call this strategy "asset-based community development." Before beginning to outline the basic elements of this approach, it will be helpful to remember how so many of our communities came to be so devastated, and why traditional strategies for improvement have so often failed.

**The Problem: Devastated Communities**

No one can doubt that most American cities these days are deeply troubled places. At the root of the problems are the massive economic shifts that have marked the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs have either disappeared or moved away from the central city and its neighborhoods. And while many downtown areas have experienced a "renaissance," the jobs created there are different from those that once sustained neighborhoods. Either these new jobs are highly professionalized, and require elaborate education and credentials for entry, or they are routine, low-paying service jobs without much of a future. In effect, these shifts in the economy, and particularly the disappearance of decent employment possibilities from low-income neighborhoods, have removed the bottom rung from the fabled American "ladder of opportunity." For many people in older-city neighborhoods, new approaches to rebuilding their lives and communities, new openings toward opportunity, are a vital necessity.

**Two Solutions, Two Paths**

In response to this desperate situation, well-intended people are seeking solutions by taking one of two divergent paths. The first, which begins by focusing on a community's needs, deficiencies and problems, is still by far the most traveled, and commands the vast majority of our financial and human resources. By comparison with the second path, which insists on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets, and which is the direction this guide recommends; the first and more traditional path is more like an eight-lane superhighway.
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The Traditional Path—A Needs-Driven Dead End

For most Americans, the names "South Bronx," or "South Central Los Angeles," or even "Public Housing" call forth a rush of images. It is not surprising that these images are overwhelmingly negative. They are images of crime and violence; of joblessness and welfare dependency, of gangs and drugs and homelessness, of vacant and abandoned land and buildings. They are images of needy and problematic and deficient neighborhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people.

These negative images, which can be conceived as a kind of mental "map" of the neighborhood (see page 3) often convey part of the truth about the actual conditions of a troubled community. But they are not regarded as part of the truth; they are regarded as the whole truth.

Once accepted as the whole truth about troubled neighborhoods, this "needs" map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and nonprofit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower income urban neighborhoods are now environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers. Consumers of services focus vast amounts of creativity and intelligence on the survival-motivated challenge of outwitting the "system," or on finding ways—in the informal or even illegal economy—to bypass the system entirely.

There is nothing natural or inevitable about the process that leads to the creation of client neighborhoods. In fact, it is important to note how little power local neighborhood residents have to affect the pervasive nature of the deficiency model, mainly because a number of society's most influential institutions have themselves developed a stake in maintaining that focus. For example, much of the social science research produced by universities is designed to collect and analyze data about problems. Much of the funding directed to lower income communities by foundations and the United Way is based on the problem-oriented data collected in "needs surveys," a practice emulated by government human service agencies. Finally, the needs map often appears to be the only neighborhood guide ever used by members of the mass media, whose appetite for the violent and the spectacularly problematic story seems insatiable. All of these major institutions combine to create a wall between lower income communities and the rest of society—a wall of needs which, ironically enough, is built not on hatred but (at least partly) on the desire for "help."
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Neighborhood Needs Map

Unemployment

Broken families

Child abuse

Lead poisoning

Welfare recipients

Gangs

Truancy

Slum housing

Illiteracy

Grafitti

Mental disability

Dropouts
IntrOduction

The fact that the deficiency orientation represented by the needs map constitutes our only guide to lower income neighborhoods has devastating consequences for residents. We have already noted one of the most tragic—that is, residents themselves begin to accept that map as the only guide to the reality of their lives. They think of themselves and their neighbors as fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community's future. But other consequences flow as well from the power of the needs map. For example:

- Viewing a community as a nearly endless list of problems and needs leads directly to the much lamented fragmentation of efforts to provide solutions. It also denies the basic community wisdom which regards problems as tightly interwoven, as symptoms in fact of the breakdown of a community's own problem-solving capacities.

- Targeting resources based on the needs map directs funding not to residents but to service providers, a consequence not always either planned for or effective.

- Making resources available on the basis of the needs map can have negative effects on the nature of local community leadership. If, for example, one measure of effective leadership is the ability to attract resources, then local leaders are, in effect, being forced to denigrate their neighbors and their community by highlighting their problems and deficiencies, and by ignoring their capacities and strengths.

- Providing resources on the basis of the needs map underlines the perception that only outside experts can provide real help. Therefore, the relationships that count most for local residents are no longer those inside the community, those neighbor-to-neighbor links of mutual support and problem solving. Rather, the most important relationships are those that involve the expert, the social worker, the health provider, the funder. Once again, the glue that binds communities together is weakened.

- Reliance on the needs map as the exclusive guide to resource gathering virtually ensures the inevitable deepening of the cycle of dependence: problems must always be worse than last year, or more intractable than other communities, if funding is to be renewed.

- At best, reliance on the needs maps as the sole policy guide will ensure a maintenance and survival strategy targeted at isolated individual clients, not a development plan that can involve the energies of an
Because the needs-based strategy can guarantee only survival, and can never lead to serious change or community development, this orientation must be regarded as one of the major causes of the sense of hopelessness that pervades discussions about the future of low income neighborhoods. From the street corner to the White House, if maintenance and survival are the best we can provide, what sense can it make to invest in the future?

The Alternative Path: Capacity-Focused Development

If even some of these negative consequences follow from our total reliance upon the needs map, an alternative approach becomes imperative. That alternative path, very simply, leads toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of lower income people and their neighborhoods.

In addition to the problems associated with the dominant deficiency model, at least two more factors argue for shifting to a capacity-oriented emphasis. First, all the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. This observation explains why communities are never built from the top down, or from the outside in. (Clearly, however, valuable outside assistance can be provided to communities that are actively developing their own assets, a topic explored further in Chapter Six.)

The second reason for emphasizing the development of the internal assets of local urban neighborhoods is that the prospect for outside help is bleak indeed. Even in areas designated as Enterprise Zones, the odds are long that large-scale, job-providing industrial or service corporations will be locating in these neighborhoods. Nor is it likely, in the light of continuing budget constraints, that significant new inputs of federal money will be forthcoming soon. It is increasingly futile to wait for significant help to arrive from outside the community. The hard truth is that development must start from within the community and, in most of our urban neighborhoods, there is no other choice.

Creative neighborhood leaders across the country have begun to recognize this hard truth, and have shifted their practices accordingly. They are discovering that wherever there are effective community development efforts, those efforts are based upon an understanding, or map, of the community's assets, capacities and abilities. For it is clear that even the poorest neighborhood is a place where individuals and organizations represent resources upon which to rebuild. The key to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those
local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes.

This entire process begins with the construction of a new "map" (see page 7). Once this guide to capacities has replaced the old one containing only needs and deficiencies, the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production.

**The Assets of a Community: Individuals, Associations, Institutions**

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community’s residents. Household by household, building by building, block by block, the capacity mapmakers will discover a vast and often surprising array of individual talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilized for community-building purposes. This basic truth about the "giftedness" of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized by communities. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labeled mentally handicapped or disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, these people too will be part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process.

In addition to mapping the gifts and skills of individuals, and of households and families, the committed community builder will compile an inventory of citizens’ associations. These associations, less formal and much less dependent upon paid staff than are formal institutions, are the vehicles through which citizens in the U.S. assemble to solve problems, or to share common interests and activities. It is usually the case that the depth and extent of associational life in any community is vastly underestimated. This is particularly true of lower income communities. In fact, however, though some parts of associational life may have dwindled in very low income neighborhoods, most communities continue to harbor significant numbers of associations with religious, cultural, athletic, recreational and other purposes. Community builders soon recognize that these groups are indispensable tools for development, and that many of them can in fact be stretched beyond their original purposes and intentions to become full contributors to the development process.

Beyond the individuals and local associations that make up the asset base of communities are all of the more formal institutions which are located in the community. Private businesses; public institutions such
Community Assets Map

- Local Institutions
- Schools

- Citizens' Associations
- Block Clubs

- Gifts of Individuals
  - Income
  - Youth
  - Elderly

- Cultural Groups
  - Artists
  - Labelled People

- Libraries
- Hospitals
- Community Colleges
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as schools, libraries, parks, police and fire stations; nonprofit institutions such as hospitals and social service agencies—these organizations make up the most visible and formal part of a community’s fabric. Accounting for them in full, and enlisting them in the process of community development, is essential to the success of the process. For community builders, the process of mapping the institutional assets of the community will often be much simpler than that of making an inventory involving individuals and associations. But establishing within each institution a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some aspects of the institution’s relationships with its local neighborhood, can prove much more difficult. Nevertheless, a community that has located and mobilized its entire base of assets will clearly feature heavily involved and invested local institutions.

Individuals, associations and institutions—these three major categories contain within them much of the asset base of every community. They will also provide the framework for organizing this guide. Each of the next three sections explores methods for recognizing, mapping, and mobilizing one of these clusters of local strengths.

In addition, the guide will highlight other aspects of a community’s assets, including its physical characteristics—the land, buildings and infrastructure upon which the community rests. And because so much of a community’s well-being depends upon the strength of the local economy, one section of the guide will explore ways in which individuals, associations and local institutions can contribute economically.

An Alternative Community Development Path: Asset-Based, Internally Focused, Relationship Driven

This guide is designed to help communities not only to recognize and map their assets—the individuals, local associations and institutions which make up the sinew of the neighborhood—but to mobilize them for development purposes. As we begin to describe the basic elements of an asset-based community development process, it is important to place this discussion in its larger context. Two major qualifications should be stated as strongly as possible.

First, focusing on the assets of lower income communities does not imply that these communities do not need additional resources from the outside. Rather, this guide simply suggests that outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully mobilized and invested, and if it can define the agendas for which additional resources must be obtained. The assets within lower income communities, in other words, are absolutely necessary but usually not sufficient to meet the huge development challenges ahead.
Chart Two: Strengthening Partnerships

Local schools sponsor an educational program in which young people learn about their own community and the process of community building. Then these students create a walking tour and slide presentation about the community. They also petition City Hall to prevent the destruction of a local landmark.

Youth form a "crime patrol" in their housing complex in which they monitor the playground, discourage fighting, and keep a watch on elderly residents. As a result, they receive city-wide recognition and are asked to make special presentations to other youth groups.

Local businesses provide training and raw materials so that young people can contribute to the economic development of their communities by rehabilitating housing. In this process, youth are paid, earn school credit, and learn skills that lead to future employment.

A community center employs local youth to do research on community organizations and institutions. These young people then go on to host a community forum to inform residents about the resources of their community.
Chart Three: One on One Relationships

SCHOOL

- Library
  - Computers, films, LSC meeting spaces, after-school tutoring, classroom
  - Display space, rent for if need be
- Artists and Cultural Institutions
  - Good publicity for events, mobilizing the community for parade, information for events
- Media
  - 10 on boards of CROs
- Community Based Organization, Civic Association
- Social Service Agency
- Bakeries or Restaurants
  - Catering opportunities, publicity, WIC program
- Churches or other Religious Institution
  - Materials for youth centers, classes for youth, space, employment for students
- Higher Education Institutions
  - Space, employment for students
- Local Institutions
  - Donations of uniforms, videotaping of events, scholarships, mentoring
- Senior Citizens
  - Literacy programs and other classes, health care relationships with students
- Police
  - Protect and arrest order
  - Assist in planning crime prevention
- Daycare Center
  - Run program, provide counseling

Assistances draw writing skills, write grants, other papers, and projects for local small businesses.