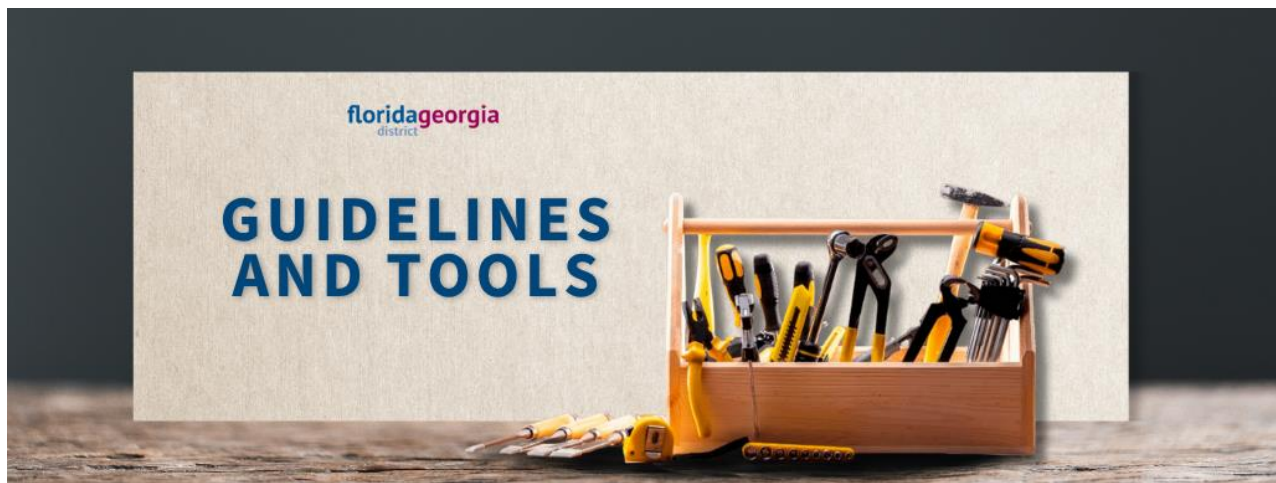




Community Asset Mapping:

Leveraging Strengths for Sustainable Development

Community development often focuses on needs—identifying problems, deficits, and gaps that require external intervention or funding. While problem-solving is necessary, this “deficit-based” approach can unintentionally foster dependency and overlook the invaluable resources already present within a community. **Community Asset Mapping (CAM)** offers a powerful, alternative strengths-based approach, fundamentally shifting the focus from “what’s missing” to “what’s here.” It’s a systematic process of identifying, cataloging, and mobilizing the existing assets, capacities, and gifts of individuals, associations, and institutions to drive sustainable, internally-led change and improvement. CAM recognizes that every community, no matter how challenged, possesses a wealth of resources that can be harnessed for its own betterment.

The Philosophical Foundation:

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

Community Asset Mapping is the core methodology of the broader philosophy known as **Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)**. Developed by scholars John Kretzmann and John McKnight at Northwestern University’s Institute for Policy Research, ABCD posits that sustainable community improvement must be internally driven. External aid, while helpful, can be fleeting; a community’s own resources are enduring.

The philosophy rests on three key premises:

1. **Assets are Abundant:** Every community possesses assets—skills, knowledge, relationships, money, land, and more—that can be used for change.

2. **Internal Capacity is Key:** Development is most effective when it is driven by the internal recognition, use, and exchange of these assets, rather than by external agencies or resources.
3. **Relationships Matter:** The connections and relationships *between* assets (e.g., between an individual's skill and a local non-profit) are often the most potent resources.

CAM, therefore, is not merely a data collection exercise; it's a catalyst for connection and a tool for empowerment. By making the community's strengths visible and explicit, it fosters a sense of pride, competence, and ownership over the development process.

THREE PILLARS OF COMMUNITY ASSETS

For the purpose of mapping, assets are typically categorized into three main “pillars,” forming a comprehensive picture of a community's capacity.

1. Individuals (Gifts and Skills)

The most fundamental and often overlooked assets are the talents, skills, and experience of the community's residents. This includes professional skills (e.g., teaching, carpentry, accounting), life skills (e.g., gardening, cooking, childcare), cultural knowledge, and personal passions (e.g., historical knowledge, a desire to mentor).

- **Mapping Focus:** Creating “asset inventories” or “skills banks” by interviewing residents, hosting community dinners, or using surveys to uncover what people *know* and *are willing* to share.
- **Example:** A retired plumber's skill can be matched with a local Lutheran church that is building a new water treatment system for a Haitian school, or a retired truck driver starts a new driving school ministry at his church to provide driving lessons for high school students to build a bridge with younger generations in the community.

2. Associations (Citizen Groups)

These are informal, voluntary, self-governing groups that are the “middle ground” of community life, where people come together for a common interest. They operate outside of formal government or business structures. Associations are critical because they are where people's individual skills are *mobilized* and *shared*.

- **Mapping Focus:** Identifying and listing all non-profit clubs, informal gatherings, cultural groups, sports teams, block clubs, faith-based organizations, and mutual aid networks.
- **Example:** A local book club could host a literacy program; a church social group could organize a neighborhood clean-up; a garden club could transform a vacant lot into a community garden.

3. Institutions (Formal Organizations)

These are the formal, structured entities—both public and private—that have tangible resources, buildings, staff, and mandates. They provide services and have the capacity to make large-scale contributions.

- **Mapping Focus:** Cataloging schools, libraries, hospitals, local businesses, police stations, parks, municipal offices, museums, universities, and non-profits with formal structures.
- **Example:** A university can offer research assistance or meeting space; a local bank can provide financial literacy workshops; a library can host community workshops and provide internet access.

The Process of Community Asset Mapping:

The successful execution of a CAM project is a collaborative, iterative process that demands genuine community engagement. It's not done *to* a community, but *with* it.

Step 1: Defining the Scope and Purpose

Before beginning, the church (or the organizers) must clearly articulate *why* they are mapping assets and *what* they hope to achieve. Is the goal to understand the changing demographics around the church property? Develop a new ministry to serve the neighborhood? Enhance youth development? The defined goals shape the inventory process.

- **Crucial Action:** Form a steering committee composed of church members, and if possible members of the community at-large, to lead the effort and ensure community ownership.
- **Pray:** Ask God to help you see your community with fresh eyes.
- **Remain Open:** Suspend any assumptions about your community.

- **Define the area:** Identify a specific geographic area around your church your team will map. You can decide to walk it together or split up into groups. You can share information with each other after the walk. Some possibilities might include:
 - A neighborhood that is central to your ministry.
 - A neighborhood where some of your members live (if possible).
 - An area small enough to walk and not drive regardless of the type of community. If safety is an issue, please select another community. If you're in a rural or suburban community that lacks buildings and neighborhoods, consider communities your congregation passes through on the way to your building. Also consider walking around the neighborhood surrounding your church building and note what you see on your walk.

Step 2: Collecting and Inventorying the Assets

This is the data collection phase, moving beyond simply listing formal organizations to actively discovering individual gifts and informal networks. Methods are typically grassroots and participatory:

- **Walking Survey Inventory:** Physical observation of the neighborhood to identify physical assets (parks, murals, buildings). Look at the structures, scraps of life, signage, and spaces. Pay attention to the sounds and smells. Look for signs of hope. See “what’s here” in your community. Take good notes.
- **People Inventories:** Surveys or interviews designed to uncover the skills, passions, and life experiences of individual residents. Ask people to share their experiences, concerns and hopes for their community. Some people will answer community questions quickly; others will not understand because they live in the community but are not truly connected to the pulse of the community.
- **Build Relationships:** Share your contact information and build new connections as you meet people in your community. Inventory their names and roles in the community. Identify key stakeholders in the community. These are the people who hold the keys to the daily functions of the neighborhood. They are not necessarily elected officials but are sometimes the elderly woman who sits on her porch, and she sees everything and knows everything. It may take some time to identify them, but it will be worth the time and the effort.³
- **Focus Groups/Community Dinners:** Hosting informal events where residents can share their group affiliations and offer information on hidden assets.
- **Worldview:** You will want to create a profile of the common worldview of the people in your area. What aspects of truth do they have some grasp of (i.e., good and evil)?

What aspects of truth do they miss? What symbols or convictions function deeply? What are the tensions or pressure points in view?⁴ Understanding the common worldview of the people will help you develop materials, ministries and resources for the gospel.

- **Assess the Congregation:** Ask the congregation about their knowledge of community assets near their church. Their answers may surprise you!
- **Document Review:** Analyzing existing lists of local non-profits, business licenses, or school directories.

Step 3: Compiling, Visualizing, and Organizing the Data

Once collected, the raw data must be organized and made accessible. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or simple online mapping tools are often used to create a visual map of the assets. This map is the tangible product of the process.

- **Visualization:** Assets are categorized and plotted geographically. A visual map immediately reveals patterns, concentrations, and gaps in resources, making the community's strengths intuitively clear.
- **Report:** Create a report on your community answering the following questions:
 - What assets did you see that you haven't noticed previously? Did anything surprise you? Why?
 - What potential key assets were missing from your walk? What impact does that have on your neighborhood?
 - What did your team see as assets? Why?
 - Did anything you see give you an idea in how to put an untapped asset to work for your congregation and community?
 - What practical ideas did God show you? Explain.

Step 4: Mobilizing and Connecting the Assets

This is the most critical step—the transition from *inventory* to *action*. The map is useless if it simply sits on a shelf. The goal is to broker connections between the identified assets to address community goals. Where is their synergy for partnerships?

For instance:

- The CAM project revealed that the old warehouse adjacent to the church property was purchased by a developer. Next year the warehouse will be torn down and there will be 200 new 2-bedroom and 3-bedroom apartments built on the property.
- Neighborhood families have expressed the desire for safe places where their children can play.
- City officials expressed hopes for more green spaces and play areas for a growing number of young families with little children.
- St. Timothy Lutheran Church has a spare acre of property that could be redeveloped into a community playground. The construction would be paid for by the developer making the apartments more family friendly. The community park will be named St. Timothy Lutheran Park with opportunities for other community building activities.

The connections prayerfully create a new initiative for new ministries and opportunities to share the gospel.

Step 5: Celebrating and Sustaining the Effort

Successful initiatives should be celebrated to reinforce the community's capability and inspire further action. The map must also be viewed as a living document, continuously updated as new people move in, skills change, and groups form or disband. This ensures the ongoing, internal sustainability of the development efforts.

The Impact of CAM

The impact of Community Asset Mapping extends beyond a demographics study or mere project implementation; it instills a fundamental shift in mindset within the church and leadership.

Benefits of the Asset-Based Approach

- **Empowerment and Dignity:** It validates residents, making them the producers of change rather than mere consumers of services.
- **Resource Efficiency:** It encourages the use of existing, free, or low-cost resources before seeking external, expensive solutions.
- **Increased Community Cohesion:** The act of mapping itself strengthens social capital by encouraging residents to meet, recognize, and work with one another.

- **Sustainability:** Projects founded on local assets are far more likely to persist long after external funding is exhausted.
- **Avoids Mistakes:** Some churches spend precious funds, with excellence, on the wrong things. CAM helps church leaders become better stewards of their church's resources to start new ministries and church plants aligned to the church's vision.

In conclusion, Community Asset Mapping is more than a technique; it is a philosophy of hope and action. By grounding development work in the acknowledged power and potential of a community's existing resources, CAM provides a robust framework for driving authentic, sustainable, and dignified progress for community transformation. It reminds us that the solutions to a community's challenges are often found not in distant places, but in the hands, skills, and associations of its own neighbors.

Checklist for Community Asset Mapping Project

Step 1: Defining the Scope

- ☐ Pray
- ☐ Scope and goals
- ☐ Steering committee
- ☐ Area(s)/neighborhood(s)

Step 2: Collecting and Inventorying the Assets

- ☐ Survey of physical assets, etc.
- ☐ Asset inventories
- ☐ List of relationships, contact information and key stakeholders
- ☐ Community dinners
- ☐ Worldview in the community

☐ Assess your congregation

☐ Document review

Step 3: Compiling, Visualizing, and Organizing the Data

☐ Visualization

☐ Report

Step 4: Mobilizing and Connecting the Assets

☐ Connect the assets

☐ New ministries or mission starts

Step 5: Celebrating and Sustaining the Effort

☐ Praise the Lord

☐ Throw a party