

Community Economic Development: Approaches

As discussed in the first of this publication series—Mississippi State University Extension [Publication 2901 Community Economic Development: Key Concepts](#)—community economic development is a crucial process for any community. This publication focuses on three community development approaches in an effort to provide community stakeholders a better understanding of what community development is and how it interacts with economic development.

Community Development Approaches

Supposing a community has identified a specific situation that needs to change through planning and mobilizing resources, the million-dollar question becomes: How? Over decades of research, the community development literature has identified multiple approaches. Drawing mostly from authors Jerry W. Robinson and Gary Paul Green, this publication covers three approaches: technical assistance, self-help, and conflict.

Technical Assistance

Generally speaking, technical assistance is a community development approach that relies mostly on experts to assist the community during a planning phase, implementation phase, evaluation phase, or all three of these. A typical example of how technical assistance as a community development approach plays out is when community leaders identify a need—say a feasibility study or coming up with a strategic plan—and bring in an external person to help with it. This approach is intended to help communities define their problems, needs, and potential solutions through specific services or programs. It strengthens a community's problem-solving capacity.

However, several issues exist with this approach. It is usually top-down. In other words, residents often aren't included in the decision-making and are unaware of the need for technical assistance. This approach also assumes situations can be analyzed objectively and that the scientific method is applicable. More importantly, as a stand-alone approach, it rarely achieves effective community development and is generally perceived as generating dependency.

Self-Help

On the other side of the spectrum, we find the community development approach of self-help. Unlike technical assistance, this approach is generally perceived as building and increasing capacity, not dependency. Perhaps the most popular self-help community development approach is asset-based. This process consists of engaging residents to identify assets—individual, organizational, and institutional resources and capacities—instead of needs. These assets then can be organized to address community issues. The main objective of the self-help approach is to strengthen the community's capacity to solve problems in the long run.

This approach is not perfect, and several issues are worth discussing. First, it assumes residents possess the potential to improve the quality of life and that they are interested and motivated to participate in these efforts. Second, self-help is typically a lengthy process. Funding organizations may not have the patience to wait until the process is mature and achieving expected objectives. For example, if a particular foundation is business-oriented, it will expect results in a relatively short period of time; if results are not achieved in this time, they may pull out, which leaves the community developer and the community stranded.

Finally, this approach relies heavily on an effective local champion to facilitate the process. This local champion will sometimes push forward and sometimes allow residents to deal with issues. If there are no local champions in the community or if the social capital in the community is weak, this approach will probably not work.

Conflict

The last community development approach is conflict. Though many people and communities stay away from conflict, it can promote community development because it has the potential to redistribute power and influence. What is conflict? It is an expression of opposite actions in multiple arenas that range from cognitive to emotional to behavioral. In a community development context, conflict should be seen as a process, not an outcome.

Sources of conflict can include differences in values and interests, and lack of or poor communication, among others. A community benefits from conflict because it can force people to address problems and take action, strengthen social networks, establish better long-term relationships, and stimulate creativity. More importantly, for conflict to result in community development, it must satisfy substantive (win-win), procedural (fair process), and psychological (heard and respected) needs.

A dual-concern management framework is a good tool to use to manage conflicts. This framework places concern for one's interests versus concern for others' interests. Of course, conflict can cause more harm than good. This specific approach assumes that conflict can be managed through an effective and unbiased mediator or negotiator. This conflict manager is crucial for the process to result in community development. It also assumes that the positive outcomes of the process will outweigh the negative. It is possible that the process will further alienate different groups or individuals in the community. It is useful to keep in mind that conflicts are usually fed by basic human needs.

Conclusion

At this point, it should be clear that any of these community development approaches implemented in isolation will not have the desired outcomes and will only increase community frustration. As shown in Table 1, each approach has different strengths and weaknesses. The secret is to implement most, if not all, of them at different times during the process. A comprehensive approach (mixing approaches at different points in time) is the desired strategy for any community involved in its development.

These are general, theoretical concepts that may seem too broad when applied to real-life situations. So how can you identify and implement these approaches? For that, we will discuss specific frameworks and strategies in the next publication of this community economic development series.

References

Robinson, J. W., & Green G. P. (2010). *Introduction to community development: Theory, practice, and service-learning*. SAGE Publications.

Table 1. Community development approaches.

Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages
Technical Assistance	Provides expert know-how Solves technical issues	Can generate dependency Top-down Short-term time horizon
Self-Help	Focuses on assets Builds community capacity Strengthens networks	Lengthy Complex Assumes potential and motivation exist
Conflict	Spurs creativity Redistributes power and resources	Requires efficient manager May make things worse

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