

“Asset-Based Community Development: Challenges and Opportunities for Funders”

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After more than 20 years as a marketing and communications consultant to the nonprofit sector and experience as a parent organizer in Oakland’s public schools, Heather P. Imboden returned to graduate school to better understand how urban environments shape access to opportunity. She is now completing her master’s in city planning at the University of California–Berkeley in the College of Environmental Design. Her current research areas include public housing redevelopment and Choice Neighborhoods grants as drivers of neighborhood investment. As a PLUS Leadership Fellow with the Center for Cities and Schools, she is also investigating how school districts can better align their career academies with economic trends to increase workforce attachment for disadvantaged youth. As an undergraduate, Imboden studied architecture at Wellesley College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She currently lives in Oakland with her husband and two sons. After completing her degree, she hopes to continue her work engaging Bay Area communities in economic development and looks forward to having time to raise chickens.

Summary and Findings: Because poverty and its attendant social problems tends to be highly concentrated in the United States, grantmakers often support place-based community development initiatives. The record for these initiatives, however, is spotty at best. Many disadvantaged neighborhoods in the nation’s largest cities remain challenged, despite decades of well-intentioned interventions. Asset-based community development (ABCD) attempts to disrupt the traditional process of community development, which focuses on a community’s most pressing needs, by strengthening the assets of a neighborhood instead. These assets include local organizations and infrastructure, such as schools and parks, as well as community groups and resident skills and interests. ABCD then supports these assets in creating a more sustainable and community-driven path to neighborhood change. Through case studies and interviews, this paper outlines the process and advantages of ABCD and shows how asset-based neighborhood change efforts offer a path to community development as well as greater collective efficacy. There are challenges, however, for funders wishing to embrace community-driven efforts. Understanding these challenges can help funders assess whether ABCD is a viable option for their support.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Before embarking on an asset-based community development process, grantmakers should be aware of the potential challenges to a successful project, including the need to allow residents sufficient time to work through their own process, even though that timing may not hew to a funder’s schedule; the difficulty of relinquishing control of where (within reason) dollars are eventually allocated; the challenge of evaluating the outcomes of a process in which resident priorities may differ from those of a funder; the need to anticipate and manage for the fundamentally distorting effects that an infusion of funds—or even the promise of funds—can have on neighborhood dynamics. Despite these challenges, there are several natural roles for funders to play in support of community-driven community development. These include acting as a catalyst to a community-driven process, as a convener of potential allies, and as a capacity builder for resident talent. In addition, funders have a critical opportunity to leverage their own power and networks to bring about systems change and increase access to capital in conjunction with locally driven efforts.