Asset-Mapping in Rural Ecuador:

TDI Summer Research Program 2013
IDS Capstone Project
Report Summary

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**Project Name:** Asset-Mapping in Rural Ecuador

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**Introduction:** This study was undertaken as part of the Tropical Disease Institute of Ohio University's Healthy Living Initiative, an on-going, long-term initiative facilitating socioeconomic development of rural communities affected by Chagas disease in Loja province, Ecuador. The specific purpose of this research intervention was to support socioeconomic development and community strengthening in Bella Maria, Guara, and Chaquizhca, Ecuador through a process of community Asset-Mapping.

**Project Overview:** In this project, the communities of Bella Maria, Guara, and Chaquizhca participated in an Asset-Mapping process. This process included creating a map of the infrastructural assets of the community as well as the skills, interests and resources individuals possess. Data on individuals’ skills, interests and resources were collected through qualitative interviews, community-mapping exercises and participant observation. The data from the assets-based interviews, community-mapping exercises, and demographic data collected by the Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE) was used to create a composite Asset Map of each community. The Community Asset Maps were shared with members of Bella Maria, Guara and Chaquizhca and have been used to inform the future action lines of the Healthy Living Initiative.

**Theoretical references:** The Asset-mapping process draws from the Assets Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to community development developed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight of the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. Drawing from over 30 years of community development work in low-income neighborhoods, the ABCD model relies on an
assets rather than a needs-oriented approach to community revitalization. The agenda-setting mechanism for international development work is often derived from community needs and deficiencies. Approaches to development work from an assets perspective, while less conventional, have been adopted by major research initiatives and funded by donor agencies such as the Positive Deviance approach which focuses on the successful strategies of individuals in communities to solve problems (Pascale, Sternin & Sternin, 2010). In this study and the community development project that emerged from the asset-mapping process, assets-based community development is understood as an alternative to needs-driven development initiatives.

As identified by Kretzmann & McKnight (1993), the ABCD process is defined by three interrelated, foundational components: (1) The development strategy is focused on what is present in the community, not what is absent or needed; (2) The development process is “internally focused” and concentrates on the agenda building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, associations and institutions; (3) The project is constructed and sustained through relationships and the relationship building process. The underlying philosophy driving this development strategy is the belief that each individual has capacities, abilities and gifts and that communities are strongest when each individual has opportunities to share those capacities, abilities, and gifts with others. The authors explain this core belief: “Living a good life depends on whether capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 13). This value permeates the philosophy and process of assets-based community development and this research initiative.

This project was also understood and designed with a social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) on community development. From this perspective, the dynamic and complex interrelationships between individuals and
their environment were recognized, as was the impact of that interaction on individual human development and community development as a systemic whole (White, Stallones, & Last, 2013). It is also through this lens that the asset-mapping process can be viewed as an integral process and tool to capacity-building in the communities of Bellamaria, Guara and Chaquizhca and as contributing to a holistic process of community development.

The interviewing strategy used in this research draws from the principles and practice of Appreciative Inquiry, based on the work of David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). It is a strategy for purposeful change that uses conversational inquiry as an intervention for building awareness and intention around community strengths, capacities and values. Appreciative Inquiry is built on the principle supported by the International Institute for Sustainable Development that focusing on community strengths has the greatest potential to advance sustainable development at the community level and to effect lasting change.

**Theory of change:** As Peter Block points out in his book *Community*, “What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps...” (Block, 2008, p.9). The process of change in communities happens through many small steps, at times imperceptible, but over time the impact is seen and felt through expanded opportunities and a sense of hope. This project was designed and implemented from the perspective that healthy communities are those that provide opportunities for community members to invest their gifts, skills and abilities. By becoming more aware of individual and collective assets, communities will be able to create more opportunities to share, collaborate and invest their assets thereby becoming healthier, thriving communities over time.

**Instrument Validation:** Prior to conducting community-mapping activities and semi-structured interviews, the interview protocol for the assets-based interviews was validated with Ecuadorian field staff and through informal, "appreciative conversations" with community members. Vocabulary was adjusted to reflect the
Research Activities and Interventions: The research team was in the field conducting research activities from May 16 to July 19, 2013. These activities consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups for community mapping exercises and an assets-based, community-building activity based on tire gardening. By July 13, 2013, 17 community members shared their perspectives in eight assets-based interviews. Four community maps were generated in community-mapping exercises in Bella Maria and Chaquizhca. Additionally, Tire gardening activities were held in the schools at Chaquizhca and Guara, as well as a demonstration at a community fair in Bella Maria.

Participant Observation: Diana and Charlie spent three weeks in the field alongside community members making adobe blocks with the Ohio University Service-Learning Group for the community center in Bella Maria. This provided an important opportunity to build rapport with citizens of Bella Maria, gather information about daily life, work flow, and relationships between community members. They were also able to attend a meeting of the comuna which provided further insight into community roles, strengths, perspectives and leadership. During interviews and time spent in the three communities and schools, Kombe took careful observation notes that focused on non-verbal communication and characteristics of the environment that reflected community and personal assets.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Three preliminary appreciative conversations were conducted to validate the interview protocol and assets-based methodology. Two members of the artisan group in Bellamaria and three citizens in Chaquizhca involved in the development of the water system participated in these conversations. Once the instruments had been validated, eight interviews were conducted: two in Bellamaria, two in
Chaquizhca and four in Guara. In total, perspectives from 17 community members were gathered during these interviews.

**Community Forums:** Community-mapping activities were held in Bella Maria and in Chaquizhca. Attempts were made to conduct a similar activity in Guara but scheduling these activities was unsuccessful due to multiple demands on community members’ time. However, ERAS had conducted extensive community mapping in Guara in 2012 and photographic results from those exercises were consulted. It is noteworthy however, that ERAS methodology differed from that of an Assets-based approach. While we asked community members to map their community based on resources, ERAS created a “problem tree” showing what was deficient and problematic for community development. (See Appendix). A focus group was also held with community leaders to discuss community priorities.

**Research Intervention:** During the course of this project, an opportunity to leverage community interest, resources and expertise presented itself in the form of Tire Gardens. The research team spent considerable time in the field conversing with community members in informal situations and generally observing community interests and priorities. In such a conversation, Chaquizhca’s teachers were lamenting the lack of green spaces at the school for children to grow plants and the interest they and the students had to have a school garden. The recent addition of a fence now made gardening sustainable since the fence would keep large animals from entering into the school compound and consuming the plants. Drawing from the principles and methodology of ABCD, interest and skills in gardening in the community were mobilized, as well as available community resources (tires, soil, organic fertilizer, ash, seeds and found wood) combined with external resources (experience in tire garden production). Materials were locally sourced and students and teachers alike shared their knowledge about gardening and agricultural practices. Four tire gardens were made by the children and
teachers at Chaquizhca school, two in Guara and one at the community fair in Bella Maria. Anecdotal evidence of the spread of tire gardening was collected. For example, a child in Guara shared that he had described the tire garden process at home and had made some with his Father. Since this is only anecdotal, it is recommended to conduct a tire garden inventory in 2014 to gage the spread, interest and use of the gardens in the three communities.

Preliminary Results: Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The data were then coded by predetermined general themes: Skills, Interests and Strengths.

**Skills**
- Agricultural practices
- Electrical work
- Textiles
- Tattooing
- Masonry
- Handcrafts
- Wood etching
- Public speaking
- Carpentry
- Animal husbandry
- Food Preparation
  - Small and large scale
  - Traditional methods

**Interests**
- Traditional weaving
- Organic agricultural practices
  - Fertilizer
- Pesticides
Home gardening
Vegetable production (sale)
Irrigation system*
Potable water*
Bakery
Barber Shop
Beauty Salon
Roads
Fencing
Local comprehensive school (Colegio)
Community Association*
Healthy Homes (Viviendas)*

*Community-reported priorities

**Strengths**
Agricultural knowledge
Community Leadership
Resourcefulness
Resilience
Family unity
Initiative
Collaboration-Mingas, family units
Community traditions
Time exchange

**Asset Maps:** The Asset Maps are composite maps that include infrastructural and demographic data collected by PUCE including information about the river, waterlines, irrigation systems, roads, schools, churches, homes and community
structures. These maps also include community resources such as livestock and agricultural production for each community. Additionally, symbols were plotted on the map to represent skills and interests for each community without identifying particular individuals. A copy of the map was made available for each community as well as for TDI planning purposes.

**Recommendations:** Asset-Based Community Development was conceived to be participatory, democratic, and empowering for community members. While this project was designed using assets-based principles and practice, it ultimately fell short of the overarching goals of ABCD due to time constraints, institutional and academic regulations, cultural and linguistic barriers and the lack of community development expertise in the research team. This is not to say there were not positive outcomes for participants in the project—anticipated and unanticipated, however it is important to note that this application of assets-based community development was necessarily less community-directed than a true application of the approach demands. While this initial intervention was adapted to fit available resources and contexts, it remains relevant within the process of TDI and as a tool for sustainable community development in rural Ecuador. In the following section, I make recommendations based on team observations for the subsequent phases for ABCD (A) and suggestions for TDI (B). Finally, I will briefly outline next steps for this particular project using the current data set (C).

**(A)** The research activities conducted in May-July of 2013 represent the first phase of a long-term intervention in three phases:

- **Phase 1**
  - Asset Map
  - Skill Inventory

The Asset Map and data on Skills, Interests and Strengths can be used as tools to inform, share and leverage individual skills for community well-
being. By sharing this data, community members learn more about the collective assets of their community and who has either shared interests for a project or initiative that requires collaboration or skill sets that can be shared, exchanged or invested to the community’s advantage.

Phase 2
•Community Initiatives
•Identify areas for outside resources

In Phase 2, individuals share information about their skills and interests with the objective of forming community initiatives. For example, three interviewees expressed an interest in learning traditional weaving practices. A fourth interviewee expressed knowing how to weave and able to teach her skill to others but was unable to practice her skill due to her eyesight. There is also an artisan group in Bella Maria that makes woven handicrafts of various types that now has a community center at their disposal to support their work. In Phase 2, these individuals could share interest in learning and teaching traditional methods of weaving. Once they decide upon a shared interest, outside resources would be identified that would support their initiative. Important questions to ask in this phase are: Are resources already available in the wider community? What local organizations already present in the community can be used to support the initiative?

Phase 3
•Community Initiative Implementation
•Shared Vision

In this subsequent phase, the community initiative is implemented. In our example, perhaps a class on traditional weaving methods is taught at the community center to interested community members and artisans. Woven handicrafts made using the traditional methods are sold at the market in
Cariamanga. Stakeholders discuss their shared vision of the community initiative and shape a viable economic plan for the future.

(B) TDI would benefit from adopting a project-wide assets-based approach and compiling a master inventory of assets data. Teams collecting interview data on community resources can better coordinate their efforts through inter and intra-group communication and data sharing.

We also recommend greater community participation in research activities. This method supports community participation and community agency. Community members could conduct interviews and create skill inventories that better leverage local abilities and community knowledge.

Since asset-mapping is part of a long-term community building process, an interim indicator we now have access to is that of the tire gardens. Prevalence of tire gardens in the communities in 2014 should be noted and follow up interviews conducted to track the relevance of the intervention.

In future TDI activities, asset-mapping can be used with children and youth and as a tool to determine the direction of a particular project. Skill inventories can all be compiled to accomplish a specific goal or to locate available resources.

(C): The composite Asset Map was completed in fall 2013. A print copy was presented to members of the communities. The Asset Map is also seen as a dynamic tool that can evolve and grow with the communities. Our research team in no way assumes to have discovered all of the skills, assets and interests in the communities. This Asset Map can be modified to reflect the changing perspectives and understanding of its creators. As more data are collected, they can be added to the map and inventories. For example, our research team later conducted one additional interview in Bella Maria and collected information on sugarcane processing equipment in the three communities to include in future iterations of the
map and data set. Further analysis of the interests and skills data set will be done with the aim of identifying both community priorities and prevalence of skills.

**Dedication:** This research was conducted by grateful students. We are grateful to the members of Bella Maria, Guara and Chaquizhca for sharing their time, expertise, perspectives on life and hopes for the future. We want to share the following words with all members of the communities of Bella Maria, Guara and Chaquizhca and with all the mentors who supported us along the way:

You welcomed us onto your porches and into your homes, into your schools, your fields and into your lives and the life of your community. We have learned from you and you allowed us to grow in your midst. We are also grateful to the mentors who have guided us in our process and who showed up along our path when we needed insight. We have benefited from your wisdom, courage, humor and dedication. Muchas Gracias
References


Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets*. Evanston, IL: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University


Appendices: (Available by request from the TDI Archives)

IRB English
Informed consent Spanish
Interview Protocol
Interview Schedule
Interview Transcripts (8)
Community Maps- Bella Maria (3)
Community Map- Chaquizhca (1)
ERAS Problem Tree
Tire Gardens (Photos)

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