

Inventory of Skills

Description

A leader in a depressed community is apt to say, with both pride and rue, “Our only asset is our people.” That’s always something of an exaggeration. However, any depressed community really must recognize that its people are a critical asset and, as necessary, take the trouble to survey just what skills are available to be used in a CED strategy. These can be strictly economic skills, or they may be community and leadership skills. In either case, information is gathered on individual capacities in order to take stock of what is at hand to be mobilized for community renewal and resilience and what is, as a matter of fact, currently being applied for community benefit.

The inventory may be directed at a very limited and specific goal (e.g., to locate local women who have any experience relevant to an up-coming proposal for women’s health services); or the inventory may have a more general purpose (e.g., to identify low-visibility vocational skills that suggest choices for new local business or other income-generating activities).

This sort of survey is most crucial for the community that is especially challenged by high unemployment. The B.C. community of Kincolith, a Nisga’a settlement with a population of only a few hundred and a 95 percent unemployment figure obviously had to start at the most fundamental information about local skills in order to consider what income-producing activities might be contemplated.

Benefits

Of course, an inventory offers a store of basic information which, if collected and recorded appropriately, can be accessed at any time as the need arises. However, producing the inventory in and of itself can have a beneficial effect because it will offer a portrait of the breadth of real gifts, talents, training, and experience of the local residents, not previously visible in its totality. Moreover, the individuals who provide the information can gain self-esteem in the very process of telling the surveyor about their strengths, which probably have not been so directly recognized before. Thus, overall the inventory can contribute to community pride and a sense of its potential to shape its own destiny.

Major challenges

Designing the survey will not be easy. Particularly important is solving the problem of precisely the kind of information to be sought and for what specific purposes. And in that

process it is a challenge to organize and make accessible the information collected so that it can be effectively and efficiently used.

Some practical steps

1. Each inventory will be different depending upon its community setting and its purpose. Therefore the first step is to become clear on both the overall and the specific goals to be achieved. The goals point the inquiry to the categories of people to be surveyed or interviewed and even to the approximate number of people who should be surveyed. Among the decisions involved here is defining exactly what is the community to be surveyed - that is, what are its boundaries.
2. The precise kinds of information need to be selected to connect directly with the goals, making sure that the survey is not overloaded with gathering less important data.
3. This leads into the precise formulation of questions that will produce the desired information. The format of the questions is sometimes a tricky proposition, and so volunteer help from specialists at a local college (or elsewhere) who design surveys can be a time-saver and indeed will help make sure that the answers will be clear.
4. How will the information be stored, made accessible, and used - and what people should best take over-all responsibility for putting the information to use?
5. What are the appropriate methods for gathering the information? These may range from using a formal door-to-door survey to holding a community event at which participants fill out a questionnaire.
6. It is important to choose some way to make an initial public report of the results of the survey - and to celebrate the completion of a useful report.
7. Consider whether and how to up-date what you have gathered.
8. Now that you have the information, remember why you gathered it: to use. Put the information to work, as you had planned, or in new ways you may discover.

Resource organizations & contacts

A local college can be a source of assistance in constructing the survey and deciding on the methodology. Naturally, any other organization that has already undertaken a similar inventory - say, the Community Futures group in an adjoining region - can be of major assistance.

Publications

- *A Guide to Capacity Inventories: Mobilizing the Community Skills of Local Residents; and A Guide to Mapping and Mobilizing the Economic Capacities of Local Residents.* John Kretzmann and John McKnight, distributed by ACTA Publications, (4848 No. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640, Fax: 312-271-7399) Also from the same authors: *Building*

Tools & Techniques

Communities from the Inside Out. There is a set of six videos that can be used with this book.

- *Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in-Progress for Rural Communities* (Aspen Institute, Publications Office, P.O. Box 222, Queenstown, MD 21658). This offers a very useful way of looking at individual skills in the context of a community effort to strengthen itself, with specific outcomes and indicators that can be chosen to measure progress.