



Key learning on Asset-based Approaches and Inequalities

Challenges

- People who are the most socially isolated are often also the most marginalised.
- If implemented without an understanding of marginalisation, asset-based approaches risk contributing to existing inequalities, excluding those who are the most socially isolated.

Strategies

- Members of marginalised groups need to be supported to be involved in genuine co-production and asset mapping.
- Targeted approaches for the identification and engagement of marginalised, minority, and socially isolated groups can be a way to meaningful and inclusive asset-mapping and co-production.
- Well-planned processes for enhancing community capacity are critical for meaningful engagement and in ways which motivate future forms of participation. Such engagement and support processes take time and require resources and expertise.

Introduction

Asset-based approaches can make significant and positive changes to people's lives but they need to be implemented skilfully because of a few challenges they present.

Although asset-based approaches to community development have been a longstanding ideal, their rediscovery and subsequent implementation in the late 20th Century has led to rapid growth in their use over the last few decades.

As a result of this growth, application of the approach by those new to the approach is likely to vary and there are risks attached to this.

In particular, when implemented without supporting targeted work, asset-based approaches can contribute to existing inequalities.

This paper uses learning from the Ambition for Ageing programme so far to exemplify different uses of these approaches, explore these limitations and offer some solutions.

Ambition for Ageing is a £10.2 million Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by funding local delivery leads to work with older people in their areas to provide small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester.

As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy.

The link between social isolation, inequalities and representation

What is an 'Asset'?

Asset-based approaches use a community's own assets to achieve positive change.

Asset maps are used in lieu of needs maps which focus solely on negative aspects of communities. Asset maps, on the other hand, focus on community assets, abilities, skills, connections and strengths in order to build its future.

Further, having more than one characteristic could potentially have a compounding effect, making individuals more at risk of isolation the more marginalising characteristics they have. **People who are the most socially isolated are often also the most marginalised.**

Our research so far has found that using an asset-based approach without targeting marginalised communities can lead to the under-representation of large numbers of those who are likely to be the most socially isolated. As a result, targeted efforts should be made to identify, engage and work with specific groups of people with multiple characteristics putting them most at risk of isolation.

Inclusion of targeted interventions within asset-based approaches helps to increase the involvement of the most marginalised in the community.

The harm caused by social isolation is closely linked to socio-economic inequalities and marginalisation.

In addition, research indicates that individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing social isolation if they have one, or a number of marginalising characteristics.

Marginalising characteristics include:

- Being older
- Being male
- Being single
- Identifying as LGBT+
- Being in poor health
- Being a carer
- Living in poverty
- Identifying as a minority ethnicity or religion



Contributing to existing inequalities

If implemented without an understanding of marginalisation, asset-based approaches risk contributing to existing inequalities, excluding those who are the most socially isolated.

A year into the Ambition for Ageing programme, the diversity of volunteers and participants across the programme wasn't always fully representative of local populations - especially those who are most at risk of isolation.

In some areas, those taking part had very few risk factors and as a result it is expected that they were not as socially isolated as some of their peers. As those making decisions about community resources and where assets sit are informed by lived experience, this led to a lack of representation from those who were the most isolated.

However, in other areas, targeted work had been focusing on those who would be traditionally marginalised. In these areas, individuals more at risk of social isolation were more likely to be supported by the programme.

Case Study: Pub lunches for men

In developing the action plan for Ambition for Ageing in Moston, it became clear that older men were under-represented in older people's activities. A member of the board suggested that some of older men can be found in the Bluebell Pub during the day.

A meeting was organised with the landlord to discuss ways of appealing to older men. Informality and self-initiation were identified as important along with the pub itself as a way for many older men to remain engaged with other people in the community.

In response to this, a project was designed by community-led Age Friendly Moston and New Moston partnership to host a fortnightly lunch club at the Bluebell pub over the winter. The success of the project has led to the project gaining further external funding to continue.

Exclusion from asset mapping

Due to the nature of inequality, fewer organisational assets are available to support those who are already marginalised.

In addition, as human, social and financial capital are closely linked, inequalities have an impact on individuals as assets. In other words, whilst everyone has assets, they are unevenly distributed as a result of marginalisation.

This can result in a vicious cycle when mapping assets. A group with no obvious assets (or non-traditional assets), during the mapping stage, means nothing or little to be built on during planning stage, ending in nothing or little being developed during the implementation process. It is important that a broad range of people in a community are able to define what an asset is to them as some assets may be hidden to those outside a community. Moreover, for marginalised groups with clear assets, these could simply be missed during mapping stage if they are not given the opportunity and encouragement to be involved at planning and co-production stages.

Those who experience inequalities face greater barriers to participation and need more targeted interventions to break down these barriers.

Our research into the benefits of co-production also highlighted that early participants were open about their lack of knowledge of groups of socially isolated people in their areas. Follow-up visits showed improvements in these areas, with further involvement with the programme and volunteers who initially held little knowledge learnt as the programme went on.

This analysis highlights a need for meaningful involvement from a diverse range of socially isolated groups in the planning stages of a project to allow for initial decisions to be made with an understanding of the needs of these groups.

One way of achieving this is to link in with local equalities organisations in the planning stages of a project, reaching out to their membership and potentially helping them extend their provision further.

To achieve a successful asset-based approach, there must be clear processes in place to facilitate inclusion, including mechanisms to develop and deliver targeted approaches to include marginalised minority groups.

Due to some minority groups being dispersed across wider areas, there is a danger in using an asset-based approach due to a lack of assets at a ward level. Often organisations that mobilise, advocate and support dispersed minority groups are at a regional or sub-regional level, or outside of the area where an individual lives. These communities can be supported on a larger geographical scale.



Case Study: Funding Application from LGBT Group

Ambition for Ageing in Oldham received an application for funding from a local LGBT group. During discussion of the application, some volunteer panel members questioned the acceptability of funding a project targeting a particular community, raising concerns that this could be seen as discriminatory against non-LGBT people. A frank discussion amongst members followed, covering topics such as inclusion and people's experiences of discrimination.

As a result of the discussions, the LGBT group received the funding they requested and panel members took part in training to help them gain better understanding of the impact of inequalities to help form their decisions in the future.



“ Without our volunteers acting as ‘community keys’ within target wards, we would not be able to gain involvement with some of the more marginalised and isolated individuals with whom we are now developing relationships.

- Ambition for Ageing Bolton ”

Conclusion

There are a range of ways to measure the inclusiveness of projects. One way is to look for an above average representation from the most disadvantaged groups.

The Ambition for Ageing programme has succeeded in engaging those with more risk factors in places where targeted work has been carried out to improve the diversity of programme participants - both those involved in co-production and those who are end users of interventions provided by the programme.

- Engaging the most socially isolated people is a considerable challenge and not something that an untargeted asset-based approach can achieve. **Targeted approaches for the identification and engagement of marginalised, minority, and socially isolated groups can be a way to meaningful and inclusive asset-mapping and co-production.**
- Engaging at-risk groups in co-production and asset mapping puts professionals and communities in a stronger position to identify unknown assets within the community.
- **Well-planned processes for enhancing community capacity are critical for meaningful engagement and in ways which motivate future forms of participation. Such engagement and support processes take time and require resources and expertise.** Existing guidance such as the Federation for Community Development Learning’s Community Development National Occupational Standards can provide a framework for successful community development.
- It is important to note that in order to deliver meaningful, inclusive outcomes, community participation and co-production must be properly resourced. On a practical level, this could be additional capacity to support at-risk groups to engage in mainstream activities or developing specific interventions to meet the needs of these groups.

Guidance and further reading

For more information about asset-based approaches, references to help complement the findings of this briefing, examples of good practice and guidance on implementing meaningful and inclusive asset-based mapping, scan the QR code or visit www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/assetsandinequalities.



With thanks to the Community Development Work Practice Group for their input into this paper.