

**Capitalizing on Natural Assets:
Exploring New Tools for Strong, Healthy and Sustainable Communities**

**A Nationwide Conference
March 2-4, 2001**

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The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice – in conjunction with the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the Ford Foundation – hosted a three-day workshop in Baton Rouge, Louisiana from March 2-4, 2001. The purpose of the conference was to invite several community-based organizations from across the United States to discuss the potential for utilizing natural asset-building strategies to enhance the work of environmental justice organizations and advance the goals of poverty reduction, environmental protection, and environmental justice.

In order to initiate open dialogue among participants, as well as familiarize community-based groups with the crisis of toxic pollution in Baton Rouge, we organized a tour with members of the Alsen and White Castle communities for the first day of the conference. Community members and participants discussed the environmental health impacts of chemical manufacturing facilities and toxic dumps located less than a mile from residential areas. Our photographer, David Woo from the Dallas Morning News, captured these events on camera for a future publication.

To introduce the concept of asset-building to Environmental Justice Organizations, we first requested that all participants produce a narrative profile of their organizations and communities describing their social, natural, and financial assets. We also asked participants to prepare for a brief presentation to conference participants. The community groups that arrived on the first day of the workshop were able to develop Power Point presentations at the Southern University with the technical assistance of students.

The following day began with Power Point presentations of 25 different organizations at the Embassy Suites Caucus Room. These presentations illustrated the wide scope of challenges, assets, and opportunities of each community-based organization. Although we expected that these presentations would be brief, it was very difficult to limit speaking time for each person, as the information that was shared was so valuable to the other conference participants.

To lead up to group discussions, James Boyce of the Political Economy Research Institute described in detail the concept of the natural assets approach, emphasizing the democratization of the natural asset ownership and the enhancement of social capital. His

theoretical perspective combined with practical examples initiated a smooth transition to the next goal of the conference: group discussions.

Group Discussions

After the presentations, community representatives divided into groups of several categories: rural contaminated communities, urban contaminated communities, farms and fisheries, military toxics, development, and preservation. These groups met to explore the possibility of applying the assets-based concept to their particular communities.

Military Toxics

Communities located near military industrial complexes are fighting the power of vested political and economic interests for the sake of environmental health. The producers of environmental toxics are financially powerful enough to recruit so-called 'experts' to defend their practices of toxic pollution. Communities are left to fight a battle that requires access to significant funding and resources. These communities need to develop well-organized full-time staff to do research and fight for environmentally sustainable solutions.

Funding agencies rarely offer organizations money if they do not have a track record of managing past projects. Limited ability to hire expertise can tie the hands of potentially powerful community groups. This leaves organizations at a standstill attempting to overcome the hurdle of financial restraints. In addition, communities often are so busy fighting for their rights that efforts to develop credibility for funders are thwarted, and so the vicious uphill battle continues.

Communities should not have to choose between jobs and the environment. Unfortunately communities often have few options since little positive investment takes place. This dilemma raised questions of worker empowerment. In the past, communities were stewards of the environment. Now property is owned by outside investors. The relationship between community and the environment has been destroyed by the practices of industry. Development now is unbalanced and unjust. Communities need to possess the strength to make sure that development serves the community and not the pockets of a handful of outside investors.

Farming and Fishing Communities

The natural assets of fishing and farming communities include direct fresh produce, a local food-security system, cheaper and better quality food products, and opportunities for labor. Additional natural assets inherent to these communities are land, water rights, seeds, and livestock breeds. Farming and fishing communities also offer a socio-cultural lifestyle that is unique.

Fishing and farming communities have to deal with land loss issues. This is a result of the privatization of commonly used assets such as estuaries and communal lands. In order to

reclaim their communities, groups need to develop land trusts. Communities also need legal defense, but there is little access to funding for this important task.

In order to enhance economic opportunity for fishing and farming communities, government should provide tax incentives for investor cooperatives and a registry for farmers of color. Opportunities for direct sales such as farmers' markets and value-added processing would enhance economic opportunity. Community cooperatives would regenerate a sense of community belonging and well-being that can keep down the level of social problems.

How do we connect farmers, fishers, and people who are not water or land-based? There is a need for a demonstrated clear connection between the rural lifestyle of farmers and fishers and the urban population. The survival of small farmers and fishers will provide benefits to those who desire a good, high quality, and inexpensive food-security system.

If people in the city don't understand agricultural policy, rural life, subsistence and family farming, then how can we build community-based sustainable projects? If farm work is stigmatized, how can we get people and policies that support family farmers and fishers? In addition to the restructuring of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), extension services and land grant colleges are imperative to improving the livelihood of these communities.

How do we promote community-supported agriculture with an environmental justice twist? Ecological restoration is imperative to the survival of a sustainable rural lifestyle. It is important that environmentalists, farmers, and fishers collaborate to link their common interests and provide solutions that are practical, empowering for workers, and sustainable.

At this point there is often competition between small family farms and corporate farms. USDA bureaucrats distort congressional policies with racial bias and big corporate bias in order to squeeze out smaller competition. The only way for small farmers and fishers to combat this is to win support from the urban population.

Urban Communities

The natural assets of urban communities include community wisdom, organization, and the potential for power through unification. In some urban communities, there is a link between the community and a local university that can add credibility and influence to the work of community-based organizations.

Often in urban communities, assets are unequally distributed. Race and social status determine the amount of assets that are divided among the community. Unequal race relationships contribute to gentrification, environmental degradation, unequal economic development, and urban sprawl. It is important that race, ethnicity, and class divides be confronted to create a greater pool of community resources.

Often urban communities are researched and studied by outside “experts.” If the relationships could shift from research to open dialogue and collaboration, then both sides could stand to gain a tremendous amount of insight.

The most important aspect of urban communities is leadership and the energy and enthusiasm of the youth population. Developing programs to strengthen the skills of local leaders and the youth will enhance the capabilities of local communities.

Assisting communities to understand public policy is also a very important aspect of the development process. Communities struggle over how development and planning take place. Community organizations are faced with the burden of deciding between employment and the environment. Workers need to be empowered to demand better options and to create options for themselves.

In urban communities that face contamination, natural assets are often destroyed. Illness weakens social assets. Financial assets are bound to political ties, disconnecting communities from the power and resources they need to solve their problems. Depending on the level of remediation at the site, some communities have very little potential for converting into healthy communities. Families that live in these communities often will not or cannot move somewhere else.

Rural Contaminated Communities

In rural contaminated communities, there are many barriers that prevent a community from taking control. Players in the process of community planning and development include local government, environmental groups, and universities. These outside players end up redefining community development. They take money from grants and redevelopment funds, intercepting funds that could be used by the community. At the same time, they co-opt community ideas.

For a community to be successful, we have to find a way for communities to access direct funding and develop direct power to have a voice and a say in the decision-making process.

When the entire asset base of a community has been deteriorated, you lack political clout that is necessary for empowerment. If you begin by building the social fabric of community then you begin to develop your social clout. The building blocks of community strength are cooperation among community, local knowledge, trust, tradition, inherent skills, culture, natural assets, and community wisdom. Some helpful tools for community building are networking and exchanging information, ideas, examples, and support.

In order to develop strength, communities need direct grants, tax credits, loans, and technical assistance that includes training and financial management. Overall, these communities need to be given respect in the whole process of redevelopment.

Natural Assets as a Tool

How do natural assets fit into the work of environmental justice organizations? The recognition of natural assets as an inherent right to all empowers individuals to demand a clean environment, as well as healthy families and communities. The assets-based approach offers a method to envision communities holistically. Rather than addressing one issue at a time, individuals can address their community in its entirety by recognizing the strengths as well as the problem areas.

Another essential aspect of the natural assets approach is building human alliances. People in their communities are assets in and of themselves. Community organizations offer local knowledge and expertise and a holistic vision that is based on years of experience. Communities have generations of knowledge of their local environment. Recognizing this valuable strength can open the possibilities of power and creativity.

Often, the ‘solutions’ played out in communities do not turn out the way analysts and experts predict. One reason for this is that local knowledge, the most important piece of the puzzle, has been excluded from the decision-making process. Communities are repositories of untapped information. Experts need and should rely on this expertise.

Communities can speak for themselves. They can offer cultural values, community insight, truth, and passion. Experts, policy-makers, and foundations need communities in order to make sustainable decisions.

Recommendations for Foundations

Community-based organizations are requesting that Foundations apply funds for community projects at the community level. Fifty to sixty percent of funds should be set aside to support local and grassroots community-based work directly. Although many large agencies are hesitant to invest in small grass-roots organizations, they should develop smaller grants and offer workshops to assist with institutional strengthening. The Ford Foundation could develop capacity training workshops to offer technical assistance that would enhance organizations’ ability to develop budgets and proposals for their programs.

Often grassroots organizations are asked to participate on committees that request their voluntary cooperation. Funding agencies should provide salary for participating on foundations and national committees. In exchange, funders will receive some real commonsense solutions that can influence national policy.

Next Steps

The various organizations participating in the conference developed a plan of action for future collaboration and exploration of the possibilities of the asset-building process. Several groups expressed an interest in future training with the Center for Popular Economics at the University of Massachusetts. They would like to address the impacts of government policies on land and development on communities.

There was an interest for these groups to gain more knowledge about redevelopment and urban impact issues, as well as small business development that is environmentally practical. In addition they desired training for securing sustainable streams of funding.

As a group, the organizations recommended further collaboration to develop a natural assets “road show” as well as a publication that would illustrate the work that is taking place all over the United States.

Many participants expressed an interest in visiting Joe Gallegos’ Colorado Acequia Association to learn from his communities experience with sustainable agriculture. They communicated an interest in developing a land-trust workshop. The organizations desire to investigate the funding possibilities of developing regional groups that offer mentoring and partnerships.

The stated goal of these organizations is to work with their communities to become independent. Training, building resources, and seeking professional assistance will contribute to this goal. Spreading hope and encouragement and energizing one another will strengthen the work of each community organization.