How to Use a Capacity Inventory
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In many communities, the natural ways of the local people and their associations and institutions constantly connect local capacities. For example:

> Neighbors have a tradition of helping each other by trading their skills. Mary repairs a dress while Sue watches her children.

> A local association of religious men combines their construction skills and builds a community center.

> A neighborhood school involves the local students in using the environmental knowledge they've gained to do a study for city council of whether a local pond is polluted.

In addition to these natural developments, other communities have intentionally used tools like the Capacity Inventory to identify local citizen talents. Then these groups have become active in making the necessary connections to mobilize the capacities. Some examples:

> A neighborhood organization interviewed over 100 local residents and found many women who had worked in hospitals, hotels or cared for sick and elderly people. Many of these women had families and were unemployed. They wanted to work part-time. The association brought them together and they formed a "company" to sell their services as home health care providers. There was great demand for their services and over 80 women were connected to neighbors needing community care. This connection met a community need and increased the income of the women.

> A group of residents of a public housing project organized and became powerful enough to gain control of their buildings. Their association took over the management and finances of the project. As a result they were able to employ residents to carry out the maintenance functions such as painting rooms, fixing broken windows, running a Laundromat, etc. In order to exercise their new-found power, they needed to know which residents had the necessary skills to do the work of maintenance and management. They used a Capacity Inventory to gather this information and their association connected residents to the new job opportunities that improved the quality of the local buildings.

> A local association in a neighborhood collected information from local residents regarding skills that could be used at a job. Then they did an inventory of the kinds of jobs available at all local employers. They then created a brokerage effort connecting people with skills to employers needing skills.

It is significant to note two common characteristics of each of these efforts. First, a local group acted as a connecter. Second, the local group took people as they were and mobilized their existing capacities. They did not start with the idea that the local people needed to be trained, educated or treated. Instead, they started with the idea that capacities were there and that the community-building task was to identify capacities, and

to connect them to people, groups and places that can use the capacities.

Does Everyone Have Capacities?

There are some people who seem to be without any gifts or capacities. They may appear to be like an empty glass. And so they get called names–names like mentally retarded, ex-convict, frail elderly, mentally ill, illiterate, and gang member. These are names for the emptiness some people see in other people. They are labels that focus attention on needs.

One effect of these labels is that they keep many community people from seeing the gifts of people who have been labeled. The label often blinds us to the capacity of the people who are named. They appear to be useless. Therefore, these labeled people often get pushed to the edge of the community, or they are sometimes sent outside the community to an institution to be rehabilitated or receive services.

Nonetheless, every living person has some gift or capacity of value to others. A strong community is a place that recognizes those gifts and ensures that they are given. A weak community is a place where lots of people can't give their gifts and express their capacities.

In weak communities there are lots of people who have been pushed to the edge or exiled to institutions. Often, we say these people need help. They are needy. They have nothing to contribute. The label tells us so.

For example, "She is a pregnant teenager. She needs counseling, therapy, residential services, special education." But also, "She is Mary Smith. She has a miraculously beautiful voice. We need her in the choir. She needs a record producer."

Her label, pregnant teenager, tells of emptiness and calls forth rejection, isolation and treatment. Her name, Mary Smith, tells of her gifts and evokes community and contributions.

Communities growing in power naturally or intentionally identify the capacities of all their members and ensure that they are contributed. However, the most powerful communities are those that can identify the gifts of those people at the margins and pull them into community life.

The following sections of this chapter describe how the gifts of various kinds of people have been identified and connected to the community's life. Included are descriptions of how neighborhoods grew more powerful because they identified and connected the special gifts and capacities of:

    people who are developmentally disabled
    people surviving on welfare
    young people and elderly people
    people with artistic gifts

There are many other kinds of people with community contributions to make. Therefore, the following sections are merely examples of the thousands of possibilities for local individuals to contribute and develop their gifts, skills and capacities. The task of community builders is to expand the list of potential giftgivers and create methods to connect those gifts to other individuals, local associations and institutions.