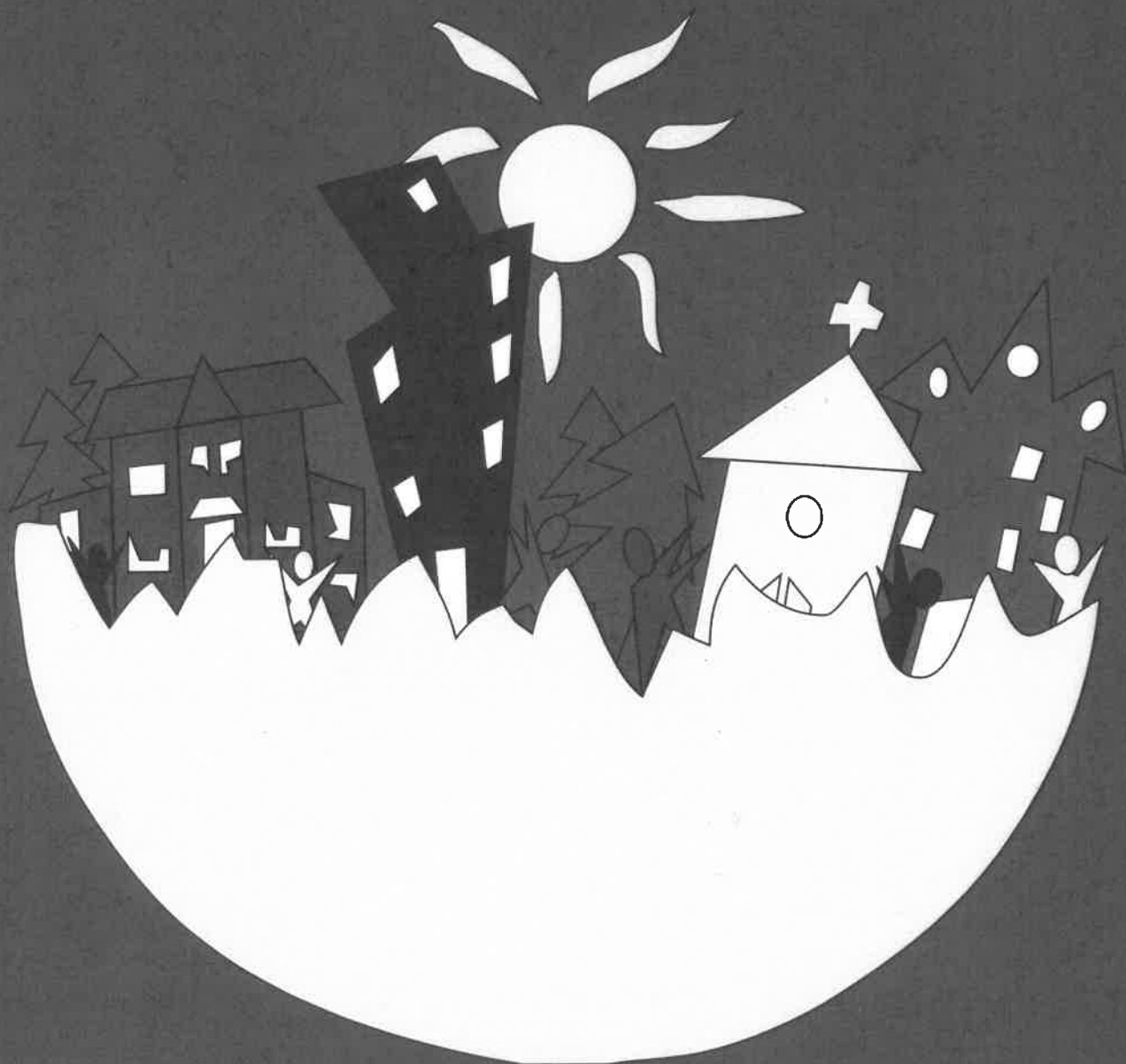# BUILDING COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT

A PATH TOWARD FINDING AND MOBILIZING A COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

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This is a guide about rebuilding troubled communities. It is meant to be simple, basic and usable. Whatever wisdom it contains flows directly out of the experience of courageous and creative neighborhood leaders from across the country.

Most of this guide is devoted to spreading community-building success stories. These stories are organized into a step-by-step introduction to a coherent strategy that we have learned about from neighborhood leaders. We call this strategy "asset-based community development." Before beginning to outline the basic elements of this approach, it will be helpful to remember how so many of our communities came to be so devastated, and why traditional strategies for improvement have so often failed.

The Problem: Devastated Communities

No one can doubt that most American cities these days are deeply troubled places. At the root of the problems are the massive economic shifts that have marked the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs have either disappeared or moved away from the central city and its neighborhoods. And while many downtown areas have experienced a "renaissance," the jobs created there are different from those that once sustained neighborhoods. Either these new jobs are highly professionalized, and require elaborate education and credentials for entry, or they are routine, low-paying service jobs without much of a future. In effect, these shifts in the economy, and particularly the disappearance of decent employment possibilities from low-income neighborhoods, have removed the bottom rung from the fabled American "ladder of opportunity." For many people in older city neighborhoods, new approaches to rebuilding their lives and communities, new openings toward opportunity, are a vital necessity.

Two Solutions, Two Paths

In response to this desperate situation, well-intended people are seeking solutions by taking one of two divergent paths. The first, which begins by focusing on a community's needs, deficiencies and problems, is still by far the most traveled, and commands the vast majority of our financial and human resources. By comparison with the second path, which insists on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets, and which is the direction this guide recommends, the first and more traditional path is more like an eight-lane superhighway.

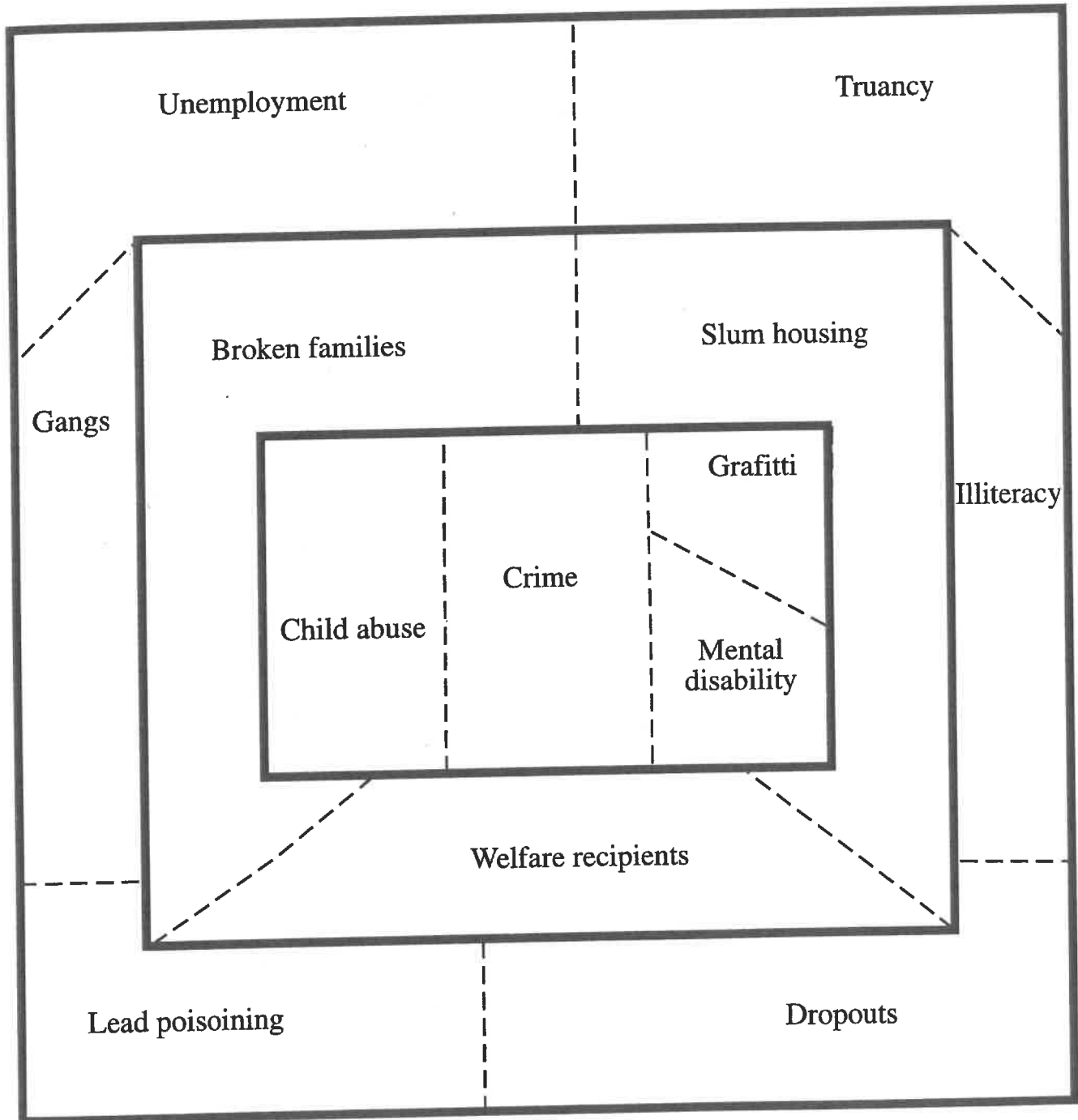### *The Traditional Path—A Needs-Driven Dead End*

For most Americans, the names "South Bronx," or "South Central Los Angeles," or even "Public Housing" call forth a rush of images. It is not surprising that these images are overwhelmingly negative. They are images of crime and violence, of joblessness and welfare dependency, of gangs and drugs and homelessness, of vacant and abandoned land and buildings. They are images of needy and problematic and deficient neighborhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people.

These negative images, which can be conceived as a kind of mental "map" of the neighborhood (see page 3) often convey part of the truth about the actual conditions of a troubled community. But they are not regarded as part of the truth; they are regarded as the whole truth.

Once accepted as the whole truth about troubled neighborhoods, this "needs" map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and non-profit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower income urban neighborhoods are now environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers. Consumers of services focus vast amounts of creativity and intelligence on the survival-motivated challenge of outwitting the "system," or on finding ways—in the informal or even illegal economy—to bypass the system entirely.

There is nothing natural or inevitable about the process that leads to the creation of client neighborhoods. In fact, it is important to note how little power local neighborhood residents have to affect the pervasive nature of the deficiency model, mainly because a number of society's most influential institutions have themselves developed a stake in maintaining that focus. For example, much of the social science research produced by universities is designed to collect and analyze data about problems. Much of the funding directed to lower income communities by foundations and the United Way is based on the problem-oriented data collected in "needs surveys," a practice emulated by government human service agencies. Finally, the needs map often appears to be the only neighborhood guide ever used by members of the mass media, whose appetite for the violent and the spectacularly problematic story seems insatiable. All of these major institutions combine to create a wall between lower income communities and the rest of society—a wall of needs which, ironically enough, is built not on hatred but (at least partly) on the desire to "help."

Neighborhood Needs Map

Unemployment

Truancy

Broken families

Slum housing

Gangs

Grafitti

Crime

Child abuse

Mental disability

Illiteracy

Welfare recipients

Lead poisoining

Dropouts

The fact that the deficiency orientation represented by the needs map constitutes our only guide to lower income neighborhoods has devastating consequences for residents. We have already noted one of the most tragic—that is, residents themselves begin to accept that map as the only guide to the reality of their lives. They think of themselves and their neighbors as fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community's future. But other consequences flow as well from the power of the needs map. For example:

- Viewing a community as a nearly endless list of problems and needs leads directly to the much lamented fragmentation of efforts to provide solutions. It also denies the basic community wisdom which regards problems as tightly intertwined, as symptoms in fact of the breakdown of a community's own problem-solving capacities.

- Targeting resources based on the needs map directs funding not to residents but to service providers, a consequence not always either planned for or effective.

- Making resources available on the basis of the needs map can have negative effects on the nature of local community leadership. If, for example, one measure of effective leadership is the ability to attract resources, then local leaders are, in effect, being forced to denigrate their neighbors and their community by highlighting their problems and deficiencies, and by ignoring their capacities and strengths.

- Providing resources on the basis of the needs map underlines the perception that only outside experts can provide real help. Therefore, the relationships that count most for local residents are no longer those inside the community, those neighbor-to-neighbor links of mutual support and problem solving. Rather, the most important relationships are those that involve the expert, the social worker, the health provider, the funder. Once again, the glue that binds communities together is weakened.

- Reliance on the needs map as the exclusive guide to resource gathering virtually ensures the inevitable deepening of the cycle of dependence: problems must always be worse than last year, or more intractable than other communities, if funding is to be renewed.

- At best, reliance on the needs maps as the sole policy guide will ensure a maintenance and survival strategy targeted at isolated individual clients, not a development plan that can involve the energies of an entire community.

   ❖ Because the needs-based strategy can guarantee only
survival, and can never lead to serious change or
community development, this orientation must be
regarded as one of the major causes of the sense of
hopelessness that pervades discussions about the future
of low income neighborhoods. From the street corner to
the White House, if maintenance and survival are the
best we can provide, what sense can it make to invest in
the future?

The Alternative Path: Capacity-Focused Development

If even some of these negative consequences follow from our total
reliance upon the needs map, an alternative approach becomes im-
perative. That alternative path, very simply, leads toward the develop-
ment of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets
of lower income people and their neighborhoods.

In addition to the problems associated with the dominant deficiency
model, at least two more factors argue for shifting to a capacity-ori-
ented emphasis. First, all the historic evidence indicates that significant
community development takes place only when local community
people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in
the effort. This observation explains why communities are never built
from the top down, or from the outside in. (Clearly, however, valuable
outside assistance can be provided to communities that are actively
developing their own assets, a topic explored further in Chapter Six.)

The second reason for emphasizing the development of the internal
assets of local urban neighborhoods is that the prospect for outside
help is bleak indeed. Even in areas designated as Enterprise Zones, the
odds are long that large-scale, job-providing industrial or service
corporations will be locating in these neighborhoods. Nor is it likely,
in the light of continuing budget constraints, that significant new
inputs of federal money will be forthcoming soon. It is increasingly
futile to wait for significant help to arrive from outside the community.
The hard truth is that development must start from within the commu-
nity and, in most of our urban neighborhoods, there is no other
choice.

Creative neighborhood leaders across the country have begun to
recognize this hard truth, and have shifted their practices accordingly.
They are discovering that wherever there are effective community
development efforts, those efforts are based upon an understanding,
or map, of the community's assets, capacities and abilities. For it is
clear that even the poorest neighborhood is a place where individuals
and organizations represent resources upon which to rebuild. The key
to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available
local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that
multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those

local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes.

This entire process begins with the construction of a new "map" (see page 7). Once this guide to capacities has replaced the old one containing only needs and deficiencies, the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production.
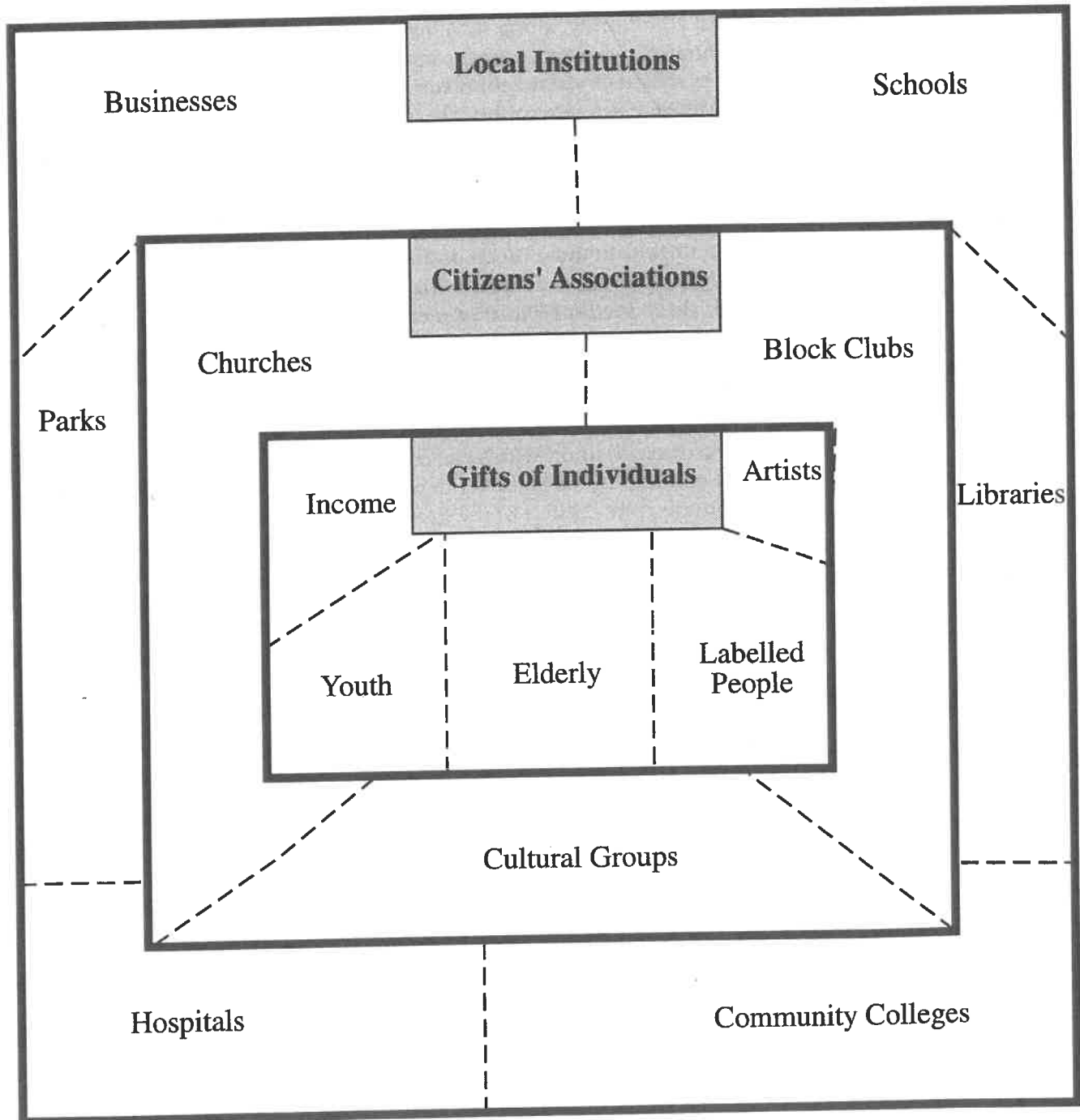
The Assets of a Community: Individuals, Associations, Institutions

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community's residents. Household by household, building by building, block by block, the capacity mapmakers will discover a vast and often surprising array of individual talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilized for community-building purposes. This basic truth about the "giftedness" of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized by communities. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labeled mentally handicapped or disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, these people too will be part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process.

In addition to mapping the gifts and skills of individuals, and of households and families, the committed community builder will compile an inventory of citizens' associations. These associations, less formal and much less dependent upon paid staff than are formal institutions, are the vehicles through which citizens in the U.S. assemble to solve problems, or to share common interests and activities. It is usually the case that the depth and extent of associational life in any community is vastly underestimated. This is particularly true of lower income communities. In fact, however, though some parts of associational life may have dwindled in very low income neighborhoods, most communities continue to harbor significant numbers of associations with religious, cultural, athletic, recreational and other purposes. Community builders soon recognize that these groups are indispensable tools for development, and that many of them can in fact be stretched beyond their original purposes and intentions to become full contributors to the development process.

Beyond the individuals and local associations that make up the asset base of communities are all of the more formal institutions which are located in the community. Private businesses; public institutions such

Community Assets Map

Local Institutions

Businesses

Schools

Citizens' Associations

Churches

Block Clubs

Parks

Gifts of Individuals

Artists

Income

Libraries

Youth

Elderly

Labelled People

Cultural Groups

Hospitals

Community Colleges

as schools, libraries, parks, police and fire stations; nonprofit institutions such as hospitals and social service agencies—these organizations make up the most visible and formal part of a community's fabric. Accounting for them in full, and enlisting them in the process of community development, is essential to the success of the process. For community builders, the process of mapping the institutional assets of the community will often be much simpler than that of making an inventory involving individuals and associations. But establishing within each institution a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some aspects of the institution's relationships with its local neighborhood, can prove much more difficult. Nevertheless, a community that has located and mobilized its entire base of assets will clearly feature heavily involved and invested local institutions.

Individuals, associations and institutions—these three major categories contain within them much of the asset base of every community. They will also provide the framework for organizing this guide. Each of the next three sections explores methods for recognizing, mapping, and mobilizing one of these clusters of local strengths.

In addition, the guide will highlight other aspects of a community's assets, including its physical characteristics—the land, buildings and infrastructure upon which the community rests. And because so much of a community's well-being depends upon the strength of the local economy, one section of the guide will explore ways in which individuals, associations and local institutions can contribute economically.

An Alternative Community Development Path: Asset-Based, Internally Focused, Relationship Driven

This guide is designed to help communities not only to recognize and map their assets—the individuals, local associations and institutions which make up the sinew of the neighborhood—but to mobilize them for development purposes. As we begin to describe the basic elements of an asset-based community development process, it is important to place this discussion in its larger context. Two major qualifications should be stated as strongly as possible.

First, focusing on the assets of lower income communities does not imply that these communities do not need additional resources from the outside. Rather, this guide simply suggests that outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully mobilized and invested, and if it can define the agendas for which additional resources must be obtained. The assets within lower income communities, in other words, are absolutely necessary but usually not sufficient to meet the huge development challenges ahead.

Second, the discussion of asset-based community development is intended to affirm, and to build upon the remarkable work already going on in neighborhoods across the country. Asset-based community development acknowledges and embraces particularly the strong neighborhood-rooted traditions of community organizing, community economic development and neighborhood planning. In fact, experienced leaders in these three areas have been among our most valuable sources of inspiration and guidance. The approach outlined in this guide is intended to complement, and sometimes to precede, their efforts—not to substitute for them.

These caveats understood, then, "asset-based community development" deserves a little more introduction and definition. As will become apparent in more detail in the chapters that follow, this process can be defined by three simple, interrelated characteristics:

- Obviously enough, the first principle that defines this process is that it is "asset-based." That is, this community development strategy starts with what is present in the community, the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area—not with what is absent, or with what is problematic, or with what the community needs.

- Because this community development process is asset-based, it is by necessity "internally focused." That is, the development strategy concentrates first of all upon the agenda building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, local associations and local institutions. Again, this intense and self-conscious internal focus is not intended to minimize either the role external forces have played in helping to create the desperate conditions of lower income neighborhoods, nor the need to attract additional resources to these communities. Rather this strong internal focus is intended simply to stress the primacy of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control.

- If a community development process is to be asset-based and internally focused, then it will be in very important ways "relationship driven." Thus, one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local institutions.

Skilled community organizers and effective community developers already recognize the importance of relationship building. For it is clear that the strong ties which form the basis for community-based problem solving have been under attack. The forces driving people apart are many and frequently cited—increasing mobility rates, the

separation of work and residence, mass media, segregation by race and age and not least from the point of view of lower income communities, increasing dependence upon outside, professionalized helpers.

Because of these factors, the sense of efficacy based on interdependence, the idea that people can count on their neighbors and neighborhood resources for support and strength has weakened. For community builders who are focused on assets, rebuilding these local relationships offers the most promising route toward successful community development. This guide will stress the importance of relationship building for every person and group in the community, and will underline the necessity of basing those relationships always upon the strengths and capacities of the parties involved, never on their weaknesses and needs.

That, then is the skeleton of the simple development process sketched in this guide—it is a community-building path which is asset-based, internally focused and relationship driven.

How to Use This Guide

This introduction to asset-based development is not a novel. It is not meant to be read straight through from beginning to end. Rather its various sections are meant to be consulted as they are needed, and as they apply to the actual conditions and challenges of particular communities.

After this initial overview, the guide is divided into six more chapters. Chapters one, two and three address the major categories of community-based assets—individuals, citizens' associations, and local institutions. Each of these chapters, in turn, is divided into sections that outline successful approaches to mapping and developing particular assets. Within the chapter devoted to individual capacities, for example, sections introduce community development activities which successfully incorporate the gifts of young people, of older people, and of those who are developmentally disabled. Similarly, the chapter on institutions introduces simple ideas about mobilizing schools, parks, libraries, community colleges and even local police stations for community-building purposes.

These three chapters should be sampled for their relevance to the reader's particular community. Not every chapter will be useful in every context. Each community's collection of assets will be unique, as will the particular sequence of development strategies, the major players, the local priorities, etc.

This guide, in other words, must not be regarded as a cookie cutter set of solutions. It is rather a starting point, a prod, an open invitation to start down a somewhat different path. All of the really creative work remains for community leadership to perform.

The fourth chapter turns a specifically economic spotlight on the approaches suggested in this guide. What does it mean to take seriously a devastated community's already existing economic assets? How might the full economic potential of every community be harnessed for development purposes?

The fifth chapter offers commentary on some central issues related to the asset-based community development process. It outlines a simple neighborhood planning process which intends to involve and activate all of the representatives of a community's asset base in constructing a common vision and a powerful strategy for realizing that vision.

The sixth chapter offers some modest advice to those in philanthropy and in the public sector who may wish to help this internally focused process without overdirecting it or snuffing out its energies. And it grapples with at least a few of the objections occasionally raised to the asset-based approach.

Finally, we should acknowledge the numerous stories of creative community-building that are included in this guide, and recommend their creators as potential advisors and helpers. Key words which follow most examples in parentheses will in most cases guide the reader to a specific project name and location. But use these references with some caution. We cannot vouch for the currency of the stories; nor have we included them as guides to the details of particular community-building strategies. Rather they are cited to excite, to spark the imagination, to underline the idea that these approaches need not be daunting or overcomplicated. We hope that at least a few of them can connect with the realities encountered in every reader's own community.