DEMOCRACY AND THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE: AN INTRODUCTION

We think of ourselves as living in a democracy, but what does democracy really mean? In the U.S., democracy pretty much means that we vote in elections, pay our taxes, and generally stay out of the way the rest of the time. This is what Benjamin Barber and others refer to as “thin democracy” (Barber, 1984). Our democracy is not only “thin” but it is also not fully representative because it excludes large segments of the population: children, prisoners (of which there are now roughly 2 million), non-citizen residents, and tens of millions who have become convinced that voting doesn’t matter because our elections have become so corrupted by money.

It seems pretty clear that our present “thin democracy” isn’t working very well. Despite the staggering wealth generated by the U.S. economy, one out of every five of our children is being raised in poverty (and among African-Americans, it is two out of five); at least one thousand new chemicals are put into commercial use each year largely untested; accidents and toxic exposures in the workplace kill at least 60,000 people each year (and make another 300,000 sick); many billionaires and millionaires refuse to pay their fair share of taxes; and many U.S.-based transnational corporations are thumbing their noses at labor standards and environmental controls all around the globe. Most U.S. citizens don’t like this situation..

The remedy for thin democracy is “strong democracy” -- one in which citizens truly participate, at least some of the time, in the decisions that affect their lives. The precautionary principle challenges us to develop a strong democracy. The principle states:

When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context, the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action.

Here we will explore what it means to say that, “the process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties.”

EMPOWERING OURSELVES:
STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES

What follows here is not the only way of looking at these problems. It is intended to stimulate thought and discussion.

Democracy boils down to the question, “Who gets to decide?” We believe that communities should control the assets of their community (air, water, public spaces, transportation system, etc.), to the extent feasible. We believe that communities can prepare themselves to assert control over the community’s assets by asking four basic questions:
1. **What are the community’s goals?** First, we should say what we mean by community. In general, we are talking about small communities – a neighborhood, a part of town, a section of a city. Sometimes, however, “community” refers to the whole municipality. So the meaning of “community” varies with the context. A community can explore what it wants for itself environmentally, economically, and socially. A community can ask what environmental resources it thinks are important to its existence. What makes a business a good neighbor? What kinds of jobs and businesses does the community want? What resources does the community have (and need) for attracting, or developing, those jobs? What are the community’s social goals: good food, housing and medical care for everyone, access to an education, control of crime, and good quality of life? In exploring these questions community members can get very specific. For example, as part of the environmental question an urban community might ask how much green space do we need to make our community livable and how far should the green space be from a typical home? By asking these questions a community gets a good sense of itself. It also gets a sense of the diversity of needs within the community. This process is often referred to as “community visioning,” which is different from the older term, “comprehensive planning.” To learn more about the community visioning process see “Community Visioning” in the “Further Reading” section.

2. **What does the community perceive as the harm or potential harm?** This question can be asked every time a community thinks there is harm or the potential for harm. This question could be asked about an environmental, economic, or social harm. An environmental harm might be pollution from a facility within the community or a proposal for a highway that will cut through the community. An economic harm might be the closing of a local business because the owner is retiring, or the takeover of a local bank by a megabank with no real interest in the local community. A social harm might be the closing of a local elementary school or library or the loss of a community meeting place because a developer bought the building to put up condos.

3. **Who knows what, and what is not known?** These questions follow the previous question about a specific harm. For any proposal affecting the life of the community, the community should understand who within and outside the community has information. Who knows about this proposal? What do they know about it? Who endorses this proposal? Who is against it? For each of these questions the community should also be looking at who doesn’t know the answers and what is not known. By asking these questions the community might find out that the chamber of commerce from community A proposed a highway for community B to keep the highway out of community A; a local community developer favors the highway because he believes that dividing the community will make it easier for him to put in new housing; and that the city wants the highway to relieve traffic in a wealthier community nearby. They also might learn that residents of a local apartment building were unaware that their homes are going to be demolished to make room for the highway; that no one knows how many lanes or how much traffic or how much pollution this highway will entail; and that contracts are being let out for bid even though the community has never been consulted.
4. **What solutions can the community identify?** The community can create its own solutions for a particular harm by considering all the alternatives including the alternative of doing nothing. It can be very important to reframe the question at this point. Let’s look at the harm of putting a highway through a community. The city probably asked the question where do we put this highway through? The community might want to ask a different question: how do we alleviate traffic congestion in the least polluting and disruptive manner? Answering this broader question community members might see the following alternatives: 1) going ahead with the plan as is; 2) not putting in any highway at all; 3) developing a non-polluting mass transit solution that would include stops throughout this community because the community is underserved by mass transit.

**EMPOWERMENT TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

Throughout these discussions the community needs to be aware of who is at the table and who is not and how to get the most diverse group to participate. The following empowerment tools would be helpful for communities to make sure the people working on these issues reflect the diversity of the community and the many points of view that exist within the community.

- **Community Asset Inventories** – Do you know what assets your community possesses? (For a discussion of assets, see Appendix 1.) How many organizations, businesses, public institutions, religious institutions, schools exist within your community. Do you know how much of your real estate is owned by community members and how much is owned by outsiders? What are the revered spaces in your community – that local corner store or barber shop where people hang out and talk while they are getting their coffee or their hair trimmed; or the park with the gym set and basketball court that is used at least 12 hours a day. Developing an inventory of your community’s assets will help you understand the diversity of your community and what people consider important to life in the community. There are simple ways to get this information and a number of guides to help you (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). The best thing about this process is you can do it yourselves and get to know your neighbors at the same time.

- **Community Mapping** – engage the community in a mapping project. You could actually develop picture maps of your community that show toxic emissions, in relation to homes, schools, or day care facilities; natural resource treasures such as green spaces, creeks, or wooded areas; environmental health problems such as diabetes, asthma, or cancer; or local businesses and the number of jobs generated. These maps could be as simple as getting a paper map from your local government and putting colored dots on it or as sophisticated as using computer software (Meuser, undated). This could be a great project for high school students.

- **Community-Organized Opinion Polling** – Similar to asset inventorying, community polling allows the community to get information from a broad cross section of community members, learning what community members think about a particular issue. We are not talking about hiring a polling firm. We are talking about developing a short easy-to-answer survey that can be passed around the community and filled out. For
example, if a community were concerned about a proposed highway they could develop a simple poll based on the larger question of how to alleviate traffic in the least polluting and disruptive manner. Questions might include: 1) Are you concerned about a highway being built in the community? 2) If so, why? 3) Do you currently use mass transit? 4) If not, would you use it if there were a stop within five blocks of your home? The questions should be phrased so that the answers are either yes/no or simple multiple choice including the choice of “other” with space for an alternative not listed on the poll. Such polls could be distributed to churches, civic organizations, and schools. You might even get a high school teacher to engage students in developing and distributing the poll.

- **Drafting Goals with Local/State Agencies** – A community could develop five- or ten-year goals with the help of a public agency around a specific environmental, economic, or social issue. For example, you could develop ten-year environmental health goals or five-year goals for the local public schools. The community would make sure that meetings were held throughout the community at various times and places so that as many people as possible could participate. There should be a process where everyone gets a chance to brainstorm ideas and then another process to debate the ideas and pick those that you reach consensus on.

- **Future Search** – This is a structured 3-day process involving about 65 people carefully chosen to represent all parts of the community. The goal is to reach agreement on solutions to a specific problem, such as “Affordable housing in our county.” The technique has had remarkable success in many different settings. It takes at least 6 months to plan a successful Future Search. The process helps diverse stakeholders discover values, purposes, and projects together and enables groups to start working toward their desired future right away. Four core principles underpin successful Future Searches: 1. Every community or organization is part of a whole system and therefore in order to do any planning the whole system must be in the room. 2. You have to explore the “whole elephant” (system) before trying to fix any part. 3. You have to focus on the things that you agree on and set aside problems and conflicts, treating them as information rather than action items. 4. Participants have to self-manage and take responsibility before, during, and after the Future Search. Each Future Search is carefully designed so that diverse stakeholders participate throughout the planning process and at the Future Search where ideally eight people are working in each of eight different stakeholder groups. Initially participants review the past by looking at key events in the world, in their own lives, and in the history of the Future Search topic. Then they look at the present, particularly the trends affecting them, what they are currently doing about the key trends, and what they are currently proud of and sorry for when dealing with these trends. Lastly participants find common ground and volunteer to take next steps (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000).

- **Independent Editorial Page in Local Newspaper** – community organizations could try to get their local newspaper to host an independent editorial page. An editor, elected by organizations throughout the community, would manage this page, filling it with news and commentary not normally covered in the newspaper and of interest to local citizens. The newspaper could run a disclaimer about the page so that they would be freed of
criticism for its content. Funding for the page could either come from a small tax or from a blind trust set-up specifically for the page.

- **Study Circles**—this discussion format, modeled after the Chautauqua movement for adult education of the 1880s, was developed and is promoted by Study Circles Resource Center (Study Circles Resource Center, undated). Study circles are small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions that provide a simple way of involving community members in dialogue and action on important political and social issues. Study circles are locally driven by a coalition of community organizations with the free help of the Study Circles Resource Center. In a study circle round, multiple groups of 8 to 12 diverse participants, each with a neutral facilitator, meet during a period of time to address a particular problem. For example a study circle round might examine bringing a supermarket to an inner city area that has none or improvements to community policing programs. The study circle process is designed so that individual participants first share personal experiences related to the issue, then the group discusses policy options, and finally the group decides how they can take action. Each of the study circles keep careful notes, which are compiled into a recommendation report. By participating in study circles, individuals gain “ownership” of issues, discover a connection between their own experiences and public policies, and gain a deeper understanding of their own and others’ perspectives. These can be done within organizations or government agencies but have their greatest impact when organizations throughout a community work together to create large-scale programs.

**WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND OFFICIALS**

Once the community is organized and understands what it wants, it can start to work with government agencies and officials. Here are a few things to think about when working with local governments:

- In an effort to get diverse representation, everyone needs to understand what it takes for people to really participate. This includes financial compensation for time, child care while attending meetings, transportation to meetings, translation services (and perhaps other things). Government officials and corporate representatives are earning their living while attending meetings; they should not expect community representatives to donate their time and energy.

- Government officials can travel to communities for meetings rather than having community members always make the trek to some high rise in the middle of the city. This serves two purposes: it increases community participation and it allows government officials to experience the community first-hand. Suddenly the apartment building slated for demolition or the polluting power plant becomes real and not just a statistic on a piece of paper.

- Most importantly, the community can work with government officials to correctly frame the questions. A narrow question – such as where do we put the incinerator? – can be
rephrased as a broader question, what should we do with our garbage? Or how do we reduce the amount of garbage we create? When you ask a broader question you are likely to get a broader range of answers. Of course the more diverse the group answering the question, the more diverse the answers will be.

PARTICIPATORY TOOLS AVAILABLE TO GOVERNMENTS TO IMPLEMENT THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

Governments can change their traditional ways of interacting with citizens. In the current system decisions are often made by a small group of people, then announced to communities after the fact. If communities want to modify a proposal, they often have to engage in long, expensive legal or political battles. This embitters people, undermines their faith in government, and causes many to “drop out” and stop participating. So our environments, communities, and health continue to deteriorate.

It is important for governments to start engaging citizens differently because it is the right thing to do in a democracy and because engaged citizens can prevent expensive problems of urban decay. Governments can genuinely engage citizens using one or more of the following participatory tools. (Some of these tools are already in use but need to be reworked to involve a diverse citizenry more deeply.)

- **Citizen Advisory Committees** – Many government agencies use these committees to help with decision-making on a variety of issues (transportation, education, policing, housing, art, etc.). In principle these committees are a good idea but historically in some communities they have been ineffective for various reasons (such as limits on the issues they can address; politically appointed membership who are not truly representative of a community; set up to rubber stamp decisions already made; heavy influence from corporate representatives; limited input from citizens who are not members of the committee). Government agencies could work with communities to redesign advisory committees so that the community gets to appoint the members, the committee itself gets to decide which issues it will address, and how to get broader community input before making final decisions.

- **Civic Juries** – Juries composed of citizens are a form of participation based on the legal jury system and promoted by the Jefferson Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Center randomly selects a panel of 18 jurors who are expected to represent the community. The jury is asked to study a particular public issue (for example, solid waste, traffic congestion, or physician assisted suicide); the jury meets for four or five days to hear “expert witnesses” with a range of views on the issue, deliberates, and then presents its recommendations to the public. The Jefferson Center has trademarked the term “Citizen Jury” so if someone wants to use this exact phrase they must go through the Jefferson Center (Jefferson Center, undated). On the other hand, anyone could create a similar process in their own community and call it something like a “civic jury” without violating copyright laws. This process may be limited because some minority views may not be adequately represented, and there is no guarantee that the results of the jury will
become part of a decision. Whoever sets up the jury process needs to make sure that these problems are addressed.

• **Community Councils** – councils modeled after watershed councils could be developed to advise town and city governments on policies that affect communities. Such councils exist now in Birmingham, Alabama; Dayton, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; St. Paul, Minnesota; and San Antonio, Texas. Los Angeles, California is in the process now of creating a system of community councils. (Prugh and others, 2000 and Berry and others, 1993).

Community councils are composed only of local people who either live or work in the community and would include business people, private land/home owners, renters, activists, and ordinary citizens. Typically, the council’s role is to inform people about citizenship within their community; make recommendations to resolve disputes affecting the local community; carry-out community enhancement projects such as turning a vacant lot into a community garden and meeting space; and help coordinate goal setting by the community. These councils could be funded using local / state taxes; a mechanism used by many watershed councils (Prugh and others, 2000). These councils would be different than citizen advisory committees because they would look at the community as a whole as well as part of a larger region rather than focusing on a single aspect such as transportation or education.

• **Consensus Conferences** – Originally developed by the federal National Institutes of Health to produce consensus statements on controversial medical topics, consensus conferences are now being used by European governments to reach consensus on controversial social issues (for example, genetically altering livestock, telecommunications policy, or the use of transplants in medicine). The conference is managed by a steering committee that chooses a lay panel of 15 volunteer participants who lack significant prior knowledge about the issue. Working with a skilled facilitator, the lay panel discusses a background paper on the subject and formulates questions for a public forum. The government agency sponsoring the conference assembles an expert panel including scientific, technical, social, and ethics experts and stakeholders from unions, industry, and environmental organizations. The lay panel then reviews more agency-provided background papers, asks more questions, and suggests additions and deletions to the expert panel. During the concluding four-day public forum, the experts make presentations and answer questions from the lay panel and sometimes from the audience. The lay panel deliberates and then cross-examines the expert panel to fill in information gaps and to clarify areas of disagreement. The lay panel then writes a report, summarizing the issues on which it has achieved consensus and identifying points of disagreement. Results of the panel are widely distributed to the media and local hearings are held to stimulate informed public debate, help citizens understand the issues, and influence decision-makers. As with all these processes, serious effort is needed to insure a diverse panel (Sclove, 2001).

• **Early Warning Networks** – these networks have been developed by non-profit organizations to warn communities when local companies may be shutting down and by the Minnesota Department of Health to identify emerging public health problems. The
Center for Labor & Community Research in Chicago works with communities to develop early warning networks for economic transitions that might cause job loss, such as when an elderly owner retires and no one in her family wants to take over the business, or when a company A is purchased by company B, which intends to shut down company A. The early warning network is a coalition of community, labor, religious institutions, government, and local business representatives. The network proactively looks for companies that are in danger of shutting down and with the community devises plans to keep that from happening (Swinney, 1999). Early warning networks can also identify local companies that find themselves in financial trouble because of poor management, and can then help firms get professional management advice.

Recently the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) has developed an early warning system to identify emerging public health problems, based on the long-established practice of “alert practitioners” who observe unusual events or emerging trends. Members of the public can ask the Emerging Issues Advisory Group to research a particular public health problem. The Advisory Group will evaluate and make recommendations to the MDH about issues that are general public health problems, carry risks of serious and/or irreversible harm, affect children and other vulnerable populations, and have feasible interventions (Minnesota Department of Health, 2001). Future efforts may extend this by establishing mechanisms that continuously scan for new patterns of emerging problems.

- **Scenario Workshops** – developed in Europe, this process allows communities and government agencies to look at alternative ways to solve a problem. For example let’s say that the problem is what to do with household sewage and wastewater because the local sewage treatment plant will be inadequate in 10 years. The four scenarios are: 1) the government deals with this problem without input from citizens; 2) every household is required to deal with its own sewage, meeting public health standards, but without government help; 3) each individual household negotiates a solution directly with local government; or 4) local residents cooperate with each other and, as a group, negotiate a solution with local government. For each of these scenarios detailed alternatives are developed that include who does what and how it gets done. Then a participatory group of citizens and stakeholders provide a critical analysis of each scenario including barriers to success, how these barriers might be overcome, and how the scenario fits in with the goals of the community. They can also ask questions and suggest combining pieces of one scenario with pieces of others to meet the community’s goals (Sclove, 1999). Note that this technique assumes that the community already has stated goals for its future.

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If you would like to suggest additions to the “Empowerment Tools” and/ or “Participatory Tools” sections—or to any other part of the paper—please send them to Maria B. Pellerano at the above addresses.
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Kretzmann, John P. and John L. McKnight. *Building Communities From the Inside Out; A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets.* Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Institute for Public Research, The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 1993. This publication is only available from ACTA Publications, 4848 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60640; phone: (800) 397-2282.


Sclove, Richard E. “Town Meetings on Technology.” Amherst, Mass.: The Loka Institute, 2001. Available at http://www.loka.org/pubs/techrev.htm or from The Loka Institute, P.O. Box 355, Amherst, MA 01004.


FURTHER READING

Civic Participation


In this book, Robert Putnam looks at trends of civic engagement in the U.S. during the past 30 years. He not only examines such things such as campaigning and voting but also participation in community organizations, letter writing, and card games.

Community Visioning


This is an excellent guide that takes you through the community visioning process and includes specific sections on downtown revitalization, economic development, housing, land use, natural resources, public works, transportation, and workforce development. You can read this 276-page guide online at http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/G3708.PDF but you cannot print it. If you want a printed copy, contact: Cooperative Extension Publications, 45 North Charter Street, Madison, WI 53715; phone: (608) 262-3346; toll-free: (877) WIS-PUBS (947-7827); fax: (608) 265-8052.


This online tutorial will guide you through the community visioning process.


This publication describes a simple but powerful process that communities can use to plan for their future. The process engages the entire community in visioning, planning, and working toward its desired future. Available from Cooperative Extension Service, Business Office, Publications Sales, P.O. Box 391, Little Rock, AR 72203; phone: (501) 671-2041. A short version is available on line at: http://extension.usu.edu/wrde/resources/drtoolkit/tool2-z.pdf.

Democracy


This book explains the difference between “thin” and strong democracy. It is not particularly easy to read, so we recommend the book by Thomas Prugh instead.

This book describes community councils — neighborhood organizations connected in various ways to municipal government -- in four American cities and systematically evaluates their successes and their shortcomings.


This book examines the importance of “strong” democracy to sustainability. It includes a clear interpretation of Benjamin Barber’s work on strong democracy.

**Empowerment Tools**


This web site provides information on Future Search conferences and the Future Search network. For more information on Future Search see the book, listed below, by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff.

Kretzmann, John P. and John L. McKnight. *Building Communities From the Inside Out; A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Institute for Public Research, The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 1993. This publication is only available from ACTA Publications, 4848 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60640; phone: (800) 397-2282.

This is the most general of the many publications put out by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. This book provides important checklists that can help you start inventorying your community’s assets. See http://www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd.html for more specific workbooks such as those that help you inventory economic assets, consumer expenditures, and community members’ skills.


Learn to map and gain access to free mapping software on this website.


This website offers much good information on study circles, plus many publications to help you get one started in your community.

This book explains the Future Search process with step-by-step guidelines for planning, facilitating, and following up a Future Search conference.

**Participatory Tools**


This web site explains the Citizens Jury Process as designed by the Jefferson Center.


This paper described this particular early warning network.


This publication explains how scenario workshops are conducted in Europe.


This publication explains how to conduct a consensus conference.


This article explains how Early Warning Systems can predict and prevent job losses.


This publication reviews several methods of democratic decision-making including citizen advisory committees, citizen juries, consensus conferences, and scenario workshops.
APPENDIX 1: Assets

The basic idea of an assets-based strategy is that people need income but they also need more—they need assets that can provide them with a continuous stream of future benefits including income. Assets can give people not only money income but also security, status, self-esteem, standing in the community, pride, hope, freedom to think long-term, the ability to help themselves and their children, a sense of belonging, and a sense of control over their own lives, among other benefits. Control of one asset (for example, a home) can be leveraged to gain control of other assets (for example, education, or access to credit) thus opening up new opportunities. If you control assets, you have a stake in the future of your community. Without a stake, it’s hard to be a stakeholder. Whether we like it or not, in the U.S., control of assets is the basis of political power. At the present time, control of assets in the U.S. is astonishingly inequitable: The top 20% of families own 91% of all financial wealth, leaving only 9% of the nation’s wealth to be shared among the other 80% of families.

The aim of an assets-based strategy is to put control of assets (of all kinds) into the hands of the people who now lack them, as a way to alleviate or eliminate poverty, inequality and despair. As its particular focus, the assets strategy aims to protect and enhance assets and to use them to build democratically-run communities that can sustain both their inhabitants and their natural assets over the long haul.

It is important for locally-based organizations to take stock of all their community’s assets. By developing asset inventories community-based organizations can think strategically about how to control their assets. Also by looking at their community in a positive way, activists can begin to see how to develop long-term strategies that will make it harder for outsiders to destroy their community.

There are five basic types of assets in every community:

• **Financial** – money used to create opportunity such as taxes, or individual assets
• **Natural** – air, water, and soil
• **Human** – skills, talents, and knowledge
• **Built** – buildings, playgrounds, and roads
• **Social** – organizations, ethnic traditions, and neighborliness

Below, we have defined each of these assets in greater detail and we have suggested questions that communities should be asking—questions that will help them create inventories and allow them to think strategically about controlling community assets.

**Financial assets:** Financial wealth is an example of an asset— it is a stock of goods (money or real estate) that can provide a stream of benefits (for example, income) into the future. This is financial capital. Financial capital is “money that is not typically used to purchase milk, shoes, or other necessities. Sometimes it bails families out of financial and personal crises, but more often it is used to create opportunities...” (Oliver, 1997: 171) Here are some questions activists should be asking about their community’s financial assets:
• What financial assets do people have? Are they investing it inside or outside the community?

• What opportunities do people have to invest in this community? (Community owned companies, local credit unions, local mortgage funds, etc.)

**Natural assets:** Natural assets are assets provided by nature, such as air, water, soil and vegetation. We can think of natural assets as falling into two categories, sources and sinks. Sources include the assets that we usually call “resources” such as land, water, air, forests and other vegetation, metals and minerals, fossil fuels (oil, gas, and coal), and energy from the sun. Sinks include nature’s capacity to absorb wastes and recycle them so they become resources once again (for humans or for other living things). For example, animals (including humans) exhale carbon dioxide as a waste but plants absorb carbon dioxide and use it for their own growth; as a result, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere remains in balance (with some natural variation over long periods of time) and this balance regulates the temperature of the Earth, keeping it habitable and pleasant. (Without carbon dioxide in the air, the whole planet would be a frozen wasteland, unable to support life as we know it.)

All natural assets — both sources and sinks — can be degraded. Forests can be cut down faster than they grow back, and an ecosystem’s capacity to cleanse wastes can be overwhelmed. To return to the example of carbon dioxide, nature’s ability to regulate carbon dioxide can be overwhelmed when millions of humans dump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by burning coal and oil. The result is a buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which tends to warm up the whole planet. This “global warming” effect is occurring now, disrupting weather patterns, contributing to an increase in large storms, floods, droughts and so on. Thus both sources and sinks are natural assets that must be protected if we are to pass them on to future generations. Here are some questions activists should be asking about their community’s natural assets:

• What are the important natural assets in our community?

• What land is public/private? Do we know who owns what? Do the owners live in the community or outside the community?

• Is our airshed or watershed being contaminated?, If so do we know by whom? Are they inside or outside the community?

**Human assets:** Human assets include each individual’s natural gifts and acquired knowledge, skill, experience and capacity to work. An acquired skill such as cooking is an example of a human asset. All communities are rich in human assets, though they may not all realize it. Human assets include all of our individual talents, skills, capacities, and knowledge. Here are some questions activists should be asking about their community’s human assets:

• Do we know what skills, talents, and special knowledge our residents have?, Are they using these talents to help the community?

• Do we have a way for people to share talents without paying for them? For example, a community currency system.
• Do people have a way of learning about each other’s talents?

• Are there populations whose talents are not being used (disabled, seniors, children or prisoners)?

**Built assets:** The stove that you use for cooking is an example of a built asset — so long as you take care of it and provide it with fuel, you can cook food with it far into the future. Other examples of built assets include houses and apartments, commercial buildings, roads, bridges, buses, and playgrounds. Each of these provides ongoing benefits and can be passed along to future generations. Here are some questions activists should be asking about their community’s built assets:

• Do we know what built capital exists in our community?, Who owns it? Do they reside in the community? Who maintains it?

• Do we have built capital that is not being used? For example empty buildings? What would be a good use for these assets? Can we work with the owners to achieve our goals?

**Social assets:** Social assets refer to the social networks, norms, and trust that make it possible for people to live, learn, and work together for their mutual benefit. (Norms are an important part of social assets; they include laws, rules — including unspoken rules — and expectations that guide our behavior, such as keeping promises, driving on the expected side of the road, and abiding by the golden rule.) Family ties, ethnic traditions and neighborliness are part of social assets. If a neighborhood has a rich network of organizations that bind people together, and if people in that neighborhood seize opportunities to meet and talk and make decisions about the things that foster good quality of life, then that neighborhood is rich in “social assets.”

• What organizations exist in our community? What services do they provide to the community?

• What meeting places exist in our community – local barber shop, coffee shop, churches?

• Are there enough opportunities for people to celebrate their ethnic traditions? Is the local government supportive?

**References**