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Unearth Hidden Assets through Community Co-design and Co-production

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Abstract: This paper discusses main findings of a pilot study, which explored how co-design and co-production could support asset-based community development. Increasingly, community developments have shifted toward an 'asset-based' approach, which concentrates on uncovering and mobilising existing assets in a community to create new opportunities. The study experimented with different co-design techniques to investigate how they could help identify unrecognised assets. Four pilot studies were conducted with key stakeholders in four communities. The study brought together researchers and local communities with the objective to co-design, co-develop and co-analyse the pilots. The results suggested that co-design was perceived as empowering. In most cases, it was 'people' that were regarded the most important assets in a community. Engaging people in a creative process could help them appreciate their skills, knowledge and creativity, and recognise themselves as assets. This research advanced the knowledge in Social Design by demonstrating how co-design could support community developments.

Keywords: Co-design, Asset-based Community Development, Creative/Art-based Methodology, Community Engagement,

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the main findings of the first phase of a research project funded by AHRC under their Connected Communities Programme. This study was a collaboration of four universities in the UK and brought together multidisciplinary academic investigators. It also included diverse project partners. The overall aim was to explore how co-design and co-production could be used to support asset-based community development.

Traditionally, community developments have adopted the *'deficit model'*, which Beazley, Griggs and Smith (2004) described as an approach where external agencies were brought in to identify shortcomings of a particular community and recommend suitable interventions to fix the problems. This *'needs-based'* approach, which seeks to uncover needs and problems can have negative psychological effects on communities, e.g. creating a *'client'* mentality among residents (Church Urban Fund, 2013). People may feel disempowered and dependent rather than becoming more

resilient and gaining confidence to take control of their own lives and their community's future developments (Foot and Hopkins, 2010). Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argued that community developments should not focus on identifying needs, problems and deficiencies, as this would make people look at their communities with negative lenses. They suggested that it would be more useful to concentrate on valuable assets that a community possesses (e.g. tacit knowledge, skills and social networks) and explore how to mobilise them to create new opportunities for the community in a sustainable manner. As a result, their *"Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)"* concept begins with a self-mapping exercise to uncover existing (but often unrecognised) assets.

Mathie and Cunningham (2003) observed that good use of the ABCD approach can help transform communities from being passive recipients of public services to *'designers'* of community development programmes. The ABCD approach has been widely adopted in various fields, e.g. public health and area regeneration – see Lynch (2010) and McLean and McNeice (2012) for examples. Thus, the *'asset-based'* approach was chosen to underpin this study, as it concentrates on active collaboration with communities to achieve long-lasting changes. In this context, the study aimed to explore the role of co-design processes on unearthing hidden and often unrecognised assets.

2. Background to the Research

Co-design is generally defined as *"the (collective) creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process"* (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). On this basis, this study encouraged the active participation of all parties throughout the whole process – ranging from framing questions/themes that would drive the project right through to creating and testing solutions. In the literature, a closely related term is co-production. Co-production refers to emerging practices in public service design and delivery:

> "Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours." (Boyle and Harris, 2009)

Recent research showed that good use of co-design and co-production in community developments could support community building, since the participatory approach encourages self-help and positive behaviour changes (Boyle and Harris, 2009). The active participation could create new networks within the community and strengthen existing ones, which could enhance resilience and prevent potential problems (Sanders and Simon, 2009). Effective use of co-design and co-production in community developments could attract disengaged members of the community to get involved and create creative solutions with respect to available resources and infrastructures (Bontoft, 2006).

However, successful use of co-design and co-production in community developments is still rare (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2008). It was observed that the use of co-design and co-production in the majority of community engagements remains *'weak'* (Walker, 2010), since people are not truly treated as co-decision makers or co-developers. Most engagements in community-led development projects are confined to consultation practices, e.g. identifying needs and problems. People might be given an opportunity to propose new ideas. Nevertheless, they are insufficiently involved in transforming ideas into reality. To achieve the full benefits of co-design and co-production, people must be given a chance to go through the whole design process (Lam and Dearden, 2015). Sanders (2002) stressed that questioning and observing people alone cannot uncover their latent assets and aspirations. There is a need to go beyond consultation and participatory research, and start involving people in co-design activities (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The acts of designing things can help

people better understand their needs and dreams, as well as build up their confidence to tackle any problems coming their way. This is the first step towards making them more resilient and self-reliant.

3. Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the project was *"to find out how to achieve inclusive asset-based community developments through co-design and co-production."* The goal of the first phase was to investigate how co-design tools and techniques could be used to 1) uncover the assets that were unrecognised by most people, and 2) attract hard-to-reach groups in order to make the process more inclusive. The first phase of this study contains three objectives. Firstly, the team piloted asset-mapping exercises with four communities using different co-design tools and techniques to 1) discover hidden assets, 2) find out which co-design activities include or exclude certain groups, and 3) identify barriers that prevent unengaged/marginalised people from being involved in community development projects. Secondly, the results gathered through the pilot activities were analysed and reflected upon to find out which co-design tools and techniques were best at identifying assets. Finally, the practical knowledge captured through this first phase was used to inform the plan for the following phases.

4. Research Methods

The co-design and co-production approach was employed to plan research activities. The rationale was that the *'collaborative'* nature of the co-design and co-production approach could offer a meaningful way for academic investigators and community partners to co-create new knowledge together. In this way, academic rigour can be assured and outcomes are likely to be relevant, useful and practical for the communities. As a result, all research activities were collaboratively designed by all parties and each task encouraged all team members to work closely together and collectively reflect upon outcomes. The research activities can be divided into four main tasks.

4.1 Activity 1: Learning from Previous Experience

The first activity was delivered via a one-day workshop (Workshop 1). All parties worked together to extract lessons and insights from previous asset-based community development projects. The workshop began with two mini case studies – two project partners who have had experience of carrying asset-based community development projects were asked to share their stories, processes, community engagement activities, findings, tips and advice. The case study presentations were followed by group discussions to reflect on main lessons learned individually and collectively. All participants were asked to work as a team to critically examine different asset-mapping approaches to extract key insights. In this way, good practices could be drawn. They were also asked to identify contributions that the co-design approach could bring to community-led development study.

4.2 Activity 2: Methodology Development

The second activity was delivered through a one-day workshop (Workshop 2) with all the academic researchers and project partners. The workshop contained two tasks: debriefing and brainstorming. Firstly, the team reflected on main lessons captured from the first workshop and summarised all key points and insights. Secondly, the team drew upon their multidisciplinary expertise and previous experiences to come up with a wide range of hands-on co-design activities that could appeal to different groups in the community. The brainstorming session was followed by an idea screening process to select suitable activities for the pilot studies. Finally, the action plans were drawn.

4.3 Activity 3: Four Pilot Studies

The third activity concentrated on 1) piloting different co-creation activities with four different communities across the UK, and 2) capturing practical knowledge through these pilot studies.

4.4 Activity 4: Reflecting on and Co-design the Next Phase

The final activity was delivered through a one-day workshop (Workshop 3). The workshop comprised of three main tasks. Firstly, all investigators who led different pilot studies with the communities were asked to present their processes and results. Secondly, group discussions were carried out to identify pros and cons of each co-design activity and to discuss how to make the methodology more inclusive. The team also examined assets identified through different hands-on methods to see whether there are relationships between activities and types of assets emerged. Finally, all parties decided based on pilot studies results which aspects they would like to pursue further.

5. Findings and Discussion

The results captured through the first phase of the study can be categorised into three groups: 1) knowledge captured through knowledge and experience sharing in Workshop 1; 2) knowledge gained through co-analysing key lessons and co-designing research activities in Workshop 2; and 3) knowledge gathered through experimenting with different co-design techniques in pilot studies.

5.1 Key Findings of Workshop 1

Two mini case studies, namely Wiltshire Voices[1] and The Glass-House Community Led Design's practices, were discussed. The brief descriptions of these case studies are shown below.

Case Study 1 – Wiltshire Voices: The Wiltshire Council has been running the Area Boards as a means to localise the decision making process on various issues. Although these boards allow people get involved in making public decisions that could directly affect them, many people were not interested in participating. Reaching disengaged members of the community in order to ensure their voices are heard represents real challenges. Rather than forcing people to attend formal meetings, a team was sent to talk to these hard-to-reach groups in their own places. The team applied the *'empathy building'* process as a means to connect with disengaged members of the community. They began by recognising these people as assets. A series of workshops took place before the team managed to identify people who were willing to share their views and commissioned the professional video production team to record their stories. These stories really help people, especially public service providers, gain better understanding about their service users. The stories also help to change people's preconception about certain groups (e.g. Gypsy and Travelers). Through this process, people developed a sense of belonging within the project. This empathic approach helped unleash assets that were already in the communities, but were unrecognised and/or disconnected.

Case Study 2 – The Glass-House Community Led Design is a not-for-profit organisation specialising in supporting and promoting public participation and leadership in the design of the built environment. The organisation believes that the quality of surrounding environments affects people's quality of life and, thus, people should be at the heart of the decision making of the design of their places. The organisation employed a number of hands-on creative techniques to help people *'interact'* and *'experiment'* with places and gain confidence to challenge designers. Being playful is the key to get people involved and think outside the box. It was observed that communities are rather exclusive.

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[1] http://wiltshirevoices.wordpress.com/

People thought that they engaged with other groups of people, but actually they were not. Hence, helping them working together is a big part of this process. The Glass-House organises a number of activities, such as a debate series, to help people get rid of misconceptions of certain groups, develop empathy and have an honest conversation. *'People'* are often the most important assets in a community and they often hold the key to unlock other assets. To unleash people's potential, it is essential to recognise them as assets. An empathic approach could help in terms of getting to know people, understanding their situations and discovering their potential contributions.

Key Lessons: It can be seen that **empathy building** could help overcome misconceptions of certain groups, which, in turn, help discover their potential contributions. Previous projects show that empathy can be built through honest conversations and storytelling. It is crucial to find a **safe space** where all parties feel comfortable to experiment with unconventional ideas. Playful, yet meaningful, activities could help create people's interests. There is a need to help people develop a strong **sense of ownership** of the community. This helps create/strengthen social groups and networks within communities. It is also important to help all stakeholders understand and respect each other. In this way, people can collectively create a shared vision for change and a shared approach for problem solving. The key lessons learned from Workshop 1 provided useful criteria for the methodology development and helped the team select suitable co-design techniques for the pilot studies.

5.2 Key Findings of Workshop 2

A number of hands-on creative activities were proposed, evaluated and selected. The team decided to use different co-design techniques with different groups so that the outcomes could be compared. All co-design techniques chosen met all the criteria derived from Workshop 1 (see Table 1).

- **Service Safari**, which helps different stakeholders evaluate existing services, could promote empathy and enhance sense of ownership via experience sharing and co-analysing. It also encourages people to explore new ways of achieving better services.
- **Asset-mapping Methodology**[2], which assists people in identifying and mapping out assets in their areas, not only promotes empathy building and enhances a sense of ownership through conversations, but also encourages people to explore creative ways to gain access to and/or make better use of available (yet underutilised) assets.
- **Participatory Theatrical Methods**, which excel in getting people to develop empathy with others via storytelling and encourage participants to explore everyday issues from different point of views through role playing, do fulfil all the criteria.
- **LEGO Serious Play**, which specialises in helping people explore new ideas in a fun way, could help provide a safe space and offer an engaging activity to connect with people. Casual conversations during the session also promote empathy among participants.

Table 1. Advantages of each co-design tools selected for the pilot studies

Criteria	Service Safari	Asset Mapping Methodology	Participatory Theatrical Methods	LEGO Serious Play
Empathy building	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
Provide a 'safe' space for experimenting with unconventional ideas	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓
Increase the sense of ownership	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓

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[2] http://creativecitizens.co.uk/2013/02/23/developing-our-asset-mapping-methodology/

The co-design approach provided a good methodological framework for all investigations – each pilot study followed three key stages of co-design: 1) co-exploring issues and framing the key question together, 2) co-designing activities to engage community members to identify hidden assets and 3) co-producing the outcomes – in most cases, the main outcomes were action plans for the next stage.

5.3 Key Findings of Pilot Studies

Pilot Study 1 was carried out with HealthWORKS Newcastle, a charity promoting good health and well-being to communities in Tyneside, North East of England. Six participants including a project development officer of the Churches Regional Commission, four senior members of the charity and a member of Community First Panel, Newcastle, took part in the pilot study, which was organised as an informal meeting. Since the charity provides a wide range of services, **Service Safari** was adapted to support the meeting. A number of prompt cards were created to examine the current services. The process started with a round table introduction, followed by a brief explanation about the project, and a group discussion exploring the makeup of their communities, their aspirations, hidden assets and opportunities for future collaboration. Since the goal of the charity is spreading healthy living messages and practices to local communities, the participants perceived volunteers recruited from local communities who help the charity reach hard-to-reach people through their social networks as main assets. Prior to working with this charity, many of volunteers were regarded as unengaged people themselves. Hence, the participants were keen to learn from them about their experiences of being involved in co-designing and co-producing health support for their communities and use this evidence to plan better services and activities. The co-design activities had helped identify a variety of assets. However, the structure of Service Safari might have prevented participants from exploring assets that were not directly linked to the current services.

Pilot Study 2 was conducted with Tidworth Mums, a not-for-profit group set up to improve well-being of families with children in Tidworth, Wiltshire. Most members are wives of army employees. Six members of Tidworth Mums and the Tidworth Community Area Manager, Wiltshire Council, took part in this study, which was organised as an informal discussion based around the **Asset Mapping Methodology** (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Asset mapping exercises with members of Tidworth mums

The main focus was to introduce the team, develop an understanding of the makeup and functions of their community, discuss their issues and challenges, and explore opportunities for future collaboration. Despite operating on the basis of a small number of volunteers, this group has many significant achievements. Evidently, these *'mums'* are valuable assets of their community. However, the makeup of their community presents a significant barrier to unlock their potential. Most mums live as single parents because their husbands are away for large periods of time. Friendships are hard to build and maintain, since families have to move around very often due to the unpredictable nature of army obligations. Moreover, it is difficult to have the support of their extended families, as

they are situated far from their place of origin. Most mums are unemployed. The poor childcare support in the area prevents their time from being better utilised. The weak social structure and the lack of spaces for social activities led to emotional problems, e.g. boredom and isolation. Thus, they were interested in unlocking and mobilising assets, e.g. people and time, to address problems identified. Ideas, e.g. time banking and recreation spaces for families, are suggested as areas for further exploration. The *'open'* nature of this pilot study enabled the group to uncover tangible and intangible assets, and identify the key areas for future collaboration.

Pilot Study 3 was organised with support from two community partners: 1) the New Vic Borderlines, an award-winning theatre outreach department, which works with marginalised individuals and communities, and 2) Kindle Partnerships, a community-based organisation promoting innovative relationships between communities and public services, especially health services. The pilot study entitled *'A Picture of Health'* involved twelve community members, three theatre practitioners, one academic partner and two Kindle partners. A broad range of creative techniques and **participatory theatrical methods** (e.g. cultural animation) were employed to explore hidden assets in relation to individual health choices and public health services. The workshop started by exploring people's views of what good health is and of whether local community could influence health services. The workshop revealed that most people felt they understood what good health is but felt powerless to make any differences to health services. Next, the group was given a scenario depicting a health dilemma of a fictional character, which they were asked to discuss health options and consequences. At the end of the workshop, three haikus and three pictures of health were created (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.   The Picture of Health created by local people

The interesting structure helped attract a wide range of participants in a short space of time. Although people were unsure about the process at first, their views were positively transformed at the end of the process. This study has uncovered a number of intangible assets, e.g. interest of community on health issues. Fewer tangible assets were identified. The outcomes provided a clear focus for this group – helping people recognised themselves as actors/influencers of public health.

Pilot Study 4 was conducted at Shinfield Rise Community Flat, Wokingham, with six participants including community development workers, members of Shinfield North Community First Panel, the Commissioning Officer and the Local Borough Councillor for Wokingham Borough Council – many of them are also local residents. The top priorities of the areas are 1) increasing engagement across communities, 2) improving youth activities and opportunities due to the high rate of young people who are not in education, employment or training, and 3) supporting isolated older people. The principles of **LEGO Serious Play** (see Figure 3) were applied to examine the makeup of their community, identify assets and explore opportunities for collaboration. Through the group discussion and LEGO building exercise, a wide range of underutilised assets were identified, e.g. facilities in local schools and green spaces. The co-design activities had helped discover a number of tangible assets, e.g. underutilised vehicles. Fewer intangible assets were identified. The LEGO bricks might have prevented participants from exploring more intangible assets. The overall approach was perceived as

positive, since it started with what the community already has. The process helped the group develop a clear focus for future work. They were keen to co-design and co-produce the asset identifying process in a way that it creates opportunities for young people and tackles isolation problems among older residents.

Figure 3.   LEGO models created by participants to identify assets

5.4 Key Findings of Workshop 3

The group discussions and reflections helped identify a number of important insights. The co-design approach was perceived as empowering. *'Hands-on'* creative activities worked well as they engaged people on an equal basis and got people to think outside the box. It was suggested that a wider range of participants in the pilot studies, especially disengage members of communities would be more useful. In the eyes of active members of a community, everything and everyone appear to be an asset. Other members may not share the same way of thinking, as many community partners often reported that people do not see themselves as assets and/or feel powerless to make any differences. This raised the questions regarding accessibility of the assets. Simply making invisible assets visible is not enough. Appropriate means of **unlocking** these assets is needed.

Evidently, empowering and empathy building should be an integral part of the *'unlocking'* process. The concepts of asset-based community development and co-design are not new to community partners in the sense that they have already applied some of these principles in their work – but might not be aware of the terminology. What excited many participants seems to be *'positive vibes'* generated through **playful** and **creative** techniques employed in the co-design and co-production process. According to the pilot studies, hands-on creative activities appeared to be more effective at identifying a variety of assets than planning tools, e.g. Service Safari. It was observed that model making tools (e.g. LEGO) were useful at identifying tangible assets while tools that promote dialogues (e.g. asset mapping methodology) were good at uncovering intangible assets. Hence, it is useful to investigate further how hands-on creative methods could 1) create safe spaces where people can contribute on an equal basis; 2) help people see their communities from different perspectives; and 3) help people develop their own solutions collectively to address the needs and aspirations of their communities.

6. Conclusion

This research revealed that the co-design approach has great potential to assist communities in discovering hidden assets and using them to fulfil people's needs and aspirations resulting in better community and society. The results illustrated that *'people'* should be regarded as important assets in a community. Their potential could be unleashed by using various approaches including empowering and empathy building, however, they do not readily recognise that they are the most valuable assets. Engaging people in a creative process, such as co-design, could help them recognise

themselves as assets. The key issue raised in this study was how these assets can be accessed and unlocked in order to help communities fulfil their needs, dreams and aspirations.

The results suggested that the co-design and co-production approach appeared to provide a good methodological framework for community development studies, as it encouraged all key stakeholders to work together to create appropriate output that reflect the needs and expectations of all parties involved. The pilot studies' results also showed better outcomes can be expected if playful and creative techniques are employed in the asset mapping exercise process.

The study is of value to academics in the fields of co-design and co-production and communities. It has the potential to make both a theoretical and a practical contribution. Involvement in the project has helped community partners build the capacity to undertake research using creative engagement activities in co-design and co-production process. At the same time, the academics have gained confidence in working directly with communities and better understanding of which creative tools are suitable for uncovering which types of assets and attracting which groups of people.

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