How Border Communities Can Survive and Thrive in the Era of Globalization: The Example of Fuerza Unida’s Asset Based Approach

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2000 I volunteered with Amigos de las Americas at a time when the organization was changing the way it approached development in Latin America. In short, Amigos was in the process of incorporating a new community-focused approach to development and phasing out the old, deficiency focused, or needs-based, development models of community development. The model of development theory that I use in this paper is called Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and was developed and researched by the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. This new paradigm in community development is a response to the detrimental effects of global and national policies, which are felt first and foremost at the local level.

The initial goal of this paper was to document examples of asset-based development at work in the border region; and to show how it is a more effective option than traditional needs-based development methods. I chose Fuerza Unida as a case study due to its grassroots origin and values, which seemed to draw on the fundamental principles of asset-based development that are listed above. Upon closer inspection I began to notice that not all aspects of the organization fit easily into the theory of asset-based development. This made me question if asset based development was an idealistic, but impractical theory. The idea of praxis reconciles how Fuerza Unida applies an asset-based development approach according to its particular situation. According to Gramsci, praxis is the union of theory and practice (Gramsci 1992). Based on the idea of praxis, I

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1 Amigos de las Américas is nonprofit organization that builds partnerships to empower young leaders, advance community development and strengthen multi-cultural understanding in the Americas. [www.amigoslink.org](http://www.amigoslink.org)
came to the conclusion that the practices of Fuerza Unida are the realistic manifestations of the theory of asset-based development. I will support my conclusions by 1) giving examples of how Fuerza Unida has used its assets to achieve its goals of social justice and community betterment and 2) examining the practical reasons why certain aspects of the organization are not asset-based.

NEEDS-BASED VS. ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

Briefly, the needs-based model is characterized by the implementation, through an outside force, of a prescriptive program that teaches the community the extent of its problems and then ‘fixes’ those needs, deficiencies, and faults. By focusing solely on the deficiencies of a community, this approach encourages the community’s dependency on outside aid, weakens existing assets in the community, and creates an overall negative community self-image. Needs based projects have enjoyed such popularity in the past due to their easily quantifiable, although not always effective and usually short term, results. For example, the construction of 100 new homes is commonly seen as a successful community program, whether or not the quality of life of the community members actually improves as a result of the project. Because this model is prescriptive and top-down, it is much easier to implement because the community is left out of the decision-making process. But needs-based programs do not bring about, and essentially discourage, the development of community member’s independence and capacities, which are key factors in sustainable, lasting community development. In the era of globalization, where whole communities are left jobless overnight and federal budget downsizing has rendered ineffective societal safety nets, a new approach is imperative.
An alternative is called Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD is based upon a fundamental premise: if development is to be effective and sustainable, it must start from within the community with the use of community resources. This model focuses on the empowerment of communities to solve their own problems from the inside out using the assets that already exist in the community such as youth groups, local leaders, churches, public parks, etc. This type of community-based model is called various names by different organizations. For example, the World Bank recognizes its value and has a website dedicated to what it calls Community Driven Development (World Bank Group 2000). Other terms that imply an asset-based approach are appreciative inquiry, community based initiatives, grassroots movements, and sustainable community development. Whatever the name, the ideas are similar. The following are core components of asset-based development:

- It is **Asset Based**. 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.

- It is **Internally Focused**. The development strategy concentrates first of all upon the agenda-building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, local associations and local institutions.

- It is **Relationship Driven**. 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. (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993:9)
My experience with ABCD as an Amigos volunteer showed me how much potential and influence communities can have in bringing about change on their own terms. This idea is especially encouraging for border communities, which have been negatively affected since the 1980’s by economic globalization. The purpose of this paper is to show how asset-based development can enhance community development in border communities as well as counter the problems caused by economic globalization. I will illustrate the strengths and limitations of the asset based development process by analyzing the means used by a San Antonio grassroots organization called Fuerza Unida to accomplish its mission.

**ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION AND NAFTA IN THE BORDER REGION**

Perhaps nowhere else have the negative effects of economic globalization been more evident than it is on the US-Mexico border. Before the deregulation of trade in the 1980’s, corporations looked for the cheapest labor possible within US borders in order to stay competitive. Consequently, the cheapest labor could be found in areas with high amounts of immigrants. These areas were New York, California, and the US-Mexico border. Corporations founded their plants in lower class neighborhoods and as a result many Latin American communities along the border became dependent upon the jobs these plants provided. Throughout the 1980’s government regulation of international trade steadily became less restrictive. While this trend meant lower production costs for corporations and lower prices for American consumers, the negative impacts on the American working class were not widely acknowledged.
The garment industry, which employs the highest number of Mexican immigrants, has been one of the industries most affected by international trade since the 1960’s…US employment in the [apparel] industry peaked at around 1.4 million in 1974. By 1990, however, almost one-third of apparel jobs had disappeared or been transferred to overseas production sites, and this job loss trend continued into the 1990s.” (Spener & Capps 2001:306) The US-Mexico border offers a unique environment in which to observe, in stark relief, the effects the changes in state regulation of the clothing trade have had on workers and their communities (Spener Forthcoming). Since the garment industry employs mostly lower class, immigrant workers, with language and educational barriers, job loss for these workers invariably has detrimental affects. The Texas Workforce Commission estimated that NAFTA affected workers in El Paso were 97 percent Hispanic, 67 percent women, and the majority have less than a sixth grade education nor were they fluent in English (La Mujer Obrera 2000). For these workers, the possibility of finding another job without any formal education and a lack of English speaking skills was unlikely.

ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION IN SAN ANTONIO AND FUERZA UNIDA

On January 17[1990], a Levi Strauss plant located in San Antonio’s south side announced that it had no choice but to close and move it to Costa Rica in order to stay more competitive (Cásares & Mata 1998). This explanation contrasted sharply with the fact that Levi Strauss & Co. revenues were growing and the company announced record worldwide sales of $7.1 billion six years later in 1996. The plant closure was the largest in San Antonio history. Of the 1,150 workers laid off, 92 percent were Hispanic and 86 percent were women (Zoll 1998). “By 1990, closing plants was nothing new for Levi
Strauss. Since 1981 it had closed 58 plants and put 10,400 Americans out of work. [A large percent of these Americans who lost their jobs were immigrants] This time, though, Levi’s decision to close a domestic plant and move its production abroad prompted local labor activists to fight back” (Shaw 1995:232).

These local labor rights activists were a handful of working class, mostly immigrant women with no prior organizing experience who had lost their jobs as a result of the plant closure. After organizing a meeting in a local church in the south side, this group of women founded Fuerza Unida on February 12, 1990. They subsequently filed a lawsuit against Levi Strauss & Co. demanding reparation for lost wages, physical injuries, and promised bonuses that were never realized. Also, they initiated what they called the Garment Workers Justice Campaign, which consisted of a national boycott of Levi’s products, a 21-day hunger strike, public presentations about Levi’s unjust actions, demonstrations, and finally a symbolic protest mail-in of Levis labels to the corporation’s headquarters in San Francisco.

Both the lawsuit and the justice campaign were in essence attempts to make Levi’s accountable for the way it treated its workers, but in a system where money and power determine whose rights are respected, the Levi Strauss & Co. came out on top. Ultimately Fuerza Unida lost the lawsuit. Perhaps it was because they didn’t have a strong enough case, or maybe because Levi’s had the financial resources to hire a successful team of lawyers that Fuerza Unida lacked.

The Justice Campaign, on the other hand, was one of Fuerza Unida’s first significant accomplishments. The campaign gained Fuerza Unida national and international support and recognition. Moreover, the members of Fuerza Unida had
formed an organization with the potential to positively affect not only its individual members but also the local community and a community of garment workers worldwide. In separate interviews with Petra Mata and Viola Cásares, two founding members of Fuerza Unida, both women expressed how the hardships of the plant closure brought them an awareness and compassion for others in their community that they never had before. This growing sense of community and awareness among Fuerza Unida members was a seemingly small change that served to ultimately bring about profound change both locally and on a larger scale.

MISSION AND VALUES OF FUERZA UNIDA

The fundamental nature of Fuerza Unida’s approach is a good example of the internally focused, relationship-driven theory of asset-based development in practice. Fuerza Unida’s Mission is “to educate, empower, and organize workers to become advocates for social change, organizers for economic justice and full participants in the democratic process” (Fuerza Unida 2001b). The organization is founded upon the belief that “organizing is key to creating solutions and implementing change for low/moderate income, working class women and communities” (Fuerza Unida 2001b). The organization believes that its members have the capacity to mobilize and strengthen the community in times of hardship. The organization includes all its members in the decision making process through monthly meetings, committees, etc. This is important in any community-based organization in order to incorporate the opinions and ideas of the whole community and to give the community members a sense of ownership.
Social Capital

Fuerza Unida recognizes the importance of relationship-building between individuals, groups, and organizations through network-building. The extensive network of connections, or social capital, that Fuerza Unida has developed over the years is one of its biggest assets. Unlike Kretzmann and McKnight’s definition of asset-based development, which presents local relationships and an inward focus on capacity-building as crucial, Fuerza Unida’s uses its ties with remote populations that share similar experiences as one of it’s greatest strengths. Fuerza Unida’s community is a group of people bounded not by geographical location, but by common experience. Therefore, anywhere workers have been laid off or mistreated due to the processes of economic globalization, it is that possible Fuerza Unida has established relationships. Fuerza Unida’s social capital is much more extensive and influential in achieving its mission than if it just stayed in its local community. This is one part of Fuerza Unida that does not fit well into asset-based theory as it is laid out by Kretzmann and McKnight. The very nature and mission of Fuerza Unida implies that its focus is dually local and global. For example, a worker’s rights organization very similar to Fuerza Unida in El Paso called La Mujer Obrera believes that “On the border, the local economy has become fully global.” Therefore, because of its specific mission of promoting workers rights in the face of globalization, it must look to a global community in addition to its local community.

The concept of social capital is a key aspect in community development. Although social capital is often times a vague and misunderstood concept, McClenaghan attempts to summarize the concept as “linked in one sense or another to collective ties,
norms, values, interactions, networks, and relationships reflecting the involvement of
human individuals in a ‘common life based on family and community’” (McClenaghan
2000:566). This definition applies to Fuerza Unida because the organization formed out
of a common value among its members that all workers should be treated equally and
justly. Furthermore, the community that it serves, as defined by Petra in her interview,
includes mainly people who share the commonalities of being working class, women, and
minorities. Petra did not, however, define the Fuerza Unida community in a geographical
sense; rather she described the community in terms of groups with common social ties
regardless of nationality.

Fuerza Unida depends heavily on the social capital it has accumulated throughout
its 12 years of work. For example, Fuerza Unida holds regular educational workshops
that address topics which “both inform and create public discourse pertaining to poverty,
low wage work, women’s issues, and other economic, social, and environmental issues
affecting the working class community” (Fuerza Unida 2001a). The leaders, facilitators
and speakers at these workshops are either community members, or are Mexican
American professionals who volunteer to administer the training for free. Fuerza Unida
is able to achieve its educational initiatives through its network of relationships, or social
capital, within the Mexican community of San Antonio and at times from other parts of
the US and even the world. Fuerza Unida’s social capital is not just advantageous in
finding trainers for its various programs. Their staff and members have established
working relationships with individuals from various associations who help the
community effectively gain access and support, such as legal assistance and media
contacts (Fuerza Unida 2001a).
Capacity Building

Fuerza Unida demonstrates asset-based practices by focusing a large amount of its energy on educating the people, including youth and families, of its local community. Fuerza Unida does not limit its education to issues of globalization or workers rights; instead, the local community members choose the issues that they are interested in learning about. Some examples of its local community focused projects are the Fuerza Unida Family Wellness Program, and the Member Leadership Institute. These programs directly correlate to several of the main components of asset-based development-building upon what is already present and using those assets to strengthen the community.

Self-Sufficiency

Another goal of Fuerza Unida is to be totally economically autonomous. A large amount of their time and energy is dedicated to various economic initiatives that raise money for the organization. These initiatives include a sewing cooperative and a catering service. Many of the members of Fuerza Unida are able to contribute to the organization’s economic initiatives by using skills they already have such as cooking and sewing. Despite the fact that Fuerza Unida is forced to put a majority of its energy into fund-raising instead of working on achieving its mission, the organization still relies on grants from foundations in order to stay afloat. This is one aspect of Fuerza Unida that does not neatly fit into the theory of asset-based development. Although the organization raised $50,000 of their $69,000 budget, the remaining $19,000 still made them dependent upon outside funding.
This brings up the question of whether Fuerza Unida is truly an asset-based organization. Fuerza Unida, like most small, grassroots organizations depend on at least some outside funding, yet their mission and goals as an organization are unmistakably asset-based. So the question becomes: Can community based organizations still maintain their asset-based practices and goals while at the same time being dependent on funding from foundations and interest groups? The problem relates back to needs-based approaches and the tendency for most foundations and social service funds to cater to projects that produce tangible and measurable results rather than less quantifiable effects of capacity building and education. “To accomplish their missions, [community based organizations] require the funds provided by progressive local governments, intermediaries and partnerships, but these funds come with strings attached, as the support organizations encourage [the community based organizations] to concentrate on creating a physical development capacity rather than on efforts to create an empowered, local community.”(Rubin 1995:151) Both Viola and Petra voiced their unhappiness that, in order to receive enough funding to run many of Fuerza Unida’s programs of self-improvement and empowerment, they ironically have to sell themselves as a needy community. Another difficulty is that they have to quantify exactly what products will come out of the programs they implement with the grant money they are applying for. The problem that any asset-based organization has to deal with is that the majority of ‘products’ are qualitative and hard to measure. Therefore, at the moment the only way for Fuerza Unida to receive enough money to stay afloat is to present its programs as needs-based in its grant applications.
**Personal Growth**

Perhaps the most striking transformation brought about by Fuerza Unida’s asset-based approach has been not within the community of Fuerza Unida but in the individual lives of each of its members. Both Petra and Viola expressed that they felt that they had grown tremendously, that they were more confident, and had a higher self-esteem as a result of their struggles. The value of individual growth within the organization is summed up in the following statement “We learned much through our campaign against Levi’s and we’ve built on our experience. Today, our vision and organizing strategy broadened into a Women Workers Center that organizes for workers rights, women’s empowerment, social/political participation, economic self-sufficiency, community development, and environmental justice. Fuerza Unida is a place of self-determination, self-knowledge, and self-representation—vital values for empowerment and movement” (Fuerza Unida 2001c).

**DO LOCAL ASSET-BASED INITIATIVES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

Fuerza Unida undoubtedly has had an affect on how Levi Strauss treats its workers. “Perhaps in response to the bad press generated by Fuerza Unida, Levi's has taken great pains to provide workers laid off in November 1997 with a generous severance package” (Zoll 1998). Although this is a seemingly small change, it is important to remember that this change profoundly affected the lives of each laid off worker in the El Paso plants. The effects of Fuerza Unida’s struggles for workers rights are not easy to measure, but they exist and will have profound effects on many people’s lives because of their hard and heartfelt work.
The success of Community Based Initiatives is extremely hard to measure based on present methods of evaluation. The traditional way of measuring success of a program is in tangible results such as reduction in crime rates or increase in educational achievement whereas community based initiatives focus on empowerment and capacity building. There is a disconnect between the goals of CBIs and the evaluation of CBIs which makes it seem as though community initiatives are ineffective (Edelman 2000). While the changes brought about by Fuerza Unida seem relatively small and hard to measure at first glance, according to the modern day theorist John Urry the relationship between local initiatives and global change exists. “Most people most of the time act iteratively in terms of local information, knowing almost nothing about the global connections or implications of what they were doing. However, these local actions do not remain simply local since they are captured, represented, marketed, circulated, and generalized elsewhere. They are carried along the scapes and flows of the emerging global world” (Urry, pg198). The time frame for these changes must also be taken into account. While Urry states that “most important developments in sociology have at least indirectly stemmed from social movements with ‘emancipatory interests’”, Edelman also points out, “change is a process of straggle,” which means that social change seems to lag slower than it should. Nevertheless, small changes do eventually produce massive consequences elsewhere (Urry 2000).
Bibliography


