Supporting Asset-Based Community Development in Maitland Garden Village

ABSTRACT

Our team, in collaboration with our sponsors, decided that using Maitland Garden Village's assets to build upon their strengths was the best approach for community development. An approach such as this is formally called Asset-Based Community Development. We worked closely with the residents to coordinate and create a youth focused community programme called the Green Light Project. Since the goals of the project were conceptualised by the community and it is led by motivated residents, the project can remain sustainable.

This project report is part of an ongoing research programmeme by students and faculty of the WPI Cape Town Project Centre to explore and develop options for sustainable community development in South Africa. For more information please go to: http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/

The following is an executive summary of a set of project reports that have been implemented as a website available at: http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/homepage/projects/2011-2/mgv/

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Prologue

Maitland Garden Village (MGV) is a close knit community on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa. Similar to many urban communities around the world, MGV faces obstacles of low income and high unemployment. While poverty and high unemployment rates cripple some communities that experience them, MGV is fortunate in that there are low crime rates, high social capital, and the village is filled with hundreds of exciting and interesting people (Galant). This combination of low crime and high unemployment is uncommon.

MGV's history is rich and it is significant to understanding the people who live there. The village, founded in 1922, was known for having lush gardens for many years. Each home took pride in their individual gardens and the village had competitions over who had the best garden. The population today has risen to an estimated 1,600 people, including backyard tenants (Galant). A backyard tenant is a person who builds a temporary structure or shack to live in, often illegally. Since it is illegal, authorities often try to force these people out. Most of the residents in MGV have allowed people to build shacks in their backyards. These shacks typically belong to family members or friends, who live there without having to pay rent or having fear of relocation by authorities; although this has not always been the case in MGV as a whole.

The history of MGV is not devoid of struggle and difficulty. During apartheid, the South African government tried to relocate the villagers. MGV, like many other places, resisted. However, they were successful. The people have continued to live in the same homes first built in 1922. Despite the relocation struggle, some villagers hold the opinion that conditions were better during apartheid. The lush gardens sweeping across the village have long faded away.It was in this environment that the group entered the Garden Village with the intention of doing an Asset Based Community Development project. As the work evolved, the primary objective became to form a youth and community group called the Green
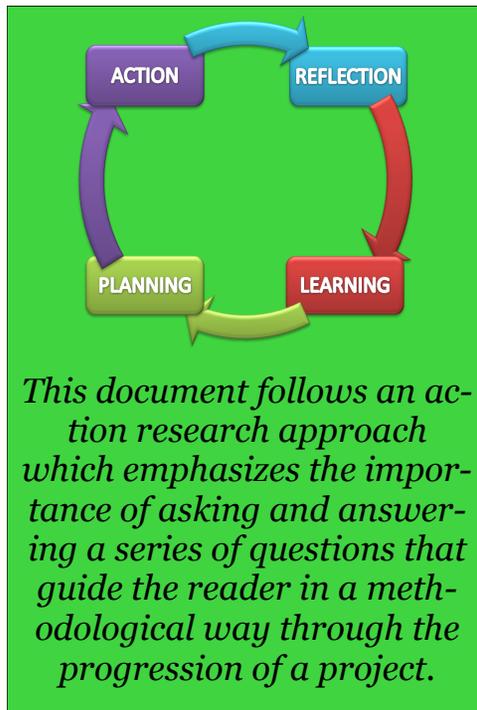

Figure 1: Cyclical thinking process for action research adapted from (Ladkin, 2004)

This document follows an action research approach which emphasizes the importance of asking and answering a series of questions that guide the reader in a methodological way through the progression of a project.

Figure 2: Arial view of Maitland Garden Village

Light Project. The big success stories of this venture were the creation of the Green Light Project with its nine specialized committees, and the completion of repairs and restoration at the crèche. This is our story.

What is the best way to aid a community in a sustainable and positive way?

Our team hoped to assist the MGV community with their development challenges. The ultimate goal of this initiative was to help MGV explore their available assets in hopes of utilising them to their full potential to stimulate continuing community development. In a typical needs-based approach to combating a community's struggles, the problems are fixed temporarily on the surface but the core roots of the problems are not addressed. We chose to employ an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to build upon their strengths. After researching various community development strategies, ABCD was chosen because it focuses on a community's strengths as opposed to their weaknesses in order to build upon what the community already has to make it stronger. Only looking at the needs and problems of a community tends to discourage and disempower, while leading to dependence on outside agencies. On the other hand, ABCD builds a store of goodwill and support within the group, empowering communities like MGV.

John Kretzmann and John McKnight are credited with being the architects of ABCD (Green, 2010). They defined assets as gifts, skills, and capacities of individuals, associations, and institutions of a community; the assets are a springboard for community action and strength-based empowerment. ABCD involves identifying and mobilising these assets to achieve collective goals, which is a process focused on community mobilisation rather than institutional reform. It is based on the concept that all individuals have the capacity to contribute to

their community – even youth, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. In fact, youth in particular are increasingly being appreciated for their potential as critical thinkers and problem solvers; the same is true in MGV.

The problem is that people do not realise the assets they have or how to utilise these assets to their full potential. By helping MGV to recognize their locally controlled resources, the residents can better utilise the assets to serve the community. These assets include social capital, which is defined as "features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action" (Emmett, 2000). After the initial identification of its assets, the community can drive the development process itself by mobilising existing assets and strengthening their skills, leading to sustainable community growth. Successful ABCD yields opportunities to build "competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution to the community," leading to sustainable improvements (Wilson, 2008).

How does one lay the foundation for a mutually beneficial relationship?

The main form of communication throughout MGV is word of mouth. The community is so small and close knit that everyone is eventually informed about important events. Many villagers were aware that a group of American students would soon come to their village, but beyond that, there were just rumours. Our team thus needed a concrete way to tell everyone in the community that we were here, who we were, what we were trying to accomplish, and to stress our goal of creating an effort led by the community with assistance from our team. The perfect opportunity to achieve these goals happened serendipitously through MGV's annual Village Day.

Village Day is a traditional weekend long celebration during October in MGV. October is the village's heritage month, and it celebrates the creation of the community, their closeness and culture. We had met one of the coordinators of the celebration, Alistair, on the first day we visited the community. He openly invited us to Village Day and ensured us that if the team needed any help to not hesitate in asking. After some deliberation, it was concluded that the celebration would be the perfect venue to strategically introduce our-

Figure 3: Drum Majorettes at Village Day

selves and the collaborative project to the whole community at once. We coordinated with Alistair to not only use the stage as well as the micro- phones but we were also asked to judge the "MGV's Got Talent" show.

In order to help uplift the community and to develop a relationship between MGV and WPI, we created certificates for the talent show. The certificates were endorsed by
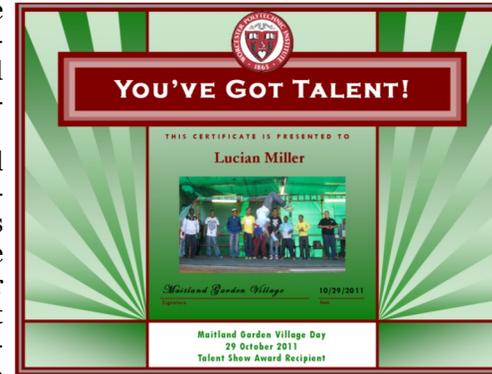
Figure 4: "MGV's Got Talent" Certificate

both WPI and MGV and they were printed with detail in colour as well as on thick paper to ensure longevity so that each participant, whether they won or not, could have a token of which they could feel proud.

What communication tools can be utilised to gauge a community's aspirations?

Useful methods for obtaining information from another person or group of people are one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and community forum discussions. We utilised each of these tools to form a foundation for the path of the programme. Personal interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the current youth programmes in the community and how they function. After discussing the hopes of many community members, our group came up with a list of possible project ideas that could be pursued during our seven weeks in MGV. These ideas included writing a book about MGV and its history, cleaning up the community, designing a community centre, assisting with technological wizbangery (know-how), creating brochures detailing Oude Molen's-the neighbouring eco-village- venues, beautifying the crèche, and creating a youth development programme.

After presenting these options to our project sponsors, they analysed each and decided that the beautification of the crèche and creation of a youth development programme for ages thirteen through twenty-one were the most beneficial for the community based upon feedback from residents. We conducted many interviews as well as focus groups and open discussions using questions that would provide constructive answers. Each of these was

> *"Tell us about a time when the community came together and was successful"*

used to gain knowledge on how to keep youth interested while educating them, with the intent to focus on their strengths as opposed to focusing on their weaknesses. We interviewed the principal of the crèche, the Anglican Church youth group leader, and a resident of the village who had past

experience with Cape Youth Care, a successful youth development programme. We also had a focus group at the local primary school that consisted of our team, two sponsors, the principal of the school and eleven teachers. This group helped us to brainstorm ways of implementing the programme with the community to ensure greatest attendance and success. Using these ABCD approaches we were able to build a community development programme that focuses on the greatest interests and skills of the youth. In addition, the Asset Based approach to this project highlighted the residents' talents and skills, which had since gone unappreciated. Sheila and Ronell emerged as community leaders through the col-

laborative work efforts with our team.

What is the best way to show gratitude and initiate community driven action ?

The crèche within MGV is an important asset which represents what the community can achieve when they work as one. The crèche was created and is sustained by the community. It also served as our work space for the duration of our project. To show our gratitude for allowing us to use this space and the facilities, our group decided to help restore the outside play area. When

Figure 6: Ronell painting the wall at the crèche

we first examined the playground at the crèche, it was clear work needed to be done; the swing sets were in disarray, broken glass and garbage covered the playground and the paint was faded. We took measurements and made a prioritized list of what was needed.

In reflection, these small projects had a wonderful impact on the community, and taught the group a great deal about staying motivated and the importance of completing small tasks. There were many talented residents who came out of the woodwork to make this effort successful. Residents expressed that the changes in one section of the community made everyone involved think more proactively, and the community was more interested in the collabora-

tive work being done.

Doing these small projects served a number of purposes. It established our group as being genuinely invested in the community. The community has also seen how determined we are to follow through on the project, which has encouraged them to be excited about possible future changes. There is one final reason for doing these small projects: because we can. There's no reason not to. These small successes are evidence to what can be accomplished when the residents are inspired.

What is the best approach to gain governmental participation in preparation for a community programme?

On the 21st of November our team met with the Youth Development Committee of the city of Cape Town. The goal of this meeting was to highlight the uniqueness of MGV's strengths and weaknesses in hopes to gain information, support, and guidance so we could take the necessary steps to begin the formation of the community development programme.

To prepare for this initial meeting, our team and our project sponsors, Lorenzo, Sheila and Ronell, collaboratively created a PowerPoint. This presentation included the history and background of MGV, background of WPI and the Cape Town Project Centre, resources within the community, possible youth/ community programmes (dance, vis-

Figure 5: Before and after photos of the swing set and tunnels at the crèche playground

ual arts, environmental projects, and community service) and different ways MGV could utilise the city's youth development committee. To optimise government assistance within MGV we also addressed successes within the community and previous efforts by the residents.

As a result of this meeting, the Youth Development Committee proposed that S.W.O.T. analysis be completed. S.W.O.T analysis is a 'situational analysis in which internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization, and external opportunities and threats faced by it are closely examined to chart a strategy' (BusinessDictionary.com). However, because our group used an asset-based approach, we wanted to eliminate negative connotations; instead, we decided to use "S.L.O.T." analysis; strengths, *limitations*, opportunities and threats. The benefit of constructing and documenting S.L.O.T analysis is that we could then use the information that we gather to more easily identify the internal and external strengths and limitations within the
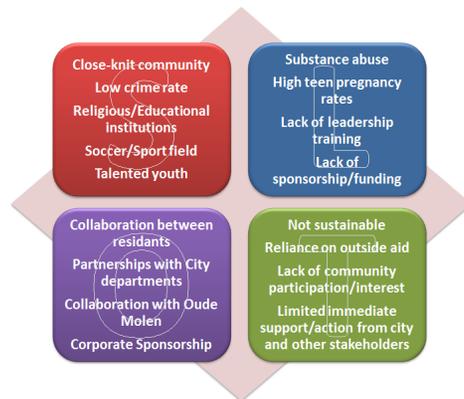

Figure 7: Chart of MGV S.L.O.T. analysis

community.

On the 28th of November, during the MGV community development meeting, our team, along with our sponsors and advisors introduced the S.L.O.T. analysis. After explaining what S.L.O.T analysis was and why/how it was used, we invited the meeting attendees to express what they felt were the community's and the project's strengths, limitations, opportunities and threats. From this and previous research, we were able to complete an accurate S.L.O.T. analysis.

How do you structure a meeting so the attendees become participants and truly invested?

In order to widen community participation, our sponsors passed out flyers they made to MGV residents; these flyers welcomed community members to attend a community development meeting. This would mark the first meeting of anyone and everyone that had an interest in creating a youth/community development programme. The meeting was structured and organised so that the discussions would be geared towards obtaining the information needed, while also being relaxed enough so that the attendees could break unexpected grounds that may not have been predicted. Under the leadership of our advisor, the meeting's discussion was focused, while occasionally allowed to flow freely. Our sponsors also led the meeting at times, especially in the planning of the leader-

Figure 8: Scott working on the large paper at Green Light Project first meeting

ship committee, next steps and scheduling of the subsequent meeting. It was pivotal that the leaders in the community were taking charge when planning next steps and leadership roles because another necessary outcome of the meeting was the gradual decrease of our team's involvement. It was essential that planning from here after was done with minimal support from WPI's end so that the project remains sustainable after we leave.

The approach we used to structure the meeting was consistent with Open-Spaced Technology (OST) approaches developed by Harrison Owen. With this tactic the overall basis for the meeting is known, in our case to create and start a youth/community development organisation within the village, but the agenda is open to creation by attendees. This approach is characterised by a few basic mechanisms, all of which were used:
1. A free discussion to create an agenda for the meeting
2. Participants arranged in an open circle
3. Large paper used, or a way to display key discussion issues and notes

brought up in dialogues
4. Breakout sessions where participants learn and contribute information to areas of interest
5. Changing from a large group to small separate group discussions (Owen, 2008)

This type of approach to running a meeting worked well because it fell into Owen's definition of when this tactic should be used with high levels of: *complexity* of tasks and outcomes necessary, *diversity* in people needed to make the outcome successful, *real conflict* that people truly care about the issue, and *urgency* that the task needs to be done now (Owen, 2008).

The community involvement and participation in making this meeting a success was an enormous testament to the further accomplishment this youth/development group could obtain. We set out with the goal to create a sustainable dance and visual arts youth development organisation, but came out with nine groups that encompassed all ages rather than focusing on just youth. These groups include fundraising, awareness, dance, music, gardening, home care, gym and wellness, soccer, and drum

Figure 9: Small break-out sessions at Green Light Project first meeting

Figure 10: Full group picture at Green Light Project first meeting

majorettes. A meeting was then set for the following night of the individuals who were elected to lead each group, "the executive board," to decide upon next steps. Even with obstacles such as lack of proper venues, funding and supplies, the community was motivated and ready to move forward with these groups and create small accomplishments in the short term to benefit large successes in the long term.

How can MGV continue to develop through mutually beneficial relationships with neighbouring communities?

As our time at the Cape Town Project Centre was coming to a close, preparations were made for a final presentation. This was an opportunity for communication between MGV and their neighbour, Oude Molen Eco-Village (OMEV), to develop. OMEV has a variety of facilities including a swimming pool, an Eco-theatre, a youth play centre, and a café that would prove useful for the residents of MGV. More importantly, MGV and OMEV share a vision for the future that encompasses education, community involvement, and sustainability. Therefore, both of these communities have definite strengths and assets the other could utilise for growth and development.

On 13 December, WPI's OMEV and MGV teams both presented their project work and invited a discussion about how the two bordering communities could collaborate further to achieve their goals for the future. There were many people in attendance, including residents of both villages, representatives from the City of Cape Town, members of the press, etc. We began our presentation to the group by introducing the concept of ABCD and how we have worked in partnership with our sponsors to apply these strategies to advance community development. We then invited resident leaders to speak on behalf of the Green Light Project and its current initiatives. This presentation provided an occasion for the MGV community to take pride in what they have accomplished, while sharing their successes with a wider audience.

The evening yielded stimulating conversation and active discussion into future teamwork between the adjacent villages. Outcomes of the dialogue included a prominent member of the City's Social Development department taking an active interest in MGV, the local press compiling an article in order to gain attention for the Green Light Project, and certain residents of OMEV becoming more invested in the community of MGV. It is our hope that the work done in MGV will not only be sustainable, but that it will also inspire those in neighbouring communities to build upon their assets and achieve more than they ever thought possible.

Epilogue

The evolution of a self-reportedly somewhat complacent community into a motivated one has been remarkable. In a short seven weeks, several dozen residents of Maitland Garden Village have joined together to both mentally and physically develop a community driven development program; thus bringing into existence the Maitland Garden Village Green Light Project.

The future of MGV's Green Light Project harbours real potential for the residents involved and the community in its entirety. Because the creation and development of this project was community driven, it encourages longevity, pride, continuing motivation; the project strives for success. Not only will the community grow from the evolution of the Green Light Project, but the individuals will as well. The specificity of each Green Light Program promotes personal growth, skill development, leadership and pride. The community has proven to themselves that when united and motivated they can make a difference. We sincerely hope that the Green Light Project and Maitland Garden Village will continue to thrive and accomplish great success.

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