

Applying Asset-Based Community Development in a Marginalized Urban Community among the Negede Woyto Community in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) emphasizes community strengths as the foundation for sustainable development. This study documents the application of ABCD in the historically marginalized Negede Woyto community in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Using a qualitative, participatory approach, data were collected through continuous community dialogues, interviews with key informants, small group discussions, and iterative team reflection meetings across four major engagement phases. The study details the activities conducted, issues raised, and outcomes achieved during each phase. Findings indicate that despite social, economic, cultural, and political marginalization, the community possesses significant human, social, environmental, economic, and cultural assets. Through trust-building, structured facilitation, and iterative reflection, the community shifted from problem-focused discussions to asset mobilization, self-organization, and emergent leadership. This study provides a detailed, process-oriented account of ABCD implementation, offering practical insights for applying strengths-based approaches in marginalized urban communities.

1. Introduction

The Negede Woyto community, a historically marginalized minority group in Ethiopia, has long faced social, economic, and political exclusion. Traditionally residing along the shores of Lake Tana in the Amhara Regional State, the origins of the Negede Woyto are debated, with some scholars tracing their ancestry to Egypt and others linking them to indigenous groups such as the Agaw and Beta Israel (Pagani et al., 2012; Fentahun, 2024). Currently, the majority of the community resides in Bahir Dar city, particularly in kebele 16, kebele 11, and kebele 13, reflecting both urban migration and displacement from ancestral lands (Binayem, 2023; Darmon, 2010). Historically, their settlements have been classified as informal, exposing the community to frequent evictions and precarious living conditions (Solomon, 2016).

The Negede Woyto have experienced deep social marginalization, often viewed as outcasts due to cultural, dietary, and religious differences, despite some members practicing Islam (Darmon, 2010; Gamst, 1984). Linguistically, their original Woyto language has become extinct, with most community members now speaking Amharic (Cohen, 1939; Sommer, 1992). Economically, the community traditionally relied on fishing, hunting, and handicrafts, though environmental changes and lack of land ownership have forced many to engage in subsistence farming, petty trading, and low-paying labor (Ajala, 2008; Darmon, 2010).

Despite multiple development interventions by government and non-governmental organizations, including livelihood support, vocational training, and infrastructure improvements, the community continues to face high unemployment, poor sanitation, inadequate housing, and limited access to education and markets (Ayele, 2018; Negesse, 2020; Zelalem, 2021). These efforts have often failed due to top-down approaches that overlooked local knowledge, cultural assets, and social cohesion (Gessese, 2022; Getahun, 2023).

Given these persistent challenges, an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach offers a promising alternative by focusing on the community's internal strengths, such as skilled artisans, youth engagement, traditional savings systems, and strong social networks, rather than merely addressing deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). By mobilizing these assets, ABCD fosters sustainable, participatory, and culturally grounded development that empowers the Negede Woyto to lead their own transformation (Chaskin, 2001; Green & Haines, 2016).

This proposal, therefore, seeks to apply the ABCD approach to improve the living conditions of the Negede Woyto, focusing on sanitation, hygiene, and community empowerment, while promoting long-term sustainability, local ownership, and social inclusion.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a strengths-based framework that emphasizes leveraging local assets—such as skills, networks, institutions, and cultural resources—rather than focusing on deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). ABCD highlights the importance of social capital, where relationships and networks within the community facilitate collective action, trust, and shared responsibility (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). By mobilizing existing community resources and fostering collaboration, ABCD aims to create sustainable development that is internally driven and resilient.

ABCD aligns closely with Participatory Action Research (PAR), which emphasizes co-learning, reflexivity, and empowerment. Both approaches view communities as active agents of change, engaging members in decision-making and leadership development rather than treating them as passive recipients of external aid (Nurture Development, 2023). This combination ensures that development initiatives build local leadership, strengthen relationships, and promote collective problem-solving.

Empirical evidence suggests that communities using ABCD approaches experience increased participation, resilience, and capacity to sustain development efforts beyond project lifespans (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Oxfam, 2011). By integrating ABCD and PAR principles, this study provides a framework to identify, mobilize, and coordinate the Negede Woyto community's assets, fostering empowerment and locally driven solutions.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, participatory process design to document the implementation of the ABCD initiative in the Negede Woyto community. The approach prioritized in-depth engagement with community members, using structured dialogues, observations, and reflective sessions to capture both the community's perspectives and the dynamics of the development process. By focusing on lived experiences, social interactions, and contextual realities, the study aimed to understand not only the challenges faced by the community but also the existing assets and capacities that could drive sustainable change.

The engagement was organized into four distinct phases, each designed to build trust, identify key issues, and co-create solutions with community members. These phases included pre-visit preparations, repeated field interactions, participatory problem and asset mapping, and collaborative intervention planning. Throughout the process, the research team emphasized iterative reflection, documentation of emerging insights, and adaptation of strategies based on community feedback. This design ensured that the study captured the complexity of the ABCD approach while maintaining a community-driven focus aligned with participatory action principles.

4. Participants and Setting

The study engaged a diverse group of participants from the Negede Woyto community, including elders, youth, women, skilled artisans, and professionals, alongside representatives of existing community organizations such as iddirs, savings groups, and local associations. These participants were selected to reflect the broad range of

human, social, and institutional assets within the community, ensuring that multiple perspectives, skills, and experiences informed the ABCD process. Emphasis was placed on including emerging leaders and motivated individuals capable of sustaining community-driven initiatives beyond the scope of the study.

Engagements occurred in community spaces, public halls, and accessible gathering areas within Bahir Dar City, allowing participants to meet in familiar and culturally appropriate environments. The ABCD team, composed of social work students and faculty facilitators, worked alongside community members to co-identify challenges, map assets, and plan interventions. By blending structured facilitation with informal interactions, the team enabled participants to share knowledge, showcase skills, and exercise leadership, reflecting the participatory, asset-focused approach central to ABCD. This inclusive setting promoted trust, transparency, and active collaboration, laying the foundation for community ownership and sustainable change.

5. Data Collection

Data were collected using a participatory, multi-method approach that aligned with the ABCD principles and emphasized collaboration, reflection, and responsiveness to community dynamics. Community dialogues formed the core of the process, conducted both in small focus groups and larger plenary sessions to ensure inclusivity. Small groups allowed participants, such as youth, women, and artisans, to voice their concerns, share ideas, and discuss potential solutions in a safe and supportive environment. Large plenary sessions provided opportunities to validate findings, prioritize community challenges, and collaboratively explore strategies, ensuring that decisions were collectively owned.

In addition to structured dialogues, informal interviews with elders, key stakeholders, and skilled community members provided rich contextual insights into historical challenges, traditional practices, and local strengths. The ABCD team also conducted observations during site visits, documenting living conditions, settlement patterns, resource availability, and social interactions. Facilitator reflections and daily team reports captured emerging themes, unexpected challenges, and opportunities for community engagement. Finally, iterative team meetings were held to review collected data, plan subsequent visits, refine facilitation strategies, and integrate lessons learned. This iterative and reflective approach ensured continuous alignment with community priorities, strengthened trust, and maintained the participatory, asset-based ethos of the initiative.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted across documents and meeting notes, focusing on phases of engagement, issues raised, and outcomes achieved. Cross-validation of findings was ensured through triangulation between facilitator notes, participant feedback, and reflective memos.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed. No personal identifiers were used. Facilitators prioritized transparency, respect, and community ownership throughout the process.

4. Findings

Phase 1: Initial Engagement and Scoping (April 9, 2025)

The first field visit marked the beginning of the ABCD initiative with the Negede Woyto community, focusing on establishing rapport, understanding community dynamics, and identifying preliminary challenges. During this visit, the ABCD team conducted informal interviews with community elders, religious leaders, and representatives of women and youth groups, aiming to capture historical context, livelihood practices, and social structures. An observational walk through the settlement revealed significant infrastructural and environmental issues, including overcrowded housing, unsanitary living conditions, absence of functional latrines, and lack of legal housing titles. Pathways between homes were littered with human waste and debris, and many shelters were temporary and poorly constructed, highlighting the community's vulnerability to evictions and forced relocations.

Despite these hardships, the visit highlighted strong social cohesion and resilience within the community. Traditional support systems, such as Edir and Ekub, were actively functioning, providing informal insurance and collective problem-solving mechanisms. Women's groups demonstrated notable organizational capacity, while youth expressed willingness to contribute labor and skills to community initiatives. During informal discussions, residents articulated both immediate concerns—such as sanitation, health risks, and food insecurity—and aspirations for improved living conditions. Importantly, community members showed openness to participate in asset-based planning, signaling trust in the ABCD team and readiness to engage collaboratively in identifying solutions based on their own strengths. This initial engagement established a foundation of trust, dialogue, and participatory decision-making, critical for subsequent phases of the ABCD process.

Phase 2: Team Planning and Preparation (April 16–29, 2025)

Following the initial community engagement, the ABCD team conducted internal planning and preparation meetings to ensure the project approach was culturally sensitive, inclusive, and methodologically sound. During this period, the team reviewed and refined project documents, addressing redundancies and ensuring that objectives, roles, and expected outcomes were clearly articulated. Special attention was given to gaps in gender and demographic representation, ensuring that women, youth, elders, and marginalized groups would be actively included in subsequent engagement phases.

The team also critically examined lessons from previous top-down interventions, recognizing the need to prioritize community-led processes over externally imposed solutions. To operationalize the ABCD approach, the team developed structured facilitation tools, participatory guides for asset mapping, and culturally aligned engagement methods. A detailed plan for conducting community dialogues, site observations, and reflective team meetings was established, emphasizing respect for local norms, rituals, and decision-making practices. By the end of this phase, the team had achieved clarified objectives, a comprehensive engagement framework, and a structured facilitation plan, laying the groundwork for effective, participatory interactions with the Negede Woyto community in the next phase.

Phase 3: Small-Group Asset Mapping (May 4, 2025)

During Phase 3, small-group discussions were conducted with elders, youth, women, and selected representatives from local community organizations to identify existing community assets and explore persistent challenges. These sessions were structured to encourage open dialogue, but initial interactions revealed tensions and disagreements regarding leadership representation and prioritization of community needs, reflecting historical mistrust from previous top-down interventions. Facilitators employed consensus-building techniques,

ensuring that all voices were heard and that power imbalances were acknowledged and managed throughout the process.

Through these discussions, participants identified a wide array of local assets. Human assets included skilled youth, professionals, artisans, and elders with specialized vocational and traditional knowledge. Social assets encompassed cooperative norms, active iddirs (traditional mutual support associations), women's groups, and informal networks of mutual aid. Environmental assets highlighted the community's proximity to Lake Tana, local agricultural knowledge, fishing skills, and water transport expertise. Economic assets were reflected in small-scale enterprises, artisanal crafts, and local trading activities, which contribute to household livelihoods. Cultural assets included indigenous knowledge systems, craft traditions, communal rituals, and storytelling practices that sustain social cohesion and intergenerational learning.

The process also revealed emerging leadership potential within youth and women's groups, who demonstrated initiative in organizing activities and mediating discussions. By the end of this phase, the ABCD team and community members had mapped a comprehensive inventory of resources, clarified priorities, and strengthened trust and collaborative capacity, laying a strong foundation for co-designed interventions in subsequent phases.

Phase 4: Large Plenary Community Validation Dialogue and Consolidation (May 11, 2025)

The final phase of the project involved a community-wide plenary dialogue, which engaged a broader spectrum of participants, including elders, youth, women, local leaders, professionals, and representatives from community organizations. This meeting was designed to validate the assets identified in earlier phases, ensuring that the findings reflected the lived experiences and priorities of the community. By bringing together participants who had not been part of small-group discussions, the process strengthened inclusivity and collective ownership, allowing a wider representation of voices in the decision-making process.

During the dialogue, the team presented the identified human, social, environmental, economic, and cultural assets, along with the challenges previously documented. Community members discussed the relevance of each asset, shared additional insights, and confirmed which resources could be most effectively mobilized to address pressing local issues such as overcrowding, sanitation, and lack of legal housing titles. Participants emphasized the importance of leveraging local expertise, cooperative norms, traditional groups like Edir, and women's organizations to drive community-led solutions, reinforcing the ABCD principle that sustainable development arises from locally owned and mobilized resources.

Discussions also addressed governance and leadership concerns. Participants collectively recognized the need for transparent and representative structures, the risks of over-dependence on external facilitators, and the necessity of creating mechanisms for continuous engagement and accountability. Outcomes of the dialogue included the decision to establish a representative community organization, self-facilitated discussion groups, and ABCD task groups focused on specific local priorities. These structures provided a framework for emergent leadership, shared responsibility, and ongoing collaboration.

The session concluded with community members voluntarily continuing discussions and activities beyond the formal meeting, demonstrating a strong sense of ownership and motivation to implement solutions. This phase not only validated the assets identified but also highlighted the community's capacity for collective problem-solving, illustrating how participatory, asset-based approaches can transform local knowledge into actionable strategies for sustainable development. The broader engagement ensured that the ABCD initiative was grounded

in community realities and supported by a wide base of stakeholders, enhancing both legitimacy and long-term impact.

6. Result

Community Assets and Social Cohesion

The ABCD initiative revealed that the Bahir Dar settlement possesses extensive human, social, economic, environmental, and cultural assets. Human assets included skilled youth, professionals, and traditional vocational knowledge. Social assets comprised Edir associations, mutual-help groups, cooperative norms, and active women's groups. Environmental assets involved proximity to Lake Tana, fishing and water transport expertise, and productive land, while economic assets included artisanal crafts, small enterprises, and trade networks. Cultural assets encompassed indigenous knowledge, craft skills, and communal traditions. Despite challenges such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of legal housing titles, and vulnerability to displacement, strong social cohesion and existing support systems facilitated community engagement and trust-building, forming the foundation for participatory interventions.

Emergent Leadership and Governance

The community actively addressed gaps in leadership and representation. Through dialogue and consensus-building, participants identified the need for transparent governance, equitable decision-making, and reduced reliance on external facilitators. Community members organized themselves into representative bodies, self-facilitated dialogue groups, and task teams to lead local initiatives. This process fostered emergent leadership, collective responsibility, and trust, with community members voluntarily continuing discussions and planning beyond formal sessions, reflecting ownership of both the process and outcomes.

Community-Led Development and Project Mobilization

Leveraging the identified assets and leadership structures, the community developed a participatory project addressing local priorities. They mobilized resources, structured developmental initiatives, and established a community organization to oversee project implementation. Interventions targeted core challenges, including improving sanitation, securing safe housing, enhancing health services, and creating small-scale economic opportunities. Team members integrated academic research into practical solutions, exemplified by a dissertation project aligned with community needs. The process demonstrated the community's capacity to define priorities, mobilize internal resources, and lead development initiatives without external dominance.

Political Engagement and Representation

Building on internal organization and leadership, the community advocated for political recognition and participation. They requested a federation structure to ensure representation in national and local governance, including the election of delegates to parliament. This approach reflected strategic empowerment, enabling the community to influence policies affecting their settlement, participate in municipal planning, and hold authorities accountable while maintaining ownership of local initiatives.

Partnerships with Government and NGOs

The community strategically engaged external stakeholders while maintaining leadership of local projects. They invited government agencies and NGOs to collaborate on development initiatives, ensuring alignment with community priorities and active involvement in decision-making. This partnership model demonstrated that sustainable interventions are achievable when external actors support, rather than direct, community-driven solutions, bridging the gap between grassroots knowledge and formal development mechanisms.

Overall Impact

The ABCD initiative catalyzed tangible change: residents identified and mobilized assets, established leadership and governance structures, developed a community organization, implemented local projects, and advocated for political and developmental recognition. The process confirmed that asset-based, participatory approaches empower communities to address systemic challenges, strengthen resilience, and foster sustainable, self-led urban development.

7. Discussion

This study set out to document and critically analyzes the process of applying an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach in the Negede Woyto community, a historically marginalized urban settlement in Bahir Dar City. The findings demonstrate that transformative community development is achievable when processes are rooted in local assets, participatory engagement, and emergent leadership rather than external, deficit-focused interventions. The experiences of the Negede Woyto community resonate with the foundational premises of ABCD, which emphasizes that *“sustainable community change begins with what is strong—not what is wrong”* (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

A key insight emerging from this study is that community assets are multifaceted and deeply embedded in social relationships, cultural practices, and everyday knowledge. Human assets such as skilled youth, professionals, and traditional artisans provided a robust foundation for locally relevant initiatives. Social assets—particularly the Edir traditional support systems, cooperative norms, and organized women’s groups—functioned as social capital that facilitated collective action and mutual accountability. These findings align with broader ABCD applications that identify *social networks as fundamental development resources* (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Rather than static resources, these assets became *active agents* in shaping dialogue, priorities, and solutions.

Importantly, the process revealed that participatory engagement fosters both empowerment and ownership. Early engagements with elders and community leaders built trust by honoring local voices and avoiding immediate directive solutions. This approach reflects the participatory action research (PAR) principle that *co-learning and shared decision-making strengthen community agency* and avoid the pitfalls of extractive research practices. The initial mistrust and tension encountered—stemming from past experiences with top-down interventions—were not barriers but rather openings for deeper dialogue and reflexive learning. As community members voiced skepticism, facilitators responded with transparency about roles and intentions, which helped shift perceptions and strengthen collaboration.

A central contribution of this study is the emergence of community-driven governance and collective leadership structures. Through iterative dialogues, the community not only identified assets but also articulated governance challenges, including lack of representation and fears of dependency on external actors. The decision to form a representative organization and ABCD task groups demonstrates *transformative leadership emerging from within*

rather than imposed from outside. This shift is critical because sustainable development requires both individual and collective agency; empowerment is not just about capacity building but *about creating mechanisms through which communities can continue to act after external support diminishes* (Chaskin, 2001).

The community's move toward political engagement and claims for representation in municipal and national structures exemplifies how ABCD can catalyze broader social and civic inclusion. Rather than solely focusing on service delivery, the Negede Woyto framed their developmental agenda in political terms—seeking federation status, participation in elections, and formal representation. This aligns with scholarly critiques that emphasize *development as a political as well as technical process*, where marginalized groups challenge structural exclusion and assert rights to resources and voice (Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

The collaborative engagement with municipal authorities and NGOs also illustrates an asset-based partnership model, where external actors are invited to support locally defined priorities rather than dictate agendas. This counters conventional needs-based models that often generate dependency and neglect community leadership. Instead, the ABCD process in Bahir Dar shows that external resources can be harnessed in ways that support autonomy and sustainability, as partners become allies in locally owned initiatives (Green & Haines, 2016).

Finally, the transformation observed from problem-focused discussions to community-led action—demonstrates that sustainable change is a process, not an event. The community's voluntary continuation of dialogues, establishment of structures, and proactive advocacy indicate that empowerment progressed from *participation* to *self-organization* a key dimension of both ABCD and PAR frameworks. This echoes findings in other contexts where communities transition from passive recipients of aid to *active shapers of their development trajectories* (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Sen, 1999).

6. Implications

Practical Implications

The findings underscore that communities possess inherent capacities that, when mobilized effectively, can address social, economic, and environmental challenges. Development practitioners and NGOs should prioritize asset-mapping and participatory facilitation over top-down interventions, as these approaches strengthen local ownership, leadership, and sustainability. The Negede Woyto case shows that community-led governance structures can serve as models for other marginalized urban settlements seeking to organize around local priorities while engaging external partners strategically.

Policy Implications

The study highlights the importance of inclusive policy frameworks that recognize and support community-driven initiatives. Municipal and national authorities should create mechanisms for marginalized settlements to participate in political representation, access public services, and lead their development agendas. Policies facilitating co-governance, legal recognition of informal settlements, and participatory planning can enhance social cohesion, reduce vulnerability to displacement, and empower communities to negotiate effectively with government agencies and NGOs.

Scholarly and Theoretical Implications

The study reinforces ABCD and Participatory Action Research (PAR) frameworks as effective approaches for sustainable community development. It demonstrates that asset-based approaches do not merely map resources but actively transform community agency, leadership, and political engagement. Future research can explore longitudinal impacts of ABCD processes on urban governance, social equity, and civic participation, especially in marginalized urban contexts in the Global South.

Broader Implications

The Negede Woyto experience illustrates that sustainable development emerges not solely from external interventions but from empowered communities leveraging social, human, cultural, and environmental assets. This insight encourages development actors to rethink metrics of success, shifting focus from project outputs to community resilience, collective action, and sustained local empowerment.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that asset-based, participatory approaches empower communities to address their own development challenges effectively. The Negede Woyto community leveraged human, social, cultural, economic, and environmental assets to organize themselves, elect leadership, and engage with government and other stakeholders. Through collective action, the community developed its own developmental organization, advocated for political representation, sought infrastructure and service improvements, and mobilized resources to address pressing issues such as sanitation, housing, and social inclusion.

The findings highlight that sustainable urban development is most effective when communities are active agents rather than passive recipients of external interventions. ABCD principles, coupled with participatory action processes, foster local ownership, strengthen leadership, and encourage long-term collaboration with public institutions and NGOs. These experiences provide evidence that community-driven initiatives can improve governance, social cohesion, and resilience, while also informing policies that support participatory urban planning.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence emphasizing that communities, when supported to recognize and mobilize their existing assets, can drive transformative change. Such approaches offer practical lessons for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers aiming to promote inclusive, sustainable, and locally led development in urban contexts.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia (Approval Reference No.: 0138/2025; Date Mar. 03,2025). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and Bahir Dar University's research ethics guidelines. See the Appendix

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from local authorities and community representatives. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were adults and informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without consequence, and the intended use of the findings. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in focus group discussions, community dialogue sessions, and other data collection activities.

To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, no personally identifying information was included in the research records, analysis, or dissemination of findings. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic and research purposes.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. No individual-level data, images, or identifiable personal information are included in this manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials

The qualitative data generated during this study, including field notes, discussion summaries, and reflective memos, are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality and community privacy. However, anonymized and summarized data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

This study was conducted as a collaborative project in partial fulfillment of the PhD program course requirements. All authors contributed equally to the design, implementation, analysis, and documentation of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) process.

Dr. **Kerebih Aserese** (Associate Professor) served as the course instructor, providing academic guidance, methodological oversight, and overall supervision throughout the project.

Mr. **Bewketu Chekol** (Assistant Professor) coordinated the project activities, facilitated communication among team members and community stakeholders, and served as the corresponding author. Mr. **Asaye Lake Mrs. Seged Ashagrie**, Mr. **Gojjam Tadesse**, Mr. **Shimelash Cheru**, Mr. **Awoke Amlaku**, and Mr. **Mulualem Atikilt** actively participated in field engagement, community facilitation, data collection, documentation, and reflective analysis. All authors contributed to data interpretation, reviewed the manuscript critically, and approved the final version for publication.

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Authors' Information

The authors are a PhD candidate/researcher in Social Work and social development and community studies, with research interests in asset-based community development, participatory action research, and marginalized urban communities.

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