

An isometric illustration on a dark blue background featuring various white and green puzzle pieces, 3D bar charts, and stylized human figures. The figures are shown interacting with the puzzle pieces, some sitting, some standing, and some holding pieces. There are also circular icons with symbols like a heart, a location pin, and a dollar sign. The overall theme is community development and asset-based approaches.

# Toolkit: An Asset-based Approach to Community Development

thinkCITY



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# 1. Introduction

This toolkit contains general guidance and adaptive resources for those who wish to learn about an asset-based approach to sustainable development. It focuses on how to facilitate communities in rural and urban landscapes to utilise their community's assets to navigate changes, challenges and opportunities for the betterment of their human settlement, environment and community well-being.

Audiences who might find this toolkit useful would be community development workers or cultural workers attached to Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), as well as administrators and project managers of development agencies or donor agencies who want to engage a community in development efforts.





## 2. Context

Community in this toolkit, refers to a group or groups of people occupying the same geographical space and who participate in placemaking together to create a shared sense of place and identity. Cultural landscapes result from the interaction of a community with its environment. Cultural landscapes often reflect an interdependence and co-existence between people's way of life, the environment and associated ecological systems.

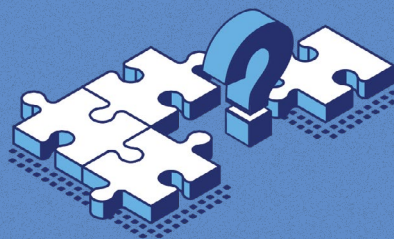
Being living entities, cultural landscapes evolve due to human activity. The cultural landscape acquires many layers of meaning that reflect the values and actions of various peoples that have shaped it over time. The tension between maintaining cultural

continuity and adapting to change is always a challenge for communities.

Problems arise when de-contextualised development policies, interventions, or disjunctive flows of capital and technology are introduced into cultural landscapes. Interventions often attend to a single goal ignoring impact on the other dimensions of the site, mistakenly assume a high degree of local cultural stability, or take a technocratic and materialist stance of resources as capital or merchandise. This can result in insensitive and unsustainable development, for instance, highways that cut through and disrupt traditional human settlements or tourism models that lead to the over commodification of cultural practices and products.

## 3. Approaches to Development of Place and Community

Place development is a process and approach for planning design and management of an inhabited site. Though meant to be rooted in the unique characteristics, cultural assets and needs of the local community, place development in modern times has often overlooked communities. As a result, there is a countermove to emphasising community development, a process which facilitates the building of strong resilient communities that can make collective decisions and goals and take collective action and responsibility for their own future.



### 3.1 The Needs-Based Approach

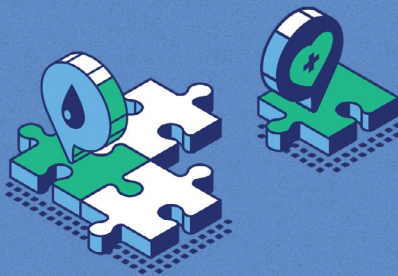
When addressing environmental, social or economic issues affecting an urban or rural cultural landscape, governments, institutions and donor agencies often resort to a needs-based approach which highlights 'needs' of a community or 'deficiencies' in the human settlement and the need for a material solution. such as programmes, subsidies, services, infrastructure.

Government departments, development agencies, NGOs or donor agencies tasked to intervene often view the community or the environment as passive recipients. Some interventions offer quick solutions without attending to the root cause or provide infrastructure, programmes or

services that do not take cognisance of context.

The needs-based approach has been critiqued mainly for perpetuating the community's dependency on outside services, causing communities to lose trust in their own capacities and assets, and establishing a mindset where communities see themselves as consumers rather than producers. The needs-based approach also tends to encourage fragmentation of funding to various service suppliers or infrastructure providers from outside the community, reinforcing the community's reliance on external parties (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993, p4).





## 3.2 The Asset-Based Approach

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a community driven approach to development that does not solely focus on the 'needs' or the 'lack' in community but rather weighs in on its strengths.

ABCD is premised on the belief that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilising existing (but often unrecognised) assets, in particular, community social capital (Mathie and Cunningham, 2002, p4).

In this toolkit, the notion of community

assets beyond social capital is expanded to include what is termed cultural assets of a community i.e. the many tangible and intangible resources that a community may possess and value for reasons that they represent or contribute to community identity, prosperity and well-being. From this perspective, the ABCD approach may bear on cultural assets (see Figure 1 below) such as traditions and practices, systems of thought, social capital, knowledge and skills, artefacts and collections and historical memory and harness them where relevant for community development.

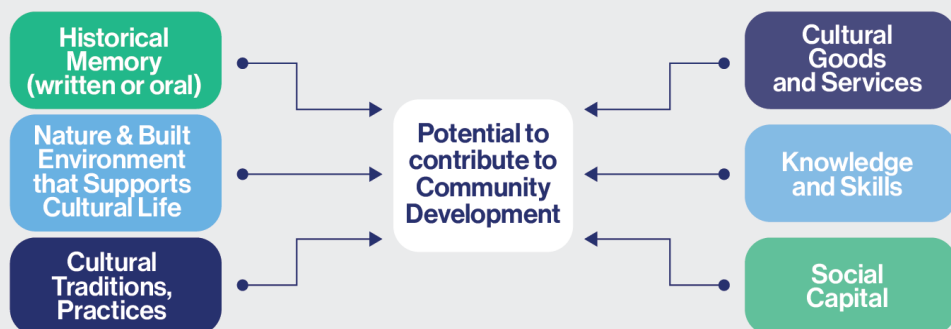


Figure 1: Community Cultural Assets





### 3.3 The Role of Culture in Community Development

Culture is often seen as a product of placemaking but in fact it is also a process of placemaking. Communities often find themselves caught between inherited cultural ways of thinking or doing and incoming advancements and challenges. Strong and cohesive communities manage change through cultural adaptation, i.e. the ability of the collective to respond, negotiate, and navigate new advances, challenges, and uncertainties in the physical, economic and social environment.

If initiatives or interventions hope to contribute to a more sustainable way of life, culture must play a crucial role. Culture must be considered to ensure the contextual relevance of the intervention,

community experiences and wisdom.

The contribution of culture also includes community experiences, legacies and resources as well their collective ability to adapt and reshape values, behaviour and practices based on newly acquired knowledge and capacities.

UNESCO has been advocating for more consideration and emphasis to be given to the transformative role of culture and its contribution to more sustainable development. This means empowering communities to mobilise cultural processes and capacities. UNESCO's advocacy culminated in the integration of culture into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## 4. Principles of ABCD

The ABCD approach empowers communities to take on and manage change by leveraging on cultural assets, with assistance and some investment inputs from third party enablers and collaboration with partners.

### Guiding Principles for Asset-based Community Development (ABCD)



The community possesses its own cultural and social assets which need to be identified, recognised and valued.

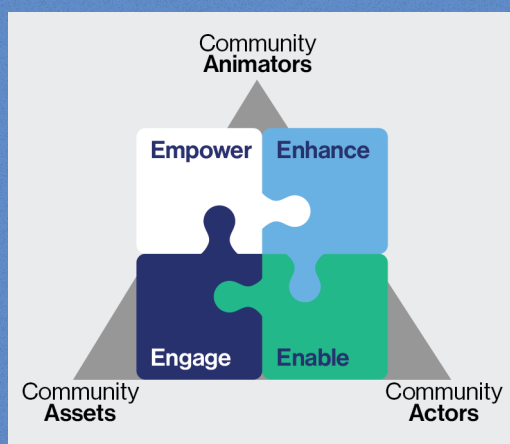


The community has networking and leadership capacity – people need to be connected and organised through a community-led activity or project.



Inside-out organisation – the community takes on actor and animator roles, while the third party plays the role of enabler and facilitator.

Communities who are disempowered or fragmented may require ‘enablers’ to facilitate self-organisation, asset management or capacity building. Development agencies, institutions or non-profit organisations may play a more useful role of third-party enablers while facilitating the communities to take on the role of actors (those who participate) and animators (those who encourage community participation as well as initiate and support change in the community).



### Role of Third-Party Enablers

- Help community identify and recognize cultural assets, resources, and their value
- Help community leverage on local assets and resources to initiate or manage change
- Strategize to engage and involve community activation and participation
- Help connect micro to macro-opportunities

Figure 2: Relationship Between Third Party Enablers and Community in ABCD



# 5. ABCD Procedure

Below is a proposed step-by-step guide for carrying out ABCD. The diagram shows a sequenced progression of activities, but often some activities may continue to be executed for a longer duration while the next activity has begun, causing overlaps. The activities should be carried out in sync with levels of readiness and participation on the part of the community.

Table 1: Proposed Flow of Activities in ABCD Approach

ABCD Procedure		
Ongoing Throughout ABCD Procedure		
A. Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Who should be engaged</li><li>Methods of engagement</li><li>Building trust and relationships</li></ul>	Third party enabler
B. Community Activation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Participatory mapping</li><li>Valorisation of the value of community assets and resources</li><li>Initiating dialogue with community on ideas for initiative</li><li>Articulation of commitment and setting collective vision, mission and goals</li><li>Forming a core community working group from among motivated members</li></ul>	Third party enabler and community
C. Ongoing Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A continuous process of identifying, analysing and resolving arising issues.</li></ul>	
D. Ongoing Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Each step of the intervention process is evaluated and linked to a mechanism that allows for adjustment</li></ul>	

## Progressive Steps of ABCD Procedure

1.Data Gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site visits and secondary source data to understand the context; people, place and use.</li> <li>• Cultural mapping to identify assets and resources (in particular social capital).</li> </ul>	<p>Third party enabler</p> <p>Third party enabler and community</p>
2. Problem Area Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From the mapped evidence, recognise and describe the problem.</li> <li>• Use a systematic approach to identify the cause of problem.</li> </ul>	Third party enabler and community
3. Designing a Strategic Intervention Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective brainstorming of ideas.</li> <li>• Discuss resources and mechanisms, how to manage the process, delivery and beneficiaries.</li> <li>• Tailor intervention or initiative to community needs and capacities</li> <li>• Collaborative goal setting.</li> </ul>	
4. Community Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core community working group become actors</li> <li>• Build community capacity</li> <li>• Seal partnerships</li> </ul>	Third party enablers relevant partners and core community working team
5. Implementation of Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing responsibility of activating the plan action by implementing and evaluating activities.</li> <li>• Tracking and monitoring progress and deliverables, identifying and mitigating problems.</li> </ul>	Core community working team with assistance from third party enabler
6. Passing Over Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community leads and drives the initiative</li> </ul>	Core community working team

# 6. Resource Tools

## 6.1 Data Gathering and Problem Identification

Third party enabler organisations (development agencies, NGOs and institutions etc.) should understand and assess the macro environmental context that affects the community and site such as changes in the natural environment, political, economic, social and demographic trends.

Gathering data from both primary and secondary information sources can strengthen credibility. Secondary source

information refers to interpretations, analysis or synthesis from a primary source and may include information from books, government records, reviews, commentaries, and analytical reports. Primary source information refers to first-hand accounts obtained directly through surveys, interviews, investigation and observation (see Table 2). When gathering information, the many dimensions of a place must be given due consideration.

Table 2: Guide to Information Gathering (adapted from Englehardt and Rogers 2009, p10)

DIMENSIONS TO CONSIDER	SECONDARY SOURCES	PRIMARY SOURCES
Historic	Books	Original creative works
Social	Journals	Study of practices
Scientific	Government reports	Survey responses
Geographic/Environmental	Databases	Written or spoken accounts
Demographic	Publications	Remote sensing
Cultural	Commentaries	Ground investigations
	Analytics reports	Photographs & recordings
	Genealogical records	Archives
	Archaeological records	Artifacts



Cultural mapping is a foundational and development tool for collecting, locating, and systematising detailed information on the micro-environment of the community and site. Cultural mapping requires multi-disciplinary skills and knowledge and is often led by outside experts.

Participatory mapping refers to a process where community from diverse sectors and subgroups, (who are the real context experts) actively participate in the mapping process and contribute local knowledge and perspectives and what is important to them. Community participation in mapping reinforces recognition of the value of their assets and existing issues.

Mapping community capacity and social capital is particularly important as in the ABCD approach, as the objective is to include community as actors or animators in the process of managing change. Factors that may exert pressure on assets and resources and threaten sustainability are also mapped and analysed.

Data gathered is analysed and synthesised to provide an integrated picture of the site's history, form, cultural character, assets and resources, function and value. Cultural mapping provides evidence and data for planning interventions or initiatives that are contextual and culture-based (see Figure 3).

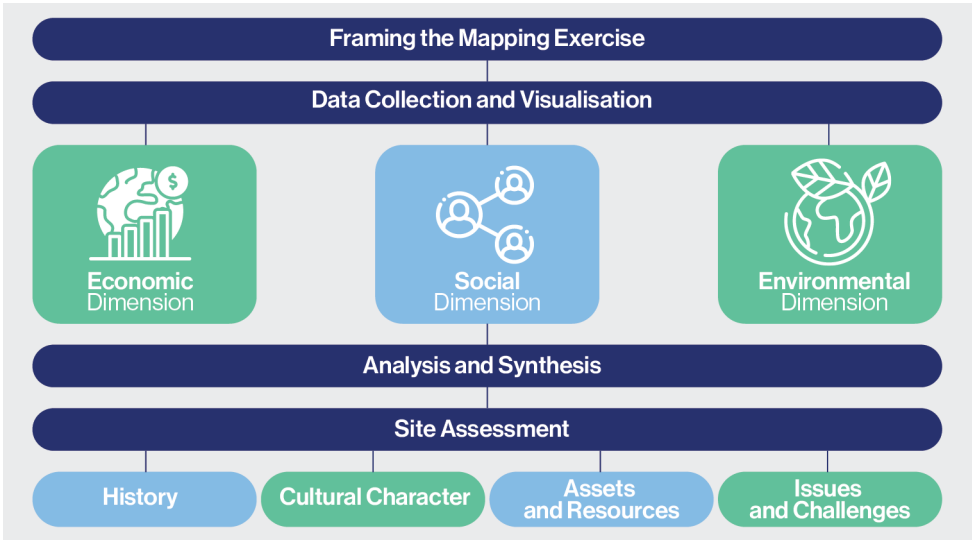


Figure 3: Steps in Cultural Mapping (Pillai, 2020, p. 28)

Figure 4 below displays multi-modal tools that may be employed to engage or involve community in data gathering. Community and related stakeholders must first be informed about the project and their consent obtained by using creative means such as public pamphlets, local billboards and information fairs.



Figure 4: Multi-modal Tools for Involving Community in Information Gathering

## 6.2 Planning a Strategic Intervention or Initiative

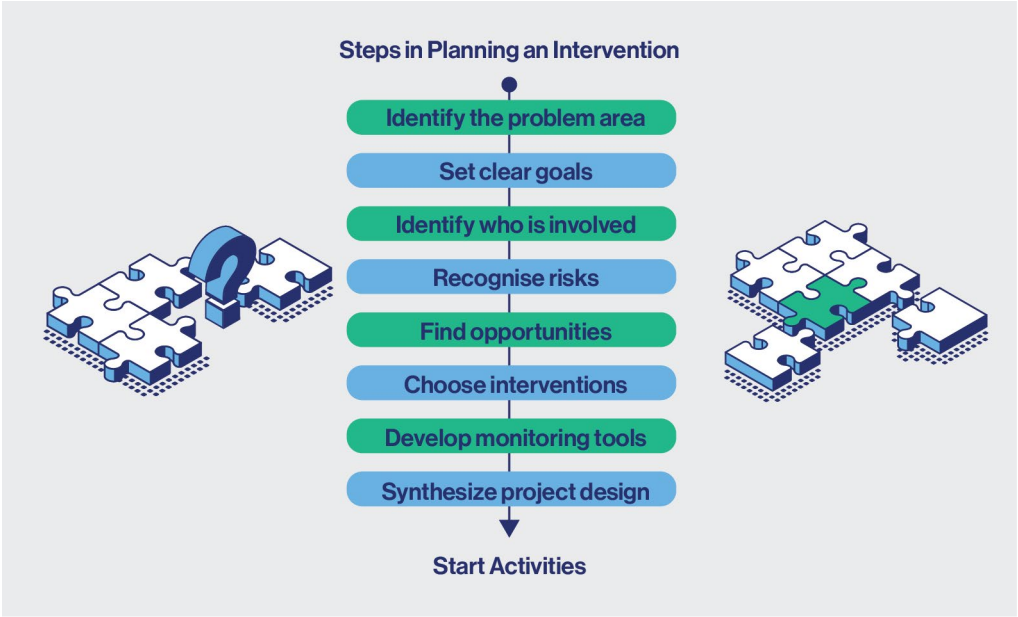


Figure 5: Steps in Effective Project Planning (Grassroots Collective p4)

Deep understanding of the site gained from detailed and differentiated mapping can help identify the underperforming and problematic areas where interventions or initiatives should be directed. In the light of this evidence, initial ideas for an intervention or initiative are surfaced and discussed with committed members of community.

Consultation and dialogue allow for community to contribute insights and ideas and to identify associated risks and opportunities. This input facilitates the development of a more viable intervention plan. The community working team and the third party then collectively set the project goals and design detailed activities that will lead to the production of tangible and intangible outputs that contribute to the desired outcomes.

It is important to articulate the relationship between the inputs, activities and outputs as this makes for effective planning and implementation. Inputs should optimise on local assets and resources and not be dependent on just outside investment. A series of targeted activities are then planned aimed at delivering concrete outputs that benefit or equip the community towards project stewardship (see Table 3).

Table 3: An Example of Strategic Planning Using a Project Chain

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
Resources Required	Planned actions to meet the objectives	Tangible and intangible products from activities	Short - or medium-term benefits to beneficiaries	Long-term benefits
Research	Participatory research	A data bank	Access to & use of data	Community-led management  Developments in products or services  Job creation
Local assets & Resources	Community resource activation	Community buy-in A core community working group	Community cohesion & shared resource	
Funding	Engage local stakeholders & partners	A cooperative funding model	Access to funds Shared profits	
Training	Awareness & capacity building	Dissemination of knowledge & skills	Improved capacity among x number of beneficiaries	

Having a baseline of the current situation and setting realistic indicators of expected community development is a critical part of design. Indicators developed must be relevant to the context as well as to the objectives, goals of the project. For example, indicators may be used to measure changes in community cohesion and empowerment, in community capacity, behaviour or mindset and in their livelihood situation or their environment.

### 6.3 Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation is an ongoing process in ABCD as is problem solving and reflection. All four should be integrated throughout the implementation process. Concrete targets and checklists should be developed to track progress, to assess the performance of actors at different stages of the project. Quantitative and qualitative indicators help with measuring levels of achievement. Expect minor problems to arise during implementation and

be proactive to reflect on the problem and consider making changes and adjustments. After the withdrawal of the third-party enabler, the initiative continues to be sustained by local actors. Community continues to make adjustments to the initiative when needed and conducts ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Third party enablers may want to have follow up activities to help community measure impacts or higher-level goals.

## 6.4 Activating Community

Community participation happens when members of the community are motivated and choose to actively contribute time, energy, knowledge, and skills to making a change. Community is more inclined to participate when there is a clear articulation of needs, objectives and shared benefits. Activating community participation takes time and involves “winnable, simple, and specific” strategic activities with specific aims.

### Strategies for Activating Community

- Valorize and build community pride and recognition of their existing cultural assets
- Motivate interest in community to contribute creative solutions to problems
- Build community cohesion through rich social interaction and participatory praxis.
- Accommodate various interest groups in activities that match their capacities or passion.
- Increase skills, confidence, and aspirations of motivated community members in preparation for stewardship.

The process of activating community requires incremental community interaction, participation and mobilisation. Building trust and relationships and cultivating a culture of inclusion, consultation and participation that involves individuals, subgroups, and stakeholders is a precondition to collaboration and empowerment (Table 4).

Table 4: Spectrum of Public Participation (adapted from IAPP, 2014, p2)

Social Cohesion		Collaborations Partnerships		Skill and Capacity Building	Stewardship and Governance
Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower	
Community is informed of intention	Community provides input or feedback	Intergrating community voices, knowledge & needs	Community contributes and shares responsibility	Community leads/drives initiative	
Outreach	Public Meetings	Community-led working groups	Co-creation	Shared leadership & management	
Presentations	Focus group discussions	Collective visioning & goal setting	Co-implementation	Shared benefits	
Billboards or newsletters	Deliberative polling	Consensus -building	Partnerships with other organisations	Autonomous Decision-making	



Consultation is a two-way process that allows for mutual articulation of the problem, presentation of ideas, and potential solutions by all parties. Consultation together with access to information can be employed to develop common purpose or collective goals or to build consensus and commitment.

**Conditions required for successful bottom-up initiatives:**

- There is local interest, assets and capacities to help an initiative take root and to provide fuel for change to take place
- Community stakeholders are invested from the outset and buy into the benefits of the initiative
- Community stakeholders are empowered to actively manage the project and are given the skills to do so effectively

Collaboration can begin to happen when committed members and partners have a clear idea of the initiative and the expected deliverables and indicate they are ready to share responsibility in co-implementing the initiative. Community capacity may need to be strengthened through apprenticeship, mentoring, coaching or professional training, etc.

Before third party enablers begin withdrawing from a community development initiative, they need to put

in an interrogative evaluation mechanism and feedback loop at each point of intervention which allows the community to make decisions to adjust the project objectives or implementation process. Only then can the shift in power dynamics become visible; responsibility and accountability are transitioned into the hands of the community. Empowerment refers to a developmental process where a community develops increasing autonomy, competence, and self-determination to manage and take ownership of the project (see Figure 6).

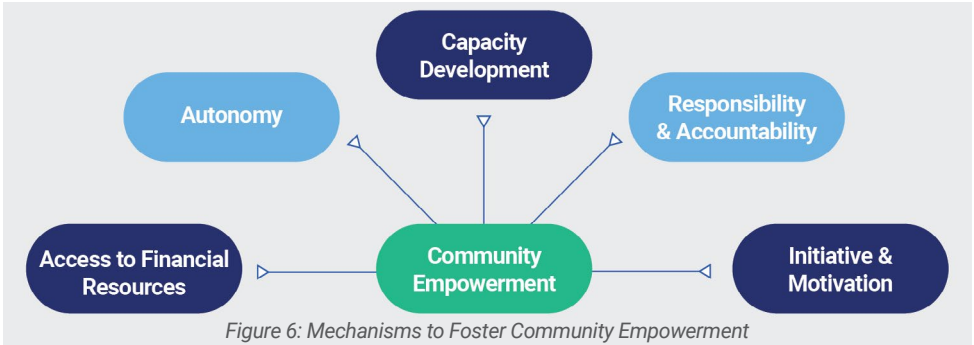


Figure 6: Mechanisms to Foster Community Empowerment



## 7. Case Example of ABCD Practice

This case example illustrates the use of ABCD practice in a rural cultural landscape in the state of Perak, Malaysia and highlights success as well as challenges in applying the ABCD approach.

### 7.1 Context and Problem Statement

Lenggong Valley, in the state of Perak, Malaysia is a rich rural landscape displaying natural and archaeological heritage assets, biodiversity, distinctive geology, archaeological sites and artefacts. It also has a rich cultural heritage of diverse settlers of Patani, Malay, Chinese and Indian descent who live in scattered villages alongside the Perak River and in a small-town centre. Fertile plains, river tributaries and man-made lakes provide for sustainable livelihood and commerce in

agriculture and fishing. Although Lenggong Valley was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012, and a National Geopark in 2021, previous surveys have indicated that its younger generation of inhabitants display little knowledge of its geo-archaeological and cultural heritage. Older residents who engage in traditional occupations and practices possess a better functional knowledge of local cultural and natural resources and are more likely to make use of them.



## 7.2 Project Description, Objectives and Goals

This project was a part of a larger plan - Lenggong Valley Sustainable Community Development by Think City. Arts-ED Penang, a community-based arts and culture education non-profit organisation, was commissioned by Think City to carry out a capacity building and education programme to enhance local communities' awareness, ownership and responsibility of cultural and natural heritage assets.

A draft initiative was drawn up to develop a series of heritage awareness walks in local sites to increase awareness and knowledge among inhabitants and younger students of Lenggong's heritage. To build the capacity of local community, a group of active community would receive on-the-ground training on co-designing, co-organising and delivering the walks. Targeted beneficiaries would be the active community group delivering the walks, as well as local residents, secondary school students and teachers participating in the walks.





### 7.3 Selection of Learning Sites

To demonstrate Lenggong’s rich heritage, the sites were selected to represent Lenggong’s diverse settler groups and their interaction with the landscape as well as being able to display strong natural or cultural heritage elements. A previous cultural mapping report on Lenggong (H&C Heritage Sdn. Bhd., 2023) provided a useful data on Lenggong’s cultural villages and heritage sites. To select the learning sites, the team paid site visits to the villages to assess the interest of the village leaders and the availability of community connectors. A thematic matrix (Table 5) was used alongside team visits to select five sites.

Table 5: Matrix for the Selection of Learning Sites

Thematic Site Selection	Natural Assets	Social Assets	Cultural Assets	Economic Assets	Displays human-nature interaction
Archaeological Site	✓		✓		✓
Lakeside Village	✓		✓	✓	✓
Historical Malay Village		✓	✓	✓	✓
Chinese New Village		✓	✓	✓	✓
Town and Urban Village		✓	✓	✓	



### 7.4 Who Was Involved

Arts-ED played the role of third-party enabler with a team of five members contributing to research, facilitation, capacity training and co-organisation of the programme together with the community. The initiative involved a total of 25 active community members as well as partnership with the local council and the village headmen.

In each site a local core working team was formed. The group consisted of a local community connector who was acquainted with most people in the village and could identify and draw upon their support, and a couple of community volunteers and potential guide.





## 7.5 The Process

The six-month process involved engaging and organising members of the larger community in the five sites around a series of activities that would motivate their participation and contribution to the initiative (see Figure 7).

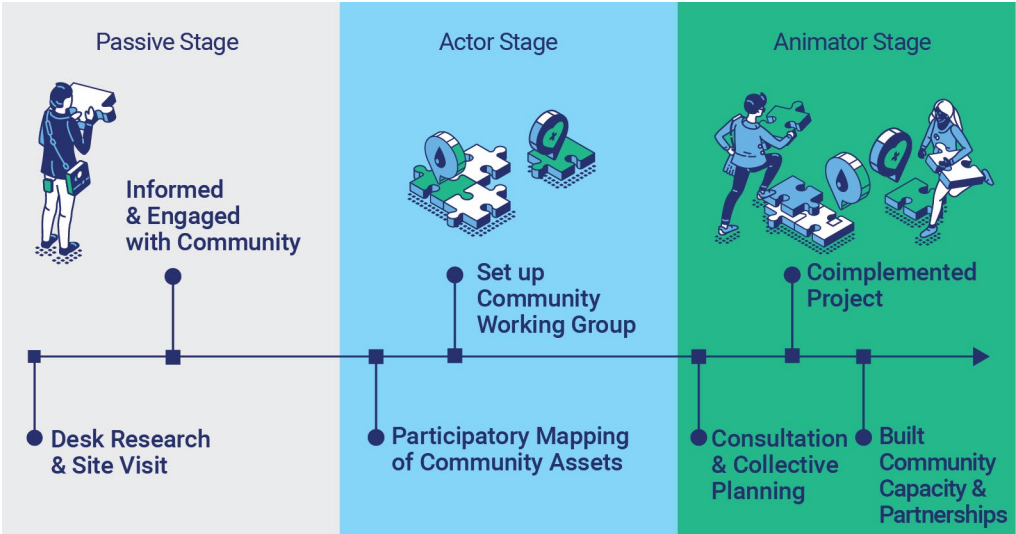


Figure 7: ABCD Process and Activities in Case Study



## 7.6 Community Activation and Capacity Building

After informing community about the initiative, the planning and development of the project in each location became a collaborative exercise between the Arts-Ed team and the local working groups from each site.

To kick off community activation residents in each site were involved in participatory mapping and value identification of cultural and natural assets. Among the tools used were informal conversations, interviews with residents and local historians and walks led by residents through the neighbourhood.

The community connectors played an important role in involving more members of community by identifying resource people, collecting historical materials from community and recruiting local storytellers and residents who could demonstrate traditional practices to enhance the walks.

Community guides were trained to lead the walks while the community working group and local council staff were given training on how to organise the logistics of transporting and hosting local participants from villagers and schools for the walks in the various sites.



**Enabler-Facilitators**  
The role of Arts-ED as third-party enabler was to engage community, identify a community working group, facilitate mapping and documentation, coach and build capacity of the working group and to provide support where needed.



Figure 8: Community Organisation and Involvement in the Project



## 7.7 Capacity Building

Capacity building involved mentoring and facilitating progressive responsibility to move the community working group towards self-organisation. Activities included:

- Role clarification
- Assigning progressive responsibility
- Assigning tasks and monitoring performance
- Scaffolded learning through practice and trial sessions
- Observation and learning from peers at work
- Feedback and reflection

Over time, individuals and subgroups within the larger community came on board to support the core working group to add value to the heritage walks through storytelling, demonstrations, preparation of food, beverage or transport. Members of the community working group focused on using their existing social and organisational capacities to organise and manage community input, and to support the chosen guides in conducting the heritage walks in each of their sites.

## 7.8 Outputs

1. A total of **24 heritage awareness walks** conducted by a total of ten members of the core community working group. (two from each site)



2. **Ten members** from the community working group were involved in planning and execution of the walks while **five members** received training as heritage guides.



3. The community working group was able to secure their **own grant to finance 14 of the 24 walks**.



5. This included:  
**A historical timeline** tracing the development and significant events at each site.



4. Approximately **350 residents of Lenggong** participated in the awareness raising walks  
Documentation of the history and assets of five sites.



**A detailed asset map** indicating built and natural heritage assets on each site.







## 7.9 Evaluation

### Evaluation of Heritage Walks

Simple verbal opinion surveys were carried out with of a small number of students and adults who attended the experiential heritage walks. However, the survey only provided their immediate response and learning from the walk and it is impossible to say if the new knowledge had any impact on changing attitude or contributing to a sense of ownership towards heritage assets.

**Instrument:** Short verbal pre and post questions were posed to 15 residents before and after they participated in the walk to evaluate if there was any increase in knowledge and awareness of the heritage site and its assets.

**Findings:** Respondents reported a 20-30% increase in heritage knowledge and awareness of heritage assets post walk. Residents living within the sites were excited to locate new assets, personal stories and practices, while residents visiting other sites displayed a strong interest in the historical development of those sites and hearing about economic livelihood, ecosystems and conservation.



## Evaluation of capacity building and community development

The guided survey and focus group discussion collected only opinions from the community working group. Unfortunately, only opinions and not indicators were used to measure the outcomes, and so transformation or change was not measured.

***Instruments:*** A guided questionnaire and a focus group discussion were conducted, involving 10 people from the community working group who were involved in planning, designing and execution of the heritage walks.

***Findings:*** The focus group discussion (FGD) was more successful in getting nuanced responses. The community working group members especially guides, mentioned a big leap in their knowledge and were able to detail many skills learned such as how the activities expanded their perspectives, enhanced their knowledge and changed their attitudes towards heritage assets. Also mentioned were improved relations between members of the working group, and better cooperation with villagers.





## 8. Conclusion

Among the learning points from this attempt at asset-based community development were

- More strategic community engagement activities could have helped community understand and extend more support to the initiative.
- Participatory mapping was an effective tool for data gathering and activation of community.
- The failure to map community capacity and create a skills-bank impacted the efficacy of the community working group which lacked diverse skills needed for the project.
- Ongoing problem solving and adjustment of the programme was very useful given unpredictable circumstances and also arising opportunities.
- The concept and process of monitoring and evaluation was not well designed, and the importance of developing indicators must be underscored.
- Opportunity to develop this micro-initiative further was lost (despite motivation to do so on the part of community) due to the 'project-based' mindset of the third-party enabler team and partners.

Overall, the initiative contributed significantly to raise immediate awareness of heritage among local residents who participated, but its long-term impact cannot be determined at this point. For members of community that were involved in mapping and documentation, the process contributed to an expanded knowledge of heritage assets and a significant development in pride of place and identity. Working on a common goal and collaborative implementation helped the community working team and partners to strengthen organisational skills and enhance connection and cooperation among some community members.





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