

# Applying Asset-based Community Development Approach to Community-based Tourism: The Case of Beni Na'im, Palestine

Report of a Master's thesis

Anna Satovuori, University of Helsinki

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background of the Study*

This is a report of the Master's thesis project that was carried out as an assignment for the Abraham Path Initiative (API) in spring-autumn of 2015. The aim of the thesis was to examine the potential of an asset-based community development (or ABCD) approach in the context of community-based tourism. The thesis is one of the first empirical case studies globally to apply the ABCD approach into tourism. This has previously been done on a theoretical level by Dolezal & Burns<sup>1</sup> and so far only once on an empirical level<sup>2</sup>. The case study area is the town of Beni Na'im, one of the 53 localities currently connected with the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil, a 321 kilometers long hiking trail in the West Bank, Palestine.

The current tourism activity on the path and thus in Beni Na'im as well is coordinated by Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIAK). MIAK is an umbrella organization of three Palestinian NGOs (The Siraj Center, Rozana Association and the Palestine Wildlife Society) and Bethlehem University.

Community based tourism (CBT) has increasingly been perceived as a sustainable alternative to conventional forms of tourism, as it aims at wider benefits by emphasizing the participation of the local community in tourism development. However, CBT initiatives often face challenges in delivering their goals.

Meanwhile, in a wider community development discussion, the asset-based approaches have gained popularity and it has also been argued that the ABCD-approach could, when applied to a CBT context, fill some of its gaps. Whereas traditionally the approaches on community development have been focusing on the needs and lacks of the community, the ABCD approach is more concerned with the existing capacities and building on them<sup>3</sup>. In this approach it is also essential that even the marginal groups in the community and their assets are recognized.

### *Research Questions*

The study was designed to respond to three main research questions. Firstly, it was important to examine the current nature of hiking tourism that takes place in Beni Na'im, in order to find some possible caveats that the ABCD could respond to. Secondly, an asset-mapping survey was conducted, as a practical application of the ABCD. Finally, a third question was aimed to tie together these two parts. Thus, the three questions were defined as the following:

- 1.) *In what ways are the principles of community-based tourism, identified in the CBT literature, currently realized in the case of community-based hiking tourism in Beni Na'im?*
- 2.) *The potential of the ABCD:*
  - a.) *What do the local people consider as the touristic (natural and cultural) assets of their community?*
  - b.) *How do these perceptions of the touristic assets relate to the current form of tourism that MIAK is promoting (community-based hiking tourism)?*
- 3.) *Could the ABCD approach improve the realization of CBT in Beni Na'im?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Community-Based Tourism*

For example Rosemeijer (2001)<sup>4</sup> defines community-based tourism as initiatives owned by the communities themselves or run jointly with the private sector, and which include fair participation of the community and improve the standard of living of the community by utilizing the natural resources in a sustainable way. Ashley (2006)<sup>5</sup> provides a more loose definition, as she defines CBT projects to be run and owned by a group of community members, and having social development objectives (such as improving livelihoods) in addition to economic ones.

Even broader is a definition by Goodwin and Santilli (2009)<sup>6</sup>, according to whom CBT is “tourism owned and/or managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefits”. Boonratana (2010)<sup>7</sup> adds to this that the community should also possess roles as the planners and developers of tourism. Furthermore, Boonratana identifies *e.g.* respect towards the local culture, cultural learning and preservation of the natural capital as attributes often associated with CBT. As becomes evident already from these examples, the CBT lacks conceptual clarity, which has been noted also by *e.g.* Goodwill & Santilli. However, in this study the participation of the locals as well as benefits were the core themes to look into, following a similar approach to that of Timothy (2003)<sup>8</sup>.

Community participation which Simpson (2008)<sup>9</sup> defines as “*a level of control, ownership or influence*” is a key concept related to CBT, and it has even been argued that it is a condition for achieving a sustainable form of tourism<sup>10,11</sup>. This is because participation is expected to deliver bigger and also more equally distributed benefits from tourism<sup>12</sup> and to improve the level of acceptance of tourism by the community<sup>13</sup>. In tourism literature participation has been conceptualized *e.g.* with the help of typologies, by Arnstein (1969)<sup>14</sup> and Tosun (1999)<sup>15</sup>.

It has been argued, that in real-life CBT projects the participation of the local community has often been limited to tokenism<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the rarely contested assumption, that participation of the local community is inherently a good thing has been challenged by Simpson (2008)<sup>9</sup>, who has argued that the active involvement of the locals in itself does not necessarily guarantee economic or livelihood benefits and is not a condition for the community being able to accrue benefits from tourism.

### ***The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach***

The asset-based community development approach reflects a wider shift in development agency discussion into an asset- or strength-based direction<sup>16</sup>. The origins of the concept can be traced back to Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993)<sup>3</sup> work, in which they wanted to move away from a needs-driven approach in community development, as it tends to create an overly negative image of the community focusing only on its problems and positions the residents as passive receivers of outside help.

Instead, they propose that development should be based on the capacities and assets already existent in the communities, such as its people, associations and institutions. They justify this view by stating, that historically community development has been best achieved when the locals have invested themselves and their resources. In other words, it highlights the idea of a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down way of thinking. The concept was later picked up by Mathie and Cunningham (2003)<sup>16</sup> who formulized it into a strategy, an approach and a set of methods towards community development.

Despite the emphasis on the own assets of the communities the need for outside resources is not denied in the ABCD. It is rather suggested, that if the locals are mobilized and have a say in how these resources should be used, they would be used more efficiently<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Applying ABCD to CBT***

Inherently ABCD is an approach that promotes participation. Therefore, it might have potential in enhancing CBT in practice, as has been noted by Dolezal & Burns (2014)<sup>1</sup>. They argue, that on a theoretical level the CBT would benefit from the application of the ABCD and that it could also provide an empirical framework for acknowledging the local community’s (tangible and intangible) assets. They further argue that applying the ABCD might help in tackling some of the problems often related to CBT, such as ignorance towards the heterogeneous nature of communities.

Wu and Pearce (2014)<sup>2</sup> attempted to map the tourism assets of Lhasa, Tibet utilizing the ABCD approach from the perspective of the youth. According to their findings the local youth were able to identify the tourism assets and also desirability of their development. These findings support the basic principle of the ABCD: that the community members themselves are able to identify the assets of their own community.

In another example Hipwell (2009)<sup>17</sup> examined the success stories of adopting an asset-based thinking in development efforts. Although in those examples the ABCD had not been applied on purpose, the findings support the usefulness of the ABCD and the focus on existing assets. According to Hipwell, building development initiatives on indigenous cultural values and heritage mobilized the community members and engaged them to the initiatives.

Despite the traditional emphasis in the ABCD on individual capacities and social capital, in this study the analysis was focused solely on cultural and natural assets, as these often form the basis of tourism development<sup>18</sup>. This study is one of the very first attempts to use the ABCD in tourism context, and more specifically in the Middle East and within the outdoor tourism sector, which is emerging only now.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT: BENI NA'IM**

Beni Na'im is a town of approximately 27,000 inhabitants, located to the east of Hebron, in the southern part of the West Bank. The most important livelihoods are trade and agriculture. In 2007 50% of the citizens were employed in trade and commerce, 20% by the Israeli labor market and 19% in agriculture. More and more people have been shifting from other livelihoods to agriculture, as the Israeli occupation and declining demand of products has caused the town economy to deteriorate. The town is known specifically for its stone pits that produce stones for export to other parts of Palestine<sup>20</sup>.

People in Beni Na'im became involved with Masar Ibrahim in 2013. There are currently eight families in town involved with MIAK as homestays. The families vary in size between four and seven comprising most often of a married couple and their children. The occupations of the adult members of the families vary from teachers to merchants and in six families women are housewives.

The main sites referred to by MIAK in Beni Na'im are the Lod Mosque and the Yaqin shrine. These are the two sites related to the Abrahamic heritage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***The Fieldwork***

The data was gathered during two field trips that took place in May and August of 2015. The trips consisted of interviews with key stakeholders and local homestay owners, an asset-mapping survey in Beni Na'im as well as participation on an organized hiking trip passing through Beni Na'im. The study relies on both, a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

In total interviews with 21 people were conducted, representing different stakeholders. The interviewees

included all homestay hosts (eight interviewees from eight families), representatives from MIAK (six interviewees) and API (four interviewees), as well as representatives of the Beni Na'im municipality (two interviewees).

Majority of the interviews were conducted in the workplaces of the interviewees or otherwise specified locations. Some interviews were done in English and some Arabic with the help of a translator. The interviews were semi-structured.

### ***Asset-Mapping Survey***

Surveys are an often used method of mapping the assets and skills of residents in the ABCD<sup>19</sup>. Although in this study the individual attributes and skills of the community members were not in focus, a survey method was used to identify/map the perceptions that the locals have of the touristic assets of their community. In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to rate some pre-defined assets on a list consisting of 28 items in total, and were also given space to provide details for the asset in question. In total 74 questionnaires were collected.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***CBT in Beni Na'im***

The criteria for this examination were built on using several definitions of the CBT principles and ideals that were discussed earlier in the literature review. The primary themes were participation, in relation to typologies of participation by Tosun and Arnstein as well as the individual and collective benefits from the current tourism. In addition, it was felt that as the concept of CBT has been understood in such different ways, it would be important to examine the different stakeholders' perceptions of it.

### ***Perceptions of CBT***

A variety of themes emerged from the responses regarding how the stakeholders understand the concept of CBT. These included *e.g.* direct interaction and cultural exchange between the tourist and the locals, direct economic benefits and participatory roles of the locals.

It is noteworthy though, that among the locals, elements related to interaction and culture were the predominant ones and many seemed to view direct interaction as a way for the tourist to get to know the local culture and traditions. On the contrary, the representatives of other stakeholders were more likely to bring up participatory roles of the locals,

ranging from inclusion to collaboration and decision-making.

#### *Participation and Ownership*

Some key issues, when discussing the nature of participation, were whether the possibilities for participation are equal and who in fact are the community members who participate and in what kinds of roles, as well as whether also the poor, marginalized or other minorities have equal chances to participate, since that is emphasized in the ABCD.

According to MIAK, it is a core element of their methodology in involving communities to approach the communities through municipality or village councils as well as local women's cooperatives. This had also been the case in Beni Na'im. The CBO that MIAK currently works with is the *Bani Na'im Cooperative for food processing*. After the initiative had been approved by the municipality, a series of public meetings were arranged, in which people could ask questions regarding the initiative. Afterwards application was open for families to apply as hosts.

Since the volume of tourism in the area is low, as becomes evident from the fact that the number of times of hosting hikers varies between nine and zero among the eight host families, no more than eight families are currently actively involved with the initiative. As was mentioned above, during the process of MIAK introducing the project to Beni Na'im, the locals have been provided opportunities to express their opinions through workshops, but as the power itself remains in the hands of MIAK – them arranging the actual hikes and e.g. deciding which family hosts each time, overall the local communities cannot be claimed to own the tourism. However, one of the interviewees from the MIAK said, that in the future it would be the ideal situation if the hikes could be directly arranged between the communities and the hikers.

Out of the current eight hosts several have members that have been active in one of the local women's associations in leading positions while two other families have a member working in the municipality. The remaining families have members closely related to one of the other active members. Therefore, the current hosts cannot be considered as particularly marginalized or disempowered members of the community. Meanwhile, only two of the women in the 8 families had jobs.

Regarding the criteria for selecting the hosts, it was brought up by both the hosts themselves as well as the interviewees from MIAK, that the most important criteria was having an extra room to host guests. Other criteria included e.g. English skills, Internet connection and willingness to attend trainings. Through analysis of the interview data emerged that despite rarely specified as a concrete criterion, the selected hosts were considered as responsible or representable people in the community.

Another issue regarding participation that emerged was the distribution of hikes among the hosts. Some families felt that in terms of the organized hikes the rotation of the hosting had not been equal: the number of times of hosting range from nine to zero, and this was identified as an issue by some hosts. The hosts had been involved in the initiative for varying periods of time ranging from six months to two years, which explains part of the variation

#### *Benefits*

In the analysis the benefits were identified as anticipated and actual benefits, on individual and community levels. Three of the eight hosts clearly stated that they had anticipated economic benefits from hosting. Other anticipated benefits included cultural exchange and learning new languages. None of the hosts felt that they would have benefited much from the initiative, especially economically. This is understandable, given the small number of hikes. Among the hosts the (economic) benefits have also been distributed unequally, resulting from the uneven rotation in hosting.

Despite the lack of significant economic benefits five of the eight hosts felt that there had been some other benefits, such as broadening social networks and improving their social skills through the trainings, getting to know new cultures and getting improvements (such as furniture) for their houses in order for it to meet the standards of MIAK for accommodating guests. Broadened social networks were mentioned most often (by four interviewees) as a gained benefit, even though only one interviewee mentioned this as an anticipated benefit from getting involved with the initiative. As for more collective/wider community benefits it was mentioned in some interviews, that in general the awareness of foreign cultures had increased.

#### *Asset-mapping*

As was explained earlier, the purpose of the asset mapping survey was to identify the views of the

local residents on the (tourism) assets of Beni Na'im and see how they relate to the current community-based hiking tourism promoted by MIAK.

The respondents rated the 28 pre-defined assets on a scale from one to three based on their attractiveness to potential visitors. They were also provided with a space to specify their ratings regarding each asset. Based on the average ratings given to the assets, the highest-rated assets were *Lod Mosque, wildlife, Yaqin shrine, local food, hospitality of the Palestinian culture, festivals and mosques* in general, which all reached a mean value above 2.5. Lowest average ratings were given to *restaurants, cemeteries, industrial sites, market places, cultural sites and Al Qasar cultural center*.

As a result of the analysis, an asset map was produced and is displayed here (Figure 1). As displayed in the picture, the themes that emerged are *local way of life and culture, nature and historical sites*. Under the category of *way of life* the community members listed assets such as the hospitality, the local food, mosques and celebrations such as weddings and religious festivals. In the category of *nature* the most often highlighted asset was the area of Al Mansafer and in the category of *history* Lod Mosque and Yaqin Maqam, as well as the old city of Beni Na'im. A geographical asset map representing the locations of the most popular assets is presented on the following page (Figure 2).

The responses were strikingly homogeneous: similar assets were highlighted by different respondents. There were no significant differences regarding the perceptions of the assets between the genders or different age groups, or between the respondents who are involved with MIAK and the other community members.

## DISCUSSION

In this study the asset-based community development approach was piloted in Palestine for the first time. It included a limited sample in one of the 21 communities hosting hikers on the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim al Khalil in Palestine.

### CBT in Beni Na'im – Meeting the Ideals

Deriving from the findings, some arguments can be made regarding the characteristics of the current CBT in Beni Na'im, in relation to the ideals identified in the literature review.

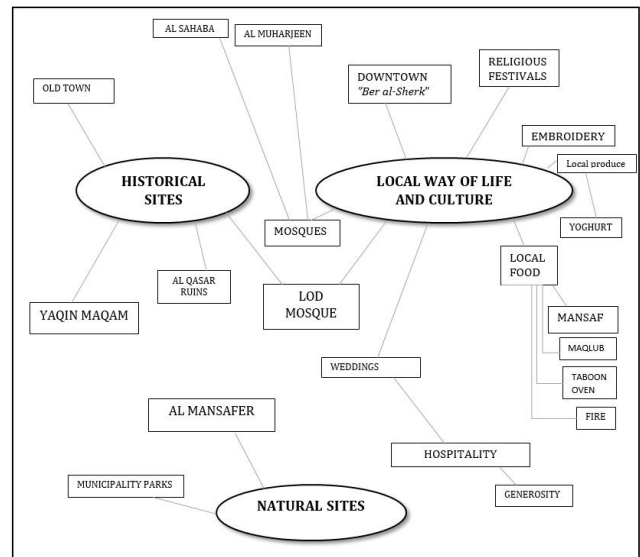
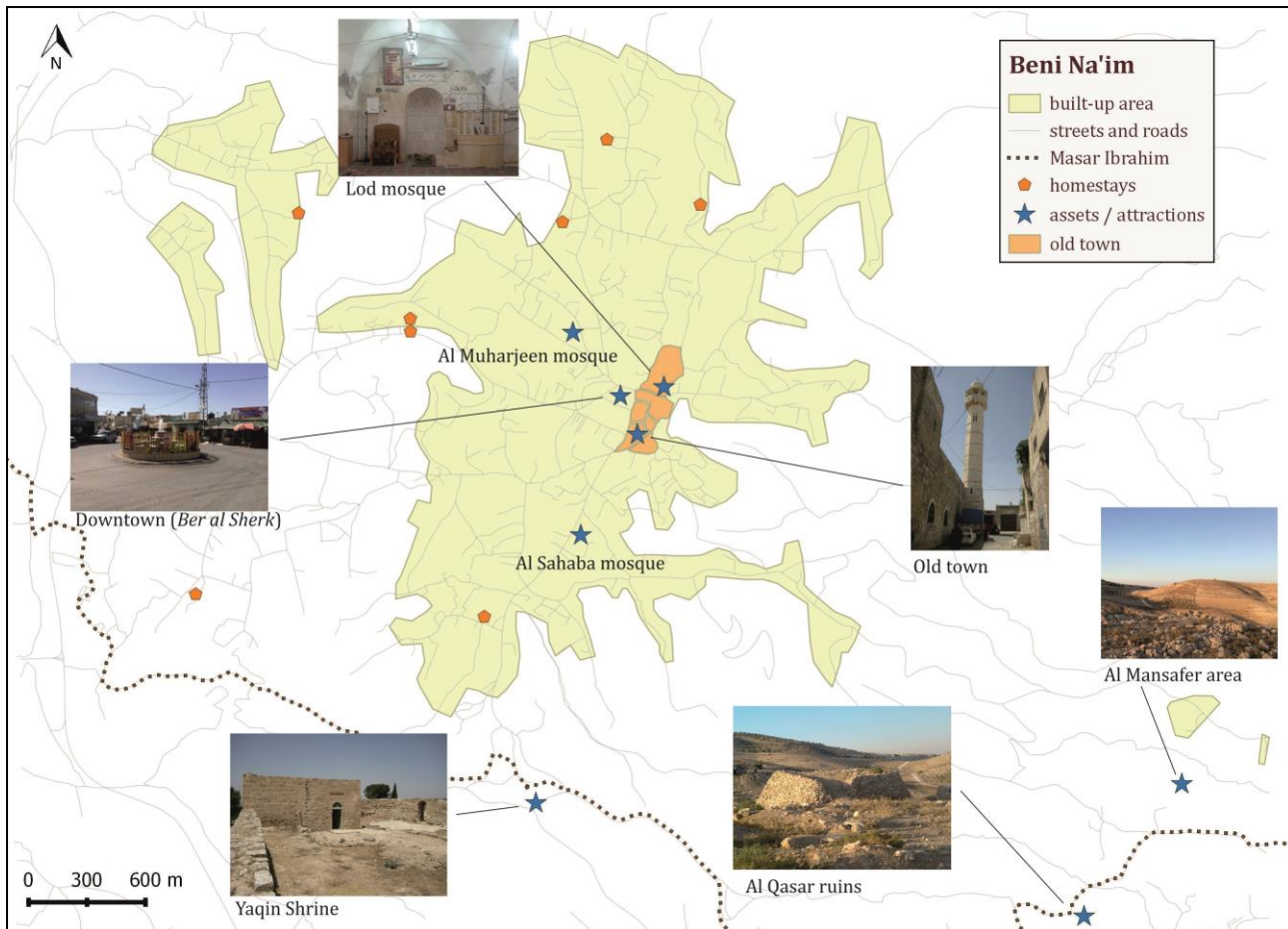


Figure 1. The asset map based on the survey results.

Clearly, the tourism initiative has not been initiated by the community but has been introduced from the outside by an external actor. However, despite the ideal that CBT initiatives would be conceived and/or owned by the community, the literature actually has rarely found examples of CBT projects that would be initiated or even completely managed independently by the local community, noted e.g. by Jones (2005)<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, as MIAK works closely with existing local institutions, it is not a project simply just "planted" from outside the community.

According to Tosun's typology for community participation in tourism, it could be argued that in Beni Na'im the participation of the locals could be placed somewhere between passive and spontaneous community participation, but at the moment closer to passive participation. In general the influence of the local people on the tourism activities are limited to public meetings (or workshops) where they have been allowed a chance to express their concerns and



**Figure 2.** An asset map of Beni Na'im, showing the locations of the most highlighted assets.

bring up their questions. Typically, this would be perceived as passive or induced participation. Furthermore, regarding the actual execution of the current hikes, it is not the community itself that makes decisions on e.g. the rotation of the home stays. In order to reach the spontaneous participation (or the citizen power stage as described by Arnstein), a more bottom-up approach would be needed and the power in planning and decision-making should be redistributed to the citizens on a more practical level (Okazaki 2008)<sup>21</sup>.

At the same time, it is worth asking, whether the more active participation or a complete ownership of the tourism initiative would be needed or desired in the case of Beni Na'im. As has been suggested by Simpson (2008)<sup>9</sup>, the active involvement of the locals itself is not a condition for them to accrue benefits. On the other hand, regarding the distribution of benefits, it would be necessary to balance the rotation, in order to ensure that all the hosts would maintain interest in the initiative and that the benefits would be more equally distributed.

Meanwhile, the current form of tourism is being developed in a way that enables the locals to maintain their culture and also has potential to preserve cultural and natural heritage. Furthermore, it has been developed by the community's consent and entails as a core element exchange between tourists and the hosts that promotes cross-cultural learning. Thus many essential elements of CBT<sup>7</sup> manifest themselves in the initiative. In addition, as has been argued by Ashley (2006)<sup>5</sup>, one key feature of CBT is that there are also social development objectives in addition to economic ones. The practice of involving women in key roles as the home stay hosts fits this ideal, as women, in addition to youth are often considered as marginalized groups in the Arab world, at least economically<sup>22</sup>.

On the other hand, regarding the host families majority of them are in relatively powerful positions within their own community. Thus, the power structures within the community have had an impact on the selection of hosts. According to MIAK, favoring lower income families has been a factor in choosing the families, but not a condition for a family to be involved. It was brought up by many

interviewees, that the key criteria of having an extra room in the house is something that poorer members of the community most probably lack.

Community-based tourism projects have been argued to be prone to the local elites capturing the benefits<sup>1</sup>, and thus prioritizing already well-off members of the community could eventually lead to problems in this regard – a problem of which a study by Jones (2005)<sup>11</sup> provides an example. In her study on a Gambian ecotourism initiative it was found that despite an impression of a harmonious community that was maintained by the villagers, in reality the power hierarchies were strong and while all the power was centered on a few, related individuals, among the rest of the community there appeared to exist dissatisfaction and mistrust. This is also where the core principle of the ABCD of involving also the marginalized and the minorities with their potential assets could come into play and prevent the project from turning into a project of the already powerful.

While the idea of applying the ABCD in this way does appear to be a fruitful one, in a tourism context it could also be questioned. It could be argued that prioritizing families with well-equipped houses and high status in the community *is* in fact in itself an “asset-based” decision. As was mentioned earlier, MIAK approaches communities through not only the municipality/village councils, but also by cooperating with local women’s cooperatives, partly in order to identify existing capacities in the communities, *i.e.* the possible hosts. Operating this way through existing networks and associations resonates well with the idea inherent in ABCD: it is the associations and informal networks within communities that provide access to individual assets.

As was mentioned above, as a criterion for the host selection emerged being considered as responsible or representable person in the community, being that this was rarely explicitly mentioned. Despite the fact that the initiative does have socio-economic goals, is tourism still inherently an economic activity intended to gain profit, and the tourism itinerary that is sold to the hikers also in the case of MIAK and Beni Na’im is essentially a tourism product. Therefore it does seem logical and a safe way of operating from the part of MIAK to rely on well-known figures, considered as responsible and good representations of the culture. Thus, it could be argued that in a way the tourism initiative in Beni Na’im is already “asset-based” in its approach. From an actual ABCD –perspective however, also

considering the possibly marginalized groups as potential contributors would be essential. And this might be where in-depth asset-mapping methodology could be applied in order to map the “human capital” (skills and attributes) of all segments of the community. In this study the focus of the actual asset-mapping was in touristic assets only, and it was not in the scope of this study to map other capital.

### ***The Asset Perceptions by the Locals and MIAK***

Moving on to discussing the asset mapping that was conducted as a part of this study, it becomes clear from the findings presented earlier, that the respondents indeed have clear perceptions about the touristic assets of their community. This supports the similar findings of Wu & Pearce (2014)<sup>2</sup>.

Whereas the focus in the study of Wu & Pearce was to map new alternative assets, in this study the purpose was to compare the assets considered by the local people with the assets that are being built on and utilized in the current tourism project in the target community. Many of the assets the community members perceived as valuable have also been promoted by MIAK and, in addition, fit well with the concept of community-based hiking tourism. For example hospitality is valued highly by locals and other stakeholders alike. Thus, in this sense the actual tourism activity meets the local perceptions, even if some assets are not represented. It is indeed encouraging that the three highest valued assets by the locals (the Lod mosque, the Yaqin shrine and the al Mansafer area) are somehow included in the current tourism itineraries.

This study was one of the first to apply an asset-mapping survey as a practical application of the ABCD and explored the usefulness of the asset-based approach in community-based tourism context. In this approach the study is ground breaking. As Haines (2015)<sup>23</sup> points out, the goal of the asset-based approach in community development is not so much about finding out which capitals are more important than others, but rather, essential is the ability of the community members to acknowledge these assets; the capital of their community. In addition, from tourism perspective, it has been suggested that only such attractions that are favored by the local people should be developed in order to ensure the local community’s support for tourism<sup>24</sup>. Thus, from the point of view of both, the CBT and the ABCD, the awareness of the local people of their community’s assets is valuable.

## FINAL CONCLUSIONS – APPLYING ABCD TO CBT

The tourism initiative taking place in Beni Na'im can already, in some aspects, be identified as "asset-based". First of all, the way of involving the communities, by approaching them through existing structures in identifying capacities in the communities resonates with the principles of the ABCD. It is recommended for MIAK to adopt ways for higher inclusion of all segments of the community. This could potentially reduce the elite exclusively capturing the benefits. At the moment of writing this the path is extending towards the south from Hebron – recently five new communities have signed contracts with MIAK. As families will be selected there, it is recommended to start by conducting an asset-mapping of the human capital. This way it is possible to identify hosts with best potential in the whole community, including the more marginalized community members. At the same time, more emphasis should be placed on the families with low income or otherwise marginalized status. In addition to public meetings a larger share of each community could be included in the planning and implementing the project with similar methods with MIAK.

Secondly, it was also found out that in terms of the natural and cultural attractions the initiative is currently building on existing assets, which are also appreciated by the locals. Some assets highlighted by the community members, such as the old town of Beni Na'im and the Al Qasar ruins might be beneficial in the long term to include in the tourism developments as well.

Although all the findings from this study cannot be generalized, the asset-mapping survey proved to be an effective way to shed light to what the locals perceive as the cultural and natural assets of their community. The asset-mapping was successful in integrating the views of a heterogeneous group of community residents.

As pointed out by Okazaki (2008)<sup>21</sup>, despite the vast amount of literature promoting community participation in tourism development, actual suggestions on how the participation could be promoted on a practical level are rarely presented. Assisting the community members discovering and building on their existing assets has also been argued to promote agency and a sense of control<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the

findings of the asset mapping of this study are encouraging, and the ABCD approach with its emphasis on the locals mapping their own assets could indeed provide a practical application of participation.

Based on the discussions above, the potential of the ABCD in the case of Beni Na'im is particularly related to the methodological level. Thus, the findings of the study give empirical weight to Dolezal and Burns' (2014)<sup>1</sup> assertion that CBT could learn from ABCD essentially in its methodological approach. Participatory methods inherent in the ABCD, such as the asset-mapping, can be used to reveal the views of the locals regarding the tourism assets of the community. Additionally, it could be used to identify the human capital existent in different groups of the community, and therefore enhance equal opportunities for participation.

In terms of future research, it would be useful to conduct similar studies in other communities along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil. Mapping the local perceptions of touristic assets in different communities and especially the ones that have been just recently involved could prove useful and possibly reveal "hidden" assets. Furthermore, studies applying the ABCD in different geographical and tourism contexts would help to build understanding of the potential of the ABCD-approach which, based on this study, clearly can contribute to community-based tourism on a practical level.

### Contact the Abraham Path Initiative:

Stefan Szepesi, API Executive Director:  
[stefan@abrahampath.org](mailto:stefan@abrahampath.org)

Shay Rabineau, Trail Research Consultant:  
[shay@abrahampath.org](mailto:shay@abrahampath.org)

Sini Pöytäniemi, Research Coordinator  
[sini@abrahampath.org](mailto:sini@abrahampath.org)

The API Research Notes are intended to summarize research results and lessons learned through the Action Research Component of World Bank Project No. P147235, and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank, its board, or its member countries.



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