



Enterprising Women

Asset development for women in the Downtown Eastside

BY MELANIE BUFFEL

Sharon is a 44-year-old divorced single mother in Vancouver, B.C. When she began the Enterprising Women Asset Development project in October 2004, she was living on about \$1000 a month from her disability level social assistance and the child tax benefit for her 16-year-old daughter. She had lived on welfare in social housing for 13 years.

Sharon has a high school diploma but a spotty, part-time employment history. Over the years she developed her employability skills through volunteering at numerous nonprofit organizations. She was keen to work in community service but felt like her skills were redundant. Most entry-level positions were temporary or insecure because of unstable funding situations.

Enterprising Women Asset Development (EWAD) is a demonstration project geared to help low-income women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside identify their assets and build on them to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families.

EWAD's centerpiece is an individual development account (IDA), a savings-matching tool that has captured the interest of a wide range of community members and interest groups. Perhaps that's on account of the simplicity of its mechanics: it tops up individual bank accounts with government and corporate

donations earmarked for a relatively specific purpose (e.g., education or business or home ownership) within a relatively short time frame. IDAs have "measurable outcome" written all over them.

Less certain is how effective this traditional application of the IDA is to marginalized women. Recent research into women's experience of poverty points out a number of types of asset that women require in order to provide adequately for themselves and their families. Is the IDA amenable to a more holistic approach to asset building – one that recognizes the complexities of a woman's life? Could an IDA be structured in that way while remaining practical, that is, manageable and acceptable to program staff, participants, and funders?

That is what the EWAD project set out to discover.

Sharon's first connection with EWAD was not as a participant, but in its initial research stage. She was asked to join the project's Advisory Committee. While the meetings were very "heady" and theoretical, she felt her perspective as a low income woman was welcome and respected. When the project research led to the design of an asset development program, she saw the very practical application to her own life and applied to be a participant.

EWAD participants evaluate the program in terms of the ideas it planted (seed), their changes in attitudes, beliefs, and realities (flowers), and the things personally or in the program that got in the way (clouds).

Originally, Enterprising Women was a participatory action research project funded by Status of Women Canada to examine the barriers and opportunities for microenterprise development by low-income women in the Downtown Eastside. In the course of the research the IDA tool and its potential to support business start-up costs was discovered. With financial support from Vancity Savings Credit Union, a short-term pilot was tested. Five women saved small amounts and received matching grants that they then used to cover their microenterprise costs.

Based on the strength of the outcomes and the transformative nature of the experience for the women participating, the concept was broadened. In addition to microenterprise, the IDA could be applied to other uses that would assist women to improve their economic situations. The Enterprising Women Asset Development Demonstration Project (EWAD), funded once again by Status of Women Canada and Vancity, was the next step in the evolution of this idea.

EWAD applies the Sustainable Livelihoods framework¹ to asset development. A sustainable livelihood is defined as “the ability to maintain ourselves and our families, take advantage of opportunities for growth and be resilient to shocks and stresses internally and externally.” It can be expressed in terms of five categories of “livelihood assets” – social, personal, physical, human, and financial – that represent the essential ingredients for self sufficiency. (See article and diagram, p. 30.)

The program’s design reflects this broader definition of assets.

In terms of *financial assets*, EWAD’s individual development account matches every dollar a participant saves with three more. Participants save \$10-30 a month. Upon reaching a goal of 12 monthly deposits or a total of \$360, their savings are eligible to be supplemented to a maximum of \$1080, for an account balance of \$1440. Participants then use these savings to purchase an asset that will support their next steps on the path to a more sustainable livelihood.

This development of financial assets is a point of entry that broadens to support development of all five categories of asset in the participants’ lives.

At eight workshops (one per month) the participants can safely talk and learn about budgeting and cash flow, banking, managing credit and debt, and self-advocacy (*human assets*).

These sessions also draw attention to many gender-based issues in the ways we deal with money. Participants explore the messages they have received about money as girls and young women from family members and other role models. These personal histories are linked to current money behaviours and beliefs, and “aha” moments lead to more effective attitudes and approaches to money (*personal assets*).

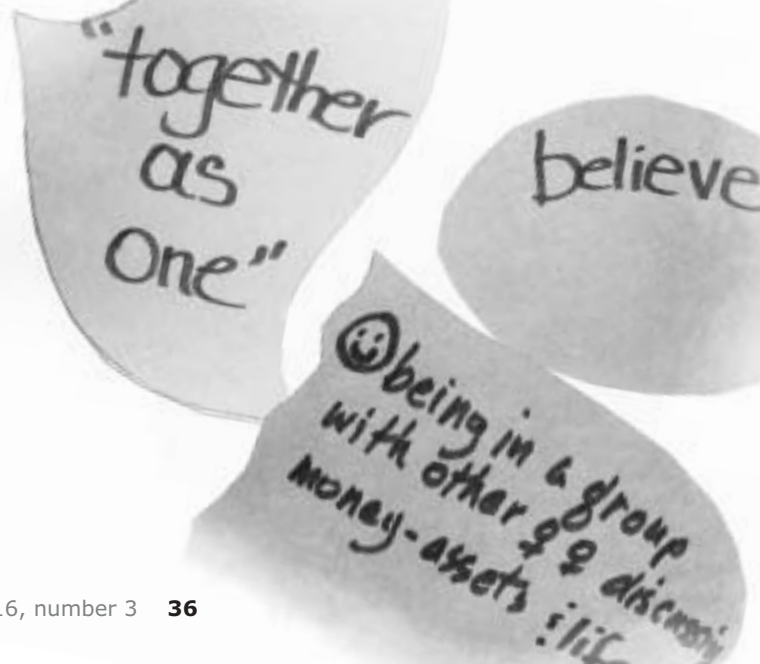
A buddy system encouraged participants to share resources and develop supportive relationships outside the sessions (*social assets*). Buddies called each other between classes to check in, to complete homework assignments, and to remind each other of upcoming workshops. One pair shared a table at a craft fair; others shopped together to get good deals and reduce their costs. At each workshop women shared information about low-cost household items, business equipment, free tax preparation services, and the like.

Each workshop also includes a 10-minute presentation from an organization offering services in the community such as educational support, job search, and social services. The intent has been to make a personal connection between each organization and each woman, so she would be more likely to feel welcome and realize the relevance of those services to her life, thereby widening her network of support.

Flexibility was key to workshop design. They were offered at three different times of the day so women could work them into their schedules. Each workshop included the opportunity to share a catered meal from the Potluck Café and childcare and bus transportation was also covered (*physical assets*).

Soon after her acceptance to EWAD, Sharon got a full-time job at an agency where she volunteered. It more than doubled her income. She felt overwhelmed – and terrified – by her new reality. She knew how to be poor; she didn’t have the knowledge, skills, or confidence to manage this new income and feel neither deprived nor wasteful. Sharon’s primary goal in EWAD was to gain these skills and information. For her, EWAD’s matched savings opportunity was a bonus, but a good way to develop the savings habit.

Thirty women began the program in 2004. They differ in age, ethnicity, and background. What they have in common is a lack of income and a lack of assets. All live at incomes below the



¹As adapted and explained by Janet Murray and Mary Ferguson in *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: An asset-based approach to building sustainable livelihoods* and *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: A guide to effective practice in promoting sustainable livelihoods through enterprise development* (Women and Economic Development Consortium, 2001, 2002).

Low Income Cutoff as defined by Statistics Canada (the majority at levels significantly below LICO). Twenty-one were on social assistance at the time of entry.

That combination makes them all highly vulnerable. Even minor shocks or stresses can lead to crisis. This close to the edge, life revolves around coping to meet basic needs. But they also share a strong desire and the courage to move beyond coping, to set goals for a brighter future, and to take steps towards realizing them.

EWAD's approach is to allow them to focus on their existing capacities and resources and explore the choices and opportunities they have to develop these further. By means of a simple questionnaire² each woman listed her assets in all five asset categories and scored (0-5) their relative strength. For each asset category the participants also expressed the goal they wanted to achieve during the program and the steps they would take to reach it. At the program's mid-point and then at its conclusion they could update and refer to this asset map to track their own progress, and a basis for evaluating the program itself.

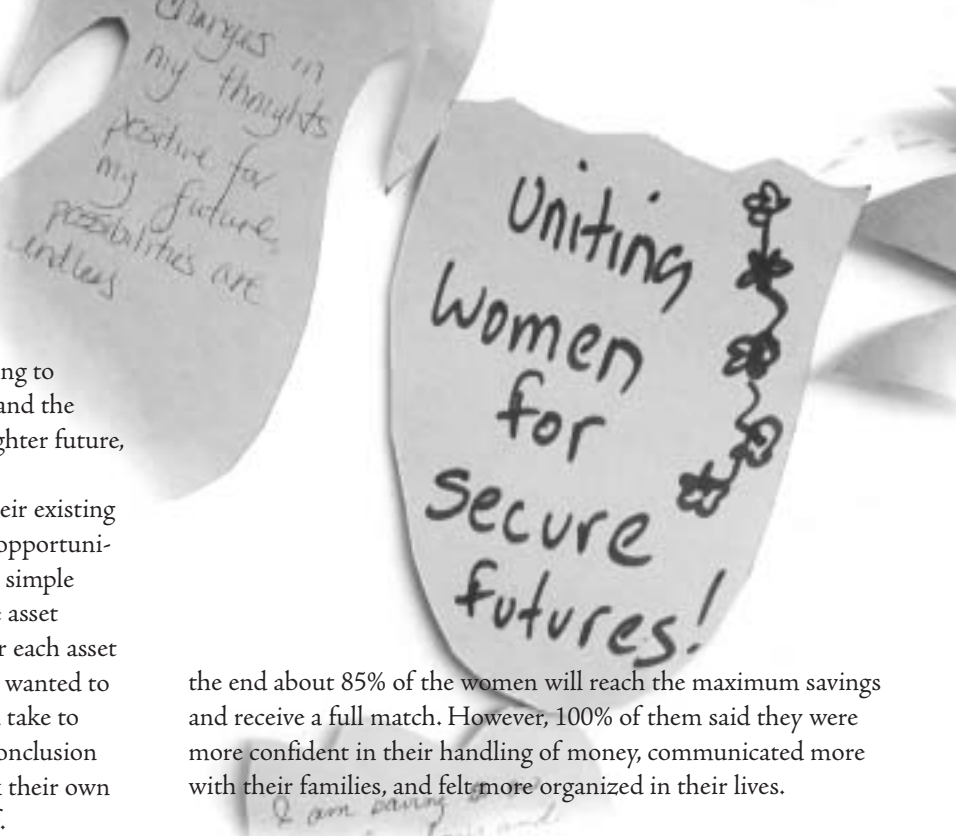
This approach stresses the personal responsibility of the individual and the power she possesses to plan and act for herself. It is vitally important that the participants make their own goals and their own decisions about how their savings could best support the achievement of those goals.

While traditional IDAs restrict the definition of asset, EWAD has been created to support women's process of transformation. IDAs are just one of the tools necessary to make that change. Ultimately it is the women who choose how to use the tool to their best advantage. Some have used their savings to purchase training, computers and other equipment (including cars) to assist with education, microenterprise, or other employment opportunities. The value of the savings is not determined by their appreciation in dollars, but by the leverage they give a woman in her efforts to achieve her goals.

This is not to say that all EWAD participants experienced all elements of the program positively. Change requires significant commitment and courage and many factors stand opposed to real progress. Asset development programs are not a panacea and do not work for everybody.

Women who were able to form clear goals were very resourceful with the information, tools, and financial resources that the program provided. Others, unable to save because of an extremely tight budget or because of a crisis they had to address, or unable to articulate clear goals, found the experience more challenging. IDA programs must be designed to address these issues so that participants are supported in their efforts to succeed – not set up for failure.

It is interesting to note that as the project progressed, the matching funds became less important than the experience of support, information, and connections made in the workshops. In



the end about 85% of the women will reach the maximum savings and receive a full match. However, 100% of them said they were more confident in their handling of money, communicated more with their families, and felt more organized in their lives.

Sharon began the program with just \$11.30 in savings. In ten months she has saved the maximum amount in her EWAD account and also has invested over \$1000 in Guaranteed Investment Certificates. Even if her income goes down, she sees the value of saving and intends to keep putting money away each month. She established a credit history by researching and applying for a credit card that she uses regularly and pays off in full each month. This access to credit goes a long way to reducing her vulnerability to crisis.

The holistic approach to asset development modifies the evaluation process. The definition of success is distinctly broader. Quantitative outcomes like employment status, and income and savings levels still count. But qualitative results also receive great weight: the remarkable transformations that women undergo once they have developed a stronger sense of confidence and control in their lives. We use a data base to store the quantitative data. A mid-term evaluation, a diary of stories, and an exit interview captures qualitative information.

Such an approach has significant implications for funding. It involves a shift away from short-term, project-based funding toward secure, flexible multiyear funding that allows for planning and tracking results over the longer term. It is a shift that is made when funds are understood as an investment in the ongoing development of communities, organizations, and individuals (rather than "a donation to a good cause") and are managed by innovative partnerships between government, private foundations, and corporate sources.

²See Murray and Ferguson, *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: A guide to effective practice in promoting sustainable livelihoods through enterprise development* (2002), pp. 68-75.

EWAD does not attempt to be everything to everyone. It only works because of the way that it connects to other, neighbouring institutions and agencies as part of a web of support. A key part of EWAD's capacity has been its referral network of complementary supports: affordable housing, quality childcare, related education and training, job search, and crisis support. This network includes members of EWAD's Advisory Committee, who represent a variety of complementary services and have assisted with resources and referrals in moments of crisis. In British Columbia there are eight other asset development programs in total. We are beginning to work together to share resources, conduct research, develop best practices, and advocate for supportive public policy.

EWAD goes beyond support to individuals to also advance the practice of asset development in our community and influence public policy. It has supported the launch of two additional asset development programs, Smart Save (run by the Canadian Mental Health Association) and CA\$H Plan (the Eastside Movement for Business Renewal Society). The latter two programs help low-income entrepreneurs to develop their assets and to capitalize fledgling businesses.

EWAD is also one of four programs that have worked with the provincial Ministry of Human Resources to develop an agreement that would enable social assistance recipients to participate without cuts to their benefits. This relationship has other benefits too. When EWAD participants move off social assistance into jobs or schooling (five, at EWAD's mid-term evaluation), there is a government audience in place to hear about it and to receive policy recommendations in that regard.

Sharon attended every workshop. She made regular monthly contributions to her EWAD savings account. She gained confidence in her management of personal finances, which transferred to confidence in other areas of her life. She found she could be more assertive with bill collectors and government bureaucratic processes. She learned the importance of knowing her rights, keeping written records, and following up on issues until they are resolved. "That's the way you get results," she says.

Because of their appeal to people right across the political spectrum, asset development programs in the United States have been termed "ideologically neutral." The right responds to the programs' promotion of self-reliance; they appear to be a way for people to build their "American Dream" and fuel the economy. The left sees them as a way to distribute government and corporate resources and provide to low-income people the kind of support that middle- and upper-income earners have enjoyed for years thanks to tax relief on investments.

Asset development in Canada exists in a very different social and political context. The swing toward neo-liberal governments and the erosion of our social safety net over the last few years has led some on the political left and people engaged in antipoverty work to view asset development skeptically. The strategy appears to represent the fight against poverty as primarily an individual responsibility to develop assets, as opposed to a collective responsibility to provide for the basic needs of vulnerable members of society. How can we expect people who are unable to satisfy their own basic needs to dedicate more resources to building future assets?

Moreover, there is a fear that asset development can be co-opted and reworked into a substitute for more universal social programs. Could not individual employment insurance accounts replace the Employment Insurance system? Could the Canada Pension Plan be replaced by a system of matched Individual Retirement Savings Plans?

It must be clearly understood that asset development projects like EWAD in isolation are no solution to poverty. They are a tool – just one of a number of antipoverty and socio-economic development tools that can be integrated into strategies that enable people to become more engaged and committed community members, to rise to their own potential, and to contribute to the common wealth of social, human, and capital assets. Adequate levels of income assistance and a strong social safety net are fundamental parts of those strategies. Inadequate and restrictive government policies (like the clawback of federal supports by provincial government and low asset limits) are a real – even fatal – handicap.

We can drive the asset-building agenda for individuals and communities by building strong networks of practitioners, activists, and social policy researchers to advocate for supportive public policy that recognizes both collective and individual responsibilities in the development of our communities.

The road was by no means smooth for Sharon. In the course of the program, the community agency that employed her lost its funding and closed. But this didn't stop her. Instead, she began vigorously searching for a new job. Once her savings were matched, Sharon devoted some of them to driving lessons, a road test, a license fee, and membership in a car co-operative. Access to a vehicle would enable her to pursue a wider range of jobs, she felt. It did. Sharon got a great new job in a software company across town. When asked what she wanted others to know about her experience in the program Sharon said, "Supporting people to become independent is always a good investment!"



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