STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES TO AID AND DEVELOPMENT

by Deborah Rhodes and Christopher Dureau[1]

"In PNG, we use this kind of approach [strengths-based] in our normal interactions with each other, because it is respectful and leads to change: it is not a new idea to us. But our experience is that aid donors are quite disrespectful because they always ask what we have done badly or what our needs are. We want things to improve, just like everyone else, and of course we are happy to work with others who share our objectives. But that doesn't mean we are useless, weak and full of problems. We would all achieve a lot more if this approach was used in aid partnerships." [Senior official, Dept of Provincial & Local Government, PNG]

1. Introduction

This submission addresses a fundamental issue relating to the approach that Australia takes in its aid relationships (partnerships) with other countries. It proposes a substantially different approach from the *problem-based approach,* which AusAID currently uses as the basis for much of its work. This submission recommends that Australia's aid program applies *strengths-based approaches (SBAs)*. We consider that now is the time for a major paradigm shift, because of the consistent failure of the problem-based approach and because we believe SBAs will significantly help Australia to succeed as a development partner and to achieve critical and shared development objectives. In particular, SBAs provide the means for Australia to meet its global commitment to principles included in the Accra Agenda for Action on Aid Effectiveness: ownership, partnership and mutual accountability.

AusAID commissioned a discussion paper on this issue in 2009 (**Annex 1**), but while some staff were most interested, it appears that a lack of coherent and strategic planning on development approaches across AusAID and a lack of leadership about effective and collaborative development partnerships, have hampered a strategic response[2].

2. Current approach

The problem-based approach, used by AusAID and many other Government agencies involved in aid program delivery, focuses almost entirely on the problems, weaknesses, gaps and needs of developing countries. While such a focus may justify expenditure decisions, it should not be used as the basis for planning, for building collaborative partnerships and for assessing change over time. Nearly all research on aid effectiveness[3], including myriad internal AusAID reports, confirms that collaborative and respectful partnerships are fundamental to the achievement of development outcomes. The problem-based approach, when used in developing country strategies and program designs creates

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[2] Although some AusAID and other Australian Government agency programs have used SBAs in recent years.

[3] E.g. Eyben, R., 2006 *Relationships for Aid,* Earthscan

fundamentally unequal and uneven power relationships which make collaborative partnerships, such as the Pacific Partnerships for Development, extremely difficult to achieve. The problem-based approach tends to imply that there are few, if any, strengths in developing country organizations and thus tends to ignore and even undermine existing capacity, local energy and motivation. The corollary is that the approach implies Australia, as the analyst of developing country weaknesses/problems, has the solutions to the myriad problems described, which in most cases, is simply not the case. Australia certainly has funds, relevant ideas and skills to contribute, but there are significant limitations. For example, Australian advisers in Solomon Islands encountered significant issues when they tried to import Australian ideas that do not work in different contexts. Their work has often failed when they started with a gap analysis or used a problem based approach[4].

3.   The proposed approach

Definition: *Strengths-based approaches concentrate on the inherent strengths of individuals, organisations, communities, groups, sectors or networks as the basis for identifying, connecting and mobilising them, for planning to achieve development or change and for working in partnerships.*

Main uses:
- *To provide a sound foundation for planning, based on what has already worked in a particular context (country, sector, organization etc.), recognizing that in every context there is always something that has worked well (on which to build) and there are always existing resources (which can contribute to shared efforts) to achieve shared objectives*
- *To provide a sound basis for collaboration, in which the respective strengths of partners are valued and where there is greater chance of developing an understanding of different perspectives on development priorities, definitions of success etc. and achieving shared objectives*

This submission recommends that SBAs be used by the Australian Government and AusAID as fundamental to all aid partnerships and collaborative planning processes. SBAs emerged from the science of human and organisational strengths[5] and have been used globally in many sectors over more than a decade, starting with organizational and community development (key areas of focus for many aid programs) and now reaching to almost every discipline. For example, SBAs are now used to underpin health reform in the UK, education services and employment schemes[6]. The President of the USA, Barack Obama, used SBAs to mobilise 750,000 volunteers during his election campaign and together with his wife Michelle, has been promoting use of SBAs in community development work in Chicago. Australian of the Year in 2003, Dr Fiona Stanley uses SBAs in her work on Aboriginal child health[7]. The NSW Department of Education has been researching SBAs as a new adult learning strategy[8]. In summary, there is a currently a great deal of energy and interest in SBAs globally and in Australia, across many sectors. While relatively new to aid and development, SBAs are highly relevant

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[4] See http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pubout.cfm?ID=5250_3610_3143_5022_8090
[5] Cooperrider, D. L. (2000). Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing. Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change. 29 - 5
[6] E.g. Glass Half Full (2010), How an asset approach can improve community health & well being, Improvement & Development Agency IDeA: http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/18410498
[7] http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkecentre/ahl/2008AnnualHawkeLecture_FionaStanley.pdf (page 18)
[8] See Research on SBAs in education (http://learningtobeprofessional.pbworks.com/f/lifebased_full_report.pdf)

and likely to provide substantial improvements in the quality of aid relationships and planning and therefore achievement of development outcomes such as MDGs.

Some AusAID-funded programs are already using SBAs on the ground (*see examples in Annex 1*), and some even explicitly include SBAs in their design (e.g. *Australian Community Development & Civil Society Strengthening Scheme* in Indonesia, *Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement* and *Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme)*.   This reflects the fact that aid and other sector professionals are taught SBAs as part of their qualifications (e.g. in management and strategic planning, organizational development, community development, public health, education, psychology etc.) and now use them in their work. A small number of other Australian Government agencies involved in aid program delivery are already using SBAs in their work in Asian and Pacific countries.[9]

SBAs are relevant at many levels in aid planning, but are particularly useful in the following:
- Negotiation of country strategies (documents which define Australian aid in partner countries)
- Planning of new aid activities, including sector-wide programs, regional and bilateral programs
- Implementation of any programs that include people and organizations
- Implementation of any programs that require motivation to bring about change
- Implementation of any short-term or long-term development programs which require cooperation
- Monitoring of any program (i.e. when people find out what is working well, they tend to be motivated to do more; focusing on weaknesses tends to be de-motivating and disempowering).

Annex 1 provides details about the tools that can be used in aid and development practice which apply SBAs in practice. A widely used planning tool is "Appreciative Inquiry.[10]"   Other well-known methodologies mentioned in the paper include Asset-Based approaches and Positive Deviance.

Some Pacific and Asian partners who have already been exposed to SBAs have said the following:

- *"Are you telling me that we can receive aid and still be respected?"* (Senior Pacific leader)
- *"You are asking me to tell you what we are good at and what is working well? That isn't a very Australian approach! Australians are always coming here asking for us to tell them about our problems and weaknesses."* (Head of Agency, PNG)

4.   Recommendation

This submission recommends that the Australian Government, through AusAID, **provides leadership on development approaches with its partners, including Governments in developing countries, by adopting SBAs across all aid and development activities**.

In summary, SBAs have very wide application[11] and will make a substantial difference to the quality of aid relationships, the planning and implementation of aid activities and thus the achievement of development outcomes across all sectors and partner countries.

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[9] Australian Sports Commission (with programs in Pacific, India, Africa and the Caribbean) and the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (with programs in Papua New Guinea).

[10] http://www.appreciativeinquiry.net.au/aidev/

[11] The only areas of AusAID work that may not directly benefit from SBAs are emergency humanitarian assistance and internal Australian Government communications related to funding approval.

Discussion Paper for AusAID on

Strengths Based Approaches:

Advantages and Possible Uses

Internal Consultation Draft

1 June 2009

Contents

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to stimulate discussion within AusAID as part of ongoing performance improvement of the Australian aid program.   It was initiated following AusAID's Capacity Development Showcase in December 2008[12].

The paper is not a "how-to" guide in relation to SBAs, but provides some background, analysis and suggested ways that SBAs may strengthen AusAID's performance and contribute to aid effectiveness.

2. What are strengths based approaches?

Strengths based approaches (SBAs) or strengths based thinking[13] (SBT) concentrate on the inherent strengths of individuals, organisations, communities, groups, sectors or networks as the basis for identifying, connecting and mobilising them, for planning to achieve development or change and for working in partnerships.   SBAs encompass both **a philosophy** about how to engage constructively with people, as well as **a set of tools** for practical application (see Section 3 and Annex 1). Most development cooperation in the early 21st century aims to contribute to capacity strengthening in some form, based on engaging with people and organisations, so SBAs are highly relevant to contemporary aid practice.

2.1 Background – A reaction to 'problem-based approaches'

The history of this field of practice is relatively straightforward – it is a reaction to the deficit or problem-based approaches which have been used for decades in a wide range of professions.   In the development context, people and countries perceived as "poor" or "developing" have been described in deficit terms, e.g. "they lack capacity" or "governance is weak or fragile." People and countries are portrayed as being laden with problems which need to be overcome so that "development" can be achieved. SBT sees such language, constantly applied, as crippling, leading to a sense of hopelessness or helplessness which is fundamentally disempowering.   "Asking people to say what their problems are…is tantamount to asking them to say how useless, weak, empty, powerless, and worthless they are in order for them to qualify to be helped"[14].

The deficit approach has other downsides too: it can be used to justify or extend external assistance after its usefulness is finished; it tends to match up the 'strengths' of the external intervener with the 'weakness' of the country, a situation that imbalances the relationship and helps to maintain donorship (could be described as the patron/client relationship); it can actually undermine existing strengths by ignoring them or allocating resources to supplanting them unnecessarily; and it tends to gloss over any discussion of donor gaps and weaknesses.

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[12] This second draft of the paper benefits from substantial inputs from several individuals whose expertise is highly valued and acknowledged.

[13] The term SBAs is used predominantly in this paper simply because it is used in the expansive literature on this topic, however the concept of "strengths-based thinking" is perhaps more accurate and helpful so is used occasionally where it seems most appropriate.

[14] Ngunjiri, E. (2003). Participatory methodologies: double-edged swords. Development Methods and Approaches: Critical Reflections. Oxford, Oxfam, GB.

2.2   Purpose and value of the approaches

Philosophically, SBAs are fundamentally about creating change based on what people, groups, organisations or networks are good at and what they want for the future.   SBAs enable people and organisations to become clearer about the desired future, building on previous or existing success and what resources are available in the particular context.   The approaches provide a set of methods and a framework to move forward which does not ignore the realities, complexities and/or challenges inherent in each context (see Section 2.3).   Strengths based thinking acknowledges that a detailed analysis of the complexity of a situation (all the causes of all the problems and all the risks) is not a necessary pre-condition for positive change to be achieved.

The approaches are firmly based on the belief that there is always something that has worked or is working well in every context. SBAs work from the premise that people move in the direction in which they focus, e.g. "focus on the positive and you will move in a positive direction[15]".   The field of practice suggests that there will be an increased sense of ownership and thus a greater sense of engagement with development processes. These factors are considered critical to the achievement of sustainable development results at any level, and are clearly highlighted in contemporary shifts in global development practice (e.g. Paris Declaration, increasing use of sector wide approaches).

SBAs are founded on the belief that people involved in development processes are more likely to achieve sustainable and relevant change or development when they have:

- A good (and shared) understanding of what works well in a particular context and the contributing success factors (why)
- A good sense of what resources are available in the context
- Agreement among stakeholders about what objectives they want to achieve
- A clear understanding about what steps are necessary to achieve their objectives, based on the evidence available.

SBAs are not a substitute for all development analysis and for all aid management purposes – while their value is broad, they were developed with the specific purposes noted above.

2.3   Alternative perspectives

This section discusses a variety of potential "critiques" of SBAs. In development practice there is a history of innovation and application of lessons learned, as practitioners and theorists attempt to redress perceived limitations of dominant practices. As noted above, a shift to the use of SBAs is not likely to be a panacea for all development practice. The shift from a problem based to a strengths based approach may simply be another innovation to help address some of the fundamental challenges to aid effectiveness encountered in recent years.

Varied definitions of and perspectives on strengths and weaknesses[16] may be considered as a potential "weakness" of SBAs.   A strength could be defined as: a recurring pattern or structure of behaviour,

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[15] Just as, if one focuses on the obstacles, all one will see is obstacles.
[16] Some of this material was provided by Peter Morgan (member of AusAID Capacity Development Panel) as commentary on an earlier draft.

either individual or collective, that has been applied in the past with success and can be recognized as a legitimate contribution to future solutions. Conversely, a weakness could be defined as: a pattern or structure which constrains such progress.   However, the Capacity, Change and Performance study[17] found that capacity (which is basically about strength) can arise from a sense of confidence, a set of rallying ideas, social capital, the power of historical traditions, or country pride. It therefore follows that the usefulness of finding strengths depends on how they are conceptualised, who is looking and how, why and when they are looking. Importantly in SBA practice, the value is not simply about asset or strength mapping alone but that it is done with and by the people who are looking for change – it is a process of locating strength and the energy for change obtained through the discovery of those strengths. The critical issue in strengths based thinking is that a strength is a reality not just a "potential", because participants have actually applied it before and this has helped them to become who they are (rather than who they are not).

For some, the differences between a strength and a weakness are not always clear cut: and there maybe situations where something described by someone as a strength is perceived by another as a weakness, so therefore could be both. A key reason for different perspectives could be diverse cultural values (e.g. about leadership, individualism/collectivism or task/relationship orientation) and the use of SBAs suggests that facilitators will need to be knowledgeable about countries and cultures and the influence of these on behaviour and understanding. Many other contextual, professional or personality factors will influence perceptions of strengths or weaknesses.   Strengths in a low income country, for example, are frequently not easily identified or understood by outsiders: resources may be hidden; attitudes may be difficult to read; and motivations can shift quickly. While there may be many examples where a strength from one cultural perspective may be perceived as a weakness, the objective of using SBAs is not to juxtapose strengths and weaknesses but for people in a particular context to identify where strengths exist and leverage change from there.

AusAID has placed greater emphasis in recent years on understanding contexts for its aid activities, and particularly on greater analysis of the political economy: while SBAs can broaden such analysis, it is not the main purpose of the approach. People and organisations which use SBAs need not be naïve about the reality of development problems and challenges, threats or weaknesses. There are times when positive change is unlikely to occur until key constraining elements are tackled and this needs to be aired. However, in practice, the approaches neither ignore reality nor the complexity of negative elements in any context. They provide a frame of reference, plus a structured way of working collaboratively which focuses **first** on achieving motivation and commitment within an evidence-based context between people, groups, organisations etc. In practice, once positive-looking, evidence-based, genuine partnerships are established then people become willing to talk about and address deeper issues. While SBAs can be seen as an important first step, many practitioners also find that strengths based thinking can be successfully applied throughout all stages in development cooperation.

SBAs may be more relevant to some professions (such as education, preventative health, behaviour change and systems or institutional development) in development practice than others. They are particularly relevant where there is not a single root cause of, or solution to an issue. In other professions (such as doctors and emergency workers), training and practice are highly "problem and solution focused" so SBAs are less applicable in practice.

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[17] Capacity, Change and Performance, Study Report, European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2008

SBAs may not be the best way of persuading a selective donor or politician of the justification of expenditure on a particular issue: their purpose is not to prove how serious a problem might be.   Policy-makers and budget planners may also not find much value in the approach if their priority is to convince the audience of the significance and complexity of a problem. However the use of SBAs can certainly result in excellent program planning documents, clear objectives, detailed plans, shared understanding about what is possible, feasible and practical governance structures and systems, monitoring frameworks, assessments of risks etc. These elements meet all other donor planning requirements.

3.   Tools for applying SBAs

SBAs have spawned a number of **specific tools for practical application** in many contexts. In international development practice, the **most commonly used tool** is Appreciative Inquiry, which is described below. Other tools currently used quite widely include: Assets Based Community Development (ABCD); Sustainable Livelihoods Approach; and strengths based research or evaluation methods (see Annex 1 for summaries).

3.1   Appreciative Inquiry

Since its first use in the 1980s[18], a theoretical framework has developed around Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which has grown exponentially within the field of organisational development.   AI is a form of inquiry or research that unconditionally focuses on the affirmative. Successes of the past are identified as a means to uncover the factors which enabled them to happen.   Through this, individuals and groups are strengthened to identify their preferred future (i.e. identify their objectives) and move forward in that direction (i.e. plan what to do to achieve their objectives).   AI has already been used in numerous settings globally and has a great deal to offer broader international development practice, particularly since much development work focuses on organisational change.

AI is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on desire for positive change in a person, a situation, or an organization. In so doing, it enhances a system's capacity for collaboration and change. AI uses a simple 4-stage process focusing on identifying what has worked well and why; envisioning what is desired for the future; planning and prioritising what would work well; and working out how the implementation would occur. AI is a practical participatory planning and evaluation process which can be used in any context with any organisation or group of people to contribute towards improvements, increased effectiveness, change and better performance. It works in both homogeneous and diverse groups, with the positive emphasis assisting efforts to negotiate shared understanding, since it is less threatening than problem definition which can appear blame orienting.

In practice, AI involves four basic planning questions:

1.   What has worked well (in this context) and why?
2.   What resources and strengths are available?
3.   What do we want to achieve in future?
4.   What steps do we need to take to achieve these objectives?

Section 4 includes examples of how AI is already used in AusAID activities and suggests ways that AI might be applicable more broadly.

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[18] AI was created by David Cooperrider as part of his doctoral work focusing on organizational development.

4. Application of SBAs

Given that SBAs are as much a philosophical approach as a set of practical tools, it is recommended that the tools be used in a coherent manner, not in isolation[19].   SBAs are highly applicable to international development practice because a significant proportion of contemporary aid activities is now focused on organisational development, the birthplace of SBAs. Another key reason is that in the shift from project-aid to sector-wide planning and funding, effective collaborative partnerships are even more critical to success, and SBAs are fundamentally about creating effective, motivated partnerships. In addition to a decade of SBA practice in organisational development (in government, private sector and civil society), SBAs have been used successfully in a wide variety of sectors/disciplines such as education, community development, law and justice, social work, governance, management and psychology.

SBAs are relevant and have been used at all levels – global[20], national, sectoral/network, organisational, community, group and even individual.   The structured approach and ease of translation of SBA concepts into languages other than English, makes many SBA tools highly portable, practical and useful globally. SBAs also allow for and promote greater understanding of the influence of cultural values (e.g. the perception of leadership, perceptions of change and risk, understandings about the balance between task and relationship etc.) on existing contexts, including on existing capacity.   The concept of SBAs is consistently welcomed by people in Asia and Pacific countries, as they recognize that such approaches enable effective development cooperation to take place without the accompanying patronizing, condescending and disempowering elements inherent in problem-based approaches.

SBAs have been used at all stages of the activity cycle, including broad planning, activity design, implementation and evaluation. Tools developed within the SBA field of practice have been used already to design and implement current AusAID-funded activities (see examples in boxes).

Example 1: AI in design

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) staff used AI to design its programs in several Pacific Island countries under the AusAID-funded Australian Sports Outreach Program (ASOP). The design processes were collaborative and highly successful in producing design documents which met AusAID quality standards. Activities are currently being implemented and soundly-based partnerships are providing a strong foundation for effective development processes.

The current shift from donor-defined to country owned development planning and delivery (exemplified by articles in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Accra Agenda for Action and related national declarations), emphasises the need for Government ownership of and **shared definition** of development

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[19] For example, a whole design process should use an SBA, rather than have some elements which are problem-based and others which are strengths-based. Similarly, coherence in the approach to implementation will contribute to better results and less confusion.

[20] E.g. Appreciative Inquiry was used as the methodology to facilitate the 2004 UN Global Compact Leaders Summit, involving 500 CEOs, Civil Society Leaders, Labor, and UN Leaders. "….This approach effectively turned the Leaders Summit into a working conference, producing a range of insights, recommendations and commitments to action". (see http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/news_events/8.1/summit_rep_fin.pdf)

stakeholders involved in any particular context[21]. Negotiation between partners is highly appropriate if there are different perspectives on defining a strength. However, the key purpose of SBA tools is not to generate scientific or exhaustive definitions of strengths, but to promote a **process** of achieving shared understanding. Quality aid activity should always include the flexibility to respond to emerging issues and understanding, regardless of the initial analysis.

Critical factors in considering/defining strengths include:

- strengths need to be **owned and identified** by those in the local context themselves, usually in dialogue with others (it is not for an outsider to take responsibility for identifying someone else's strengths, although in a partnership context, their contributions/perspectives are valid and will be variously valued, depending on the context and purpose)

- inquiry needs to occur **in context**
    o the local context (which includes any partners working in that context) provides nearly all information about what has worked well and why, what resources are available, what is desired and what steps are feasible to achieve the desired future

    o the selection of **who participates in a planning process** (e.g. urban elites, effective communicators, corrupt officials, activity beneficiaries) and therefore who helps define the local context and the desired future, is an important issue in any process, not unique to the use of SBAs

    o analysis of the broader **political economy context** will always assist development planning but need not be undertaken in a participatory way concurrent with other forms of inquiry

- once the context and the focus of inquiry are decided, it is easier to identify strengths and more importantly the enabling factors for success, i.e. those things that will cause or enable good practice to take place in future.

Example 2: AI in implementation methodology

AusAID's Yogyakarta Jateng Community Assistance Program (YCAP) in Indonesia is currently working with 25 NGOs helping communities to identify ways they can continue to recover from the massive earthquake in 2006. AusAID funds are provided for proposals put forward by the NGOs once they have worked with communities to address three program priority areas (livelihoods, small scale infrastructure improvements and disaster preparation strategies) using strengths based approaches. The critical elements in this planning and implementation process include:

- community engagement in analysis of what was valued in the past and what they are proud of in their context, culture and past achievements
- community participation in formulating a shared statement of what they want in the future (objectives)
- community awareness of existing assets and resources available and identification and connection of those assets which can be used for recovery
- community decision-making about priority steps for immediate action (based on knowledge of what they have done in the past and what resources they have)
- community identification of additional resources they require from government and AusAID to complement their own resources.

NGOs and Government officials have been astounded by the enthusiasm of the community to participate, the creativity that has emerged in thinking about solutions, the extent of leverage that a small amount of donor funds has been able to achieve and discovery of opportunities for government-community complementarity.

(source: Dureau, Christopher, 2009, *Applying Strengths Based Approach to Community Development and Civil Society Strengthening Activities* (draft))

The ongoing incongruence between western task-oriented approaches (e.g. fixed deadlines, pre-determined indicators of success, tightly defined objectives) and different cultural approaches to change which prevail in most developing countries (e.g. flexibility in relation to time, different attitudes towards change, different perceptions of leadership) are not necessarily overcome by the use of SBAs. However by prioritizing positive thinking and understanding of what already works in a particular setting, there is an inherent emphasis in strengths based thinking on promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Finally, effectively facilitated consultative planning processes can be time consuming, whether they focus on strengths or weaknesses, but they are central to the SBAs. The use of SBAs can reduce excessive research and analysis of layers of problems and issues which are not likely to ever be addressed by a single aid intervention. This can therefore reduce unnecessary delays in commencement of collaborative work where there is already a shared commitment, e.g. to a sector plan.

5.   Where AusAID might start

5.1   Agency-wide

AusAID, with its large and complex portfolio, operating in a dynamic international and national environment, is keen to learn new ideas and techniques, experiment with them, attempt to synthesise lessons learned from existing practice and disseminate information and learning in order to mainstream good practice. Strengths based thinking is potentially critical to how a donor like AusAID should operate, what role it should play, what its real contribution can and should be and what kind of relationships it should establish. Engagement with SBAs goes beyond promoting country ownership of development plans and projects (as noted in all good practice guides on development and articulated in the Paris Declaration etc.), towards a broader focus on human, political and social dynamics in a country.

The adoption of a new habit in AusAID of searching for existing country strengths, energy and commitment in the development of country strategies and programs would be an excellent starting point. The discussion about how AusAID will support a particular country is as much about engaging with and inciting country power, energy and commitment for change as it is about coming up with technical responses in any sector. AusAID leadership and engagement with country leadership on efforts to search out, develop and harness national strengths is an area of considerable potential.

5.2   Program-wide

At a programming level, AusAID could easily promote and encourage the use of methodologies and techniques which are based more on finding positive energy and strengths, in all aspects of its work, and in a coherent and consistent manner. AusAID's evaluations have consistently found the significance of local leadership, ownership and local empowerment in the achievement of effective development processes and development results. SBAs provide the obvious link between such lessons learned and future development practice.

As noted in Section 2 above, SBAs are relevant to working collaboratively internationally, as well as to a wide *range of sectors*; all *stages of the activity cycle*; and a variety of *development approaches, particularly capacity development*. As noted in Section 4 above, coherence in approach is recommended, so that SBA tools are not used in isolation, i.e a holistic approach is more likely to achieve the desired partnership and commitment to change.

SBAs are highly relevant and could be promoted in the design and implementation of activities in key AusAID development **sectors** such as governance, law and justice, education, community development, leadership and management, health, disability rights etc. The Appreciative Inquiry tool can be used for organisations operating in any sector and fits well with any kind of organizational development program. Other tools, such as ABCD (see Annex 1) work well with community building practice and can be used wherever there is interaction with communities, e.g. health promotion, education, governance, civil society, livelihoods etc.; and the Sustainable Livelihoods approach fits well with programs in rural and urban development , economic growth etc.

Across the **activity cycle**, AusAID can promote the use of strengths based thinking internally and with partners (NGOs, managing contractors etc.).   SBA thinking and practice can inform: assessments of particular contexts (e.g. country strategy development and sectoral reviews); concepts and designs for new activities or programs (see section 5.3 below); implementation strategies; and monitoring approaches and evaluations.

SBAs and tools are highly relevant to activities and programs which emphasise various dimensions of **capacity development** with individuals, communities, organisations, networks and sectors. By identifying existing capacity and the factors that have contributed towards capacity in each context, SBAs can generate much greater achievements than those which start with the description of a "lack of capacity[22]".

5.3   Using SBAs in activity designs

The design of activities is an excellent place for AusAID to start to use, promote, support or trial the use of strengths based thinking[23].   Given that AI has now been widely used internationally as a planning and design tool, this is likely to be the most appropriate practical tool for the purpose.

Traditional aid project design starts with a "problem analysis", on the basis of a belief that a detailed and robust understanding of "the problem" will make clear the set of technical or other responses needed to address the problem. As aid projects have become increasingly participatory in nature, have aimed to increase a "partnership approach" and have shifted towards different forms of aid including sector approaches, designers have often involved partners (beneficiaries, stakeholders, communities etc.) in long processes of unpacking and defining problems. Naturally, after hours or even days of listing problems and the causes of the problems, both participants and project designers often became despondent and overwhelmed by the apparent enormity of the "challenges".   Long and critical design documents may well suit donor agencies, but are usually both inaccessible and disempowering for partner Governments or other stakeholders.

The other negative effect of such design processes is that since external people focus on the problems of the local context, they are seen as the "problem solvers" and build up a perception they are the "experts", when in all likelihood, they have little experience of what can actually work in that particular

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[22] The author's experience suggests that the use of this approach contributes to collaborative and constructive partnerships (based on trust and mutual respect), relatively short start-up phases and more culturally effective implementation, all important ingredients in achievement of successful development outcomes.

[23] There is some consideration needed about the potential effects on aid partnerships if SBAs are used at design phase, but problem-based thinking is then applied at implementation or monitoring phases of an activity. It may be useful to monitor this if trials are undertaken, with encouragement given to a consistent approach throughout the activity cycle.

cultural context, what is realistically possible to achieve, and how long it will take. Such a situation breeds a lack of local ownership from the outset for activities proposed, a lack of congruence with local cultural values and an unrealistic expectation that the external partner will come to "fix" the problem. This is hardly a basis for a partnership approach or a shared commitment to effective implementation. Nor does it acknowledge the reality that it is the combined resources of external and local people learning and working together which is more likely to bring about sustained change in each different context.

As with all design processes, appropriate terms of reference are important. AusAID currently seeks a "problem analysis" in its standard design TORs[24], but this could be changed to a "situational analysis" which could incorporate strengths based analyses.

Facilitation skills are important for designers using this tool, as is a basic understanding of the structure of the processes involved. Facilitators need skills in working with groups of people in different cultural contexts and sectors, working out ways of using these questions in locally-appropriate ways (i.e. using symbols or pictures to define the future) and promoting participatory approaches to the development of shared objectives. AusAID may provide training for its own design advisers or promote the use of the approach in design processes. For some aid workers, it may be a fundamentally different way of operating, particularly if they have had considerable experience identifying problems "to be fixed". People experiencing the approach themselves, hearing experiences of past practice and outcomes will be important contributors to change.

Example 3: AI in design

In Vanuatu, Appreciative Inquiry questions were used in the design process for two phases of AusAID's Kastom Governance Partnership. In the first phase, a 3 day workshop used a variety of group activities to answer the four basic questions. When identifying the expected goal/objective of the partnership, groups of participants (chiefs, AusAID officials, representatives from other organisations and the implementing partner) were asked to find a symbol of what customary governance might look like in 5 years time and why that symbol was selected. When the groups reported back, describing their choice (e.g. a palm leaf or a picture of a river meeting the sea), they identified what success would look like and the key elements of the future, from which clear objective statements could be written. These statements were "workshopped" and negotiated among all the members of the group (including AusAID who ensured statements were consistent with Country Strategy etc.), to develop clear, respectful and most importantly ***shared*** objective statements. For example, the goal is: to strengthen governance in Vanuatu at national and community levels, recognising the significance of governance to achievement of appropriate social and economic development outcomes. A positive approach, based on mutual respect, shared objectives and an open-ness to learning by all partners, has since characterized the successful partnership.

The first two AI questions (what has worked well and why; and what resources are available – see 2.3.1 above) provide often-rare opportunities for stakeholders to discuss and deepen an understanding of

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[24] AusAID Rules and Tools, 'Guideline for Managing the Development of a Design' section 4.1 (2).

their current situation in positive terms and therefore draw out both specific information about the existing context and a positive attitude and sense of starting capacity and optimism. It is important for discussion to include consideration of why things have worked well, so they might apply these factors in their future planning. For example, in an organisation which has previously run a successful event, it is useful for participants to consider the factors that contributed to success (maybe things like leadership, community participation, shared commitment, volunteers, local knowledge, use of existing facilities and networks etc.), so they might identify the contribution of such factors to future events or processes.

Facilitators need to be able to work with groups of stakeholders and draw out shared agreements about questions 3 and 4 in particular (what do we want to achieve (or what is our vision for the future); and what steps are needed to achieve these objectives). There are many ways this can be undertaken, drawing on existing policy or organisational objectives for example and using participatory activities, symbols, pictures or verbal presentations (see Example 1 above) as the starting point for "word-smithing" shared objectives.   When it comes to working out the steps that are needed to achieve a particular set of objectives, earlier group work on identifying what has worked well in the past, tends to influence the selection of options, the refinement of choices and the agreement about specific steps to be taken, as well as the allocation of responsibilities and broad agreement about scheduling.

The AI approach in itself is not sufficient to cover all aspects of activity design, in terms of AusAID's current requirements. Additional work is needed for example to identify management approaches, but again, using strengths based thinking, this can be relatively easy, i.e. "what management approaches have worked well in the past and why?" and "what resources are available in this context to support management, implementation and risk mitigation?"

Design of risk management is an interesting concept viewed through the strengths based perspective. Traditional project design approaches emphasise the identification of all the things that could go wrong, an assessment of the likely severity and impact of these things and a list of proposed mitigation and management steps. In practice, while AusAID systems assume such planning is an effective risk mitigation approach, good implementers and skilled AusAID staff spend much more time on promoting factors which will contribute to good relationships and achieving success, than pay attention to this risk analysis. Through an SBA lens, risks would be regarded as just part of the context, which influences the way things work and why some do and some do not work and therefore the selection of future steps.

The use of SBAs for design purposes does not necessarily lead to 100% successful implementation, just as any design does not necessarily lead to perfect implementation. However SBAs place the participants in the design process in a frame of mind which is more conducive to building on existing realities and strengths (e.g. institutions, resources, positive cultural values, networks, lessons learned) and to collaborative partnerships (where development is seen as a shared process of learning and working, not the production of technical results identified by external experts).

5.3.1   SBAs in sectoral approaches

The shift towards sectoral programs (including Sector Wide Approaches – SWAps), brings the need for quite different approaches to aid management, which place even more emphasis on trusting relationships and positive thinking. Strengths based thinking is highly suited to this new focus, given the primary purpose of building motivated, positive-looking partnerships working on evidence-based, resource-appropriate programs towards objectives which are jointly shared (and therefore, presumably jointly understood).   A challenge is likely to be other donor interests in highlighting problems and

weaknesses, but partner governments are likely to be positively inclined towards approaches which generate respect for their leadership and positive interaction on shared objectives.

5.4   Using SBAs in implementation

Activity implementers can use SBAs in many ways and a number of AusAID-funded programs already use them effectively at various levels of implementation (see Examples 4 and 5 below).

AusAID may wish to encourage implementers (partners, contractors, NGOs, AusAID staff) through a number of mechanisms to consider the use of SBAs as one of a suite of approaches to implementation. They are particularly relevant where a strong partnership is sought, where capacity development is a central element, where groups of people are expected to be motivated and engaged, and where professionals and specialists are already using these tools in their respective sectoral work (e.g. community development, health promotion etc).

Example 4: SBAs in implementation

The Australian Community Development and Civil Society Strengthening Scheme (ACCESS) has been operating since 2002, with the second Phase commencing in May 2008 for a five-year period. ACCESS Phase II emphasises the importance of building demand for better governance and building the capacity of local communities and civil society organisations. ACCESS Phase II operates in four Provinces: Sulawesi Tenggar, Sulawesi Selatan, Nusa Tenggara Barat and Nusa Tenggara Timur. The purpose of ACCESS Phase II is: "citizens and their organizations are empowered to engage with local governments on improving local development impacts in 16 districts in eastern Indonesia".

The work of ACCESS Phase II is explicitly underpinned by the following principles: gender and social inclusion; **empowerment and assets-based approaches**; sustainability; cooperation and collaboration; transparency, accountability and participation; and continuous learning. In relation to the use of the assets-based (strengths-based) approach, ACCESS II emphasises that the solution for what the communities and citizens want changed, must come from within the community in the first place, not from outside it. It emphasises that an exploration of problems will only lead to disempowerment. By looking at opportunities rather than problems, ACCESS Phase II builds on positive experiences in directing the development of the community. It considers the community and community groups as equal partners in development. The approach also creates space for continuous searching for solutions rather than the application of outside and pre-conceived plans. The main change agent is the person/people most wanting a solution or most likely to benefit from the improvement.   (source: http://www.access-indo.or.id/index.html)

5.5   Using SBAs in monitoring

Strengths based thinking is also highly appropriate to monitoring progress of activities or programs. Its contribution is to identify what is working in relation to achieving objectives and how to continue to use these strengths or how to move in the direction of the energy being generated by those who want change. Monitoring and evaluation tools under the SBA umbrella (see Annex 1) generally emphasize formative aspects of evaluation (rather than the analytical aspects), i.e. they focus on increasing learning and improvement within the context. This is highly appropriate to partnership approaches where a single pre-determined "solution" is not the basis for collaboration. Other evaluation approaches tend to critically examine why and where a program or activity did not achieve its objectives.

6.   Implications for AusAID policies, programs and procedures

If AusAID is interested in proactively trialling or supporting the *use of SBAs in the design* of activities or programs, the implications for operational guidance are relatively minor – design teams could be

offered the option of using the approaches and given references and simple guidance on their use. A pool of existing practitioners, who also know AusAID practice well, could be identified and made available to support new facilitators/designers during initial stages[25].

Guidance for design teams could offer the use of SBAs *as an option*, and thereby not seek explicit and detailed "problem analysis" in design documents.   Guidance for design teams could emphasise the use of AI tools in participatory design processes, shared objective-setting etc. Advice associated with the *appraisals for concepts and design documents* would need to take account of this alternative form of analysis and planning, and could place more emphasis on assessing the extent to which stakeholders were involved in the setting of objectives.

If AusAID considers that the approach could be used *across the activity cycle*, AusAID would need to make minor alterations to current guidance on activity design, appraisal, implementation and evaluation to allow or encourage people to use these approaches where appropriate. One way of assessing their value is to trial particular tools in selected countries, in selected sectors or in selected capacity development activities and then have the processes and results assessed independently over time. AusAID may also wish to commission specific research on the use and consequences of SBAs in specific aid activities, sectors or contexts.

Example 5: SBAs in implementation

The Basic Education Development Program (BEDP) works with over 3000 communities in PNG to promote school-community partnerships. The project uses a strengths-based approach unique to PNG in training and funding gender-equitable teams of two (an education officer and a local woman leader) to conduct capacity building visits. Their training focuses on capacity building using AI and includes HIV/AIDS and gender awareness. The first visit is to engage the communities in supporting their schools, to gather data about infrastructure and governance and to help develop a School Action Plan for infrastructure maintenance. During this visit, communities are taught to identify their previous contributions to the welfare of the school, agree on an achievable vision for how the school could be improved, connect and mobilise all the assets they currently have at their disposal and develop an immediate action plan. Schools subsequently receive a small annual maintenance grant.

Subsequent visits reinforce the key messages of the strengths based approach, update data and engage communities in a qualitative evaluation process using an adaptation of Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology. Schools are also assisted to develop an infrastructure development plan. The project has achieved significant results in community participation in taking responsibility for improving service delivery, particularly to remote school communities, and in engaging the assets of community members. The project is enhancing the capacity of provincial governments to manage a program of school visits and infrastructure maintenance. Key learning relates to the focus on a strengths-based approach, an active commitment to gender equity, a reliance on evidence-based decision making and an uncompromising approach to accountability and transparency.

(Source: Tagagau, S and Pettit, J " A successful strength-based approach in PNG Education: From strength to strength – Building on strengths to build strong school-community partnerships." Paper presented at 2006 Strength Based Strategies Conference, 10-12 November 2006, Hyderabad, India.)

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[25] For example, AusAID's Design Support Panel members could be asked if they have used the approaches and whether they could support others in their use.

7.   Resources

Increasingly, resources on SBAs and their application are accessible on the internet.   There are occasional conferences and training in Australia on SBAs. Practitioners are increasingly documenting their experience of using SBAs generally and AI specifically, although there is little peer-reviewed academic material on the use of SBAs in aid work.   Interestingly, Professor Fiona Stanley, in her 2008 Annual Hawke Lecture[26], mentioned the notion of a strengths based approaches in Aboriginal health and its value in changing perceptions and achieving results. **Annex 2** provides a selected list of articles, books and websites on SBAs and AI.

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[26] http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkecentre/ahl/2008AnnualHawkeLecture_FionaStanley.pdf (page 18)

Annex 1   Summaries of Other SBA tools

Assets Based Community Development (ABCD)

Assets Based Community Development (ABCD) is a long-established and successful model used internationally in community development activities and programs. A pool of ABCD practitioners and teaching programs, research and practical resources has been developed[27].   The approach considers local assets are the primary building blocks of sustainable community development. Building on the skills of local residents, the power of local associations and the supportive functions of local institutions, ABCD draws upon existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities.

Sustainable Livelihoods (SL)

Sustainable Livelihood (SL) approaches[28] are based on the inter-generational concept of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[29] The approaches define a livelihood as being sustainable when it maintains or enhances the assets on which the livelihood depends and has net beneficial effects on other livelihoods[30]. A tool called "Sustainable Livelihoods Framework" has been developed to apply this approach, focused on improving the understanding of livelihoods, particularly the livelihoods of the poor. The Framework includes analysis of the assets (or strengths) which exist in any context (e.g. human, social, physical, natural and financial) as well as other aspects of the existing context. This tool can be applied to small-scale rural livelihoods development as well as resource management of larger scale development such as forestry and mining. Urban livelihoods are also an important context given the importance of addressing urban poverty, unemployment and youth alienation.

SBA research tools

A number of research tools are founded on the premise that in every context there are certain individuals or cases whose special or uncommon practices and behaviours enable them to find better ways to address a particular issue or achieve a particular result, in comparison with others who share the same resources and face the same risks[31][32]. Research in many settings shows that people and organisations will copy others who are successful: this premise underlies the logic of many development cooperation programs, e.g. pilot projects, model schools or showcase clinics. In these cases, careful analysis of why particular cases are successful is always considered necessary to enhance the likelihood of success. Such practice is relevant to population-focused programs in areas such as micro-finance, health promotion, education promotion, disaster preparedness, community governance etc. Some

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[27] For example the ABCD Asia Pacific Network based in Australia has been recently established. (For more information of ABCD see http://www.coady.stfx.ca/work/ABCD/)

[28] Sustainable Livelihoods approaches have been extensively described and used by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) (see http://www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm)

[29] Definition of sustainability from World Commission on Environment & Development, Our Common Future, 1987

[30] Chambers and Conway, quoted in DFID Guidance Sheets – Sustainable Livelihoods (www. dfid.gov.uk)

[31] This is called "positive deviance" in much of the literature.

[32] E.g. Brinkerhoff, R.O. 2003. *The Success Case Method: Find Out Quickly What's Working and What's Not.* Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco,CA

AusAID evaluations have used such research methodologies[33] in the way they emphasise learning about what worked well and why. Communications of research findings about success factors is critical in order to inform/motivate others, strengthen future work and sustain good practice.

Other tools

Endogenous development is a concept used to understand innovative approaches to capacity building that work. The concept is based on local peoples' own criteria of development, and takes into account the material, social and spiritual well-being of peoples. COMPAS (comparing and supporting endogenous development) is an international network implementing field programs to develop, test and improve endogenous development methodologies.

A number of other tools may have elements of SBAs, including the Drivers of Change analyses, which in part consider existing factors in a political economy which may influence positive change.

 The World Bank has also devised a framework for empowerment that looks at agency, opportunities, assets, domains and levels[34].

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[33] E.g. Recent evaluation of AusAID's Access to Basic Education in Laos program, 2009 – report not yet finalized.
[34] See Ruth Alsop, Mette Bertelsen, Jeremy Holland, Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation, 2006

Annex 2   Selected resources on SBAs

Articles/books

Kretzmann, J., P and J. McKnight, L 1993 <u>Building Communities From the Inside Out</u> Chicago, ACTA Publications (focuses on ABCD)

Ngunjiri, E. (2003). Participatory methodologies: double-edged swords. <u>Development Methods and Approaches: Critical Reflections</u>. Oxford, Oxfam, GB (critiques the problem-based approach)

Preskill, H and Tzavaras Catsambas T, 2006 *Reframing evaluation through Appreciative Inquiry*

Preskill, H and Coghlan A T 2004 *Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation*, New Directions for Evaluation, No. 100

Websites (either describing SBAs or showing practical application of them)

http://www.strengthsbasedpractice.com.au/

http://www.buildmotivation.com/

http://web.uvic.ca/iicrd/proj_hiv.html

http://cecp.air.org/interact/expertonline/strength/sba.asp

http://www.icvet.tafensw.edu.au/resources/strengths_based.htm

http://bluejeansocialwork.wordpress.com/2008/03/18/what-it-means-to-be-strengths-based/

http://www.compasnet.org/ (covers endogenous development)

Specific material on Appreciative Inquiry can be found at:

http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/

http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/

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