EXPLORING SINPA'S
STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICE:
A LEARNING PAPER

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This Learning Paper is about the practice of using Strength Based Approaches (SBA) in the Solomon Islands (SI) community development sector. The paper draws on experiences of six non-government organisations (NGOs) under the AusAID-funded Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA), 2009-2014 working in more than 100 communities in SI.

Though SINPA, six SI organisations (Save the Children (SCA) SI office, Anglican Church of Melanesia, Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA) SI, Live and Learn Environmental Education (LLEE) SI office, Oxfam SI/Family Support Centre and APHEDA SI) have joined together in a partnership with each other and with Australian NGOs (SCA Australia, Anglican Board of Mission, ADRA Australia, International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), Oxfam Australia, and APHEDA).

This new partnership model features innovative ways of thinking about aid design and delivery and is designed to explore locally relevant community development models which support community livelihoods and health, particularly for women and young people. Some agencies also include a focus on advocacy beyond the community level. SINPA offers a path for the envisaged contribution of civil society to the achievement of Solomon Islands Governments Medium Term Development Strategy (2008-2010) and to meeting other development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals.

Within the SINPA partnership, the six NGO projects are complementary and share common aspects related to approach. They differ in focus, micro-credit savings to youth initiatives to efforts to advance gender equality. SINPA builds on lessons learnt from the previous Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreement (SINCA). Through working together, exchanging ideas and reflecting on 'learning by doing', SINPA aims to improve collective NGO effectiveness.[1]

SINPA design documents include a strong focus on exploring approaches that enable Solomon-Islander led development, with the role of SINPA partners to: "*support and empower individuals, community based organisations and communities to take personal and social responsibility and respond appropriately to their own health and livelihood needs in their own culture*"[2] and to "*[e]nsure that each project works towards a "community vision" which is guided by the Solomon Islander groups with whom the project works*."[3] This focus demonstrates the exploration by SINPA of a new development paradigm

that responds to the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action aid effectiveness agendas. SINPA looks to treat primary stakeholders as key actors in their own development process instead of 'objects' of other people's development plans.[4] Use of strengths-based approaches by most SINPA partners from the outset to fulfil the design has led to uptake of elements of the approach and its associated way of thinking by all partners.

Figure 1: SINPA Frontline staff at research workshop

PURPOSE OF THIS LEARNING PAPER

This paper explores how SINPA partners have interpreted, embraced and practiced SBA in their project design and delivery so far and relates this experience to what we know and can learn from others' practice and academic literature on SBA. SBA is not a defined field of practice but rather has emerged from a number of disciplines including community development, organisational development, health and social work. The experience of SINPA provides important contributions to this emerging practice.

The purpose of this learning paper is to:

- Support SINPA partners in developing a joint understanding of how SBA can be most appropriately and effectively implemented within the SI context.

- Support SINPA partners in developing an understanding of best practices when working with communities in the Solomon Islands.

- Share learning about practice, outcomes and effectiveness with external stakeholders within and beyond the Solomon Islands.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Four researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, led a structured research process involving SINPA partners in a participatory process of reflecting on and sharing their experiences during July-August 2011.

The researchers reviewed the SINPA design and reporting documentation, academic and other literature on SBA and prepared a draft conceptual framework for SBA to guide the inquiry. Two participatory workshops were undertaken with a group of 17-25 mostly Honiara and some field based staff (21-23rd June and 22nd July) and one workshop was held with 14-16 purely frontline field-based staff (25-26th July). Activities included use of appreciative inquiry 'discovery' storytelling and analysis, explaining practice through a chosen totem, targeted paired interview questions, affinity mapping processes, and group 'where do you stand' activities(where participants chose a point on a spectrum from 'agree' to 'disagree' for a given statement and discussed their reasons for their stance). In addition, a short survey was completed by 20 frontline staff that explored their role and experiences.

One of the benefits of this participatory methodology was the collective learning process for participants. One of the limitations of the approach was that the researchers did not have opportunity to engage directly with communities and direct beneficiaries due to funding, scope and geographical constraints. At the same time as

Figure 2: Participants mapping similarities and differences in SBA

this SBA Learning Paper was developed, the researchers also developed a paper on Participation and Accountability (P&A). The two papers are complementary and in some places we have provided a link or cross referenced between them.

INTRODUCING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO ASSIST INVESTIGATION OF SBA

There are several approaches used in development practice which look to create change by focusing on strengths. Examples include Assets Based Community Development (ABCD), Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Strengths Based Social Work, Sustainable Livelihoods using 5 Capitals (or assets), Community Economies for Development, Working with the Champions, Social Capital Strengthening, Positive Deviance in Nutrition and Ford Foundation's Framework for Asset Building. Some of these approaches have been explicitly adopted by SINPA partners (particularly ABCD and AI), or have informed the design of activities or processes.

As researchers we saw value in developing a meta-framework to cover and explain a breadth of these approaches. We felt that a conceptual framework would help everyone engage with the ideas that form the foundation of SBA in the literature and we used it to support the investigation of the range of strengths-based practices used in SINPA. This conceptual framework (see Figure 3 below for summary, and Annex 1 for full version), is built on three levels or layers and described on the following page.

Figure 3 Conceptual framework to describe SBA
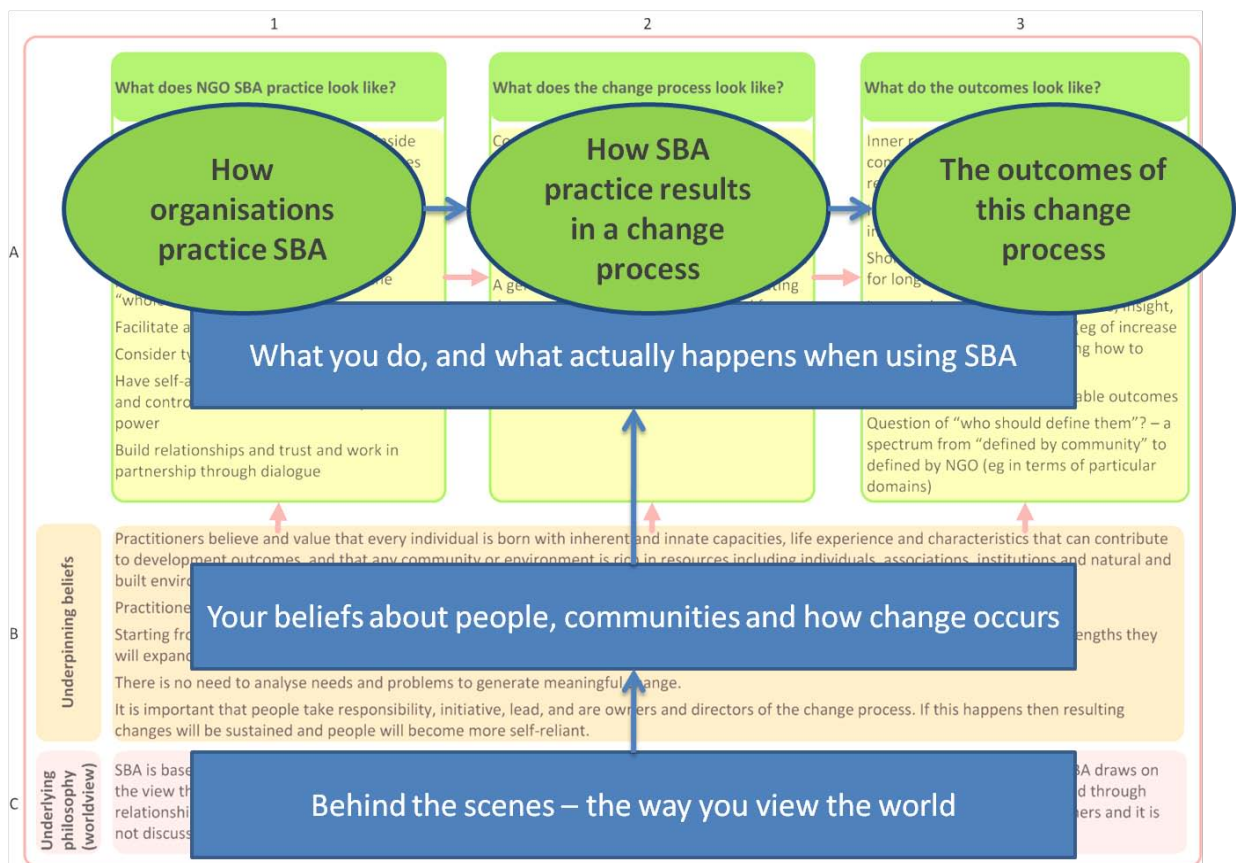
The foundation (bottom level), is about your **philosophy**, or the way you view the world. SBA is based on the view that there are many ways to view 'reality' and 'knowledge', and how we each understand things is subjective. SBA draws on the view that our world is constructed socially (ie social constructionism). This thinking prioritises language and its shared meaning gained through relationship. This level of the framework was not explicitly explored with SINPA research participants since it is less relevant for practitioners and it is not discussed in this paper.

The middle level of the conceptual framework is about **beliefs**, a critical level that is often overlooked. SBA is based on a particular set of beliefs about people and communities, and about how change occurs.

The top level is about **what actually happens** when using SBA:
- how organisations **practice** SBA (i.e. what you do, the actions you take)
- how SBA practice results in a **change process**, and
- the **outcomes** of this change process, which, if positive, are likely to feed back into reinforcing relevant beliefs in middle level of the conceptual framework

In the sections below we use the framework to provide findings about SINPA's strengths based practice.

FINDINGS

SUMMARY OF OVERARCHING FINDINGS

Our overall finding is that SBA have been well-utilised by most partners and are progressing well in implementation. Our assessment is that investment of time and resources in the application of SBA in SINPA is of significant value.

There is evidence of significant change in NGO practice as compared with SINCA, which followed conventional community development practice. SINPA partners report that they feel SBA thinking resonates and fits with what people remember as traditional Solomon's community kastom in terms of roles, responsibilities and structures, where balance is in all social and natural systems and recognising strengths and working together was essential for community resilience: "*SBA is not new – it's part of culture and the old way of how people did things*" (ADRA Honiara staff). Partners feel SBA is not a 'new' thing in these terms, however it *is* new when used as a development approach in a country that commonly receives externally-driven and 'hand-out' style development support. This finding is significant in that the research revealed how SBA is being contextually indigenised. SINPA partners' stories highlighted how use of SBA supports SI traditions and made them relevant to addressing present challenges. This points to the value of SBA as a development approach since SI has demonstrated strong resilience towards their own customary ways and resistance to adopting externally driven models of economic and political practice.

Our analysis shows many commonalities and some differences in how SINPA partners have adopted SBA. Of note, through participation in the research process, participants discovered their approaches to

be more similar than they had previously realised which they felt highlighted the importance of the SINPA partnership and of sharing experiences within the partnership.

SINPA's application of SBA shows areas of significant depth of practice with reference to the literature, as well as areas which could benefit from further reflection, adaptation and improvement. Organisations and individuals tend to work from a basis of their own beliefs and values, and it is fortunate that for most staff these generally have a good fit with SBA. Further learning about the core concepts in SBA, increased awareness of their own beliefs and increased commitment to put these beliefs into action (despite the challenges) would strengthen SINPA's strengths-based practice. Within the findings below we make more specific recommendations about areas that could benefit from focus in the future. We have structured our analysis of the research findings below using the conceptual framework introduced above. First we address the level of the **beliefs** that underpin SBA, and then we move into describing the **practice** itself, the **change process** created and the kinds of **outcomes** SINPA is achieving.

FINDINGS ON UNDERPINNING BELIEFS

According to the literature on SBA, some of the underpinning beliefs or values common for practitioners include:

- Practitioners believe and value that every individual is born with inherent and innate capacities, life experience and characteristics that can contribute to development outcomes, and that any community or environment is rich in resources or assets including individuals, associations, institutions and natural and built environments.[5]

- Practitioners see themselves as *facilitators* and not the 'expert' on what changes are needed or the best ways to achieve change.[6]

'How' or 'why' we think particular actions will result in particular outcomes in a development approach is referred to as a 'theory of change'. In literature on SBA, common beliefs about how change happens include the following:

- Starting from strengths and appreciating and focusing on them is motivating. If you provide support and nurture existing capacity and strengths they will expand and will contribute to a positive change process.[7]

- It is not necessary to specifically analyse needs and problems to generate meaningful change.[8]

- It is important that people take responsibility, initiative, lead, and are owners and directors of the change process. If this happens then resulting changes will be sustained and people will become more self-reliant.[9]

These beliefs based on the literature are compared below to SINPA partners' beliefs.

Do SINPA partners believe that all individuals have valuable capacities and skills that can contribute to development? Amongst SINPA staff including both frontline and Honiara staff, it was clear that this

belief is strongly held. This belief connects strongly to Solomon Islanders' view of the church being at the centre of community life and the belief that everyone has an element of inherent 'good' if they nurture a relationship with God or the 'Big Man'. Research participants felt that SBA as an approach built on this component of cultural identity and social cohesion and made it relevant to them: *"SBA has been here a long time, once we briefly told [the community] about it then they were able to do something themselves. My reflections from other provinces are very similar"* (ADRA frontline strengths motivator) Staff also shared the view that individual capacities are there to be discovered or revealed, with one NGO staff member describing them as "*hidden potentials",* in line with SBA literature that emphasises the value of discovering what has given life in the past. Another stated: *"[t]hose powers are dormant and ICP helps to wake them up and realise their power"* (ICP Honiara staff). SINPA partners recognise that SBA is about a lived experience and life philosophy, for example an ICP staff member stated: "*we encourage [new field staff] to practice SBA approaches upon themselves. They have to become an SBA role model in order to influence others*". Other partners shared similar stories.

Do SINPA partners believe that any community is rich in resources that can be put to use? This belief is firmly held by both Honiara and frontline or field-based staff. When asked to describe their organisation's approach, five of the six organisations spoke about, or acted out through drama, building on peoples' existing capacities and other local resources. A typical explanation of SBA was that it is: "*about realising what you are capable of doing to fulfil your dreams. You have a lot of potential in terms of social, politics, human, culture and environment, these are your strengths*" (LLEE Honiara staff).

Reinforcing this, some SINPA partners selected communities to be involved in SINPA based partly on recognition of strengths and self-organisation within a community: *"[i]n the design phase we stated we would only work with villages that were ready for the project, were organised and well set up, and had strong groups and networks"* (LLEE Honiara staff). This was also the case for several other partners including APHEDA, who decided to work both in communities where they had an existing relationship as well as new and "ready" communities.

Figure 3: Oxfam staff describing strengths and resources

Do SINPA partners see themselves as facilitators rather than experts? In SINPA, staff commonly see themselves as facilitators rather than experts, and spoke about a feeling of shared responsibility between themselves and community members (or partners such as Family Support Centre, in the case of Oxfam) to make things happen. For example: "[Our] *work is about strengthening partner organisations within existing structures and systems. It's a two-way process, we work together. The partner organisations set agendas"* (Oxfam Honiara staff). ADRA pointed out that they make their facilitator role clear to communities: **"***We also explain that ADRA should only be seen as a coordinator – the community should make the change."* (ADRA frontline strengths motivator).

Do SINPA partners believe that nurturing and supporting strengths will cause these strengths to expand and contribute to a positive change process? The experience of SINPA partners confirms this belief, as it is what they have seen happen in many cases. LLEE describe the skills they feel are required for a community facilitator to support a change process as including: "*patience, endurance, consistency, maturity, commitment and ability to gain respect (of men, women, youth, church leaders)".*

Do SINPA partners believe they should focus only on revealing and analysing strengths (and not investigating and analysing needs and problems')? According to the SBA literature, techniques drawing on appreciative inquiry and ABCD should *only* focus on revealing and building from strengths and desired visions. Importantly, they do not include a focus on finding out in depth about needs or problems in a community as they are based on a belief that it is not necessary to inquire into or analyse these and their causes as the prime source to decide on strategy or action. This does not mean SBA seeks to ignore or diminish the presence of perceived problems. Rather SBA takes a different approach to facilitating 'improvements' in a given situation, by generating a collective vision of a desired future and revealing strengths that can be drawn upon to move towards this future. In this scenario, drawing on traditional methods of 'problem analysis' (focused on problems, gaps and weaknesses) is not required. Indeed SBA literature also asserts that such problem analysis is de-motivating, fragmenting and disengaging whereas the analysis of strength provides inherent motivation for change.

SINPA staff demonstrated mixed views on the relative strength versus problems focus. The majority of partners view SBA as processes for both identifying problems or needs *and* revealing strengths that can offer solutions: "*SBA is also giving a chance to those communities to identify their own problems and then identify their own resources that they have in terms of manpower, skills, and what they have in the village"* (ADRA Honiara staff)*.* This quote is typical of the way partners frame their practice, and reflects an approach divergent from SBA literature.

During one of the research workshops with Honiara staff, 10 of 14 participants believed that there should be a focus just on strengths, though admitted that in reality their current practice looks different to this. The perspective of those who were convinced that focusing only on strengths was important was that there is a need to: "*learn lessons from the past where problems were identified and there was no one to fix them. In the past we focused on problems and it doesn't work, we overruled the strengths of communities"* (ADRA Honiara staff).

One justification for a dual focus on problems as well as strengths shared during the workshop was to maintain good community relations, by taking what people consider a logical approach, and also due to the legacy of hand-out aid from the past and problem based approaches to aid in general: *"We need to be flexible in our approach to communities. Sometimes we really focus on trying to solve problems, as a way of maintaining relationships. SBA works but is hard to align with previous projects, we need to recognise the reality of past projects and reliance"* (LLEE Honiara staff).

Another reason why 'needs' are sometimes given focus in practice is because of the perceived efficiency of this approach in comparison to a lengthier SBA process: "*many communities have conflicting priorities, e.g. church demands, the school needs a building, and when we come often their time and*

resources are limited, and it's easier for them to say 'I want x, y, z' rather than go through an SBA process." (SCA Honiara staff).

➢ In summary, many staff felt they understand and believe the theory of only focussing on strengths, but feel that it is sometimes challenging to apply in practice and in the SI context. SINPA partner organisations need to individually and collectively consider whether they wish to further evolve their practice to focus *only* on strengths as is intended in SBA, and in doing so consider the implications of this course of action or proceeding with the current approach.

Do SINPA partners believe that communities or primary beneficiaries should own and direct the change process? Overall, there was consensus in the belief that communities should lead, take responsibility and own their change processes. ICP and APHEDA held particularly strong views on this: "*All planning comes from communities. APHEDA is there for support in terms of funding and realising outcomes from the training, but not influencing their decision*" (APHEDA Honiara staff); and "*For ICP SBA means communities being in the driving seat. Sustainability of the program depends on this*" (ICP Honiara staff). APHEDA describe their capacity to adapt to different community needs and environments in Box 1.

APHEDA compared their approach to an Octopus

"*An octopus can change colour for different environments as can APHEDA… Like an octopus we are flexible and able to match the colour of the background. This approach is based on SBA*".

Box 1: This description reflects how APHEDA looks to be responsive to what the community

However, there was also diversity with regard to this point. One partner reported differences in views amongst their project leadership on this matter: *"One (Honiara office) says let the community decide, the other (ANGO) has a plan of activities they should follow"* (organisation name withheld). Also, in reality partners find they need to play a strong role to facilitate and prompt processes to happen in the community especially at the outset. This area is discussed further in the section below on findings about 'how change happens'.

Figure 4: APHEDA (left) and ADRA (right) staff describing their organisational approaches and practice

In the literature on SBA, the key characteristics of what SBA practice usually 'looks like' is described as:

- A facilitated process to reveal a range of strengths and then assist to build action "from the inside–out". This means that development practitioners support action that focuses on internal strengths before accessing external resources.[10]

- Including building relationships and trust and working in partnership through dialogue.[11]

- Utilising a double focus, by looking to achieve short-term 'wins' in tandem with longer-term change. Practitioners assist people to initially set realistic short term goals that are within reach, and as part of this build morale by recognising and celebrating successes as part of the process of achieving longer term change.[12]

- As part of their practice, development practitioners ensure inclusion and participation, with a focus on including the 'whole' or the collective. In doing so, development practitioners facilitating SBA are sensitive to issues of power and control in any group of people (including their own position), and make constructive efforts to equalise power.[13]

- Where appropriate, practitioners act as brokers to assist people to access external resources or engage with institutions such as government or other civil society organisations.[14]

These practices based on the conceptual framework are compared below to SINPA partners' practices.

Do SINPA partners facilitate a process to reveal strengths? All SINPA partners facilitate a strengths-identification process. Three organisations are using appreciative inquiry's 4 D's approach (discover-dream-design-deliver). Aspects of ABCD and Sustainable Livelihoods frameworks are also used, focusing on different types of assets and strengths. The following example from ADRA illustrates a typical approach to revealing strengths:

> "*We started conducting SBA awareness in North Malaita in January 2010, implementing the youth engagement and livelihood project using SBA. We started with 5 communities with what we call Exploration, Envisioning, Realisation and Determination to conduct a baseline survey and develop the Action Plan based on the activities youth proposed. After going through the processes, we told the elders and youths to provide whatever personal skills they already had in the village to help make things they want happen. To my surprise three communities built their three poultry houses within three days.*" (ADRA Honiara staff).

Another example is APHEDA's work in Uqi Island where they used the 4D's to reveal existing strengths together with a visioning process as well as other tools including pocket charts: "*Following SBA awareness on Ugi Island Makira/Ulawa Province, at Nolau Community Learning Centre, the community began to realise or identify that they have assets such as an outboard motor, chainsaw and generators that are helpful in their daily community lives.*" (APHEDA staff member). Revealing strengths can also be quite a challenging activity for NGOs that requires persistence to help communities and beneficiaries see things differently (See Box 2).

Do SINPA partners practice focusing on building action from the 'inside-out'? The practice appears to be variable depending on the situation. Sometimes the action is built from the

 "*At first the communities struggled and had the perception of limited strengths as they thought they have nothing, no money and no things, but we helped them realise that they have knowledge. Now we all 'hold the table up' together- AusAID, LLEE and the community*" (LLEE Honiara staff member)

Box 2: Revealing strengths

'inside-out', for example building a community hall, or the following example from Live and Learn where a man decided to build a composting toilet at his home with a small team. After it had been built others in the community came to see it, congratulate and talk with him, they then decided to replicate the design and build their own. This example captures the idea that within a community (or beneficiary group in the case of Oxfam), there are good examples which can be recognised, learnt from and followed using internal resources only.

However in other circumstances there are requests outside to SINPA partners' usual focus areas that mean occasionally partners and communities look to access external resources or expertise rather than focusing initially on activities that can be achieved using internal strengths within the community (e.g. financial literacy skills).

➢ It would be useful for SINPA partners to consider whether an increased focus on working from the 'inside-out', might be beneficial, since it could potentially promote less dependence and build confidence in using a communities existing strengths

A related issue concerns the ability of SINPA organisations to respond to community requests for support. One of the dilemmas for SINPA organisations in taking up SBA and its associated focus on community leadership is that communities can (and have) come up with ideas that require support and expertise that lie beyond the skills of their organisation. One solution SINPA partners have started to practice to overcome this challenge is drawing on each other's expert skills. For example LLEE provided training on savings clubs with APHEDA communities, APHEDA shared financial literacy training with ICP and LLEE, and SAVE assisted ADRA with accountability approaches. Other solutions are also needed.

➢ Monitor how often communities request expertise or resources to support the SINPA project that lie beyond SINPA organisations' capacity, and continue to develop appropriate solutions to this issue. These may include brokering access between communities and external resources or stakeholders. This is important since SBA does not mean to separate the community from the broader system (markets, other stakeholders, resources), and recognises that revealing and drawing on strengths within the broader system is also important.

Do SINPA partners build relationships and trust and work in partnership through dialogue? All partners value relationship building and trust in their work. They practice dialogue in multiple ways and in line with SI culture, using both formal and informal communication processes. An example of building relationships and trust can be taken from an APHEDA frontline worker talking about how they sought to change a lack of participation of youths: "*I approached the youths and just talked* [together with them]*"* (APHEDA community learning centre leader). She went on to explain that making the effort to listen to the youths validated their participation in the project processes and resulted in open dialogue and building trust.

Do SINPA partners have a dual focus on short-term wins as well as longer term change? At the community or direct beneficiary level partners include a focus on quick-wins. During workshop discussions, participants shared numerous examples of these, for example: An ICP community facilitator shared, "*After the workshop in 2009, after 4 weeks I did an assessment and one family had saved $18,000 (through selling 18 bags of cocoa) ... that finding was within 4 weeks only! Others [in the community] saw this and they followed.*" (ICP frontline worker). ADRA also shared a story where a community built a community hall in "just three days" the staff member expressed: "*If they can do this in three days, then what else can they do?!*" (ADRA Strengths Motivator).

As mentioned in the May 2010 progress report, "*communities only begin to trust an outside development agency when they can see some action resulting from the interventions*",[15] reflecting the importance of quick wins. However, the many examples of quick wins are not currently celebrated and also are not commonly shared beyond individual SINPA agencies, due to the belief that small short term outcomes are not valued or not worth reporting.

➢ Increase focus on quick-wins in two ways. First, by helping the community or beneficiary groups to set realistic achievable actions. Second, by appreciating, celebrating and recognising 'wins' within the community. This will support increased self-esteem and motivation to continue to develop and achieve larger, longer-term outcomes. This could be achieved through saying 'congratulations', conducting an event e.g. opening ceremony, or receipt of materials for further work, or other opportunity to expand the activities.

Do SINPA partners ensure inclusion and participation with a focus on including everyone in direct beneficiary groups or 'whole' communities? Generally all partners have made efforts to give access for inclusion to everyone at key project points especially during entry to new communities and during the design phase to ensure 'access for all'. Although access has been invited, not everyone is included in

practice and delivery because of the focus of some projects e.g. Oxfam is striving to reducing violence against women, LLEE women's financial savings clubs. In both these cases the focus has since been expanded. For example, despite the focus on women, Oxfam plans to give access to men attending meetings, thus acknowledging that to change the reality of women and generate greater understanding of gender based violence issues, it is important to include both men and women in some situations. In the case of LLEE, "*men who saw what women had achieved through saving are now learning from the women to join and be included in the activities*". Beyond focussing on youth, SCA ensured they gave access and a voice to all from the outset "*SAVE made efforts to include everyone before focusing on the youth. First they built a relationship with the whole (Chief and adults and other informal and formal leaders) and gained their input, trust and thought before engaging with the youth.*" (SCA Honiara staff)

In practice nearly all target groups for different activities are smaller than the 'whole', and subgroups for different activities might exist in some cases (e.g. APHEDA's poultry farming training group is a different group of people from their financial literacy group). Of note, ICP appear to have a large number of projects that include the 'whole' community, and this may be a reflection of facilitation through the church structures into the associated and well-established men's women's and youth groups.

Figure 6: Participants pointing to their stories of high-points

➢ It would be useful for SINPA partners to reflect on the potential value of expanding their successful work currently undertaken in subgroups of communities, to allow involvement of 'whole' communities to a greater extent.

Do frontline or field-based staff facilitating SBA have self-awareness about issues of power and control amongst people, and do they make constructive efforts to equalise power? In taking on a facilitation (rather than expert) role, frontline staff help reduce them power imbalance between themselves and those they seek to help. In terms of addressing power differentials within the community, SINPA's work is mixed. It's important to note that using this language in SBA literature doesn't necessarily mean that 'equalising' of power needs to be done in a culturally inappropriate, confrontational or quick way- it could include slow, longer term ways within existing structures, culture and thinking. For example, projects that provide women with opportunities to take on new leadership positions (for example in LLEE's work with women savings groups) are 'equalising power'. The level of staff self-awareness and associated actions taken to address power depends primarily on the beliefs of the frontline staff. For some staff, supporting equalisation of power in the community is perceived to be in conflict with culture and kastom and to work against the long established structures that they are using to do SBA. This area is explored in more detail in the 'Participation and Accountability' paper.

Do SINPA partners assist to broker relationships between communities or direct beneficiaries and Government or other stakeholders? There are a growing number of examples within SINPA where partners are playing this role. For example, Oxfam are planning, through their advocacy component, to

provide links and introductions directly between Government and UN programs and Oxfam's partner, the Family Support Centre). A further example from APHEDA can be drawn on where APHEDA invited the Provincial Government to communities as an introduction to show people, 'here's your go-to" person/resources'. An APHEDA frontline staff related an example of how they broker their communities to access external resources:

> "*I then approached the CLC and we started working with the youths to try to reduce their home brew dependence. At the centre we talked about culture, change and kastom law. We involved the youths in the CLC. We also worked with and talked to the police to work with us as well as a gaining support for youths from a Provincial Government member. And we worked with everyone to map an alternative vision for the youths so Ministry for Agriculture helped deliver a workshop on farming for youths. So now the reliance [on home brew] is reduced but still a little bit there. People are respecting each other more.*" (APHEDA Community learning centre Leader).

In other examples, APHEDA SKILLS project brokers field based relationships between community and LLEE, TVET, SIARTC (Solomons Rural Training Centres), Department of Foresty and Ministry of Health in delivery of training (on life skills, health, spiritual, agriculture and reforestation, and literacy for livelihoods). While LLEE mediates relationships between community and ADRA, SCA and APHEDA and the SI Credit Union League, and provincial forestry units.

➤ All partners could strive to deepen their role in brokering these types of relationships and access to resources outside beneficiaries groups in the future, especially between Community-Provincial and National Government.

➤ Brokering between communities and other SINPA partners is also very important and in its infancy and appears to be increasing in a fast and dynamic way during 2011. There is also scope to increase the momentum of this trend to enhance effectiveness of the partnership and program level outcomes.

FINDINGS ON WHAT THE CHANGE PROCESS 'LOOKS LIKE'

Literature on SBA describe the change process as:

- Communities or beneficiaries take responsibility[9]

- Communities or beneficiaries lead their own development process[9]

- Communities or beneficiaries take initiative to draw on internal (and sometimes external) resources to act[10]

- A process that is inherently motivating and builds due to moving from a position of and focus on strengths[7]

Are people within the community (or primary beneficiaries) taking responsibility? The research revealed that they are taking some responsibility, but that it takes time and effort to encourage this. In addition, community members were reported to only fully take responsibility when and where they are the ones centrally involved in the activity taking place. If someone is not involved from the outset, generally they won't take any responsibility. This may be symptomatic of the growing emphasis on '*cargo culture'* and associated shift from a communal focus where 'everyone helps everyone' toward a more 'everyone for themselves' mentality. For example, an LLEE and ADRA staff mentioned:

> "*So when I tried to introduce the LLEE activity they thought I was the government program like Community Sector Program (CSP), they approached me for money. This happened every time I went to run awareness programs. I never preached to the community, I was humble and always said sorry if something go wrong, it was new for them and new for me. And once they understood what we are doing they offered in-kind help. We talked a lot with the community and tried to explain how we are different from CSP (who came then disappeared). After sometime in the next meeting everybody came and listened to the story about LLEE, this was a major challenge for me. And after a while the community opened up their eyes.*" (LLEE community facilitator)

> "*It's really a challenge for us (NGOs) to get leaders to understand their role (in the project); to lead from behind, especially with young people.*" (ADRA strengths motivator)

However in this generalisation we acknowledge that communities are far from homogenous and research participants reported that a small number of communities have been early adopters and within this there has been wide-spread uptake of responsibility. Generally community cohesion and collective responsibility is found to be greater in communities located furthest away from provincial centres and with lower levels of economic development, transport hubs and major markets perhaps due to a necessity for these people to take collective responsibility to survive as compared to communities with easy access to provincial centres.

Frontline staff commonly believe that people involved feel very responsible for their project and its outcomes, however this responsibility is currently still based on a certain amount of 'handholding' from the SINPA partners, described further in the question below.

Is the change process community or beneficiary-led (or NGO-led)? According to SBA literature, it is important that the community or beneficiaries lead the change process. Within SINPA, current practice mostly reflects a shared leadership between community/beneficiary and NGO rather than solely community/beneficiary-led approaches, with just one or two agencies confirming that they see community as the leader. This current practice demonstrates major progress in comparison with approaches used in SINCA, but also presents room to continue to shift practice as SINPA progresses. Below we explain why most NGO's have found if appropriate to provide some leadership and significant support rather than insist that communities lead everything themselves.

Some organisations did describe the change process as community-led (or partner-led) and owned. For instance APHEDA reported that: "*All planning comes from communities. APHEDA is there for support in terms of funding and realising outcomes from the training, but not influencing their decision*" (APHEDA

Honiara staff) and ICP reported that, "*For ICP SBA means communities being in the driving seat. Sustainability of the program depends on this*" (ICP Honiara staff)

Most other organisations made clear that their own role in the process was critical, particularly in the design phase, and described the need to strike a delicate balance between driving or pushing things to happen, and allowing the community to lead (see Box 3):

> "*[Our] organisation mentors and guides and advises, but not dictating what the community does and all the practical parts. Not too much push, but at the same time not letting the line slacken too much*." (SCA Honiara staff)

> "*All comes from the communities, but in going through the process the organisation [NGO] actually influences things a lot. For example sometimes if we don't visit communities they will ask 'how come you are not here to take things forward?'. So although we're not leading, we are influential. This raises a question... if we leave them how far will they take things on themselves?*" (ADRA Honiara staff).

"*We work with the community, change requires the community to push a little and we push back a little – like a bow saw. Sawing together shows our partnership... We give them the tool to see their strengths and identify their resources and then work together. After this the community must stand on their own....There's 2 handles on the bow saw and to be effective it needs to locate a place to begin to saw. We can file the different sides differently. It takes a long time to file with the bow saw in this way, but it has a good result.*" (SAVE Hon staff)

Box 3: SCA's approach to community-led development

> "*What the project looks like in a community is a community decision. But still communities are dependent on the influence of Save to make projects progress. You see lots of half finished houses, churches etc across the Solomon Islanders. Without the organisation [NGO] projects wouldn't finish.*" (SCA Honiara staff)

One way that a SINPA organisation has approached the balance between leading and letting the community drive change is ADRA's use of a number of 'strengths-motivators' within each community. The role of strengths motivators is rotated to different people throughout the course of the project so that people take turns to 'motivate' or facilitate SBA activities. This has many advantages including avoiding any one person becoming perceived as the 'owner' or leader of the change process.

In general the way the change process is described is generally as a shared process to which both community and NGO contribute. An ADRA frontline worker shared from his position as being part of the community "*We contribute and ADRA contribute.*" (ADRA Strengths Motivator). In the language used by Honiara staff and frontline staff and workers, it's not about communities doing things and NGO supporting and facilitating, rather the language is one where both are seen to equally 'contribute'. This understanding and achievement is seen by staff to be realistic in the SI context.

> ➢ It would be useful for SINPA partners to individually and collectively decide whether, in line with SBA, achieving a fully community-led approach is important, and also to test how the extent of community ownership affects the sustainability of outcomes and level of self-reliance achieved. Diversity in SINPA partners' approach could potentially provide useful 'variation' for learning lessons in this regard.

Another challenge to achieving completely community-led change is managing any 'mismatch' of community desires with individual SINPA partner's 'core' or historical project specialisation and target-group focus. For instance SAVE have a focus on youth, LLEE on natural resource management and women's savings and so on. At times communities decide that they desire something outside the scope of NGO expertise, which raises an important question about whether an SBA approach in SI should include a completely open focus to support communities to take the lead, or whether it is reasonable and effective for NGOs to maintain some control over the direction taken. ADRA and APHEDA both indicate that the community makes decisions, however that: "*it must meet ADRA's criteria*" (ADRA Strength Motivator), and "*we fully listen to what the coordinators have taken from community desires, but according to some boundaries*" (APHEDA Community Learning Centre Leader). Oxfam indicate that they define the "*overall goals, but the process or journey is defined by the beneficiaries*" (Oxfam staff).

> ➢ It would be beneficial for SINPA partners to explore together whether completely community-led decisions about project focus, as expected in an SBA approach, are possible and desirable, given that many partners have a particular content or sector focus.

There is also complexity with respect to who 'the community' is, and therefore who within the community is actually leading when we talk about 'community-led' development. This area is explored further in the 'Participation and Accountability' learning paper.

Are communities or beneficiaries taking initiative and drawing on internal and other resources (including the facilitating NGO) to act? The change process described by SINPA partners involves communities and beneficiaries drawing on internal and external resources. People frequently draw on NGO knowledge sources to act, (e.g. CARE youth policy training, APHEDA farming workshops, LLEE conservation practices). This transfer of knowledge and linking knowledge to change is the biggest resource utilised. ICP shared a story about community drawing on their own and other resources to make change happen:

Figure 6: ICP demonstrating SBA as an eagle, flying, seeing challenges as a way forward

> "*Tubila Village is a community in the Central island Province. In May 2010 the ICP team visited the community and undertook an SBA process. During the process the community identified water-supply as their vision for the next 3-5 years. While there have been other agencies working with them to improve their water, there was not much initiative by the community, after the ICP SBA process the community did*

their own fundraising and raised about $8000. They used the money to pay for an organization and Rural Water Supply and Sanitation to do a survey. The community cleaned up the site and is continuing to fundraise to buy their materials that will soon complete their community water supply."

Another example from SCA demonstrates how an SBA approach led to a community relying on other nearby communities (rather than the usual practice of reliance on support from Honiara): "*One time there was a cyclone that hit an island. The cost to charter and boat and the materials to go to help from Honiara was very high. So communities in Makira and other non-affected and closer nearby communities supported those who were affected on other close by islands*" (SCA frontline staff)

Often training or workshops are translated into action through the provision of cash or materials from SINPA partners to beneficiaries as an 'externally' provided resource. This is a complex area to manage. During the research process, a number of discussions concerning cash versus material support from SINPA partners to communities took place. At the centre of discussions was the question, 'Is one (cash or material support) better than the other for communities?' Everyone was open-minded about the different approaches and identified the potential benefits and pitfalls for both approaches. They agreed in *principle* that it would be ideal to give cash (e.g. for small livelihood loans) because it matches well with the idea of the community being accountable for their own development and deciding their own direction. However, in practice, to ensure a high level of NGO accountability, cash was seen to not always work due to corruption issues within communities. Accordingly, some NGOs have a 'no cash' policy in which case provision of materials (e.g. timber, tools) reportedly worked well.

Are SINPA partners supporting a change process that is inherently motivating and builds due to moving from a position of and focus on strengths? Yes they are, and there was an abundance of evidence for this, too much to fit in this paper. A selection of examples is included below. An ADRA Honiara staff talked through the ingredients that helped change to happen:

> "*… traditional and local knowledge are a big part of SBA and making things work, strong village structure is extremely important as is leadership and commitment of youth and women, partnership and collaboration is major between the NGO and community and there's a high level of intergenerational sharing"* (ADRA Honiara staff)

APHEDA described the elements that enabled a water pump project, including how existing strengths such as peoples' ability in the community to solve family conflicts and community leaders support (their communication skills, status in the community) were built upon, for example through leadership and governance training delivered to leaders and ensuring both male and female leaders are acknowledged. Another APHEDA staff mentioned: *"[Community learning centres are showing appreciation, morale building and complementing each other. Strong morale gives the project momentum"* (APHEDA Honiara staff).

ICP identified how in Tubila village good communications and good community structures provided a basis for change, and how the change process was facilitated as the community were prepared for learning and realized they had the power to make things happen. In another example of ICP's work it was found that: *"After the SBA process they (the community) realised that they can do things on their*

own without depending or waiting for outside help. With the resources they have they can do things they will benefit from" and *"[w]hen communities realize their power, together there is no stopping them."* (ICP Honiara field staff).

In some cases change even spread from one community to another, as SCA describes: *"the mindset of one chief changed because he had seen how other communities benefit from SBA"* (SCA Honiara staff) and the enablers for the Choiseul provincial youth policy launching were seen to include: *"provincial support and motivation, high women's contribution, together with divine support, community have faith in the activity and want to participate"* (SCA frontline staff).

➢ One area where SINPA partners could improve their practice is to ensure they do not just focus on revealing strengths during the design phase. In addition it is important continue to recognise, acknowledge and use SBA during change process and delivery phase. This on-going recognition and support for strengths is important to ensure on-going change.

FINDINGS ABOUT WHAT THE OUTCOMES 'LOOK LIKE'

According to SBA literature characteristics of typical outcomes include:

- 'Inner resources (or strengths)' are used to the maximum and complemented by accessing external resources[10]

- Increases in self-esteem, hope, confidence, insight, knowledge, interconnections (an example of increased in knowledge might be knowing how to access external resources)[7]

- Short-term quick wins are built upon to achieve long-term change[9]

- Strong ownership and sustainable outcomes

Below we discuss the evidence of these kinds of outcomes in SINPA, and also consider what kind of outcomes are being valued by SINPA partners and AusAID.

Do the outcomes visible so far from SINPA partner's work demonstrate these typical characteristics?
There are numerous examples from SINPA that demonstrate the above characteristics. Many examples exist for how inner resources are being used, external resources access and how numerous 'process' outcomes related to increased self-esteem and hope have resulted. A few are provided here:

> *"Feelings of achievement, and changed attitudes and values"* and *"Men and women share responsibilities"* (LLEE Honiara staff)
> *"Women staff [at Oxfam] now feel confident and very happy with progress"* (Oxfam Honiara staff)
> *"Woman (of domestic violence) are not peeping out of their windows any more they now walk out of their homes to greet you"* (Oxfam Honiara staff)
> *"Families see the importance of coming together"* (ICP Honiara staff)

*"[People] practice saving [and are] mindful of spending….young people feel responsible to their parents….families working together to achieve their visions and families see the importance of coming together" (*ICP Honiara staff)
"Young people are being assertive in the community" (SCA field staff)
"Youth realise their potentials and taking pride in their achievements" (ADRA Honiara staff)

The section on 'practice' already provided examples of many 'quick-wins' that have been achieved. What remains to be seen during the remaining 3 years that SINPA will operate, is how partners are able to build upon these 'quick-wins' towards longer-term outcomes, and to capture evidence of such changes through robust M&E systems

The research process also revealed some of the more significant 'final' outcomes representing the expected '*substantive changes in the lives of men, women and families as a result of SINPA NGOs work'* (SINPA Design document, p5), and that may be characterized as both community-owned and sustainable. There are likely many more examples than those provided here, which should in future be captured using stronger M&E systems. It was beyond the scope of this paper (and also not the correct timing) to capture and report the breadth and depth of these outcomes. Some examples of those mentioned during the research include:
- Construction of 3 poultry houses in 3 days in North Malaita (ADRA)
- Community hall built in 6 months (APHEDA)
- Formation of Provincial Youth Policies across a number of Provinces (SCA)
- Set up of successful women's savings groups (LLEE)
- Organisation and delivery of effective and inclusive IWDA celebrations (Oxfam)
- Motivation of communities to realise water and sanitation goals through SBA (ICP)

Do SINPA partners value the 'process' outcomes related to the SBA process? Different people may value different kinds of outcomes that result from projects. When describing examples of outcomes from SINPA activities during sharing and learning sessions associated with this paper, the majority of Honiara staff were focused on 'end-product' outcomes that aligned with objectives in their design documents. These outcomes are yet to emerge in some cases. Staff did not point out 'process' outcomes as existing or being important until prompted. Once prompted, extensive and important process outcome stories and evidence were given. In general Honiara staff feel under donor pressure to show end-products and did not seem convinced that donors would value process outcomes. When prompted Honiara staff identified a wide range of important process outcomes, and reported feeling validated and motivated in realising that these are also valued by other SINPA partners including AusAID. Frontline staff were very aware of process outcomes and contributed many examples without being prompted.

➢ SINPA partners need to be supported with consistent tools and skills to identify and report process outcomes, (not only 'end-product' outcomes that align with original design docs). This should also be undertaken at the programmatic level

What kind of outcomes does AusAID value and what does this mean for SINPA partners? Based on comments shared during workshops and interviews with Honiara and frontline staff, it appears that they

perceive AusAID staff have conveyed mixed messages during the past two years regarding what outcomes they value as the funding organisation. The agreed design includes a focus on both final outcomes (expressed as "evidence of substantive changes in the lives of men, women and families"[16]) and also promotes SINPA as a learning program valuing exploration of the development approach. This means that both process outcomes and end-product outcomes are important. However the lack of coherent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in SINPA, particularly at the partnership level, appears to have diminished AusAID's trust in the process, which has been interpreted by partners as increased pressure to achieve and demonstrate tangible outcomes. This pressure appeared to be quite overwhelming for some Honiara staff who reported that they could see evidence of change in the field but struggled with how best to decide what change outcomes are of interest to funders, and how to attain the skills to capture and present the evidence.

➢ Review the nature of M&E support, particularly at the partnership or programmatic level. Seek to further the dialogue about which outcomes are valued by the funding agency

What is needed to increase capture and communication of outcomes of SBA work? More structured M&E systems are required to systematically capture representative information from across the 119 communities and primary beneficiaries[17] that SINPA works with. Within M&E, it will be important to capture the breadth of outcome-types mentioned here, and also to ensure that 'process' outcomes are given appropriate attention given that their recognition and validation is an important element to support on-going positive change. Further it would be beneficial if partners were prompted to capture intangible process outcomes (outcomes you cannot physically touch) e.g. how people 'feel', how they 'think' differently and what they 'do' differently as a result of the project/s.

➢ It would be valuable to seek to validate sharing of process outcomes including intangible outcomes

WHAT ELSE COULD SBA OFFER SINPA?

The research process with Honiara staff and frontline staff revealed that the SINPA partnership itself might benefit from being facilitated with a strengths-based philosophy, and in doing so mirror the processes taking place in communities and amongst beneficiaries. As covered in the 'Participation and Accountability' paper, the SINPA collective and SINPA Steering committee have room to strengthen their engagement with one another. Examples of how SBA might inform how the collective and the Steering group operates include taking an explicitly appreciative approach during meetings (potentially including discussion of high-points and enablers) and developing an 'assets' map of SINPA partners so that it is clearer what capacities and resources organisations might connect and share.

➢ Consider the potential to facilitate the SINPA partnership practice with a strengths-based philosophy
➢ Provide further training and participative opportunities for SINPA partners to reflect on the questions and future considerations arising from this paper.
➢ Continue the strengthen engagement across and between SINPA partners

CONLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our conclusion from this research process is that SINPA is providing a rich learning ground for SBA, and that it is clear that this new and different development approach is demonstrating worth. Of greatest significance is the finding that SBA is perceived as an approach that brings the past into the present and connects strongly to traditions, culture and community social structures. This points to the genuine possibility of defining a new development paradigm that is rooted in SI culture, can give life and meaning SI's own traditions and make them relevant to addressing present challenges.

During the upcoming years a priority for SINPA must be on strengthening appropriately developed M&E systems that will capture representative information from across the initiatives. Such evidence could form the basis for AusAID to lead a robust conversation with SIG and other development partners operating in SI about the value of taking an SBA approach and the necessary elements for it to work well.

To nurture SBA through the remaining years of the partnership, it will be important to maintain faith and the direction set out in the design, which includes maintaining limits on the reach of partners' activities (i.e. not taking on new communities until ready) and acknowledging that this kind of community-led development takes significant time. This may require increased capture and recognition of 'process' outcomes and reduced expectations on tangible 'final' outcomes. In addition it will be important to consider and plan for staff-turnover and both look to ways to reduce and plan for this, and ensure appropriate knowledge capture systems are in place and capacity building processes in SBA are provided to new staff.

For SINPA partners we hope that this learning paper offers new ideas to consider in SBA practice. We hope it helps to distil more clearly what SBA is, and what it looks like in the SINPA context. A comment participant comment from the start of the workshop series was that: "*we feel like we know SBA but (in terms of) how we use it for implementation, we're sometimes confused*". Comments received in the evaluation of the research workshops and in response to drafts of this paper confirm that SINPA partners found significant value in the facilitated research reflection process and that the workshops and this learning paper provide many new ideas of collaboration, investigation and consideration.

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Annex 1: Strengths-based approaches conceptual framework

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A

What does NGO SBA practice look like?

Build action from inside-out- ie from inside strengths before accessing external sources

Dual focus on short-term wins and longer term change, and helping set realistic quick wins that are within reach)

Need to involve all (ideally) community - participation and inclusion - include the "whole"

Facilitate a process to reveal strengths

Consider typologies of strengths

Have self-awareness about issues of power and control, and make efforts to equalise power

Build relationships and trust and work in partnership through dialogue

What does the change process look like?

Communities or beneficiaries take responsibility

Communities or beneficiaries lead their own development process

Communities or beneficiaries take initiative and draw on NGO and other resources to act

A generative process, inherently motivating due to moving from a position of and focus on strengths

What do the outcomes look like?

Inner resources used to the maximum and complemented by accessing external resources

Increase in hope and related to this increased achievement

Short-term quick wins and foundation built for longer-term change

Increase in self-esteem, confidence, insight, knowledge, interconnections (eg of increase in knowledge might be knowing how to access external resources)

Strong ownership and sustainable outcomes

Importance of the question as to who defines what is seen as an outcome, and what outcomes are valued

B — **Underpinning beliefs**

Practitioners believe and value that every individual is born with inherent and innate capacities, life experience and characteristics that can contribute to development outcomes, and that any community or environment is rich in resources including individuals, associations, institutions and natural and built environments.

Practitioners see themselves as facilitators and not the 'expert' on what changes are needed or the best ways to achieve change.

Starting from strengths and appreciating and focusing on them is motivating. If you provide support and nurture existing capacity and strengths they will expand and will contribute to a positive change process.

There is no need to analyse needs and problems to generate meaningful change.

It is important that people take responsibility, initiative, lead, and are owners and directors of the change process. If this happens then resulting changes will be sustained and people will become more self-reliant.

C — **Underlying philosophy (worldview)**

SBA is based on the view that there are many ways to view 'reality' and 'knowledge', and how we each understand things is subjective. SBA draws on the view that our world is constructed socially (ie social constructionism). This thinking prioritises language and its shared meaning gained through relationship.