The practice of a strengths-based approach to community development in Solomon Islands

Juliet Willetts*, Sally Asker, Naomi Carrard and Keren Winterford

Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

(Received 18 November 2013; accepted 29 October 2014)

This paper presents empirical findings from research undertaken in Solomon Islands to examine the use of strengths-based approaches (SBAs) by a group of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A summary framework was developed to underpin the analysis, drawing on literature in social work, organizational management, community development, and international development fields. The paper employs this framework to reflect on the practice of six NGOs working in partnership in Solomon Islands over 2009–2014. The findings demonstrate alignment between the NGO practice in Solomon Islands and SBA philosophy and practice as described in the literature, particularly in terms of adherence to beliefs about innate community capacity, the need to draw on community resources to create change, and the delicate balance between a strengths focus and repression of problems that might need to be surfaced. The findings diverged from the literature in how NGOs saw their role. Whilst they saw themselves as facilitators rather than experts, they also saw the development process as a partnership between themselves and communities rather than community led. This paper contributes empirical evidence of the characteristics, complexities and limitations of implementing a SBA in Solomon Islands, including reflections on the tension between self-help and advocacy development strategies.

Keywords: strengths-based approach; community development; participatory development

Introduction

A strengths-based approach (SBA) is an emerging approach in development practice to operationalize participatory development principles. This paper contributes insights on the use of SBAs, drawing on the experience of a community development initiative in Solomon Islands. SBAs remain relatively undocumented in the development studies literature to date, both in terms of their practice, their potential outcomes, and the theories that have informed their development.

The purpose of the paper is to critically reflect on the philosophy and practice a SBA in the context of its implementation in Solomon Islands, using a structured framework to guide the inquiry and retaining a predominant focus on what can be learnt from the lived experiences of the relevant development practitioners.

SBAs, also termed strengths-based practice, emerged in a number of fields in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including in social work, community development and organizational management. In the social work field a SBA is referred to as a ‘social work practice theory’, developed initially by Saleebey (1998) and Weick (1992) in the late 1980s. Their perspective challenged conventional social work approaches which assume ‘that clients become clients because they have deficits, [and] are, in some essential way, flawed or weak’ (Saleebey 2009, 3). In the community development field, the seminal work in North America by Kretzmann and McKnight that led to asset-based community development (ABCD) approaches was published in 1993. In a similar vein to Saleebey, these authors asserted that a focus on needs (rather than strengths) causes communities to ‘begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders’ (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 2). Lastly, in the field of organizational management, appreciative inquiry (AI) was developed in 1986 by Cooperider (1986 as cited by Bushe 2012), as a way to focus research methods on what gave organizations vitality rather than on what problems and issues they faced, thus making action research and theory-building more generative.

SBAs have been adopted in the development field as one way of operationalizing the participatory development principles originally proposed by Chambers (1983). Pioneers in this work include Mathie and Cunningham (2003, 2008) and a range of organizations which adopted approaches focused on ‘assets’ or strengths (Ford Foundation 2002; Burkett 2011; O’Leary, Burkett, and Braithwaite 2011; Willetts et al. 2013). Mathie and Cunningham (2003) point to the mixed results of mainstream participatory development
practice due to an efficiency focus or limitations in the extent of community engagement. They assert that ABCD can be used to address such shortcomings, and highlight the importance of its use to strengthen civil society and expand participatory democratic space for citizens’ engagement. They propose that the recognition of strengths is more likely to inspire positive action rather than a focus on needs and problems, and describe the empowering potential of an SBA process (Mathie and Cunningham 2008, 122): ‘The logical consequence of focusing on assets, capacities, and capabilities is to encourage a proactive role for the citizen, replacing the passive, dependent role of client in the welfare service delivery model of community development practice.’ More recently, there has been debate about whether a SBA collectively represents a ‘new’ approach to development, or is ‘rediscovered’ traditional community development (Burkett 2011). This paper does not seek to resolve this debate. Rather, it contributes empirical evidence on the lived experiences of practitioners of a SBA in Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands is an ethnically and geographically diverse nation with more than 350 inhabited islands and almost 90 languages (Connell 2006). As a result, social structures and systems of authority vary across different provinces. There are tensions and contradictions between traditional ('big man' and hereditary chiefs) and western governance and leadership systems (Nanau 2002; Fukuyama 2008; McLeod 2008). In general, leadership and power are dominated by males at all levels (Corrin 2008). Dominant forms of development have been large-scale, top-down, economically focused efforts such as plantations, mining, logging and fisheries (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002), and Australia’s engagement has been strongly focused on peace and security (McKibbin 2009). Whilst a large proportion of the population lives in rural areas, the national government has paid limited attention to rural development (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002). The divisive effects of civil unrest or ‘ethnic tensions’ between 1998 and 2003, which led to deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (McKibbin 2009), are still being felt in many communities.

There have been critiques of previous community development approaches in Solomon Islands, which some authors have argued perpetuate a passive 'clientelism' rather than fostering active citizenship (Cox 2009). Others have argued that previous approaches have continued a paradigm of 'modernization' that undermines rather than supports indigenous voices (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002). Yet other authors point out failures evident in Solomon Islands and elsewhere in Melanesia that have involved disjunctures and mismatches between the aims and aspirations of external organizations, and those of the relevant communities (Foale 2001; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002; West 2006).

Against this backdrop, the design document of the Solomon Islands Non-Governmental Organisation Partnership Agreement (SINPA) proposes the exploration of locally relevant, Solomon Islander-led community development models by six non-governmental organizations (NGOs). SINPA replaced a previous Australia-funded NGO partnership criticized for being externally driven and lacking sufficient flexibility and responsiveness (AusAID 2009). SINPA’s design proposes the use of ‘strengths models’ in ways that are cognizant of power differentials and that address gender inequity. It describes communities in Solomon Islands as displaying resilience and self-reliance, and yet in relation to aid it says they ‘often see themselves as grateful recipients of charitable assistance rather than equal partners in a development process’ (AusAID 2009, 4). Cox (2009) cautioned against this type of conceptualization of Solomon Islanders, and instead proposed that it is the strength of the client–patron dynamic that underlies the way aid is received. Either way, as a result of this thinking, SINPA sought to treat community members as key actors in their own development process instead of ‘objects’ of other people’s development plans (AusAID 2009, 2).

One tension running through the design document that is evident in the analysis provided in this paper is the tension between self-help and advocacy. In the main, SINPA is concerned with applying a self-help model 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’ (AusAID 2009, 14). There is no mention in the design document of an intention to enable and empower communities to engage with the state concerning their rights and responsibilities. This shortcoming was raised in reflective learning processes (Willetts, Carrard, and Asker 2011; Asker and Willetts 2011) and in the mid-term review (AusAID 2012). These sources point to the additional attention and effort required to address this aspect seriously, in a way that might open up the civic space discussed by Mathie and Cunningham (2003) above. As discussed by O’Leary, Burkett, and Braithwaite (2011), a SBA cannot replace investment in improving services or tackling the structural causes of inequality, but can help communities to build a stronger political voice. However, clear intention around this dimension of an SBA is required to bring it to fruition, and as discussed later, it was not a key focus of SINPA’s application of a SBA.

**Methods**

The researchers reviewed academic and other literature on SBAs and prepared a summary framework for SBAs to guide the inquiry. The framework drew on literature from community development, social work and organizational management fields, as the latter two include useful theoretical insights on SBAs. Employing this framework, in
August 2011 we led a structured research process involving SINPA partners in a participatory process of reflecting on, and sharing, their experiences, followed by a further process in March 2013. Four participatory workshops were held. Two of them (one in 2011 and one in 2013) involved the head-office and some field-based staff and had between 17 and 25 participants. The other two workshops (one in 2011 and one in 2013), had 14 to 16 participants and involved community representatives as well as head-office and field-based staff. Participant numbers varied as some participants were not able to attend all research workshop sessions. Head-office staff members were generally involved in developing the framework for how a SBA was adapted to suit each organization. Field staff members were responsible for facilitation of SBA processes at the community level.

As background, the component programs under SINPA work across multiple provinces (some NGOs in two provinces, others in up to six provinces, including Guadalcanal, Malaita, Honiara, Western Province, Makira, Isabel and RenBel). Each NGO implemented a program with a particular orientation. Programs include a focus on: youth engagement; community learning centers; gender inclusive natural resource management in provinces impacted by logging; addressing violence against women; and strengthening a network of churches to support community driven development.

The overall methodological approach was participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008) involving facilitated focus group discussion and structured activities. Activities in the 2011 workshops included storytelling and analysis, explaining practice through a chosen metaphor or totem, paired interviews between participants and affinity mapping processes. Different perspectives were also explored through a ‘where do you stand?’ activity, in which 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 field staff that explored their roles and experiences. In 2013, storytelling was again employed, and included personal reflection on ‘high-points’. A visualization activity was also used to look beyond current practice into the future (after NGO support had ceased), and role plays were used to identify frequently appearing characteristics of current practice. Detailed notes, including direct quotes were captured by a dedicated note-taker. The two guiding research questions were: ‘What are the characteristics of SINPA’s strengths-based practice and how do these compare with those described in the literature?’ and ‘How can SBA be most appropriately and effectively implemented within the Solomon Islands context?’ This paper focuses primarily on the first question, although in doing so it provides some insight into the second. It should also be noted that the paper does not seek to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of SINPA’s practice and its outcomes, but rather to explore the nature and characteristics of SBA philosophy and practice in the Solomon Islands context.

### Summary framework to describe SBA

The dominant application of SBAs in the development field has been in ABCD approaches. Burkett (2011) asserts that ABCD and related approaches have suffered from a lack of the academic inquiry and reflexive practice that have been applied in the broader community development field. In the social work and organizational management fields, however, the academic literature on SBA is more developed, with theoretical insights presented concerning SBAs, their basis for creating change and an evaluation of their effectiveness. Informed by literature from across these fields, a summary framework was developed for this research. The summary framework is shown in brief (Figure 1) and in detail (Figure 2). It has three levels: (i) underlying philosophy or worldview; (ii) underpinning beliefs or values; and (iii) practice and outcomes. Many publications have focused on the steps, tools and processes rather than on these levels. However, in this paper each of these levels was considered, since proponents of SBAs maintain that such approaches are less about steps, tools and processes and more about the underlying intention and philosophy (Bushe 2012). Each level is described in the sections below, drawing on literature from fields in which strengths-based practice is used.

#### Underlying philosophy (worldview)

The foundation level in the summary framework is about an individual’s or organization’s philosophy, or the way one views the world. SBAs are based on the view that there are many ways to view ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’, and there is nothing inherently true or real. SBAs draw on the view that our world is constructed socially (Bushe 2001). This thinking prioritizes language and shared meaning gained through relationship. AI in particular has its theoretical foundations in social constructionism (Gergen 1999). As Bushe points out, in social constructionism ‘every theory and method is a human construction that allows for some things to be seen and done and for other things to be overlooked or unavailable’ (2012, 14) and AI is ‘not interested in discovering what is but in allowing a collective to uncover what could be’ (2012, 14).

#### Underpinning beliefs or values

SBA is based on a particular set of beliefs about people and communities, and about how change occurs. According to the literature, an SBA is based on two fundamental beliefs. First, practitioners believe and value that every individual
has 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 (Weick 1992, 23; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 8; Mathie and Cunningham 2008, 122; Saleebey 2009, 7). Second, practitioners see themselves as facilitators and not the ‘experts’ on what changes are needed or the best ways to achieve them (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 10; Glicken 2004, 6; Kisthardt 2009, 51).

‘How’ or ‘why’ we think certain actions will result in particular outcomes are questions addressed in theories of change (Funnell and Rogers 2011). In the literature on SBAs, beliefs about how change happens include three common ideas. First, 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 contribute to a positive change process (Weick 1992, 23–24; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6; Winterford 2013). Second, it is not necessary to specifically analyze needs and problems to generate meaningful change (Whitney and Torsten-Bloom 2003, 16; Mathie and Cunningham 2008, 121), though some practice-based literature proposes a focus on strengths and needs (SEWA 2006), and Bushe cautions that attention must be given to what may happen to negative images and feelings if they are repressed by a process that has an exclusive focus on the positive (Bushe 2001). Third, it is important that people take responsibility, initiative and leadership, and are owners and directors of the change process. For example, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) argue that communities can drive the development process themselves. The assumption is that if this happens then resulting changes will be sustained and people will become more self-reliant (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 474; SEWA 2006, 31).

**SBA practice and outcomes**

This level of the framework is about what actually happens when a SBA is used. It includes how organizations practice SBA, how SBA practice results in a change process, and the outcomes of this process.

**How organizations practice SBA:** In the literature, there are five key characteristics of SBA practice. First, it is described as a facilitated process which identifies a range of strengths and then helps to build action ‘from the inside out’. This means that development practitioners support action that focuses on revealing and employing

![Structure of summary framework to describe SBAs.](image-url)
internal strengths before accessing external resources (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6). Second, it includes building relationships and trust and working in partnership through dialog (Saleebey 1992, 9–11; Weick 1992, 24; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 9). Third, it requires a dual focus on short-term ‘wins’ and longer-term change (SEWA 2006, 31). To achieve this, practitioners assist people to initially set realistic short-term goals that are within reach, and build morale by recognizing and celebrating successes (Rapp 1998, 17; Winterford 2013). Fourth, as part of their practice, practitioners ensure inclusion and participation, with a focus on including the ‘whole’ or the collective. In doing so, practitioners facilitating an SBA are sensitive to issues of power and control in any group (including issues related to their own position and involvement), and make constructive efforts to equalize power (Saleebeey 1992, 9; Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2003). Finally, where appropriate, practitioners also act as brokers to assist people to access external resources or engage with institutions such as government or other civil society organizations (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 15; Sullivan and Rapp 2009, 227).

How SBA practice results in a change process: The literature describes the change process as involving communities or beneficiaries who take responsibility (Saleebeey 1992, 8; Weick 1992, 23–24; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6) and communities who take initiative to draw on internal (and sometimes external) resources to act (Whitney and Torsten-Bloom 2003, 16; Mathie and Cunningham 2008, 121). The change process thus relies on communities to lead their own development processes. Lastly, the change process is viewed as inherently motivating because it starts from, and utilizes, inherent strengths (Weick 1992, 23). For further discussion in this area, see Bushe (2001), who discusses a series of theories of change which explain the change process arising in AI processes.

Outcomes of the change process: According to the literature on SBA, outcomes are typically associated with strong ownership. ‘Inner resources (or strengths)’ are used and complemented by accessing external resources (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 9). Importantly, increases in self-esteem, hope, confidence, insight, knowledge, interconnections (such as knowing how to access external resources) are typical outcomes (Saleebeey 1992, 8; Weick 1992, 23; O’Leary, Burkett, and Braithwaite 2011) noted by Peters, Gonsamo, and Molla (2011) as intangible outcomes that are achieved in addition to more tangible
outcomes in relation to changes in socioeconomic circumstances. Finally, short-term quick wins are built upon to achieve long-term change (Dureau 2010).

Findings in relation to SINPA

Beliefs and values of SINPA partners

A range of questions explored the underlying beliefs and values of SINPA staff. The findings are described below. They cover their beliefs about individual’s capacities, the availability of community resources, their roles as facilitators and the need to nurture strengths. There were diverse views about whether a sole focus should be given to revealing and analyzing strengths versus surfacing problems in the community.

Belief in the ability of individual capacity and skills to contribute to development

Amongst SINPA staff including both field and head-office staff, it appeared that this belief was strongly held. This belief connects strongly to Solomon Islanders’ view of the church at the center 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 the SBA 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’ (Field staff member).

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 emphasizes the value of discovering enablers of success from the past. Another stated: ‘[t]hose powers are dormant and [our program] helps to wake them up and realise their power’ (Head-office staff member). SINPA partners acknowledge that SBA is about a lived experience and life philosophy. For example, a staff member stated: ‘we encourage [new field staff] to practice SBAs upon themselves. They have to become a SBA role model in order to influence others’. Other partners shared similar stories.

Belief in the availability of community resources

This belief was firmly held by both head-office and frontline or field-based staff. When asked to describe their organization’s approach, five of the six organizations spoke about, or acted out through drama, building on people’s existing capacities and other local resources. A typical explanation of a SBA was that it was: ‘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’ (Head-office staff member).

Reinforcing this, some SINPA partners selected communities to be involved in SINPA based partly on a recognition of the strengths and self-organization 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’ (Head-office staff member). This was also the case for several other partners, who decided to work in communities where they had an existing relationship as well as in new and ‘ready’ communities.

Belief in being facilitators rather than experts

In SINPA, it was found that staff commonly saw themselves as facilitators rather than as experts who knew what changes were needed or how to manage such changes. They spoke about a feeling of shared responsibility between themselves and community members (or other civil society partners) to make things happen. For example: ‘[O]ur work is about strengthening partner organisations within existing structures and systems. It is a two-way process, we work together. The partner organisations set agendas’ (Head-office staff member). One NGO also pointed out that they made their facilitator role clear to communities: ‘We also explain that [our organisation] should only be seen as a coordinator – the community should make the change’ (Field staff member).

Belief in the need to nurture strengths

The experiences of SINPA partners confirmed this belief, as it was what they had seen happen in many cases. One NGO described the skills they felt 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)’.

Belief in the need to focus on revealing strengths rather than analyzing problems

According to the literature and practice of AI and ABCD, SBAs should focus on revealing and building from strengths and identifying desired future visions in a generative process. Importantly, they do not include a focus on in-depth analysis of needs or problems in a community. Instead, they are based on a belief that it is not necessary to inquire into, or analyze, these needs or problems and their causes as the prime source to decide on future strategy or action. This does not mean SBAs seek to ignore or diminish the presence of perceived problems. Rather, SBAs take 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 toward this future. In this scenario, drawing on traditional methods of ‘problem analysis’, (focused on problems, gaps and weaknesses) is not required. Within the SBA literature there is also divergence on this matter. Some SBA literature discourages problem analysis and asserts that it is de-motivating, fragmenting and disengaging whereas the analysis of strength provides inherent motivation for change (Whitney and Torsten 2003). More recent critiques of AI have suggested that surfacing problems may be important, and that the core issue is to develop a generative process rather than one that is blindly tied only to ‘the positive’ (Bushe 2012).

SINPA staff had mixed views on strengths versus problems focuses. Most partners viewed an SBA as a process for both identifying problems or needs and revealing strengths that could 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’ (Head-office staff member). This quote is typical of the way partners framed their practice, and reflects the complexity described in the literature.

During one of the research workshops with head-office staff, 10 of 14 participants said they believed that there should be a focus just on strengths, though they admitted that in reality their current practice was different from this. The perspective of those who were convinced that focusing only on strengths was important was that there was 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’ (Head-office staff member).

During the workshop, one justification given for a dual focus on problems as well as strengths was that such an approach maintained good community relations. It did so because it took what people considered to be a logical approach, and because it recognized the power of client-patron relations in Solomon Islands (Cox 2009) and the legacy of previous problem-focused approaches to aid:

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. (Head-office staff member)

Another reason why ‘needs’ are sometimes given attention 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 is easier for them to say ‘I want x, y, z’ rather than go through an SBA process. (Head-office staff member)

Belief that communities should own and direct the change process

Overall, there was consensus that communities should lead, take responsibility and own their change processes. Two of the NGO partners held particularly strong views on this: ‘All planning comes from communities. [Our organisation] is there for support in terms of funding and realising outcomes from the training, but not influencing their decision’ (Head-office staff member); and ‘For [us] SBA means communities being in the driving seat. Sustainability of the program depends on this’ (Head-office staff member).

However, there was also diversity with regard to this point. One partner reported differences in views amongst their project leadership on this matter: ‘One [head office] says let the community decide, the other [Australian NGO office] has a plan of activities they should follow’ (Field staff member). Partners also described how they needed to play a strong role in facilitating and prompting processes to happen in the community, especially at the outset. This area is discussed further in the following section on findings about ‘how change happens’.

How SINPA partners practice SBA

Practices based on the SBA summary framework are compared in the following to SINPA partners’ practices.

Facilitation of a process to reveal strengths

All SINPA partners used a strengths-identification process. Three organizations used an AI approach (a four-step process of discovery through storytelling of high-points, a visioning activity, design of activities and implementation of activities) (also known as the 4Ds approach: discovery–dream–design–deliver) (Whitney and Torsten 2003). Aspects of ABCD and Sustainable Livelihoods frameworks are also used, focusing on different types of assets and strengths. The following example from one NGO illustrates a typical approach to revealing strengths. In this case youths identified available capacity and resources to develop a business. They chose to raise chickens as an accessible, easy entry point to small enterprise development that they hoped would bring them new purpose, skills and income:

We started conducting SBA awareness in [one of the provinces], implementing the youth engagement and livelihood project using SBA. We started with five communities with what we call Exploration, Envisioning, Realisation and Determination to conduct a baseline survey and develop the Action Plan based on the activities
Another example is an NGO’s use of the 4Ds to reveal existing strengths together with a visioning process as well as other tools including pocket charts: ‘Following SBA awareness [activities in one of the provinces], 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’ (Head-office staff member). Revealing strengths was found at times to be quite a challenging activity for NGOs, as it requires persistence to help communities and beneficiaries to see things differently.

Building action from the ‘inside out’

SINPA partners’ practices appeared to vary depending on the situation. Sometimes the action was built from the ‘inside out’, for example, building a community hall, or the following example from one NGO where one male community member 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 him and talk with him, and they decided to replicate the design and build their own. This example captures the idea that within a community (or beneficiary group), there are resources and good practice which can be recognized, learnt from and replicated using internal resources to respond to a local situation.

In other circumstances there were occasionally requests which could not be addressed using only the community’s and the SINPA partners’ existing strengths and resources. On these occasions external resources or expertise were required (e.g. financial literacy skills).

A related issue concerned the ability of SINPA organizations to respond to community requests for support. This demonstrates one of the challenges of playing a ‘facilitator’ role, in that various forms of expertise may be required that are not available within the NGO. One of the dilemmas for SINPA organizations in taking up a SBA is that communities can (and have) come up with ideas that require support and expertise that lie beyond the skills of their organization. One solution SINPA partners have started to use to overcome this challenge is drawing on each other’s expert skills. For example, one NGO provided training on savings clubs in communities in which another NGO worked. NGOs also shared financial literacy training across their communities, and one NGO assisted another NGO with social accountability approaches. This issue of ensuring that appropriate expertise is available reflects Burkett’s (2011) observation that a SBA can require additional skills and expertise (beyond SBA facilitation) to be successfully implemented.

Building trustful relationships through dialog

All partners valued relationship building and building trust in their work. They practiced dialog in multiple ways that were in line with Solomon Islands’ culture, using both formal and informal communication processes. An example of building relationships and trust can be taken from one NGO frontline worker talking about how his organization sought to change a lack of participation of youths: ‘I approached the youths and just talked [together with them]’ (Field staff member). 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 dialog and building trust.

Dual focus on short-term wins and longer-term change

At the community or direct beneficiary level, partners included a focus on quick wins. During workshop discussions, participants shared numerous examples of these. One community facilitator shared, ‘Four weeks [after the workshop] I did an assessment and one family had saved $18,000 (through selling 18 bags of cocoa) … that finding was within four weeks only! Others [in the community] saw this and they followed’ (Field staff member). One NGO also reported that a community built a community hall in ‘just three days’. The staff member said: ‘If they can do this in three days, then what else can they do?!’ (Field staff member).

As mentioned in an SINPA progress report, ‘communities only begin to trust an outside development agency when they can see some action resulting from the interventions’ (AusAID 2010), reflecting the importance of quick wins. However, the many examples of quick wins were not celebrated and also were not commonly shared beyond individual SINPA agencies, due to the belief that small short-term outcomes were not valued by relevant donor staff and therefore not worth reporting.

Focus on inclusion and participation

Generally, all partners made efforts to give access to everyone and ensure inclusion for all at key points in the project cycle, especially during entry to new communities and the design phase. However, not everyone was included in practice because of the focus of certain projects on particular groups (e.g. women, or youth). However, despite the focus on women, one NGO planned to allow men to attend meetings, thus acknowledging that to change conditions for women and generate greater understanding of gender-based violence issues, it was important to include both men and women in some situations. In the case of
another NGO, ‘men who saw what women had achieved through saving are now learning from the women to join and be included in the activities’. Another NGO, although it focused on youth, ensured that it gave access and a voice to all from the outset:

[we] 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. (head-office staff member)

Awareness of issues of power and control, and efforts to equalise power

By taking on a facilitation role (rather than claiming to be experts who already had the answers), frontline staff helped reduce power imbalances between themselves and those they sought to help. In terms of addressing power differentials within the community, SINPA’s work was mixed. It is important to note that ‘equalizing’ power does not mean addressing this area in a culturally inappropriately, confrontational or quick way – it could include slow, longer-term approaches within existing structures, culture and thinking. Projects that provide women with opportunities to take on new leadership positions (e.g. one NGO worked with women savings groups) are ‘equalizing power’. The level of staff self-awareness and associated actions taken to address power depended primarily on the beliefs of the frontline Solomon Islander staff. For some staff, supporting the equalization of power in the community was perceived to be in conflict with culture and kastom and to undermine long-established community structures.

Brokering relationships between communities and government or other stakeholders

Supporting community members to engage with government is important because of the need to expand the civil space for participation (Mathie and Cunningham 2003) and the need to work against a conception in Solomon Islands that communities should be fully self-sufficient. Instead, it is important to help communities to demand services that are the responsibility of the state (Cox 2009). There are a number of examples within SINPA where partners play this role. For example, one NGO is planning, through its advocacy component, to provide links and introductions directly between government and UN programs and their civil society partner. Another NGO invited the provincial government to visit communities to ensure that community members knew who they could approach. A field staff member related an example of how they brokered their communities to access external resources:

We started working with the youths to try to reduce their dependence. At the centre we talked about culture, change and kastom law. We involved the youths. We also worked with and talked to the police to work with us as well as 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 is reduced but still a little bit there. People are respecting each other more. (field staff member)

In other examples, one NGO project brokered field-based relationships between community and Solomon’s Rural Training Centers, the Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Health in the delivery of training (on life skills, health, spirituality, agriculture, reforestation, and literacy for livelihoods). Another NGO mediated relationships between community and other NGOs and the Solomon Islands Credit Union League, and provincial forestry units. In the 2013 workshops, this area of brokering relationships with other parties was deemed to require further attention and a strong focus in the final phase of the SINPA program. The absence of stronger work in this area by SINPA partners points to the potential limitations of a development approach that relies only on community ideas and initiatives. For instance, adoption of strengthened social accountability approaches that include engagement with government to demand services might also be needed. This requires that Solomon Islands’ communities be sufficiently informed of their rights, and equipped with the necessary tools and means to engage (Cox 2009). More recent literature tackles the potential for using a SBA within social accountability approaches (see Winterford 2013).

What the change process ‘looked like’

Responsibility taken by community or beneficiaries

The research revealed that communities and beneficiaries were taking some responsibility to improve their own situation, but that it takes time and effort to encourage this. In addition, community members were reported to only take full responsibility when and where they were centrally involved in activity implementation. If someone was not involved from the outset, generally they did not take any responsibility. This may be symptomatic of the Solomon Islander response to dominant development approaches used by outsiders to date, and an associated shift from a communal focus where ‘everyone helps everyone’ toward a more ‘everyone for themselves’ mentality seeking individual material benefit. For example, an NGO staff member reported:

So when I tried to introduce the activity they thought I was the government program […]. 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 [that program] (who came then disappeared). After sometime in the next meeting everybody came and listened to the story about [our organisation], this was a major challenge for me. And after a while the community opened up their eyes. (field staff member)

Another NGO member reported:

It is really a challenge for us (NGOs) to get leaders to understand their role (in the project); to lead from behind, especially with young people. (field staff member)

However, despite this generalization we acknowledge that communities were far from homogenous and research participants reported that a small number of communities were early adopters and within this cohort there was a widespread acceptance of responsibility. Generally, community cohesion and collective responsibility were found to be greater in communities located furthest away from provincial centers and in communities with lower levels of economic development, fewer transport hubs and fewer major markets. This may have been because unlike communities with easy access to provincial centers, people in these more remote communities had to take collective responsibility to survive. In addition, there were layers of complexity concerning who within the community was involved, who carried power and who took responsibility. This area is described further in Willetts, Carrard, and Asker (2011). In this paper it is sufficient to mention that the NGOs used existing self-organized groups as entry points (e.g. women’s groups, youth groups, groups in existing church structures) and it was these groups who generally took responsibility for driving activities.

Frontline staff noted during workshops that community members involved in projects felt very responsible for their projects and their outcomes. However, this responsibility was still based on a certain amount of ‘handholding’ from the SINPA partners, described further below.

A community-led or NGO-led change process?

According to SBA literature, it is important that the community or beneficiaries lead the change process (Mathie and Cunningham 2008). Within SINPA, current practice mostly reflects a shared leadership between the community and NGOs rather than solely community-led approaches. Only one or two agencies said that they saw the community as the sole leader. This current practice demonstrates evolution in comparison with the predetermined NGO-led approaches formerly used by the same NGOs, but also indicated the potential to evolve SBA practice as SINPA progressed. In the following we explain why most NGOs found it appropriate to provide some leadership and significant support rather than insist that communities lead everything themselves.

Some organizations did describe the change process as community-led (or partner-led) and owned. For instance, one NGO reported that: ‘All planning comes from communities, [we are] there for support in terms of funding and realising outcomes from the training, but not influencing their decision’ (Head-office staff member) and another NGO reported that, ‘For [us] SBA means communities being in the driving seat. Sustainability of the program depends on this’ (Head-office staff member).

Most other organizations reported that their own role in the process was critical, particularly in the design phase, and described a need to strike a delicate balance between driving or pushing things to happen, and allowing the community to lead:

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 we must stand on their own … There’s two 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. (head-office staff member)

[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. (head-office staff member)

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? (head-office staff member)

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 Islands. Without the organisation [NGO] projects wouldn’t finish. (head-office staff member)

Another factor discussed by research participants was the importance of the NGO role in relation to power within communities, and the need for their presence as an external moderating party to support equity and accountability. Indeed, community members were concerned that the future departure of NGO staff (or loss of support for community facilitators) would mean powerful members in the community might take over the benefits or the decision-making of successful activities. Strategies to address this were under discussion.
One NGO approached the balance between leading and letting the community drive change by using a number of ‘strengths motivators’ within each community. The role of ‘strengths motivator’ was rotated to different people throughout the course of the project so that people took turns to ‘motivate’ or facilitate SBA activities. This had many advantages including avoiding any one person becoming perceived as the ‘owner’ or leader of the change process.

In general, the change process was described as a shared process in which both community and NGO contributed. One NGO frontline worker shared from his position as being part of the community: ‘We contribute and [we] contribute’ (Field staff member). In the language used by head-office staff and frontline staff and workers, it is not about communities doing things and NGO supporting and facilitating; rather, both are seen to equally ‘contribute’. This understanding is seen by staff to be realistic in the Solomon Islands context, and is in line with contemporary thinking in participatory development, which argues that leadership is needed, combined with a high level of reflexivity amongst practitioners which enables them to play such roles with care (Chambers 2013). Another challenge to achieving completely community-led change is managing any ‘mismatch’ between community desires and individual SINPA partners’ ‘core’ or historical project specializations and target-group focuses. For instance, one NGO was focused on youth, another on 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 SBA process the community did their own fundraising and raised about $8000. They used the money to pay for [a consultant] and Rural Water Supply and Sanitation to do a survey. The community cleaned up the site and is continuing to raise money to buy their materials that will soon complete their community water supply. (field staff member)

Another example from this same NGO demonstrated how a SBA approach led to a community relying on other nearby communities (rather than the usual practice of reliance on support from head-office):

One time there was a cyclone that hit an island. The cost to charter and boat and the materials to go to help from head office was very high. So communities in [one of the provinces] and other non-affected and closer nearby communities supported those who were affected on other close by islands. (field staff member)

Often, training or workshops were translated into action through the provision of cash or materials from SINPA partners to beneficiaries as an ‘externally’ provided resource. This was 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 center 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 of both approaches. They agreed in principle that it would be ideal to give cash (e.g. for small livelihood loans) because it matched 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 had a ‘no cash’ policy, in which case provision of materials (e.g. timber, tools) reportedly worked well.

Communities taking initiative to draw on internal and other resources

The change process described by SINPA partners involved communities and beneficiaries drawing on internal and external resources. People frequently drew on NGO knowledge sources to act (e.g. youth policy training, farming workshops, conservation practices). This transfer of knowledge and linking knowledge to change was the biggest resource utilized. One NGO shared a story about a community drawing on its own and other resources to make change happen:

Motivating a change process that builds from strengths

It appeared that SINPA partners were successful in stimulating a constructive change process that builds from strengths. A selection of examples is included below. A head-office staff member 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 inter-generational sharing. (Head-office staff member)

One NGO described the elements that enabled a water pump project to succeed. They included existing strengths such as people’s ability to solve family conflicts, and community leaders’ communication skills and status in the community. These skills were built upon, for example, by delivering leadership and governance training and by ensuring that both male and female leaders were acknowledged. As one staff member mentioned: ‘[our centres] are showing appreciation, morale building and complementing each other. Strong morale gives the project momentum’ (Head-office staff member).

One NGO identified how in one 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 their 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’. (Head-office field staff)

In some cases change even spread from one community to another, as one NGO described: ‘the mindset of one chief changed because he had seen how other communities benefit from SBA’ (Head-office staff member) and the enablers for a 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’ (Field staff member).

**Outcomes of SINPA’s work**

Both intangible and tangible outcomes were described in relation to SINPA’s work, in line with findings by others on the effects of SBA processes (see O’Leary, Burkett, and Braithwaite 2011; Peters, Gonsamo, and Molla 2011). Intangible outcomes related to process outcomes for NGO staff and the effects on the self-esteem and motivation of participating community members. Tangible outcomes related to changes in livelihood.

**Intangible outcomes of increased self-esteem and motivation**

There were numerous examples from SINPA that demonstrated how a SBA led to constructive outcomes where community members were empowered. Many examples showed that inner resources were being used, external resources were accessed and there were numerous process outcomes related to increased self-esteem and hope. A few of these examples are provided here, with the caveat that they are described from the perspective of the NGOs rather than the community members:

‘Feelings of achievement, and changed attitudes and values’ and ‘Men and women share responsibilities’. (Head-office staff member)

Women staff [at our organisation] now feel confident and very happy with progress. (Head-office staff member)

‘Women [victims of domestic violence] are not peeping out of their windows anymore. They now walk out of their homes to greet you’ (head-office staff member). This was the result of their choice to draw on counselling through the project, and a sense of belonging and support due to an expanded network of women and men in their community willing to speak out against violence. This change was generated through project activities, and reduced the stigma associated with being a victim of domestic violence [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. (Head-office staff member)

‘Young people are being assertive in the community’ (field staff member). ‘Youth realise their potentials and taking pride in their achievements’ (head-office staff member). These changes related to a situation described by NGO staff where, following participatory SBA processes, youth took ownership and a central role in changing their own reality through small-scale poultry and piggery activities, drawing them out of a previously confused, bored existence involving drug abuse and laziness.

**Tangible outcomes**

The research process also revealed some tangible outcomes representing the expected ‘substantive changes in the lives of men, women and families as a result of SINPA NGOs work’ (AusAID 2009, 5). These outcomes may be characterized as both community-owned and sustainable. Some examples mentioned during the research included: (i) construction of three poultry houses in three days in one province; (ii) a community hall built in six months; (iii) the formation of provincial youth policies across a number of provinces; (iv) functioning and successful women’s savings groups; (v) organization and delivery of effective and inclusive International Women’s Day celebrations; and (vi) building water and sanitation facilities. These were the result both of NGOs becoming more responsive to community needs, and of communities becoming more responsive and acting to address their own needs.

**Valuing of different types of outcomes**

SBAs have a strong emphasis on process outcomes, such as the increased motivation and self-esteem described above. However, such outcomes were not always valued by, or
perceived to be valued by, development partners. When describing the examples of outcomes of SINPA activities, the majority of head-office staff focused on the ‘end-product’, tangible outcomes that aligned with objectives in their design documents, and for which they felt pressure from donors to deliver. Their perception was that donors were only interested in tangible outcomes. However, such outcomes take time and are yet to emerge in some cases. Head-office staff did not point out ‘process’ outcomes as existing or being important until prompted. Once prompted, extensive and important process outcomes were evidenced through numerous stories and examples. Field staff members, however, were very aware of process outcomes and contributed many examples without prompting.

Conclusion

This paper draws on relevant literature across a range of fields of practice to develop a summary framework to describe a SBA and its implicit theory of change. We applied this framework to the practices of six NGOs in the SINPA Partnership. It appears that a SBA resonated well with understood roles, responsibilities and structures in Solomon Islands in the past: ‘SBA is not new – it is part of culture and the old way of how people did things’ (Head-office staff member). NGO partners felt SBA was not ‘new’ in terms of Solomon Islands’ kastom, but it was new when used as a development approach in a country where externally driven development support has led to citizens and communities becoming clients of aid, rather than active citizens in their own country. However, despite this, SINPA focused predominately on supporting communities to self-help rather than to take action to engage with government with respect to services. The need for ways to ensure balance across these two areas and the need to employ a SBA as a means of promoting collective action and advocacy were recognized as shortcomings in the program to date.

SINPA’s philosophy and practice mostly aligns with those described in the literature, informed by NGO staff members’ own beliefs and values, and affirmed by NGO organizational mandates. In particular, both head-office and field staff believed in the availability of strengths and resources within communities that could be catalyzed and nurtured, and oriented their practice toward facilitation roles rather than external experts with knowledge of the most appropriate development pathways. In line with the diversity of views in the literature, staff members demonstrated mixed views about whether analyzing ‘needs’ or ‘problems’ was unnecessary and unhelpful within a SBA, or remained important. NGO practice also demonstrated the typical characteristics of a SBA described in the literature, including use of visioning processes that break out of ‘normal’ ways of seeing current conditions, effort to build relationships and trust, and a dual focus on short-term wins to inspire confidence with longer-term goals that would require sustained effort. There are also areas where practice deviated from the literature. For example, concerning the question of who ‘drives’ development, NGOs perceived change to happen as a partnership rather than being ‘community driven’ as explained in the SBA literature.

Finally, it should be pointed out that SINPA partners recognize a SBA as a development approach that takes significant time and is not conducive to short-term interventions. Even a five-year program was seen as insufficient to instill and embed a new way of approaching development, and to reach extensive tangible development outcomes. A SBA also cannot be considered an antidote to the complexities of working with varying motivations, power relations, interests and skills within communities. Ways to address and negotiate these challenges are needed, just as they are in other development approaches, including consideration of the dynamics likely to ensue after an NGO leaves. However, the demonstrated intangible outcomes of increased confidence, self-esteem, motivation and hope bode well for stimulating the ongoing generative processes referred to in the SBA literature. Such outcomes are critical for facilitating the Solomon Islander-led development conceived of in SINPA’s original design and for operationalizing participatory development principles more broadly.

Acknowledgements

The Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney undertook the research design, facilitation and analysis with review by the SINPA Steering Committee comprising members of partner organizations and Australian aid program.

Funding

The research that formed the basis for this paper was commissioned by the SINPA, a program funded by the Australian aid program of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Notes

1. SINPA partners include six Solomon Islands organizations: Save the Children (SCA), Anglican Church of Melanesia, Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA), Live and Learn Environmental Education (LLEE), Oxfam/Family Support Centre and Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA.

2. Kastom is an important Melanesian conceptualization of social cohesion and identity that embraces cultural change rather than continuity. It may be used for political ends and is defined in the literature as ‘a psychological linkage to an ancestral past used in contemporary contexts as a conscious political resource’ (Gilberthorpe 2013, 266).

References

Asker, S., and J. Willetts, 2013. Strongim Yumi Tugeta: Lessons on Sustainability, Strength-Based Community Development and Working and Learning in Partnership. Prepared for Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA) by Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.
