

Coordinator International Development Policy  
Development Policy Section  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
RG Casey Building  
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**Re: A strengths-based approach to international development policy**

Dear DFAT International Development Policy Coordinator,

**What key trends or challenges will shape Australia's engagement in our region and globally over the next five to 10 years? What risks and opportunities does this present for Australia's development assistance?**

The view of a world separated into 'developed' and 'under-developed' has spawned an industry to address 'the problem'. Within international development, there are countless approaches, tools and methods to support needs-assessment, problem and gap analysis. A professional practice of 'international development' has been established, whereby the problem of under-development is addressed by managers or facilitators who administer programs using deficit-based approaches, tools and methods. The separation between 'us' and 'them' is clear: the experts *do* development and people in countries where programs are implemented are their *beneficiaries*.

The distinction between '*us*' and '*them*' is blurring as a result of an increasingly interconnected world, with shared experiences of inequality, poverty and environmental sustainability. However, development practice has largely not taken this on board. A strengths-based approach is aligned with a perspective that we are all part of global development, key to the Sustainable Development Goals.

There is no doubt that an agenda focused on reducing poverty, inequity, and social injustice remains critically important. However, we argue there is a better path to achieving positive outcomes than the deficits-based and problem-solving practice of previous decades: we describe this as a strengths-based approach to international development.

With a focus on inquiry into local strengths and assets and local leadership of change agendas, a strengths-based approach provides both an ideological basis as well as practical means by which to operationalise localisation and decolonizing knowledge agendas.

At the conceptual level, a strengths-based approach highlights some of the key themes relevant to international cooperation in the 2020s, particularly the importance of agency by those whose development is at stake. This is manifested in calls for greater localization in development programming and for greater ownership and leadership of people responsible for their own development. It is also central to the movement towards decolonizing knowledge and development. While these principles are not particularly new – they were clearly articulated in the Paris Agreement of 2005 for example - they are now much more central to mainstream development discourse.

International development practice will be significantly improved and manifestly more in line with processes of localisation and democratisation of knowledge if a strengths-based philosophy is applied and if strengths-based practices are used.

### **What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges?**

Use of a strengths-based approach redefines an expert in the international development sector. Development workers are often defined as technical or sector experts/advisers or as team leaders and managers who are responsible for guiding programming approaches or managing the implementation of plans, budgets and timelines. A strengths-based approach gives expert status to those individuals situated within communities, groups or organizations who are experienced in their own past, know their own context and have a central stake in the future. The role of the international development worker to the 'local context' is to support and work with local agendas and priorities decided locally. Expertise is conferred in local stakeholders who should have power in decision-making, lead the change process and are ultimately accountable to local actors.

Challenging the controlling role of development workers over development processes and deliverables, the discussion encourages them to 'let go' and to focus on the critical importance of facilitating change led by the people and groups whose lives are changing. Modelling appreciative and inclusive facilitation is critical, alongside the ability to find comfort with uncertainty and recognize the limits of external contributors. While these ideas challenge contemporary international development systems which determine the role of development workers, a shift is possible. The authors have proven the significant value of this different mindset and new ways of working, 'within the system' albeit 'under the radar' for at least two decades.

**How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?**

Australia should employ a strengths-based approach to international development.

A strengths-based approach does not deny inequalities, injustices and problems – or as defined in the question – vulnerabilities: it offers an alternative perspective on how these issues can be addressed. It seeks to address these through an orientation and focus on action towards preferred futures, rather than defining needs, problem-solving and filling gaps.

**How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitments to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality?**

The international development policy should employ a strengths-based approach. This operationalises practically the intent of the government to be a trusted and respected partner which listens to the partner interests and aspirations.

A strengths-based approach seeks to reveal assets, strengths or what is working within an individual, group, community or organization, then elevates and amplifies them, as a means to achieve a preferred future.

A strengths-based approach explores the factors that individuals and groups value and which shape their world and uses them as levers for change. Change is catalysed by deciding visions and preferences for the future, rather than through an investigation of problems to be fixed. Problems are solved by this approach, as action is orientated towards achieving preferred futures.

A strengths-based approach also highlights the reality that sustainable, long-term developmental change is more likely to be the result of self-determined, locally-led and long-term processes of change among those whose development is the centre, rather than short-term projects controlled by external interests. Again, this is not new: researchers, international agencies and development workers around the world have regularly called for re-thinking the development cooperation approaches which have dominated for decades. In the 2020s, with so many significant shifts occurring in global issues and power relationships, respectful and feasible collaboration are more necessary than ever. A strengths-based approach is a way of working that will contribute to effective collaboration as well as developmental change.

## **What lessons from Australia's past development efforts should inform the policy? What is Australia seen to be doing comparatively well?**

A shift is already underway within the sector, and whilst the dominant deficit approach prevails there are more than two decades of practical experience and learning about a strengths-based approach which should inform future practice. The authors of this submission will publish a book in 2023 focused on introducing a strengths-based approach for international development.

The book provides a weight of evidence and legitimacy for a strengths-based approach. The examples provided demonstrate that this approach is not a passing fad, but a serious re-framing of development practice, underpinned by research in many sectors. International development approaches have not kept up with thinking and practice about how best to bring about change. A strengths-based approach to collaboration for change means revealing and catalysing existing strengths, visioning preferred futures and working together towards these visions. When such processes are led by those at the centre of a change process and who have the vision for the future are supported by external collaborators, then success is achievable.

The current problem-based approach which underpins international development practice is simply not suitable for achieving successful collaboration for change, across cultures and in every corner of the world. Successful collaboration requires trust and respect. Trust and respect require recognition of everyone's agency and potential, understanding of diverse cultural values, localization of goal-setting and decision-making, and decolonization. A strengths-based approach contributes to all of these layers.

At first, using a strengths-based approach may appear to be counter-intuitive, especially for those from the 'helping' sectors and those steeped in critical analysis methods. It may appear to some to be irresponsible. In reality, as evidenced by the research and stories captured in this book, a strengths-based approach is the opposite – your job will be much easier if you work in true partnership using this approach. Using a strengths-based approach lifts a huge weight off your shoulders, because you become less conscious of your own expectation that you can solve problems like poverty and injustice and 'save the world'. We simply cannot solve these problems, but we can work with others to address them, on a transformative change pathway. Our job is to support people, communities and organizations to identify their own pathways, achieve their own goals. We can do this by enabling people to change their own perceptions of their strengths, enabling them to convert wicked problems (e.g. exclusion and inequality) into future visions and collective

objectives (e.g. increased inclusion and equality), supporting them to collaborate with others who can contribute to their own goals, and facilitating change processes with the combined expertise found in specialist and collaborative partnerships.

**How should the performance and delivery systems be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance?**

Monitoring and evaluation are central to international development practice and a key driver of international development approaches since the 1990s. Recognising that monitoring and evaluation thinking and practices are constantly evolving, there are opportunities to extend this evolution, informed by a strengths-based approach. Complexity is a key concept central to contemporary thinking and practice of international development, which aligns with and is a useful way to describe how change happens within a strengths-based approach. Use of approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Deviance and Adaptive Management are relevant to performance and delivery systems.

Transparency and accountability and effectiveness perspective need to be interwoven with the ongoing change agenda, informed by cyclical forms of learning, led by locals and strengthen accountability and learning for change in local contexts.

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