

# DEVELOPING LOCAL ORGANISATIONS THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rob Wayne, Massey University

Tony Banks, University of Sussex/Massey University

---

## Introduction

Recent development practice has shifted markedly towards encouraging target communities to design and execute their own development. 'Capacity-building' and 'organisational development' (OD) are now seen as primary areas of intervention. However, neither training nor traditional OD consultancy provide a truly participatory model of practice. Over the past five years or so, practitioners seeking ways to build local organisations have developed a new methodology; organisational self-assessment (OA). This paper introduces the emerging group of techniques used, and investigates the extent to which this methodology is able to influence development outcomes. Using field-level research with community based organisations (CBOs) and local NGOs in Bangladesh, the Appreciative Inquiry technique is evaluated for its potential to catalyse development. The findings indicate a number of significant outcomes, and make a strong case for the wider adoption of organisational self-assessment. Further recommendations are made regarding the use of these techniques in a development context.

## Overview of OA

Although several authors writing since the mid-nineties have introduced or called for organisational self-assessment using various titles,<sup>1</sup> examples of OA are still relatively rare in the literature. However they are becoming more common in the field. Those practitioners who have published to date have tended to report more about the design of their technique than about outcomes. This part of the paper provides an overview of OA in the development context.

Two documents may be considered early reference publications on the topic. The Christian Reformed World Relief Committee's *Partnering to Build and Measure Organisational Capacity* (Johnson

and Ludema 1997) reports over twenty years experience refining assessment techniques for use with local organisations, charting their transition from an extractive to a partnering approach. World Neighbors' *From the roots up: strengthening organisational capacity through guided self assessment* provides a comprehensive guide to what they see as 'a fundamental component of an effective development strategy' (Gubbels and Koss 2000:3) with the potential to foster systematic and ongoing reflection.

More recently, MYRADA, an NGO from southern India, with the support of Britain's Department for International Development, has reported trials of Appreciative Inquiry with over 500 community groups. They found quite remarkable impacts. In one case 'the village council...achiev[ed] their visions for five years in less than one' (Ashford and Patkar 2001:33). Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed in the mid-eighties, and has become widely used in corporate environments (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). It is based on a post-modern understanding of reality as socially constructed. Using this instrumentally this method aims to collectively construct new positive images of the future. It is generally practiced as a four stage assessment, involving 'discovery', where individuals appreciate the best of what they already have in their organisational context, often through shared stories. Then 'dreaming' asks members to envision what might be, 'dialogue' allows them to discuss these possibilities and decide what should be, and 'delivery' implements this.

World Vision has incorporated AI as an integral part of their capacity building model, and 'have noted a higher degree of hope in the future, greater participation by all members, increased investment of both time and money for change, [and] greater articulation of the future' in those communities where they have consistently used AI (Booy 2002, pers. comm.). Other

development organisations with considerable experience of AI include Habitat for Humanity and Lasadev, in Nepal. Positive outcomes are also reported from techniques which use a predefined scope. USAID's Discussion Oriented Self Assessment (DOSA) tool is a 'catalyser and enabler' for internal capacity building, and insights gained 'often ripple and ramify in a profound way' (USAID 2000:4). Tearfund UK's recent trials of their Capacity Self-Assessment (CASA) tool produced early findings that the tool was consistently effective in team building, and proved instructive for some partners in understanding what is good practice in a particular field (Crooks & Burn 2002:4). These outcomes indicate that positive effects are not limited to Appreciative Inquiry, and may be due to the wider OA methodology.

However, there are some differences between the methods. Tearfund UK found that their pre-defined capacity areas and indicators raised some issues in the trials. In some cases 'the indicators were seen as very value-laden...from a strong Tearfund perspective' (ibid:3). World Neighbors by contrast see it as critical that participants generate their own indicators, ensuring that they engage in defining what is important to them, not someone else (Gubbels and Koss 2000:3). AI also adopts this approach, and attempts to collectively construct new and positive images of the future. Pretty's 'typology of participation' (quoted in Blackburn & Holland 1998:157) is insufficient to distinguish these relational differences between implementing and facilitating organisations. Instead, a typology for OA is proposed, describing methods as *extractive*, *directive*, or *facilitative* (Refer Table 1). Potentially they could also be *autonomous*. These approaches reflect differing understandings of what constitutes development. Who initiates, who decides, and who acts are important. OA potentially changes the relationship between implementing and participating organisations, empowering the latter to set their own goals, and doing so explicitly through the implementing organisation. Such a shift in the locus of power requires the implementing agency to desire or at least accept, this change.

<b>Extractive</b>	Participation is primarily to provide better information to an outside organisation.
<b>Directive</b>	Members participate in collective analysis and decision making, but the scope is still set by an external organisation.
<b>Facilitative</b>	Members define their own scope, the criteria for their assessment, and set their own goals.
<b>Autonomous</b>	Initiated and designed without the involvement of an external organisation.

### **Research Methodology**

Based on case study fieldwork in Bangladesh, this study explores the question whether organisational self-assessment can catalyse development outcomes. A 'development outcome' is a change that improves the potential of individuals or groups to provide for their own needs and aspirations without reducing the potential of others to do the same (Wayne 2002:43). The cases include several organisations with which Concern Worldwide and UNICEF have used Appreciative Inquiry. The selection of Bangladesh was purposive, but influenced largely by opportunity and contacts. Concern has used AI with community based organisations (CBOs), local NGOs, and local health facilities, and thus presents an ideal spectrum of target organisations to allow comparative study. In addition UNICEF have used AI with health institutions.

Finding a balance between depth of study within organisations and breadth of study across a variety of comparable organisations was the critical part of the research design. This was resolved by selecting the primary focus of the research to be in Concern's South East Regional Programme, based at Chittagong, and focussing in greatest depth on their CBO project. Within this, two of the four organisations were selected on the basis of variety (different cultural groups, and

different Concern staff perceptions of organisational strength). As a comparison, a third CBO was visited on the outskirts of Dhaka.

Concern's partnership project also has three local NGOs from which two were selected, on the basis of different cultural and operational foci. The government health facilities were explored in less depth. They were not visited, although reports were selected, and Concern staff interviewed. Similarly the UNICEF programme was covered by review of secondary sources and an interview of a key UNICEF staff member.

Qualitative methods were used, involving:

- i. Key informant interviews with the implementing organisation to provide historical background and individual perspectives on the use of OA,
- ii. Review of secondary information sources (mostly project documentation).
- iii. Workshops with implementing organisation field staff, including PRA tools.
- iv. Focus-group discussions with OA participants using PRA tools.
- v. Semi-structured interviews with focus group members, and also with other community members, were sought after the focus-group discussions.

## Findings

The research explored two complementary aspects of OA. Firstly, the participants' experience of the process, and secondly the outcomes attributable to it. The Appreciative Inquiry workshop used by Concern involved an initial 'story-collection' phase, an opportunity to collectively value these stories, then to 'dream' of future possibilities. From the stories, capacities were identified and then grouped to define capacity areas. In these groups, existing status was assessed and then desired future status was agreed collectively using a pictorial representation of organisational maturity. Task definition and responsibility allocation followed. UNICEF's approach is broadly similar. Concern's workshops with CBOs also included the collective design of organisational names, logos, and vision statements.

The participants' experience was generally reported very favourably, though with some caveats. Generally CBO members found the

workshops difficult to attend, as they were unable to complete their normal activities, and in some cases faced resistance from family or community members. A shorter time period would be better received. In direct contrast, the local NGO staff found the workshops too short, and would like to take more time to reflect on their organisation, and plan for their future. However, they don't face the same conflicts for their time as they are already expected to be at work and are paid for their time. In the government health facilities, both Concern and UNICEF found that considerable 'lobbying' and preparatory work was required to obtain sufficient staff involvement in the workshops (particularly at the higher levels). The process itself was found to be inspiring for people at lower levels, some of whom had never been consulted before, while it was in some cases humbling for senior staff.

In several cases, parts of the process were difficult for illiterate or poorly educated participants to understand. This resulted in reduced participation. However, certain parts of the workshop featured pictorial methods, and these received good reviews from all participants. Facilitation is a vital, and skilled component of the process, and plays a significant part in determining the outcome.

Numerous outcomes were reported by participants and implementing organisations, though many of these are only partially or indirectly related to the organisational assessment process. It is important to note that in most cases, the assessment process was only one component of an overall programme of interventions. The main areas of direct influence are in the preparation of strategic action plans, vision and identity building, role definition and task allocation, and the building of the relational components of the organisations (trust, unity, communication skills etc.). In addition to this, the workshops have provided a unique opportunity for new concepts to be introduced to the organisations. These direct outcomes within the organisation have a follow-on effect in people's lives and communities. The most obvious are in the areas identified in the action plans as they are carried out (e.g. environmental improvements), but others relate to the participatory philosophy of the process. Appreciation for the perspectives and stories of others was observed in the way organisations are valuing the inputs of

stakeholders and beneficiaries. And related to this, the valuing of people's views has the consequence of generating both increased self-esteem and ownership within their organisation. Some social effects have also been observed with group or organisational unity allowing collective actions to resist social injustices or help one another. For example, one respondent commented that 'if someone dies - we used to say let him die. Now if someone's in trouble we all go to help together.'

It is important to note that in all cases, the assessment process was only one component of an overall programme of interventions. Interestingly, at Saidpur Municipality Health Department, where Concern's initial Appreciative Inquiry workshop stopped short of preparing an action plan, some of the capacity areas were found in a subsequent review to have experienced limited progress. This highlights the fact that the appreciative approach alone does not develop sufficient internal impetus to address all issues. An action plan with assigned responsibilities plays an important role in this regard.

## Discussion

Appreciative Inquiry was first used by most organisations in this study approximately one year prior to the research, though two instances have three years experience. This is actually longer than many of the examples reported in the literature. Some issues regarding how to institutionalise the OA process, who facilitates, and how much is truly attributable to the assessment have been exposed by this longer term perspective. The other side of the same coin is that three years is not long in capacity-building terms, where a realistic time frame is over ten years (Eade 1997:3). This study reports a work in progress, not the final picture.

The findings from this study reflect positively on AI, commending it as a helpful component of a capacity-building approach to development. The findings echo the experiences of several other practitioners. MYRADA found that the action planning component allows members to be 'buoyed by their short-term achievements while still addressing their long-term goals and structural changes' (Ashford & Patkar 2001:31). The vision building, ownership and relational outcomes are also supported by World Vision's experience (Booy 2002).

Habitat for Humanity in Nepal have found that Appreciative Planning and Action (a variant of AI) can generate micro-enterprise impacts well before planned interventions intended to do so (Odell 2000). Similar knowledge transfers from facilitators to participants were found in this study, highlighting its potential as a new site for knowledge transfer. However, in contrast to their experience, this study indicates that if the planning component is omitted, the enthusiasm generated does not convert to anticipated achievements.

Quality facilitation of organisational self-assessment has emerged as an important factor, both from the field research and from the literature (Fowler et al. 1995:1). The facilitator often provides an outside view, which may be seen as impartial if he or she is not pre-aligned with any internal coalitions or opinions. This study found that facilitators are able to introduce new information and ideas to a group forum. Such inputs can have a significant impact on the outcome of an assessment. For instance, in each of the local NGOs studied, monitoring & evaluation capacity was introduced and explored, for the first time, at the assessment. So where should the development practitioner look for the facilitator who exhibits all these criteria? And, how much should be done by 'experts' and how much handed over to 'insiders.' It remains valid and important to encourage the development of skills for self-reliance in local organisations, but is equally important to use an outsider for the facilitation of an organisational self-assessment. Perhaps this issue may be resolved by encouraging each organisation to develop skills in facilitation, and then to facilitate OA in other organisations. This would resemble the use of internal auditors from one company as external auditors in another under the ISO 9001 quality assurance accreditation system. And it potentially allows the process freedom from dependence on northern consultants. With so much responsibility falling on facilitators to mediate the development relationship, the comments of Chambers (1997:130) ring true; 'outsiders' behaviour and attitudes are critical'.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Significant outcomes have been observed from the use of OA with local organisations in Bangladesh. Outcomes were mostly found in the less tangible dimensions of organisational life; hope, trust, unity, identity, and ownership among others. These are the

very areas which many development interventions struggle to achieve, and yet are the foundation for self-reliant sustainable development (Burkey, 1993). OA is a potential catalyst for development, and forms a useful opportunity to advance development objectives within the context of an overall capacity-building partnership strategy. Other findings include the importance of the planning component of OA, its potential as a new site for the transfer of ideas, shortcomings when AI is used with illiterate groups, and the importance of quality external facilitation.

The participants' experience of the OA process was found to be remarkably positive. It was inspiring to see CBO members visibly proud of their new-found identity and their plans. For some, the story-collection phase of Appreciative Inquiry helped them acknowledge their own abilities for perhaps the first time, and the experience of having others value their input was liberating.

This study recommends further refinements to Appreciative Inquiry techniques, encouraging greater use of pictorial methods with groups having lower levels of literacy. It also suggests a model for the comparison of OA methodologies drawing on a process perspective of development. Further research is encouraged, including longitudinal and comparative studies on the effects of OA as experience builds with its use. Of particular interest in this regard is the institutionalising of such techniques as relationships change between the main actors.

Action research trials of the extension of this methodology into new applications is encouraged. This is where we will see the full extent of OA's potential to catalyse development outcomes. But let's not ignore the relationships within which we do this. Above all, let's take a process perspective, being aware of our own attitudes and behaviour, and considering that of others in our analyses of their activities.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *Self-appraisal* (Eade 1997), *participatory self-assessment* (James 1994, and Fowler et al. 1995), *participatory institutional capacity assessment* (Angeles

---

and Gurstein 2000), *organisational assessment* (Roche 1999).

## References

- Angeles, L. and Gurstein, P. (2000) Planning for participatory capacity development: The challenges of participation and North-South partnership in capacity building projects. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 21 (Special Issue):447-478.
- Ashford, G. and Patkar, S. (2001) *The positive path: using Appreciative Inquiry in rural Indian communities*. International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg.
- Blackburn, J. and Holland, J. (eds). (1998) *Who changes? Institutionalising participation in development*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.
- Booy, D. (2002) pers. comm.
- Burkey, S. (1993) *People first: A guide to self-reliant, participatory rural development*. Zed Books, London.
- Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.
- Crooks, B. and Burn, I. (2002) *CASA tool: General conclusions and recommendations following pilot workshops in Nelson (UK), Cambodia and UK with Tearfund partners*. Unpublished report dated 26 June 2002, Tearfund, London.
- Eade, D. (1997) *Capacity-Building: An approach to people-centred development*. Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Fowler, A., Goold, L. and James, R. (1995) *Participatory self-assessment of NGO capacity*. INTRAC, Occasional Papers Series No 10. Oxford.
- Gubbels, P. and Koss, C. (2000) *From the roots up: Strengthening organisational capacity through guided self-assessment*. World Neighbors, Oklahoma City.
- James, R. (1994) *Strengthening the capacity of southern NGO partners*. INTRAC Occasional papers series No. 5. Oxford.
- Johnson, S. and Ludema, J. D. eds. (1997) *Partnering to build and measure organisational capacity: Lessons from NGOs around the world*.

- 
- Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, USA.
- Odell, M. J. (2000) *From inquiry to impact: Getting results prior to intervention*. Unpublished draft report 13 August 2000, Women's Empowerment Project, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Roche, C. (1999) *Impact assessment for development agencies - learning to value change*. Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- USAID Office for Private and Voluntary Cooperation, Bureau for Humanitarian Response. (2000) Results review FY1999 and resource request FY2002. [http://www.usaid.gov/hum\\_response/pvc/r2.00.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/hum_response/pvc/r2.00.pdf)
- Wayne, R. (forthcoming) *Organisational Assessment: A catalyst for development outcomes?* MPhil research, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.