

Lessons learned from the long term application of a monitoring and evaluation process based on the capability approach

JOHN SCHISCHKA*

Abstract

This paper evaluates the utility of the Capabilities Approach (CA) to empower communities and to guide development appraisal mechanisms. Volunteer Services Abroad (VSA) is a New Zealand non-governmental organisation (NGO) working in the area of international development. One of VSA's development partners in Vanuatu is the indigenous NGO Pri Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu (PSABV). The central aim of PSABV is to bring together all those concerned with the development of pre-school education in Vanuatu. In particular, VSA volunteers are working with PSABV to improve the quality of pre-school education especially in remote rural parts of Vanuatu. This project was used to pilot a CA based monitoring mechanism. The lessons learned from the long-term application of a CA based participatory appraisal methodology are applied as a means of ascertaining the long-term results for the children, parents and other community stakeholders involved in the programme.

An Introduction to the Capability Approach and its Applicability in a Development Setting

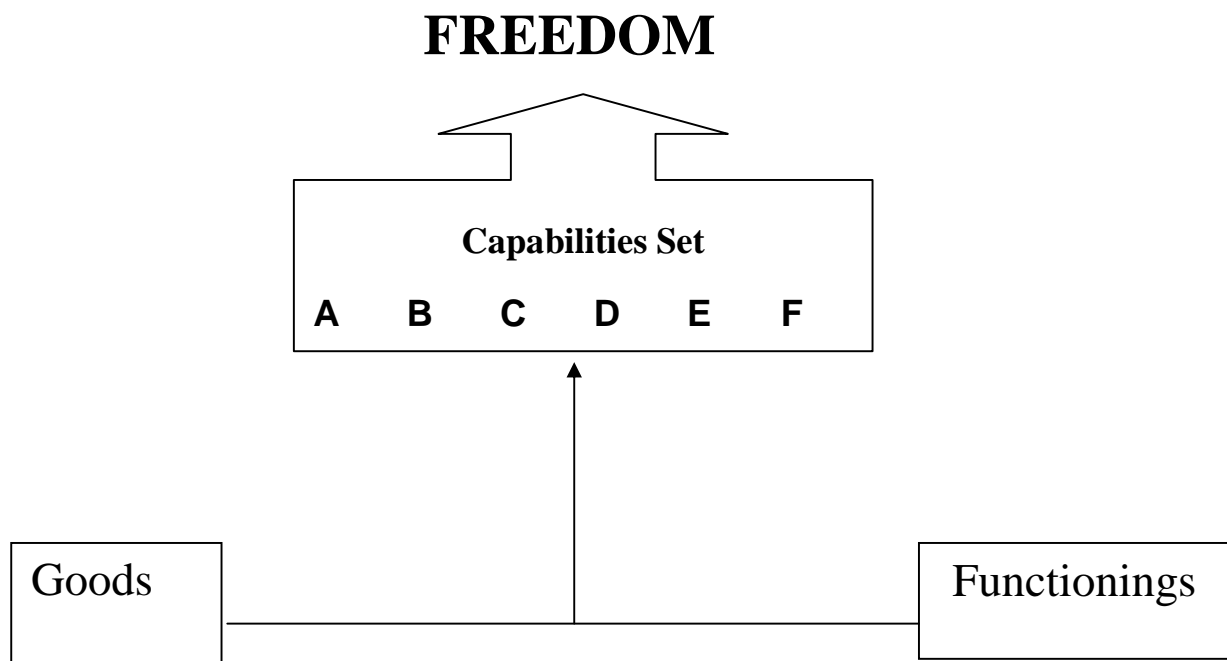
This article attempts to demonstrate the utility of the capability approach (CA) to empower communities and to guide evaluation mechanisms. The article commences with an introduction to the CA and how it can be applied in the development setting. There is then a discussion of the background of the Vanuatu case including: Pri Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu (PSABV), Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA), and the educational context. Following this, there is a description of the case study. Next, important themes from the study are related and finally conclusions are presented on the outcomes from this process for the capability of the communities, pre-schools and agencies involved.

Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has outlined an alternative to appraising economic development (Sen, 1999). Sen argues that it is necessary to go beyond traditional measures of material success to encompass concerns of social development. He believes this may be done by focusing on enhancing capabilities to achieve education, health and other goals – through the use of the CA. Central to his framework is its focus

* Dr John Schischka, School of Business, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, PO Box 540, Christchurch 8015. schischkaj@cpit.ac.nz

on the freedoms generated by commodities rather than just the commodities themselves. Sen argues for the necessity to examine capabilities that people have to choose a life that they have reason to value. While development projects can supply *goods* and facilitate the acquisition of *functionings*, it is in combining these in the course of the development project that an individual's and a community's *capabilities set* expands which results in greater *freedom*. This expansion of capabilities results in greater choice and is central to development. A framework demonstrating the relationship between these four key concepts is shown in the diagram below developed by the author in Schischka (2005).

Figure 1: Sen's Capabilities Approach



The CA has a number of implications, not least that agencies involved in the funding and delivery of development work, look for new ways of appraising the success of their interventions. For some time, there has been comment in the literature and amongst development practitioners on the effectiveness of some Aid programmes. Rehnstrom (2000:1) notes that:

The effectiveness of development cooperation has been the subject of much debate, and while some critics continue to argue that aid is wasteful, a more commonly held view is that development cooperation can be justified on grounds that are not merely humanitarian. While recent research is beginning to show more clearly under which conditions aid can be most effective, **what remains less clear is the extent too which different bilateral or multilateral organisations have been able to contribute to social progress and improved standards of living.** (Emphasis added).

Dasgupta (2001: 32) has noted that:

Policy evaluation techniques that were developed in the 1970's, while formally correct, neglected to consider resource allocation in the wide variety of non-market institutions that prevail throughout the world...I have argued that the evaluation of policy changes can only be done effectively with a fair understanding of the way socio-economic and ecological systems would respond to the changes.

The problem has been that, in not properly considering the socio-economic context and the perspective of those involved in the projects, more harm may be caused to them than good by the operation of the development programmes.

There have been other calls for some time from development practitioners to re-examine development programmes in order to develop evaluation techniques that better encapsulate the views of the poor. Chambers' (1995: iv) statement is typical of this view:

In assessing conditions and seeing what to do, professionals' realities are universal, reductionist, standardised and stable. The [views] of economists dominate [and are] expressed in poverty thinking, concerned with income-poverty, and employment... Both projects [namely] the Northern project, [which has] the more industrial and urban conditions, [inserts] categories onto Southern project [which has] more agricultural and rural realities. Both have force **but miss much and mislead.** (emphasis added).

Research reported here outlines a longitudinal study conducted by the author with development partners in Vanuatu, which aims to apply the CA to develop appraisal methodology suitable for development initiatives that allows for reduction in this propensity to "miss much and mislead" and seeks to capture more of the realities of the participants in development programmes.

The Background of the Vanuatu Case: PSABV, VSA in an Educational Context.

Pri Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu

The PSABV was established in the early 1980s and has been the main agent in introducing a progressive approach to early childhood education (ECE) throughout Vanuatu. The PSABV has worked with the Vanuatu government to ensure that early childhood education has moved from being solely community-based and relying on voluntary effort to a situation where early childhood education has become a recognised and valued sector of education in Vanuatu, managed and staffed by a mix of trained teachers and volunteers.

During the late 1990s, as there was a limited supply of locally trained early childhood educators, PSABV turned to volunteer sending development agencies for support. A request was made to the New Zealand NGO Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) for an early childhood educator for assistance. By 1999, the first New Zealand pre-school teacher started her volunteer assignment as a Pre-School Adviser with the PSABV in Port Vila, Vanuatu. This was the beginning of a long-term relationship between the PSABV and VSA, and set the pattern for the subsequent assignment of a series of volunteers.

Volunteer Service Abroad

VSA aims to deliver volunteer programmes that address key development needs in partnership with local organisations. Accordingly, VSA has developed a Monitoring and Learning Framework (MLF) as a means of monitoring and evaluating the quality and processes of its programmes and operations against intentions and values set out in a formal statement of strategic intent (VSA, 2006a).

This study is one in a series of studies undertaken, as part of the MLF, to monitor and evaluate the work of VSA's international development programmes. Lessons learnt from this research will be applied to this and other programmes, with the aim of improving the quality of VSA's development practice. A significant role of the research is to contribute to VSA's declared intention that "New Zealand volunteers, partner organisations, and communities abroad share skills and knowledge to help improve quality of life, and build self-determining communities and stable nations" (VSA, 2006b: 2).

Context of Pre-school Education in Vanuatu

Most of Vanuatu's rapidly growing population live in rural areas (around 80%) and are dependent upon subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. New Zealand's Agency for International Development (NZAID) estimates 40% of the population experiences poverty or hardship and notes:

Lack of access to education opportunities and unemployment are increasingly serious issues for young people. Urban drift is becoming a problem as people look for better opportunities in the towns. In recent years the population has grown faster than the economy, and services such as education and health have fallen behind (NZ AID, 2008).

Vanuatu is rated 118th on the UNDP Human Development Index (between Guatemala and Egypt), (UNDP, 2005).

The formal education system in Vanuatu today is a product of a particular approach to education, dominated by church mission schools, and developed by the British and French during the colonial period. As a result, Anglophone and Francophone schools are still in operation throughout Vanuatu and many schools are run by religious organisations.

The Vanuatu Ministry of Education is aware of the problems. In 2001, the Ministry noted "...despite enormous efforts and [considerable] costs, Vanuatu's education system is not producing the desired results." (2001: 58) This concern is not limited to Vanuatu; it is a Pacific-wide problem. A group of leading Pacific educators concluded that "...three decades of considerable investments in education has not made a significant impact on the educational developments of Pacific communities" (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki and Benson, 2002: 1). What has been missing in the educational development of Vanuatu has been the influence of Ni-Vanuatu educators, and the 'ownership' and active participation by parents, local teachers and communities. The beginnings of a paradigm shift can now be detected. Early childhood education programmes, and the development of the PSABV, are important in this shift in educational philosophy and practice.

A recent movement to re-think Vanuatu education, and assert an indigenous, Ni-Vanuatu perspective, was documented following a Regional Colloquium on Education in 2001 (Sanga, Niroa, Matai and Crowl, 2004; Sanga, Chu, Hall and Crowl, 2005). This move towards indigenous self-assertion is summarised in Jean-Pierre Niroa's statement: "We must think and act as Ni-Vanuatu and do away with Anglophone and Francophone agonies" (Sanga et al, 2005: 38). Hence, the CA based participatory monitoring and evaluation methodology utilised in this study is located within this growth of early childhood education, the development of the PSABV, and the context of a wider social movement. A movement brought about by a change in thinking about education in Vanuatu, and informed by an appreciation of the development needs, and rights, of children and their parents.

A description of the Case Study

The CA based monitoring process utilised a participatory, focus group process reported in detail below. The CA is reflected in this focus group process, both through the actual questions asked, the participatory process employed, in the resulting evaluation and commentary on changes in opportunities and choices experienced by participants and their children.

(a) The focus group process

Focus group interviews were conducted with groups of self-selecting parents and extended families of pre-school age children enrolled in PSABV pre-schools. The first set of interviews were carried out in seven different villages in North Pentecost in January 2006, in a location deemed to be appropriate by the local people such as the village pre-school or meeting house. The second sets of interviews were conducted in seven villages and communities in Espiritu Santo and Malo Islands in June-July 2006, most of which were in a more developed and urbanised context than the first set of interviews. The general aim of the focus group study was to determine the perspectives of parents and community members on what had happened for their children since their involvement in the programmes of PSABV. Opportunity was also provided for the parents to give their suggestions for the future development of the PSABV programmes and resources.

Present at the meetings was the PSABV key teacher or provincial coordinators who were able to observe in detail the focus group approach. Initial consultation took place with the PSABV staff and the staff counterparts (the VSA volunteers) to determine the most appropriate village pre-school groups to act as the pilot studies and the most appropriate timing for the focus groups so as to minimise the intrusiveness into the lives of the participants. The longer term aim of this project is to have local staff become trained in the focus group approach so that they may be able to assume the role of the focus group facilitators.

Optimising the opportunities for inclusiveness required considerable efforts and the realisation that for the parents of the pre-schoolers, there are many competing calls on their time. In some cases, the focus group locations were moved in location to allow for important activities such as the vanilla bean harvest. In other instances, the focus groups were re-scheduled to fit in with important cultural activities related to celebrations such as weddings, funerals and coming of age ceremonies. In all cases, the focus groups were held where local communities felt best for them to occur, whether they were the village meeting house, the grounds of the pre-school or elsewhere.

(b) The discussion guide used in the focus groups

The discussion guide, developed in consultation with PSABV staff, is discussed below:

Introduction: background to study, request for full participation and outline of what will happen to the results.

This gave the opportunity for all participants to become familiar with the aims of the study, for the facilitator to ask that all present take part fully but to also make it clear that if they did not want to be involved they could leave at the start of the process or during the course of the focus group discussion. It was also important to establish that the results of the focus group would be used in the research process but also that the contents of the discussion were primarily owned by the participants and that they would receive the research results.

Questions

1) When did you and your children join the group - how did you come to be involved?

This question aimed to encourage everyone present to answer and is designed to make people feel involved and comfortable by identifying early on what all the participants have in common. This also allowed each of the individuals to reflect on how they and the people in their village became involved in PSABV. In this way, there was the possibility of a comparison (as outlined in question three) between the situation when they first got involved and how things were for them now that they and their children had been engaged in PSABV activities for some time.

2) *What were your expectations for you and your children when you joined?*

This built on question one and was aimed at eliciting more information from the respondents on how they perceived the project and their aspirations when they started. It was planned that this question would provide further basis for comparison in question three – in particular on how the choices and opportunities that they had expected to receive for them and their children compared with what actually did occur for them. Another important aspect of this question and others used in this discussion guide was that it was open-ended so as to enable the respondents to determine the direction of the response. Framed as an open ended question, Krueger writes: “The answer is not implied, and the type or manner of response is not suggested, individuals are encouraged to respond based on their specific situation” (1998: 31). It is then possible to delve into what is on the mind of the participants rather than what the moderator *thinks* is on the mind of the participant and this is at the essence of this research.

3) *What changes have resulted from your involvement?*

4) *Have you had any new choices and opportunities for you and your children since your involvement in the programme?*

These were the key questions in the discussion guide and the one for which most time was allocated. Question three was a more general question aiming to obtain the parents’ observations on any variations they had seen. In question four, the plan was for the parents to elaborate further in more of a capability approach context. The participants were given the opportunity to nominate the choices and opportunities that they felt were important so as to give the maximum chance for them to express, in their own words, how it was that they and their children’s lives had changed in the time they had been participating in the programmes. It should be noted that in question four, the words “choices” and “opportunities” were used as these were seen to be ones which the participants would be able to readily relate to and it was felt that they also captured the essence of “capabilities” and “functionings” as used by Sen in the CA. The use of the terms “functionings” and “capabilities” would have been ideal from an academic point of view but may not have been so easily understood by the participants.

The hope was that the participants would start by identifying aspects which could be called increased functionings. That is, new skills that they and their children may have developed since they have been in the projects. It was hoped that this would lead on to elaboration of new lifestyle choices that they now had, in particular new capabilities that they had developed.

Did you expect these changes?

This follow up question intended to elicit from those involved any surprising developments that occurred since they had been involved in the programmes. In this way,

the respondents had the opportunity for personal reflection on the development process that they were undergoing.

5) What suggestions do you have for the future of the PSABV programme?

This question was included at the request of PSABV and was aimed at obtaining the perspectives of parents and other community members on how the NGO could better suit their needs. When asking this question, care was taken to avoid unrealistic participant expectations.

6) Summarise, ask if there was anything that was missed and promise to provide a summary of research findings and express thanks

In this part, the researcher gives a short summary of the major findings that have come out of the focus group session and allows the chance for participants to add any further comments that they may have thought of at the end. It was also considered to be important to reiterate to the participants that they will be receiving feedback from the results of the study that they take part in.

c) Collaborative Training Session

Following a second field trip in Sanma Province, it was considered that there would be benefit in a collaborative training session with Provincial Coordinators at the national conference so as to allow key staff the opportunity to gain feedback from the two studies conducted and to gain their input and to experience the focus group methodology. It was also considered that there would be benefit in future interviews with class one primary teachers to determine their perspectives on the differences that attendance at PSABV pre-schools makes in children's lives and education. In November 2007, a collaborative training exercise was carried out with PSABV provincial co-coordinators at the annual conference of the association in Vila. During this time key, PSABV staff had the opportunity to develop and contribute their perspectives on the focus group methodology. This allowed for advancement of capabilities at another level – that of the provincial coordinators trainers within the PSABV movement.

d) The capability approach and the focus group methodology used in the study

The parallels between the participatory approaches to project appraisal (such as focus groups) and the CA have been noted in the literature – see for example, Alkire (2002), Apsan Frediani (2006), and Pellisery and Bergh (2007). The participatory appraisal methodology, developed and used in this project, is based within the CA and allows for evaluation of a programme's progress in terms of criteria that are especially relevant to the participants in the programmes. Sen argues that "...in analysing social justice, there is a strong case for judging individual advantage in terms of the capabilities that a person has, that is, the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value." (1999: 87). Furthermore, Sen suggests that "...in this perspective, poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as

lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty” (ibid: 87). From a CA perspective, the aim of the focus groups utilised in this study is to determine the extent to which the programmes of PSABV, supported by VSA are alleviating the deprivation of these basic capabilities of the parents and children involved. Fundamental to the focus group methodology is that the village communities where the pre-schools are established are at the centre in this evaluation process:

One of the strengths of the focus group method is that it allows participants to identify *for themselves* the choices and opportunities they have learned or discovered through their participation; that is, it assists participants to recognize the active expansion of their own capability sets (Schischka, Dalziel and Saunders, 2008: 21).

The main objective of the focus group project was to provide the Ni-Vanuatu people involved in PSABV programmes in the villages with a participatory tool whereby they can regularly take part in the appraisal of the programmes. The appraisal of the programmes has particular reference to the stated aims of PSABV:

To bring together all people concerned with the care, education, and health of pre-school children, so that through contact and discussions with each other, the members will seek ways to promote the development of pre-school education... To work with the community to develop and improve village pre-schools... James (2004: 141)

The methodology utilised was based around focus groups which had been successfully applied in case studies of two poverty alleviation programmes in other Pacific locations. The results of which are reported in Schischka et al. (2008). Using focus groups within Sen’s CA has two particular strengths for practitioners. First, it is a mechanism for facilitating reflective participation by programme members. In the group interviews with the parents (and in some cases extended families) of PSABV children, participants were able to reflect on the way the programme had helped them to discover capabilities they already had, but which they had not previously realised could be valuable in creating self-help opportunities. Second, the focus groups are a mechanism for providing information to external agencies on the participants’ life choices that they themselves value and have reason to value.

Key themes emerging from the focus groups

Theme one was the efficacy of the CA based focus group methodology in empowering the communities in Vanuatu that work with PSABV. As the long term aim is for the focus group methodology to become part of the regular operation of the PSABV in all their activities, it is seen as important that the focus group methodology is adapted to local circumstances and that can be owned locally. In this way, it is not dependent on an outside facilitator but rather can be implemented by local people as part of the development cycle that they are taking part in. It is anticipated that the Researcher will

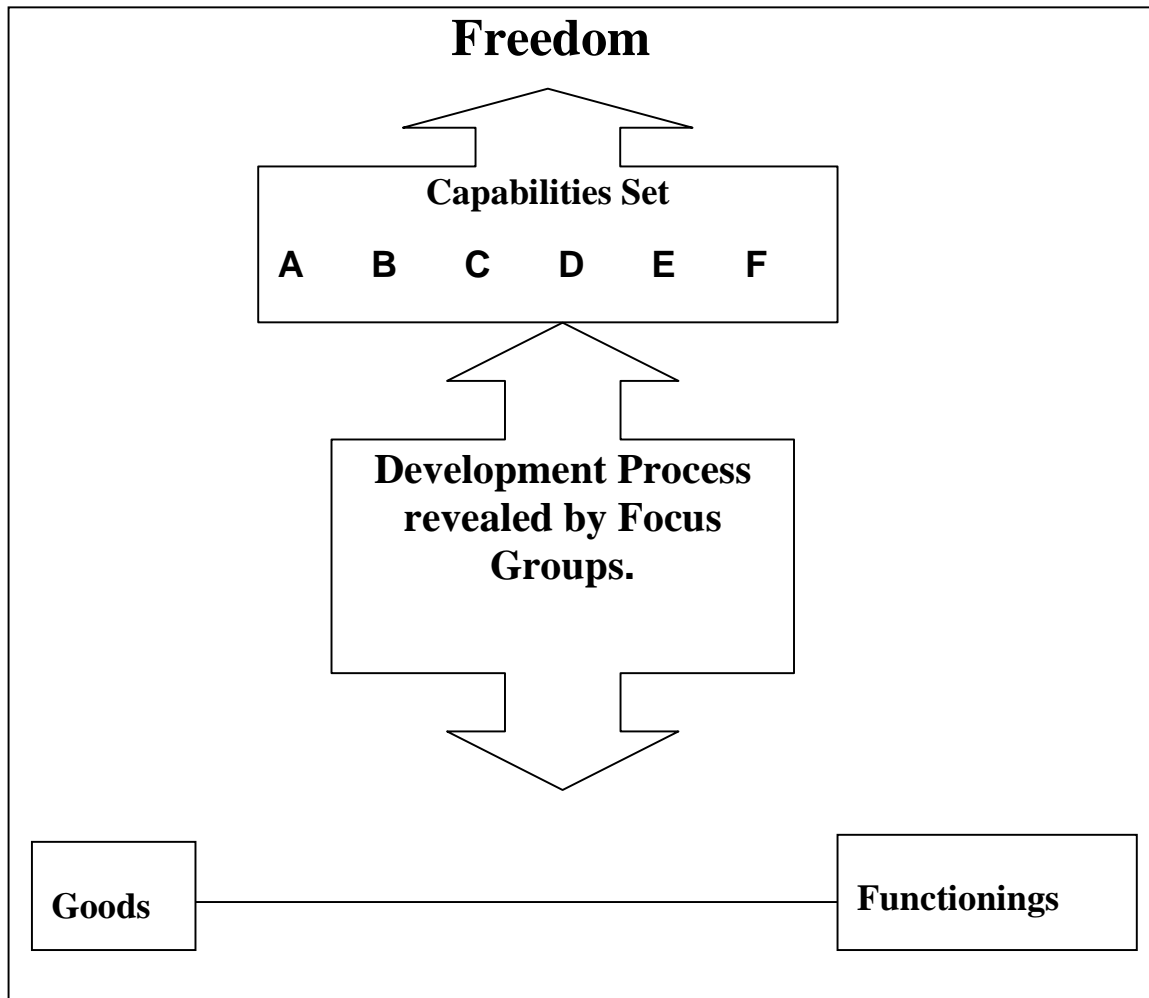
return to the community pre-school groups in the future to appraise the extent of success of the incorporation of the focus groups into the programmes of PSABV and to advise on any modifications that might become necessary to the methodology and discussion guide in future years. The focus groups also allowed parents the opportunity to increase their awareness of the effect of PSABV programmes operating in their villages.

In the terms of the CA, it is argued that what is necessary is that the participants are able to discover for themselves the valuable functionings that they have been able to develop and it is useful to return to Sen's original definition of capabilities. The necessity of people's involvement in the process of development and appraisal is accentuated when it comes to the consciousness raising process that should occur when they are able to realise the "...substantive freedoms that they have been able to achieve alternative functionings" or in the way that the participants are more likely to understand the freedom that they are developing "...to achieve various possible lifestyles," (Sen, 1999: 75).

Not only is it essential, therefore, that the people involved in the development and appraisal process not come up with the criteria by which the projects can be appraised through such means as the focus group process, but it is also important that they get immediate and ongoing feedback of the results of this analysis, since the discoveries they make in the appraisal are part of their discovery of the development process. It is important that the results of focus group deliberations are owned by those participants rather than simply "extracted" by outsiders for analysis elsewhere. After a time, the focus groups can provide a clear trend as to how the capabilities of groups are developing and comparisons can be made regularly over time without the need for outside control groups for comparison.

However, it is also important that field workers, supervisors and management of development organisations regularly monitor the results of participatory methods, such as focus groups. It is important for them to be aware of the motivations of the participants – what sorts of functionings they see as valuable to develop and what alternative capabilities they wish for. This is also important because this kind of discussion amongst the participants will give opportunity for real contribution to programme design by those who are supposed to be benefiting. It will also be possible with regular appraisal by focus groups for the management to be regularly conversant with the changes that are occurring in the lives and perspectives of the participants in a systematic way. There is also the real prospect of the results of the focus groups being used as a means of accountability of the development agency to participants – a way of making explicit how far the projects provided are succeeding in discovering or expanding the capability set of the participants. These focus groups should be used as a way of returning again and again to the participants in a continuous cycle of appraisal that is incorporated into development initiatives. It is argued here that it can be through the use of participatory methods such as the focus groups used in this study can realise these freedoms to achieve various possible lifestyles and thereby enhance their capabilities. The incorporation of the focus group methodology into the capabilities approach can be shown in a diagram (figure two) which is an adaptation of figure one earlier in this article.

Figure 2: The Capabilities Approach Revisited: A model which puts the development process occurring for the participants at the centre of the appraisal process and which incorporates the capabilities approach.



This diagram shows that the capabilities approach can, indeed, be operationalised using focus groups to appraise the development processes that are going on in the minds and lives of those participating in the programmes. While development agencies can provide goods and increase functionings, it is possible to argue that development has only truly occurred when “the free and sustainable agency” as stated by Sen, is developed and participants are able to actively expand their own capabilities set. The arrow leading from goods and functionings represents the development process that occurs for individuals involved in development initiatives such as the PSABV. It is the realisation of this development process that is going on within them that is important to capture in the appraisal method that is developed – the realisation of the extent to which Sen would say that they are “achieving alternative functioning combinations (or less formally put, the freedom to achieve possible lifestyles)” (1999: 75). It is the consciousness raising

process whereby the participants realise the extent to which their capability set has expanded that the focus groups have been able to highlight and to appraise.

The diagram shows that this appraisal is an overtly qualitative and subjective process – the participants are describing in their own terms the potentials within themselves that are being developed when they take part in these projects. By looking back at the time they have been taking part they can see how their lives and their perspectives have altered since they received the ‘goods’ of the project and started to develop the ‘functionings’ that they have reason to value. They can also reflect on the way in which their ‘capability set’ is expanding.

Implicit in the two-way arrow of the diagram leading from the focus group is that there needs to be continual re-evaluation of the goods and functionings incorporated into a project. Development is acknowledged as a dynamic process and the needs of a group of participants will change over time. For example, Vanuatu may be hit by another major cyclone in the future that will greatly affect the relevant goods and functionings that the participants value in the immediate recovery phase from such a catastrophe. This, in turn, could change the capability set that a project would develop.

The methodology revealed in this diagram is one that is flexible enough to cover many different contexts. This methodology does not attempt to develop a ‘master list’ of ‘central human functional capabilities’ or ‘central values of the poor’. Rather it recognises that participants in development programmes such as PSABV are a heterogeneous group, that poverty is a multi-faceted condition and that poverty reduction programmes should reflect this diversity. Consequently effective appraisal of these programmes should allow for, or even encourage, the changing and diverse perspectives of those involved.

Theme two was that the CA based focus group methodology has allowed the views of the participants to be expressed and this is revealed in the following analysis of the transcripts of the focus group interviews. Primary, the realisation amongst many parents that pre-school is the foundation of children’s learning and what they do while attending helps them get ready for Class One at primary school. A number of comments were made by parents in various pre-schools to the effect that their older children had performed much better at primary school in comparison to those children who had not had the opportunity to attend a pre-school. Related to this better performance was the greater confidence that the children had gained from their exposure to the pre-school activities such as the games and toys which help them to be able to write, read and understand basic mathematics.

Also of significance was what the parents came to realise when reflecting on their own understanding of the learning of pre-school age children. A number noted that it is beneficial to allow the child to gain independence in play and learn to solve problems on their own and that the children had this opportunity at the village pre-school.

The use of the local vernacular language as the main medium of instruction in the pre-schools attracted generally favourable comments from the parents interviewed. A common sentiment was that it is important that the child is familiar with his/her own language first before he/she learns a new language like English.

The focus groups offered the opportunity for constructive criticism of the programmes they were involved in. A number of parents saw need for permanent materials for classrooms including concrete floors, corrugated iron roofs to make the buildings of the pre-schools more durable and water tank storage facilities to make better use of the rain that falls in the wet season. However, there were also many positive comments concerning the pride communities felt in constructing buildings and equipping them using local materials. An important outcome of the discussions in the interviews was the unexpected results that the parents had come to realise after they and their children had been involved in the activities of PSABV for some time. The focus group discussions gave the parents the opportunity to actively reflect on the consequences for their communities and children due to the presence of PSABV pre-schools in their villages.

Related to this was the realisation of the importance of the involvement of different parts of the village. It was seen by a number of parents that this participation was important to maintain the momentum of the pre-school in the long term. A common sentiment was that there are a large number of commitments that individuals households have and the contribution to the village pre-school was sometimes hard to maintain in the long term. Having an active and effective Chairman and committee was cited as an important requirement for the pre-school to develop in the district especially when it came to fund raising and the construction of new buildings, as well as the maintenance of existing facilities.

Comments revealed the importance that the parents gave to the need for the whole community to work together for the pre-school to be successful in their community. The integration of older people into the pre-schools was seen as very important when they visited the class to pass on customs, songs, stories and dances.

Conclusions on the Outcomes from this Process for the Capability of the Communities, Agencies and Schools Involved

The focus group analysis provided the participants with the opportunity to voice *their* opinions on a wide range of changes which had occurred in their lives, to consider the scope of the projects and to relate the standards by which *they* would wish to appraise the effectiveness of the programmes. That is, the findings show that development does not involve just *giving* people skills or physical goods, rather, in the terminology of the capabilities approach, development is a process involving people actively enhancing their functionings and thereby recognising their own capabilities *that already exist*. The focus group process also makes it possible to identify the choices and opportunities that the participants are realising are becoming available to them through their participation – that is, the *active expansion of their own capability sets*. In this way, the capabilities and

processes revealed in the focus group findings represent a significant appraisal of development for those individuals and groups involved in the projects.

The focus group methodology allows for the highlighting of the paradigm shift that is required in advancing education opportunities for all children. According to Swain, James and Schischka (2008: 48)

Over two thirds of Ni-Vanuatu children are currently excluded from the education system before secondary school. Girls are actively discriminated against. Exam-centred schooling has led to elitism and nepotism with many inequities. The basic human right of access to education has been denied for many Ni-Vanuatu children. However, change, led by early childhood educators, is underway. The beginnings of a paradigm shift can now be detected as learner-centred early childhood education programmes have spread throughout Vanuatu. It is expected that this shift will percolate up.

The changes in their children identified by the parents, and the many advantages of local ownership of the PSABV *kindis* revealed in the focus groups reported above, indicate that there is an increasing realisation amongst parents of the value of the active learning environment provided in PSABV pre-schools. The reports of the focus group interviews allow PSABV management to better articulate these benefits to policy makers and funding providers. They have also aided increased recognition of the important role PSABV plays and provided impetus for provision of resources to enable the growth and consolidation of PSABV programmes.

Moreover, the results of the focus group studies, undertaken in a number of village communities, demonstrate the wide engagement of these communities in the learning and education of their children. Active engagement was a requirement at the outset as villages had to demonstrate their commitment to the establishment of a *kindi* by providing land, building a local material school and other facilities, and actively participate in the establishment of the *kindi*. This approach ensured that the principles of partnership and participation were central to the work of the PSABV in rural Vanuatu. The consequences of this partnership approach, that have been identified in the evidence gathered for this study, and have been profound for families and communities throughout Vanuatu.

The transcripts from the interviews in both the remote rural context and the more developed urban situations revealed some significant capability outcomes from the result of the programmes of PSABV. Specifically, the realisation amongst many parents that pre-school is the foundation of children's learning. Also, that what children do while attending *kindi* helps them prepare for Class One at primary school, their future education, and greater parental involvement and understanding of their children's education.

The focus group interviews also revealed quite specific capability needs of Key Teachers, Provincial Coordinators and local people involved with the PSABV. The need for trained teachers in isolated rural communities was identified by many and this need reflected the

views of returned VSA volunteers and PSABV management. High training needs, very limited access to any training opportunities, and difficulties in travelling away from home for training characterised the situation of local teachers. When it comes to training needs at PSABV, demand most often exceeds supply. The focus group methodology was successfully utilised and adapted by key PSABV staff in both remote rural and urban contexts outlined and represents a sustainable long term option for training and awareness raising within the limitations of time and resources that this organisation operates.

In other instances, the focus groups allowed for the contrasting views of the parents to be articulated, such as, where they made suggestions for priorities for resources for the pre-schools. While it was important that unrealistic expectations were not raised in the course of the focus groups, they provided an opportunity for parents to report back to the programme staff their views on ways in which the pre-schools could develop to best reflect what the parents valued.

Finally, local PSABV stakeholders developed the local Bislama name for the focus group process – “Janis blong toktok”, which translates as “the chance to talk”. The focus groups allowed a chance for all community members to “exercise their voice”. Central to Sen’s CA is the concept of expanding capabilities, and this provides a useful framework for analysis of the situation of the many parents and children who have participated in the development and management of village pre-schools. The focus groups also provide a means by which organisations like VSA working with development partners can integrate the views of their development partners into the ongoing development of their programmes.

References

- Alkire, S. (2002). *Valuing Freedoms: Sen’s Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Apsan Frediani, A. (2006). ‘Participatory methods and the capability approach’, Human Development and Capability Association Briefing Note
- Chambers, R. (1995). *Poverty and Livelihoods: Whose reality Counts?* Institute of Development Studies. Discussion Paper 347.
- Dasgupta, P. (2001). Valuation and Evaluation. In O.N. Feinstein and R. Picciotto (eds.) *Evaluation and Poverty Reduction – World Bank series on Evaluation and Development Volume 3*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Friere, P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, New York.
- Friere, P. (1974), *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Continuum, New York.

James, J. (2004). Early Childhood Development in Vanuatu. In K. Sanga, J. Niroa, K. Matai and L. Crowl. (eds). *Re-Thinking Vanuatu Education Together*. (pp. 136-156). Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific: Suva.

Krueger, R. (1998). *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

NZAID. (2006). *NZAID Vanuatu Development Programme Strategy 2006-2010*. Wellington.

NZAID (2008), website: <http://www.nzaid.govt.nz/programmes/c-vanuatu.html>
Retrieved December 2008

Pellissery, S. and Bergh, S. (2007). Adapting the Capability Approach to Explain the Effects of Participatory Development Programs: Case Studies from India and Morocco. *Journal of Human Development*. 8(2): 283-302.

Pene, F., A. Taufe'ulungaki & C. Benson (2002), *Tree of Opportunity: Rethinking Pacific Education*. Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific, Suva.

Rehnstrom, J. (2000). *Development Cooperation in Practice: The United Nations Volunteers in Nepal*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press

Sanga, K., Niroa, J., Matai, K. and L. Crowl. (eds). *Re-Thinking Vanuatu Education Together*. (pp. 136-156). Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific: Suva.

Sanga, K., Chu, C., Hall, C. and C. Crowl. (eds.) (2005). *Re-Thinking Aid Relationships in Pacific Education*. He Parekereke Institute for Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education, Victoria University, Wellington, and Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific, Suva.

Schischka, J. (2005), *The Capabilities Approach in Economic Development*. Doctoral Dissertation. Christchurch: Lincoln University.

Schischka, J. (2006), *Research on Participatory Appraisal Methodology for Pri Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu – Report on Focus Group Interviews Conducted in North Pentecost Villages Communities during January 2006*. Unpublished MS.

Schischka, J. (2006a), *The Long Term Operationalisation of the Capabilities Approach by a New Zealand Based Development Agency in Different Socio-Cultural contexts*. Paper presented to the sixth International Conference on the Capability Approach, September 2006. University of Groningen, Holland.

Schischka, J. (2007), *Research on Participatory Appraisal Methodology for Pri Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu – Report on Focus Group Interviews Conducted in Sanma Village and Town Communities during June/July 2006*. Unpublished MS.

Schischka, J., Dalziel, P. and Saunders, C. (2008). Applying Sen's Capabilities Approach to Poverty Alleviation Programs: Two Case Studies. *Journal of Human Development*. 9(2): 229-246.

Sen, A. K. (1999), *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

Swain P., James, J. and Schischka J. (2008). *Janis Blong Toktok: Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu and the role of New Zealand Volunteers*. Voluntary Service Abroad Case Study Series Number Two. Wellington: Volunteer Service Abroad

Vanuatu Ministry of Education. (2001), *Draft Education Master Plan*. Ministry of Education: Port Vila.

VSA. (2006a). *Monitoring and Learning Framework*. Wellington: Volunteer Service Abroad.

VSA. (2006b). *Strategic Intent 2007-2011*. Wellington: Volunteer Service Abroad