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# EXPLORING PROCESSES FOR PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A LEARNING PAPER



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Authors: Dr Juliet Willetts, Naomi Carrard and Sally Asker

Institute for Sustainable Futures  
University of Technology, Sydney  
(p) +61 2 9514 4950

**Corresponding authors:** [Juliet.Willetts@uts.edu.au](mailto:Juliet.Willetts@uts.edu.au) and [Sally.Asker@uts.edu.au](mailto:Sally.Asker@uts.edu.au)

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## INTRODUCTION

This Learning Paper is about mechanisms and processes for participation and accountability (P&A) in the Solomon Islands (SI) community development sector. The paper draws on experiences of six non-government organisations (NGOs) under the AusAID-funded Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA) running from 2009-2014.

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

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

Central to the design is the idea that beneficiaries of the partnership should be considered ‘primary stakeholders’ rather than simply beneficiaries. This signifies the commitment by SINPA partners to become and remain accountable to these stakeholders, rather than only to AusAID as the funding agency.

Within the SINPA partnership, the six NGO projects are complementary and share common aspects related to approach however they differ in focus, traversing poultry farming to composting toilets to youth initiatives and efforts to advance gender equality. SINPA builds on lessons learnt from the previous Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreement (SINCA). Through working together, exchanging ideas and reflecting on ‘learning by doing’, SINPA aims to improve collective NGO effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: SINPA Frontline staff at research workshop

During the design phase of the program, SINPA organisations committed to work in a manner that recognises power differences – particularly gender inequality – and emphasised accountability to the primary stakeholders by prioritising “Solomon Islands voices” and “Solomon Islands perspectives”.<sup>2</sup>

## PURPOSE

SINPA partners are interested to explore how they individually and collectively understand the terms ‘participation’ and ‘accountability’ to share lessons, learn and improve practice. This paper and the participatory research process that informed it are intended to contribute to this aim.

The purpose of the paper is to explore how SINPA partners have understood and put into practice ideas about what good participation looks like and how accountability works between different individuals, groups and organisations within the SINPA partnership. This paper relates SINPA’s experience to what we know and can learn from practice and academic literature on P&A to provide ideas for partners to enhance their practice.

The focus of this learning paper is on participation and accountability for four sets of relationships:

1. **NGOs and Primary Stakeholders** – the relationship between each implementing NGO and their primary stakeholders (communities or target group).
2. **Within NGOs** – the relationships within each NGO, in particular between field based or frontline staff and Honiara based staff.
3. **The SINPA collective** – the relationship between the six NGOs interacting as part of the SINPA program.
4. **SINPA organisations and AusAID** – the relationship between the SINPA organisations (individually and as a collective) and AusAID.

Below we provide some broader context to current dialogues in the aid sector on both ‘participation’ and ‘accountability’ and describe the research methodology that underpins this paper. We then report the findings against each of these relationships listed above.

## BACKGROUND TO PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Both participation and accountability concern people and relationships between individuals, groups and organisations within a development process. Below we briefly present the current context and debates in these two areas that have informed this learning paper.

**Participation** affects the process, outcomes and sustainability of a development process. Over the last 20 years, many development practitioners have focused on how to improve genuine participation of beneficiaries in development initiatives. Many authors have discussed different ways in which participation is understood and carried out. Common models include the well-known participation ladder<sup>3</sup> and models that question *why* people are being asked to participate.<sup>4</sup> What is common to these models is that at one end of the spectrum, participation is viewed as an instrumental (or sometimes manipulative) approach that tries to put people in projects and processes which have a pre-determined agenda. At the other end of the participation spectrum is the idea that citizens lead a development process, and that they are supported to take action based on their own agendas and to develop their own capabilities. Another important factor relevant to participation in the development sector is the

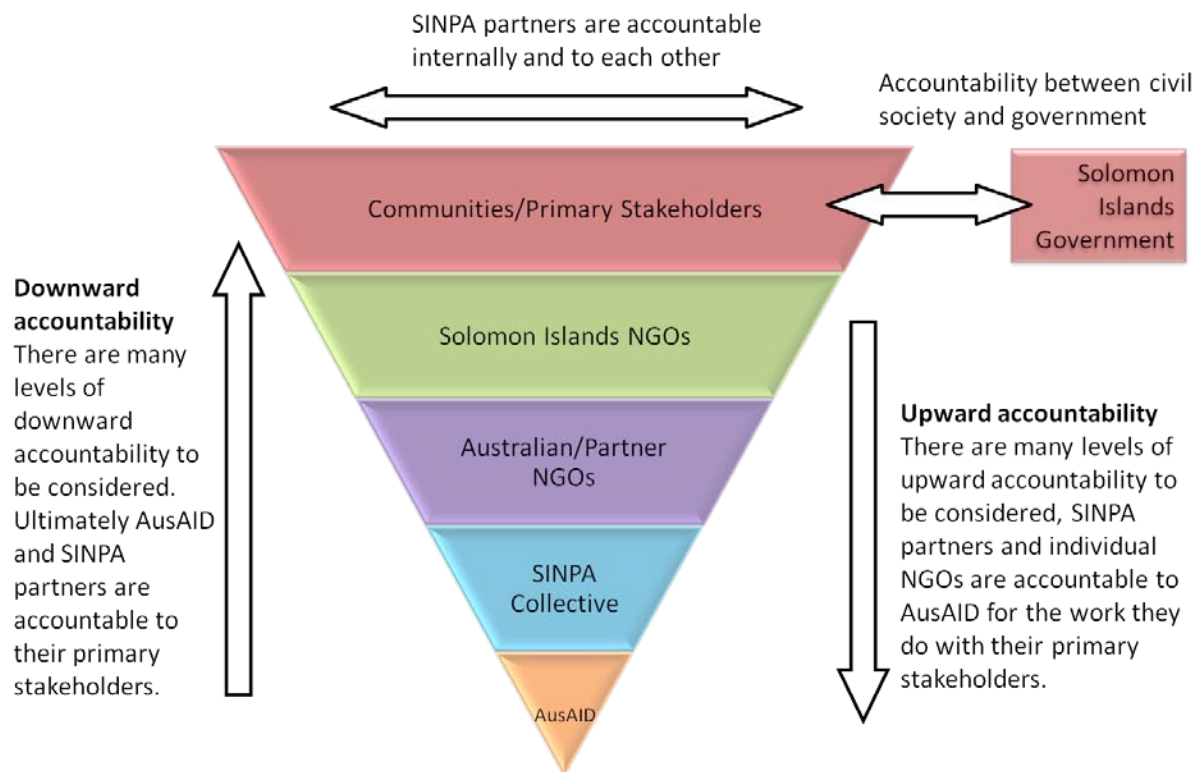


question of *who* in a community or group participates. Many practitioners have ideals to involve all parts of a community (including the disadvantaged and vulnerable and including both genders) however in practice it is highly challenging to reach this ideal.<sup>5</sup> According to its design, SINPA aims to take leadership in terms of supporting Solomon Islanders to guide their own development processes (specifically through use of Strengths Based Approaches) and to make strong efforts to ensure equitable participation.

**Accountability** is the idea that an individual or organisation accepts responsibility for their actions and are answerable to someone (they must justify their actions to someone). In the development sector, traditional forms of accountability have been focused on organisations who receive aid money being accountable to the funders. This is called upward accountability. Within an organisation, being accountable to your superiors is also an example of upward accountability. A recent topic of discussion internationally, particularly within the NGO community in UK and Australia, concerns downward accountability.<sup>6</sup> Downward accountability means that an organisation implementing a development program is accountable to those they are seeking to assist.<sup>7</sup> The SINPA design included a focus on improving downward accountability by treating direct beneficiaries as ‘primary stakeholders’.

Figure 2 below captures a simplified version of some of the many dimensions of accountability within the SINPA partnership, particularly the formal hierarchy. This figure suggests that in addition to upward and downward accountability, SINPA partner organisations are accountable to one another and that accountabilities exist between communities or primary stakeholders and Solomon Islands Government.

Figure 2 Multiple forms of accountability present within the SINPA partnership



## METHODOLOGY

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

The researchers reviewed the SINPA design and reporting documentation, academic and other literature on P&A and prepared a draft conceptual framework for the areas of participation and accountability to guide the inquiry. Two participatory workshops were undertaken with a group of 18 participants comprising mostly Honiara staff (21-23<sup>rd</sup> June and 22<sup>nd</sup> July) and one workshop was held with 16 frontline staff (25-26<sup>th</sup> July). Activities included use of appreciative inquiry 'discovery' storytelling and analysis, explaining practice through a chosen totem or symbol, mapping individual's relationships in their work noting their nature and quality, semi structured group discussions . On 27<sup>th</sup> July a series of key informant interviews were conducted with all SINPA partners and AusAID focused specifically on accountability relationships within and between organisations. Finally, a short survey was completed by 20 frontline staff that explored their experiences.



Figure 3: Frontline staff discussing approaches to working with primary stakeholders

A benefit of the participatory methodology was provision of a collective learning process for participants. One of the limitations of the research approach was that researchers were not able to engage directly with primary stakeholders due to funding, scope and geographical limitations. This affected the ability to provide direct evidence about the quality of participation being achieved at community/primary stakeholder level.

At the same time as this P&A paper was being developed, the researchers also developed a second learning paper on Strengths-Based Approaches (SBA) in SINPA. The two learning papers are complementary and in some places we have provided a link or cross referenced between them.

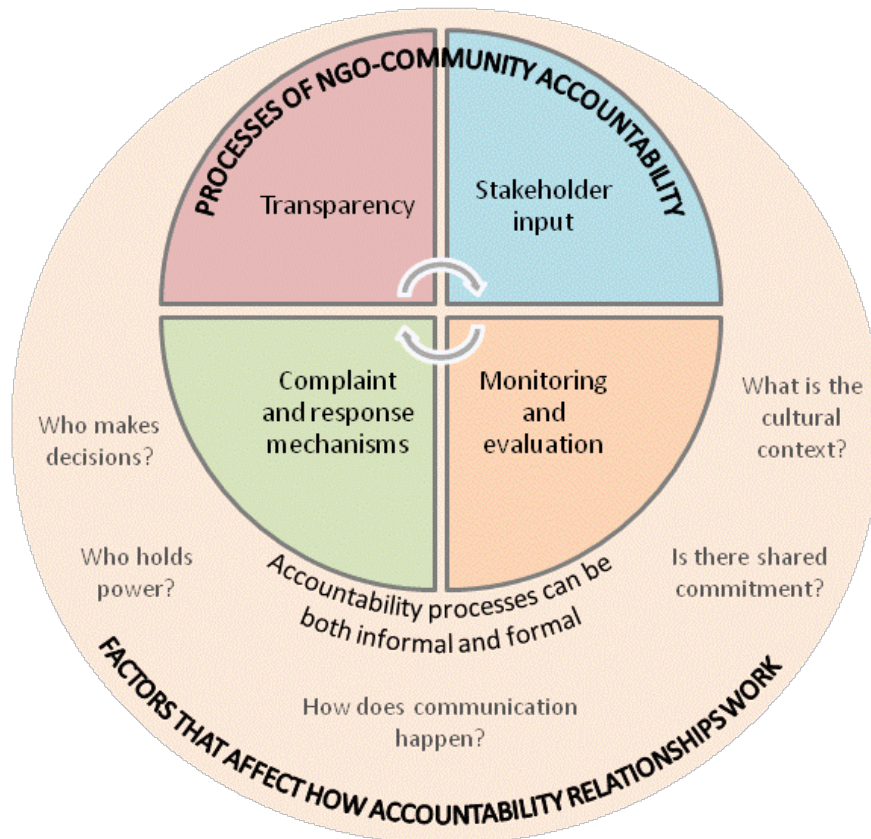


Figure 4: Frontline staff at research workshop

## HOW WE THINK ABOUT P&A: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To help everyone think through ideas about accountability, a conceptual framework was developed and is shown below in Figure 5. The accountability conceptual framework was developed upon documentation from the SINPA partnership (including previous P&A workshop materials, design and progress reports) that describe relationships and accountabilities, and literature on accountability of NGOs to their stakeholders. Within this literature is the idea that NGOs need to have in place processes that support transparency, complaints and response, methods to acquire stakeholder input to their governance and planning, and effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E).<sup>8</sup>

Figure 5 Conceptual framework on factors affecting accountability relationships and processes of NGO-community accountability



This conceptual framework illustrates the broad set of factors that affect how accountability relationships work. The questions posed as part of this part of the framework (e.g. ‘who holds power?’ and ‘How are decisions made?’) are relevant to all types of accountability relationships (e.g., between staff at different levels within each NGO, or between one SINPA partner and another).

The inner circle in the framework describes some specific processes that organisations use to ensure accountability to their primary stakeholders (described as community in Figure 2), and is adapted from a similar model in the literature.<sup>9</sup> These four processes include **transparency**, **stakeholder input**, **monitoring and evaluation** (which includes learning) and **complaint and response mechanisms**.



## FINDINGS

### SUMMARY OF OVERARCHING FINDINGS

Our overall finding is that SINPA has taken some initial steps to treat beneficiaries as ‘primary stakeholders’ (for instance generating strong trust, use of some clear accountability mechanisms) however there is much more that could be done to promote downward accountability, assuming true downward accountability is what SINPA hopes to achieve. Current mechanisms for participation and accountability are dominantly informal and on-going efforts to recognise, support and in some cases formalise (or develop back-up mechanisms) for these are needed. This is true for relationships between SINPA partners and communities, and also for promoting two-way accountability within the hierarchy of SINPA organisations. In the SI context relationships to family, extended family, friends, community, province and Wantok strongly affect what mechanisms would be appropriate when working with communities, and this needs to continue to be taken into account.

The research process didn’t involve fieldwork and we therefore report on progress in ‘participation’ just from the perspective of SINPA staff. Based on the research it seems that SINPA has made good progress in working with existing power structures in communities and in developing a range of processes to support gender inclusion, however not all frontline staff have the beliefs or skills necessary to promote gender equity, and further fieldwork would be needed to investigate how activities are interacting with power structures in communities at depth.

We found that strengthened relationships between SINPA partners are starting to generate some useful and important learning and program outcomes, but that there is room to improve the two-way accountability between SINPA organisations. Equally, we found that the relationship between SINPA partners and AusAID has some positive aspects, however continued efforts are needed from NGOs and AusAID to promote effective communication, and all need to agree on and support the capturing and reporting of SINPA processes and outcomes.

Detailed findings are discussed below for each of the broad relationships explored through this research: (i) between SINPA partners and primary stakeholders; (ii) within SINPA organisations; (iii) within the SINPA collective; and (iv) between SINPA organisations and AusAID.

### SINPA PARTNERS’ RELATIONSHIP WITH PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS

Downward accountability has at its core, a focus on promoting the voice of beneficiaries of aid projects to ensure mechanisms are in place to remain accountable to them. As previously mentioned, the SINPA design includes this, and names beneficiaries ‘primary stakeholders’ to signify this shift. For SINPA partners, these primary stakeholders are generally the communities (or subgroups within communities) with whom they works, or in the case of Oxfam who are working against domestic violence against women, the primary stakeholders are women it helps through the Family Support Centre (FSC).

Below we explore some key questions about the nature of SINPA partners' relationships with their stakeholders. These questions are developed on the areas in the conceptual framework shown in Figure 2 above.

**Are SINPA partners building mutual trust and respect in and with primary stakeholder groups?** Trust

and respect are central to ensuring effective participation and effective accountability relationships, so it is important to consider if and how SINPA partners are working toward this. The use of SBA within SINPA has been key to developing constructive, trustful relationships. The SBA Learning Paper describes this process in depth and provides numerous stories of positive change founded on good relationships and shared responsibility between SINPA partners and communities. How SINPA partners see themselves building trust and respect is reflected in the following:

*“If you are going to be a leader in the community you need to believe in fitting in with life in the community to gain the cooperation of the community and Provincial Government. You need to trust them, they need to trust you” (APHEDA Honiara staff)*



Figure 6: Discussions during workshop with frontline staff

While the use of SBA is generally helping to promote trustful relationships, it is also presenting challenges for some in managing community expectations. A core idea in SBA is that primary stakeholders take responsibility for themselves and their development. Trust can be damaged if stakeholders expect hand-outs and these expectations are not carefully managed. Overall however, it is clear that SINPA partners are making strong efforts to build the foundation necessary for mutual accountability.

**What are the similarities and differences in SINPA partners' models for engagement with primary stakeholders and how do these affect the relationship and accountabilities?** All partners have slightly different models of how staff and volunteers in communities facilitate SINPA activities. The different models affect how participation happens, and affects the level of trust and type of relationships, with some more likely to result in future project sustainability, particularly with reference to embedding strengths-based thinking within the community. For example, APHEDA utilise pre-existing (volunteer) coordinators at the community level (through Community Learning Centres and Rural Training Centres), who are accountable to people at the provincial level. This formation is well-suited to ensuring a legacy of strengths-based thinking beyond the project compared with other community delivery formations. This arrangement works well because the community learning centre leaders are not likely to be perceived by the community as new or intruders in the existing power dynamics. In addition, due to their volunteer status, there is minimised risk of disputes arising from the community about them being paid and potentially trying to 'impose' activities on the community because of payment to do it.

ADRA's approach of mobilising multiple volunteer Strength Motivators (through rotating positions of around 4 months) also appears to be a good model for embedding SBA in a way that is likely to result in

longer-term sustainability. Because of the rotation of roles, the responsibility for driving the project ultimately falls to the community rather than the responsibility of any one or two people.

LLEE take a different approach, employing two long term facilitators per community or hub of communities (1 local man and 1 local woman who are seen and paid as LLEE staff). According to feedback from research participants, LLEE encounter more frequent challenges related to this set-up than other SINPA partners, which may affect their ability of facilitators to embed strengths based thinking within communities.

- SINPA partners should consider each other's models for community-level engagement to learn from models that are working well.

**Who makes decisions and who leads the development process? Do SINPA partners or primary stakeholders lead?** This area is also discussed in the SBA learning paper in relation to SBA's and the idea in SBA that communities or primary stakeholders lead. The power relationship between the NGO and the community or primary stakeholders has a large role to play in exploring 'who takes the lead?'. Strong downward accountability is associated with giving community or primary stakeholders the lead in the development process.

In SINPA organisations ICP and APHEDA both work with whole communities and appear to handover significant decision-making power to communities to define their needs. Amongst other organisations however, most NGO partner's lead decisions about projects within a community or target group, and hold the power to make decisions on the content area of the project and the target groups, for example LLEE financial savings clubs target women, SCA target youth. This is mostly related to following a pre-determined project design and beliefs that it is important to follow this design. However that said, in taking a SBA, it is true that NGOs also provide space for target groups to define the specific focus of a project they are motivated to work on. Across all SINPA partners, as the projects and the relationships develop over time, it appears that NGOs are trying to gradually shift power to communities to enable stronger accountability to communities or primary stakeholders and in doing so enable self-reliance.

- SINPA partners should consider whether they wish to provide communities or primary stakeholders greater opportunity to lead and define the development process, in line with treating them as 'primary stakeholders' in this process.



Figure 7: Discussions during workshop with frontline staff

**How are SINPA partners negotiating the power structures in communities where they work? Are SINPA partners inclusive of, and accountable to, all parts of the communities where they work?** SINPA partners are making efforts to work through 'leaders' in communities, and also to be inclusive, despite the challenges that this sometimes presents. There were many examples that demonstrate SINPA

frontline staff making efforts to work with community leaders and ensuring that leaders are on board. Without the support of leaders it is very impossible to make constructive progress. For example frontline workers said: *“I worked with the community including the chair people and the chief was very supportive of me”* (LLEE community facilitator) and *“as a leader I worked together with the community and with the chief and two other leaders”* (APHEDA CLC leader).

However it was clear that working with and through leaders is a complex process, and can affect the level of inclusiveness achieved, particularly with regard to gender equity and involvement of women. For example ICP work through the church diocese committee and this group holds considerable power, which means that to be inclusive, specific efforts are needed to give decision making power to youth and women. ICP report how they have attempted to make these efforts by: *“involving the church groups, community groups and youths and every time we go into the community do this approach we involve everyone and take their views”* (ICP community facilitator). Another important point to note is that it can be challenging for frontline staff to negotiate with powerful leaders: *“because he’s the big man, I could not argue”* (ICP community facilitator).

There are many cases where frontline staff have found ways to work with leaders to facilitate and promote inclusive processes, for example:

*“Political issues between tribes are hard to manage when they affect my activities. Sometimes men from different tribes tried to bribe the chief (especially around election time), so I went to visit the young men who were left out of decisions and receiving funding from the government. I try and include the left out people, including women who can’t vote for parliament. When the chief saw how I was acting, they said ‘oh that’s a good way to get everyone on board for our better livelihoods.’ They thought they should also start include those who are left out. This happened over 7 months.”(organisation name intentionally omitted)*

SINPA partners use various strategies to achieve broad participation and inclusive processes. For instance they all provide catering for participants, but avoid paying a ‘sitting’ fee (a payment trend recently started by some other aid projects in SI). Although some organisations focus on particular groups within the community, they make explicit effort to involve everyone during the early phases of decision-making in the design phase. For example ICP ensured whole communities worked together on a community hall near Auki: *“We are not selective, men, women and youth all come and work on the hall together”*. In another example SCA involved elders and chiefs in a youth program, both to ensure success of the program since the elders hold power, and also because they had capacity to contribute.

These experiences shared by frontline and Honiara staff provide examples of how SINPA organisations are addressing local power structures, however further field research or improved M&E is needed to provide a stronger evidence base for this claim.

- Structured M&E or other learning processes are needed to explore how frontline staff are negotiating community power structures and ensuring inclusive participation.



**How are SINPA partners negotiating cultural barriers to gender equity?** Our finding is that all NGOs are making an effort to address gender equity, and Oxfam and LLEE have this as a particular focus of their work. SINPA partners are making notable in-roads into making previously ‘invisible voices’ heard and more importantly, seen, in decision making arenas through innovative project approaches that both meet the contextual setting, yet seek to make a shift in what is generally seen as ‘culturally appropriate’ or the ‘kastom ways of doing things’.



Figure 8: Oxfam and Family Support Centre present their approach to engaging with primary

During the research processes, all Honiara staff used a language of gender inclusion and participation and identified strategies to use with primary stakeholders. Honiara staff from every organisation provided examples of the tools and techniques that they can draw on. However, the extent that gendered strategies, tools and approaches are implemented in the field appears to depend on individual buy-in from frontline staff and is therefore variable across and within SINPA partners.

Where frontline staff hold the ideology that gender equality or equity is important, they are likely to ensure it is given a focus. Where they personally do not agree with the concept, or feel that it is in conflict with kastom, they are more likely do not promote it in their interactions with communities. The majority of frontline staff participating in the research workshop included women’s groups or ‘woman’ as one of the many community groups with whom they engage in their project work.

A selection of examples that SINPA partners use to increase involvement of women are presented below:

- Working in separate groups of women and men in decision-making processes: *“when it comes to decision making we often separate women and men. This is important because otherwise men dominate the discussion... it can be very hard to get women to talk. We use tools to get them to participate- like ten seeds, pocket chart, 3h analysis”* (APHEDA CLC Leader).
- Making space for women to gain leadership skills: LLEE are giving opportunities for women to lead financial literacy activities, and as a result of women’s good financial decision making, they have been invited by men to participate in decision-making about natural resource management.
- Building trust and acceptance in community workshops: An example from LLEE demonstrates how an inclusive process led to a change in perspective about involving women in decision-making: *“According to this project, when the RAP [Rapid Assessment of Perceptions] was undertaken each province had a different design and for Rennell it was found that women did not make a decision. Everything in Rennell is very much in the old kastom, and when this project came it was a major challenge [because it did not fit with traditional kastom].”* Following LLEE’s process with community including sharing and building trust at community workshops: *“The*

*community voted for a woman to make decisions with men about NRM. This was the first time for this to happen in Rennell.”*

- Using female facilitators: For example SCA use female facilitators for women’s groups and ADRA uses equal numbers female and male strength’s motivators. In another example of gender sensitivity, an ICP male community facilitator asked his wife to assist him to access women in Savo. To do so his wife played bingo with the poor women to engage with them. This approach overcame the problem of involving poor women in the community and led to a positive outcome: *“they [the women] felt as much a part of the community as everyone else” (ICP community facilitator)*. LLEE also confirmed their awareness of the need for specific gendered perspectives in projects: *“Because we use gender separation, we can gather different perspectives”* (LLEE Honiara staff).
- Working with men as well as women on gender equality issues: Oxfam are planning to include men, (as well as their prime primary stakeholders, women), in their work on reducing violence against women and have seen the importance of involving men rather than working with only women.
- Working on issues that women care about: In LLEE’s work a male community facilitator reported how women were highly motivated to contribute and assist on a sanitation activity towards having improved toilets: *“mostly the women and girls helped this as they are they are the ones who use a far-away place for toilet, so sanitation helped their protection and safety.”* (LLEE community facilitator).
- Giving a voice to female and male youth: Through the Development of Provincial Youth Councils SCA have been effective in giving young people a voice/participation.

Despite the above evidence of good practice, it was also clear that gender inclusion is a highly challenging area to address and will require long-term effort and acceptance of slow progress. As one frontline staff member mentioned: *“This can be very challenging as men in many instances dominate decision-making and control most resources, so our capacity to insist is limited- in almost all instances a compromise can be reached however”* (SCA field officer). As an observation, in many cases where women are becoming involved in SINPA activities, the role or tasks that they are given is usually along the lines of traditional roles (for example, cooking while men build the house or sweeping for men to build the toilet).

- Further efforts to ensure experiential gender training is offered to all frontline staff would be beneficial and on-going broader organisational dialogue about generating deeper commitment to gender equality is required

**What are the roles of informal and formal communication paths for SINPA partners working with primary stakeholders? What level of formalisation is most effective?** The research revealed that informal mechanisms are dominant in SINPA partners’ practice in managing participation and accountability in the NGO-primary stakeholder relationship, and that there may be a case for formalisation of some processes to better ensure accountability.

In managing conflict or difficult situations in communities, the research found that frontline staff typically use informal mechanisms and processes to resolve problems, rather than seeking guidance and support from Honiara based staff. Similarly Honiara staff, noted that they do not get involved in community level conflicts unless necessary: *“community facilitators have conflict resolution skills, so we leave it to them and don’t want to get involved in community conflicts”* (LLEE Honiara staff), and *“because the CLCs [community learning centres] are in the community and belong to the community, it is up to them to deal with problems that arise, we can only suspend funding for CLCs nothing more”* (APEDHA Honiara Staff).

The extent to which strengthened formal mechanisms and support from Honiara are necessary and desirable depends upon the nature of challenges confronted at the community level. In some cases community resolution is most appropriate, in other situations more support from the NGO would be desirable.

In practice informal processes work well at the field level when issues arise that are ‘community things’ related to SINPA projects e.g. a difference of personalities, a family dispute about something to do with the project, fighting between youths etc. In these situations the front line staff find it most suitable and effective for issues to be dealt with using community resolution methods as described above (often within the family unit or involving chiefs and church leaders). Where issues arising related to the project are deemed to be ‘wantok’ issues e.g. minor theft between family members, jealousy etc, it is also seen as inappropriate for the NGO staff to get involved. As an ADRA Honiara strength motivator commented, *“Wantok [issues] does have an impact. We’ve experienced this. We’re hoping communities deal with this”* (ADRA Honiara staff).



Figure 9: Mapping accountability relationships

In many situations informal mechanisms are best suited to the SI context and work effectively. However informal processes tend to rely on individual personalities to manage difficult situations. While this allows for nuanced responses to varying issues in different community contexts, it presents risks if someone is not well-equipped or well-supported.

For this reason, in some cases either formalising existing informal processes, or developing formal processes that support informal mechanisms may be helpful (whilst also weighing up the risks that formalisation presents). Where informal mechanisms are largely working, developing ‘back up’ mechanisms whereby Honiara program staff can provide support to field based staff would be helpful, for example in dealing with complaints from primary stakeholders about project progress, delay in funds for materials or other management issues. During the research, field based staff explained that when confronting challenges in their work they often do not feel they receive support from Honiara program managers. There is scope to improve processes for checking in with and supporting frontline staff, and

as part of this to better monitor and document strategies for managing difficult situations to improve consistency in responses.

An example of a supportive formal mechanism is the development of a shared Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the NGO and primary stakeholders. ADRA was the first partner to utilise MoUs, and shared:

*“we thought issues may arise with the community so we developed MoUs between ADRA and the communities we work in. The MoU gives high level access and is signed by the elders. Communities then get a detailed MOU which captures the responsibilities for youth. This process safeguards both sides”*  
(ADRA Honiara staff).

LLEE and other partners are considering the introduction of MoUs after learning from ADRA's experiences. SCA also utilises MoUs with provincial government which allowed the formation of a provincial youth policy, formalising a strong relationship between SCA-Youth-Provincial Government. These models provide useful learning for all SINPA partners about what formalised processes might be effective to adopt.

- Continued consideration of when and where it's appropriate to introduce formal accountability processes at the NGO-community or beneficiary level should be encouraged.
- All SINPA partners could review existing formal and informal mechanisms to promote accountability and share experiences relating the effectiveness of different techniques.

**How are SINPA partners supporting communities to hold government accountable in their roles?** The research revealed some cases where NGOs have assisted communities to develop stronger accountability relationships with other stakeholders including government. For example APHEDA reported how they obtained support from police, provincial government and ministry of agriculture to provide support and training for youths to reduce drug use. Oxfam plans to undertake advocacy with national government and UN Women. Important to note, when research participants drew 'relationship maps' indicating the groups and individuals who they work, there was only a few examples of engagement with government. This therefore presents an area of opportunity to increase attention in the future, towards a situation where communities seek greater accountability from government.

- It would be beneficial for SINPA partners to focus greater effort on how they might play an intermediary role to support and facilitate constructive accountability relationships between primary stakeholders and government. This is in line with taking a strengths-based approach, and ensuring that appropriate external strengths and resources are accessed. Demonstration of effective models for this kind of social accountability is a major contribution SINPA could make

**Are SINPA partners ensuring that they have processes to support transparency in terms of the breadth of information they share about their organisation with communities?** Recent literature on accountability in NGO's emphasises the importance of transparency, which might include sharing information about funding amounts, overall work-plan and strategies etc.<sup>10</sup> In general SINPA partners were found to ensure that information was available about their work to their primary stakeholders,



however that information was usually limited to a focus on specific activities where communities or primary stakeholders were involved. Most partners reported that they don't share broader information about budgets, overall plans, activities in other places, organisational strategies. An ICP frontline worker did reported that ICPP have been proactively communicating about their current organisational restructuring with primary stakeholders, acknowledging that there have been significant internal changes in the organisation and that it is helpful for primary stakeholders to be aware of this to avoid confusion and frustration related to staff and process changes.

Despite this, all research participants (7 Honiara staff and 12 frontline workers) were confident that they share adequate information about their main SINPA project with the community and that everyone in the community hears about it. Communication methods include, verbally via field based staff, using noticeboards, church meetings, drumbeat, announcement, writing letters and newsletters.



Figure 10: Mapping accountability relationships

- SINPA partners should ask their primary stakeholders what kind of information they would like to have about the organisation and whether current information provided is seen as adequate and transparent.

**Are SINPA partners treating communities or target groups as important stakeholders who should provide input to their organisation's direction and strategies?** In general participation by primary stakeholders is limited to influencing the activity they're directly involved in and does not extend to having input into NGO's direction/strategy. Models of accountability in the literature discuss making opportunity for primary stakeholders to get involved in strategy development and giving them ways to input to broader planning processes, however this doesn't seem to be part of most current SINPA partner's practice. Amongst Honiara staff, 66% [6 out of 9] staff reported that they don't involve community to participate in their strategy development (APHEDA and ICP were the exceptions on this). In addition an Oxfam frontline worker reported that they are involving external stakeholders in designing their STAV module: "*The institutions are also a stakeholder and we run consultations with them on how to design the STAV program*". SINPA partners do generally seek and respond feedback focused on actual activities taking place within a community. 66% [10 out of 15] frontline workers felt that they always changed and adjusted their projects based on feedback from communities, and 33% [5 of 15] felt they did to some extent.

- As part of the process of exploring downward accountability, SINPA organisations should reflect on ways to facilitate greater involvement of primary stakeholders in their organisational strategy and planning processes, and how this would impact on the relationship with communities and target groups.

**What kinds of processes are SINPA partners using to allow complaints to be received and responded to? Are the current processes sufficient?** Most SINPA partners use informal mechanisms for complaints to be put forward and responded to. SCA have formalized a process using a suggestion box to encourage feedback and facilitate anonymous support and two other SINPA partners are considering taking up this idea. Whilst informal mechanisms often work, the disadvantage is that there may be some people or groups within the community for whom it is challenging to raise any issues or concerns. Frontline staff reported making observations of community members' body language and attitudes to check for complaints or disapproval. About half SINPA partner frontline and Honiara staff felt sure that they would find out if someone in the community wasn't happy with the project.

- Consider whether informal mechanisms for managing complaints and responses at the primary stakeholder/community level are sufficient, or if some formalisation would be helpful.

**Are SINPA partner's M&E processes designed to work in a two-way manner so that information is both collected from, and reflected back, to communities and target groups? Do current M&E processes help communities and target groups to hold SINPA partners to account?** Community members and primary stakeholders are involved in M&E through provision of information and stories, however this information is only sometimes analysed and rarely reflected back to communities with analysis, which limits both the idea of a two-way communication process, and limits community or primary stakeholders ability to hold SINPA partners to account. It is also reflective of a lack of analysis skills and lack of meaningful analysis being undertaken. Broadly, M&E tools used by partners include site visits, reflection workshops, Most Significant Change stories, and some use participatory tools (e.g. participation ladder, spiders web exercise, ten seeds). An example of how stories are collected in a participatory manner is provided by ADRA: *"We ask for stories of change from strength motivators (SMs), they often say "after I've been working in this position we realize XYZ is happening in the communities. There is a community committee that select stories before they come to us. If things don't happen we encourage them to share the challenges with us"* (ADRA Honiara staff).

Some efforts have been made to share some information back with communities. SCA noted that they share information back to communities through noticeboards and screening of digital stories. LLEE also holds quarterly reflection workshops where they seek feedback from the community on planning and design and results are written up and shared with community.

- It would be helpful for SINPA partners to consider how they could increase information reflected back to communities and primary stakeholders, particularly after information has been analysed so that a more complete SINPA picture can be shared back to communities (for example so communities can see and hear about how their community is working as compared with other communities).

## ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN EACH SINPA ORGANISATION

This section addresses how upward and downward accountability mechanisms are working within each SINPA organisation. Overall it appears that the idea that *accountability within an organisation could work as a two-way mechanism* is new to SINPA partners. The discussion below is limited to relations between staff in SI, and does not cover the relationship (where it is relevant) with Head office in Australia as this was beyond the scope of this research. Other research shows that this relationship plays a key role in signaling and providing incentives for different accountability elements.<sup>11</sup>

**How does the relationship between frontline staff and management staff work? What might improve upward and downward accountability?** SINPA partners are gradually introducing more formal mechanisms for communication in their organisations, as they learn from each other about what mechanisms work best to ensure accountability between Honiara and frontline staff. The extent to which informal mechanisms are supported by formal mechanisms is variable across SINPA partners, and which at times can present an issue when there are challenging or tricky situations.

There is evidence that Honiara offices are moving toward more formal mechanisms to ensure upward accountability from their frontline staff, however there is less mention of how downward accountability (accountability of Honiara staff by frontline workers) might be strengthened. From the perspective of Honiara staff, they report investing training support and responsibility in field staff. Common phrases describing Honiara staff's perceived responsibility to frontline staff included 'we train them' and 'we trust them'. For example: *"community facilitators feel valued and supported. They have their own work-plan, budget, then we support them. We trust them to have the money and a work-plan, they feel valued and trusted because they have this responsibility."* (LLEE Honiara staff). Honiara staff did not mention responsibility to share information with frontline staff, and there are no formal mechanisms to deal with situations where a frontline staff has a concern about their superior and hence such issues, if raised, are generally dealt with through informal mechanisms.

Additional support from Honiara staff to frontline workers to assist with challenges faced by frontline staff would be beneficial. When frontline staff drew diagrams to represent their connections and relationships with other individuals and groups, most included strong relationships with Honiara staff, however they reported even stronger relationships with community. This aligns with their views about where they felt they drew support. When conflicts arise, frontline staff reported that they felt unsupported by Honiara staff but very supported by communities and by families. Only 27% [3 out of 11] participants felt well-supported by Honiara staff to resolve complaints and conflicts. Honiara staff views agreed with this, with the majority, 70% [7 out of 10] reporting that they felt their frontline staff were not well-equipped and well-supported to deal with conflicts.

- Consider what information should routinely be shared from Honiara with frontline staff.
- Consider formalising mechanisms for frontline staff to raise concerns about their superiors.
- Consider mechanisms that ensure that frontline staff receive the support that they require from Honiara staff, including supporting frontline staff in dealing with challenges and conflicts

## ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN THE SINPA COLLECTIVE

**What are the benefits of the program or partnership approach? Is it valuable for partners to be part of the SINPA collective?** There are clear benefits arising from the SINPA partnership and programmatic approach, relating to both efficiency and effectiveness. All NGOs agree the partnership has already reaped benefits, in terms of both coordination and sharing of skills and resources. Honiara staff noted that SINPA is the first time there has been *any* NGO coordination mechanism in the Solomon Islands and as such, SINPA has offered a much needed space for communication and information sharing to promote efficiency in NGO development activities: *“Before SINPA it was different, with each NGO working for themselves. No one knew what everyone else was doing and there was duplication”*.

In addition to the benefits of coordination, both Honiara and field staff reported value arising from the partnership in terms of skills transfer, sharing of resources and a sense of a supportive team-based approach to development: *“Our willingness to share lessons learnt is now very good. Before we were very competitive but now the SINPA model enables us and makes us more transparent”*. (SCA Honiara staff)

Numerous stories were shared during workshops and interviews attesting to the benefits of coordination and collaboration. One ADRA staff noted that *“there there is so much sharing...We could do this without SINPA but we probably wouldn't. Because we're in this group together we share.”* Similarly, during the workshop with field based staff, a LLEE community facilitator identified SINPA collaboration as a high point in his work:

*“Under SINPA we all work together...We are organised into SINPA ‘hubs’ so I visited SAVE’s project and saw how they were working with the community. APHEDA and Live & Learn both do this. APHEDA has close ties with Save and also with Live & Learn, like sharing skills on micro-finance...This is an incentive to work together and in the community’s eyes it’s a good idea too.”* (LLEE Community facilitator).

**What are the challenges associated with participation in the SINPA collective?** SINPA includes an additional administrative level compared with traditional models of AusAID-NGO programming and with this extra level comes different and often additional work for program staff. Effective functioning of



Figure 11: Workshop with Honiara staff

SINPA as a program requires significant effort from all partners to facilitate and nurture collaboration and program level activities. Interviews with Honiara staff indicate that the time and energy required to participate in and drive this kind of network was likely underestimated by all SINPA partners, and as a result has been a burden for many.



The underestimation of time and effort required to support effective partnership has meant that commitment to investing and achieving program level outcomes has been mixed, some individuals and organisations have actively engaged in steering committee meetings while commitment from others has been less consistent. Related to this, opportunities were missed during the first phase of SINPA to articulate program level objectives and define clear, practicable monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. The absence of clear goals and M&E processes for program level activities has made it difficult for partners to articulate the value of SINPA as a whole program to AusAID, and stories of success have been missed in official reporting. Evidence of the benefits of SINPA as a collective does exist, and came through strongly during development of the learning papers during workshops and interviews, however to date this evidence has been implicit and not sought, collected and reported.

More recently (in mid 2011) the collective has been increasingly active, with regular and better attended steering committee meetings compared with the previous period. Committee members reported that it was the upcoming MTR (likely to take place at the end of 2011) that prompted this shift. There is opportunity now to build a stronger framework and processes for the SINPA collective level to ensure the potential benefits of a programmatic approach are realised and articulated through the next phase of work. As one Honiara program manager stated: *"SINPA management need to help us to improve our work. Maybe we need a financial officer and an M&E officer as well as the coordinator. The Steering Committee should focus less on trying to guide the actions in the communities and more on guiding how we work as SINPA partners."*

- All partners (AusAID, the coordinator role and the steering committee) need to support program level activities. Revisiting (and where needed formalising) program level objectives, functions, and roles and responsibilities of partner organisations as part of this would support more effective collaboration.
- Clearer structures and roles for the steering committee would facilitate stronger mutual accountability and make meetings more effective. Organisations can support their representatives by valuing their participation and building SINPA-level activities into their work-plan (rather than participation being additional to internal program management activities).
- Investing in program-level monitoring and evaluation is critical, to ensure the benefits of the collective are captured and communicated.



Figure 12: ICP presenting the ICP approach to working with primary stakeholders

## MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY BETWEEN THE SINPA COLLECTIVE AND AUSAID

**What do SINPA partners and AusAID value about the partnership?** Both AusAID and SINPA partners are interested in the outcomes of this partnership agreement, and the chance to trial new approaches to development in the SI context. The design is an innovative one, and provides greater opportunity for AusAID to participate than is usually the case in funding arrangements for civil society organisations.

**What are the expectations by the SINPA collective of AusAID and are these expectations being met?**

SINPA partners have an expectation that AusAID participates actively within the SINPA steering committee, provide funds in a timely manner, and support the agreed design for SINPA. SINPA partners reported that AusAID's role in the Steering Committee could be improved and be more equitable. One staff mentioned that this role appears to have changed during the partnership: *"In the early days I perceived AusAID as the 7th partner, but now that relationship is changing - now moving to less of a 7th partner and more overhead body requiring reporting. I'm not sure if this is a good or bad thing, could be both."* At the time of the research, SINPA NGOs saw AusAID's current role as a contractor rather than a partner, and were disappointed that senior management in AusAID had not engaged at all directly with SINPA partners. This may have been a function of the poor M&E at the program level which served to undermine trust between AusAID and SINPA partners, and resulted in AusAID requests for stronger reporting. During the research AusAID confirmed their commitment to continuing to operate in a genuine partnership with SINPA partners. It also may not be realistic or appropriate to expect that AusAID participate as equal member in the Steering Committee, given their status as funding organisation, however it does appear that improvements in trust between SINPA partners and AusAID would be beneficial on both sides.

With regard to disbursement of funds, there have been issues raised by both SINPA partners and by AusAID. SINPA partners reported that funding delays have proved problematic and caused delays in work and breakdown of trust at the community level: *"At one time [there was a] funding delay for 7 months. That affects things, [it] stops work from moving without explanation and causes the community to ask questions and lose faith in the program"* and *"support for the communities is just cut off and they get a bad picture of the project"*. This issue has made it challenging for some SINPA partners to maintain accountability to their 'primary stakeholders'. Equally, AusAID reported that the delays were in part caused by a lack of appropriate quality in the budgets submitted (in that they would not have met ACFID standards) which then required on-going negotiation and confirmation about related organisational capacity for funds to be disbursed.

With regard to SINPA partners' expectation that AusAID support the design they have agree to, it appears that many SINPA staff feel under pressure from AusAID to demonstrate tangible outcomes from their work (which they have but some encounter challenges in capturing, analyzing and meaningful reporting) and the lack of structured overarching M&E system has potentially obscured visibility of these outcomes. The use of strengths based approaches requires significant investment of time upfront to assist communities and primary stakeholders to take responsibility, and so should not be expected to deliver too many tangible outcomes quickly. The longer time invested in SBA is likely to result on more

sustainable projects in the longer term. As mentioned in the SBA learning paper, greater emphasis and recognition of small quick-wins and intangible outcomes (like increased morale, hope and confidence) are important to maintain the integrity, momentum and belief in the importance of the SINPA design. The commitment to this approach in the design needs to be maintained for the full duration of the SINPA partnership to ensure the achievement of outcomes that can only be obtained through long-term engagement. It will be important to find ways to communicate the value of SINPA's innovative approaches to AusAID and the depth of learning that is taking place such that the value of the partnership is more clearly demonstrated. The learning papers form part of the evidence-base for this.

- SINPA partners and AusAID should consider the best role for AusAID in the Steering committee, and whether a 2-tiered approach to AusAID's involvement in the Steering Committee might be beneficial. Such an approach might mean that the first part of Steering Committee meetings are held without AusAID (and as such focus more on internal mutual partner support, sharing and discussion- building a community of practice) and then AusAID join for discussion of matters that require all parties to be present.
- Delays in disbursing funds should be avoided wherever possible, and there is a need for efforts to improve trust and communication between AusAID and SINPA partners with regard to this issue.
- AusAID should maintain support for the original design of SINPA such that the promising investment made so far in use of innovative SBA approaches can achieve its full potential in the coming years.

#### **What are the expectations by AusAID of the SINPA collective and are these expectations being met?**

AusAID have an expectation with regard to SINPA program level outcomes based on structured M&E processes, including demonstrating a relationship between investment and results. AusAID report that there is a need to clearly demonstrate the value of the partnership and the work undertaken within it to SIG to clarify the importance of the civil society role in development. Current M&E arrangements differ from organisation to organisation and NGOs are finding it challenging to undertake M&E at an organisational level only. Without a structured approach to collective program-level M&E it is not possible to meet this expectation. This learning paper and the accompanying SBA learning paper as well as two SINPA progress reports represent the sum of current efforts to synthesise information from across the SINPA partners' work.

The upcoming mid-term review and related communication about this from AusAID during Steering Committee meetings has prompted SINPA organisations to invest greater thought in what outcomes SINPA has already achieved and find ways to articulate these. As one NGO described: "[It's a] *good idea for AusAID to be involved in SINPA meetings, they share info about AusAID's expectations then we have to work to this. Good for us to be aware of their expectations and we can work backwards.*"

- AusAID and SINPA partners should collaboratively decide on an appropriate approach to improve program-level M&E to better capture the breadth of SINPA's outcomes including both process and final outcomes.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In exploring mechanisms and process for accountability, we have identified a number of key messages for SINPA relating to each of the relationships discussed in this paper.

With respect to the **relationship between SINPA organisations and primary stakeholders**, it is important to acknowledge, support and in some cases formalise (or develop back-up mechanisms) the many and varied informal processes that currently shape participation and accountability. It is also important to recognise that taking strengths based approaches can take time to produce visible, tangible results. Taking time to ensure meaningful participation will ultimately support community-led outcomes likely to be more sustainable than externally driven development.

With reference to downward accountability, the innovation and commitment to treat beneficiaries as primary stakeholders in the design phase have not yet been fully realised partly because the method of using SBA in aid delivery is new to many communities and NGOs. The models of engagement with primary stakeholders reported during the research indicate more traditional approaches to inclusive participation, rather than real downward accountability as described in the literature. Partners may feel that their traditional inclusive participation models are more suitable in the SI context, which may be valid. However given the initial commitment to treating beneficiaries as primary stakeholders, all partners need to take stock and decide whether achieving downward accountability is something they are committed to exploring through SINPA or not.

**Within SINPA organisations**, there is a need to consider what additional formalised mechanisms might be usefully introduced to ensure two-way accountability. For example mechanisms for frontline staff to raise concerns or requests for support with their superiors. Restructuring as well as staff-turnover also require careful planning to ensure that innovative approaches being trialled in SINPA are not undermined.

**At the SINPA collective level**, there is significant opportunity to strengthen activities and outcomes to ensure the many potential benefits of the program approach are realised. It is important to acknowledge that there are challenges associated with the additional administrative level, and to develop structures and support mechanisms to aid effective participation from all partner agencies and a meaningful, practicable approach to monitoring and evaluation of whole-of-SINPA outcomes. In the lead up to the MTR, we recommend that partners undertake a process to identify collective or aligned expectations for what SINPA as a program means over the next period as a first step to more effective collaboration.

**The relationship between SINPA and AusAID** could be improved through restructuring how SINPA organisations and AusAID operate the Steering Committee meetings, through combined collaborative planning on how to achieve better structure to M&E at the program level, and through continued AusAID support to follow through the SINPA design to its completion, given the promising outcomes to date recorded in this and the SBA learning papers.

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