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**DEVELOPMENT FROM WITHIN: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW THE
STRENGTH BASED APPROACH ESPOUSES PEOPLE-CENTREDNESS- A CASE
OF THE CATHOLIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (CADECOM) PROJECT IN
DOWA, MALAWI**

BY

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**A MINI-DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE
REQUIREMENTS OF THE MASTERS DEGREE IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES IN
THE FACULTY OF ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES, CENTRE FOR
DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT,**

**UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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JANUARY, 2018

DECLARATION

I, **Martino Kamwano MAZINGA**, student number **2015335256**, declare that the mini dissertation submitted for the Master's degree in Development Studies, at the Centre for Development Support, University of the Free State, South Africa, is my own work. I also confirm that this work has not been submitted to any institution for any qualification.

I am well aware that plagiarism, that is using someone's work and presenting it as my own, without permission and acknowledging the source, is an academic offense and punishable. I declare that the work presented here has made references to ideas from other authors, but such has been credited to the sources accordingly. In adherence to the conventional referencing styles, author's name, year of publication and in some cases pages have been presented in the text.

Martino Kamwano MAZINGA
January, 2018

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ABSTRACT

Strength Based Approach (SBA) is a new thinking in the alternative approaches to community development discourse, an approach which is grounded on philosophies that promote utilization of locally available resources, skills and capacities for self-transformation. Strength Based Approach offers a paradigm shift, from the needs-based or problem-based perspectives to development, to a more asset-based, strength-based or resource-based approach that is oriented more towards development from within. This paper draws attention to how the Strength Based Approach can be considered an archetype of people-led development along the people-centeredness development paradigm. The paper establishes how, in practice, the Strength Based Approach links with concepts of “community participation”, “community empowerment” “social learning” and “development sustainability.”

The study’s central question is: Whose reality counts in development work and what constitutes active people’s participation in the development process? Using CADECOM project, in Dowa district, Malawi, as a case study, the study establishes that the Strength Based Approach, as a participatory development approach, engages people in the development process; putting them at the centre of the development process. Conclusions are made that self-reliance and independence of thought in the development process are key to sustainable development.

Data for the study was collected through a series of eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 11 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with communities and officers who participated in the CADECOM project that adopted the Strength Based Approach, as a community engagement mechanism in the livelihood project in Dowa. Strength Based Approach is categorized in the realm of development from within; it is people-centred and resource-centered. While acknowledging the many advantages of the strength-based approach, visa-a-vis the needs-based approach, the study finds implications with the approach in situations when communities are resource constrained and cannot attain their desired development aspirations from their visions. Visioning is an important element of the Strength Based Approach; however, people cannot be limited to dreaming about their future in view of the only resources or strengths around them. The study recommends further exploration on how the SBA can be effectively implemented alongside Rights Based Approaches (RBA). Again, further academic research is required to establish the impact of illiteracy in the implementation of SBA, among rural communities, majority of whom are illiterate, given that in this approach, inspiration for self-transformation emanates from the community visions.

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LIST OF ACROYNMS

AACES	: Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme
CADECOM	: Catholic Development Commission in Malawi
ECM	: Episcopal Conference of Malawi
ENRM	: Environment and Natural Resources Management
EPA	: Extension Planning Area
FGD	: Focus Group Discussion
GOM	: Government of Malawi
KII	: Key Informant Interview
NSO	: National Statistics Office
RBA	: Rights Based Approach
SBA	: Strength Based Approach
SDGs	: Sustainable Development Goals
SPSS	: Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences
UNDP	: United Nations Development Programme
WASH	: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

1. CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH OUTLINE

1.1 Introduction

Development can be defined in many different ways; however, no single definition has comprehensively described the word development; it is a fluid concept. What is common for all definitions is that development is about people. Development is about people; it is centred on the well-being of people. Development to be meaningful to the people it must originate from the people themselves; people must see themselves as agents of their own development. People should consider themselves drivers of their own development. The bigger question is how to achieve people's authentic and full participation in the development process. How can development planners and implementers foster active citizenship rather than "clientelism" perpetuated by the conventional needs-based approach? (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993:13).

According to Julius Nyerere (1978) "people cannot be developed they can only develop themselves". This postulation gives recognition to people and their inherent capacity to make decisions on their own development destiny. In the conceptualization of people-centered development, with or without external support, people should be at the centre of their own development. Development that is people-centered recognizes people's strengths, capacities, skills and resources as intrinsic elements to their self-development (Bruwer, 1994:39). Outsiders cannot give pride and self-confidence to communities; such has to be created by the community members themselves (Nyerere, 1978), meaning development has to be centred on the aspirations and motivation of the people themselves. People should be initiators and implementers of their own development, motivated by their inherent capacities, strengths and abilities. Korten and Klaus (1984) look at development as a process through which people increase their personal and institutional capacities through mobilization and resource management), and Sen's (1999) perception of development is about people's freedoms and choices of doing. The freedom of doing this or that emanates from the people themselves, looking at their capabilities. Davids (2014:16) argues that development has to be consistent with the people's own aspirations.. Development should be derived from the people's aspirations and ambitions for self-transformation; it should be people's realization of their visions resulting from their own efforts (Ranjha, 1995: 84). People-centred development, in a

way, increases participatory democratic space for citizen engagement on issues that affect their wellbeing (Effah, 2006:28).

Facilitation of development, has evolved over the years and has been subjected to varied approaches. The development world has tried a number of participatory approaches aimed at putting people in the development equation; that people should be master minders of their own development (Martinez and Olander, 2015:98). The emergency of participatory rural appraisal tools, integrated community development, endogenous approaches among others, were all in an attempt to put people at the centre of the development process (Davis and Ebbe, 1995:48). Much as the intentions for these so called participatory approaches have been good, in practice they have remained mere rhetoric with less practicability (Chambers, 1997:56). The so called participatory development approaches have been criticized as not being people-centered; they do not always draw inspiration from the people themselves (Chambers, 1997:58). It is important that the people, who are the target and beneficiaries of any development, be at the centre of the development agenda. Development should be contextualized; meaning drawn from the lived experiences of the people it targets (Max-Neef, 1991:32).

The quest for people's active involvement in their own development calls for consideration to yet another highly contested subject in development, the concept of participation. Conventional development approaches have been challenged as being top-down imposition on the people; as there is less meaningful involvement of the people that the development initiatives target. In development discourse, many approaches have not successfully put people at the centre of the development process (Braun, 2005:203). The question remains, which of the participatory approaches put people at the centre of their own development? The study focuses on one participatory approach – the Strength Based Approach – and analyses how it embraces people-centeredness. Experiences in the study are drawn from the Catholic Development Commission (CADECOM) project in Dowa, Malawi.

CADECOM is a relief and development arm of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi. CADECOM works with rural communities in the development areas of agriculture, food and nutrition security, environment and natural resources management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, gender and women empowerment, water, sanitation and hygiene, economic empowerment among others. Over the years CADECOM has applied different approaches in community engagement that are participatory in nature. In 2011 CADECOM got funding from

the Australian government through Caritas Australia to implement a community integrated development project that adopted the Strength Based Approach. The Strength Based Approach was chosen for its philosophical underpinning that it enhances human dignity and enables communities to fully realize their own visions and potential, through a more engaging process of letting communities define their own development agenda (Emery, 2000). The study sets out to explore how the Strength Based Approach promotes people-centeredness.

1.1 Problem Statement

Community engagement, involvement and participation in their development process remains problematic. Many development approaches fail to engage people in determining their own development aspirations (Boonanan, 2015:7). The concept of people's participation in development remains mere rhetoric and some speech-making; in practice, the so called participatory approaches have not been participatory in practice (Chamber, 1997:48). This development scenario raises a big question on whose reality counts in community development? More so with the elitist, top down and centralized development processes; where development is decided for the people by the few. In many contexts development has only been "theoretically decentralized" - power still lies with the outside agencies (Nuttavuthisit and Jindahra, 2015:56), executing development on behalf of the people who are supposed to be the final beneficiaries. Development beneficiaries are often left in the peripherals and on the receiving ends of the processes. In this process people are not central to the development process.

The study sets out to test the hypothesis that the Strength Based Approach (SBA) espouses a more people-centered approach to development by making communities themselves as agents and architects of their own development (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993:18). The study explores how the Strength Based Approach puts people at the centre of the development process.

1.2 Study Central Research Questions

The study is guided by the following key research questions:

- i. How does the Strength Based Approach change process look like? Is it an archetype of people-centeredness?
- ii. What are the characteristic features of the Strength Based Approach that makes it uniquely people-centered?

- iii. Whose reality counts in development work? Do project beneficiaries when SBA is used have a voice or choice on their development undertakings?
- iv. What is the alternative development approach that can be considered more participatory and people centered in practice and not only in theory?

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The overarching and underlying aim of the study is to explore new perspectives in the alternative development approaches' discourse that can be considered people-centered. Thus, the study explores, in an evaluative manner, the people-centeredness of the Strength Based Approach (SBA) as implemented by CADECOM in Dowa, Malawi. The main objective of the study is to conduct an in-depth exploration of CADECOM's Strength Based Approach (SBA) and analyse how it espouses people-centeredness. The study attempts to answer questions if SBA, as a participatory approach, puts people at the centre of the development process.

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- 1.1.1 To explore communities' perceptions of the Strength Based Approach in Traditional Authority Chakhanza in Dowa district.
- 1.1.2 To explore the Strength Based Approaches processes/stages and analyse their people-centeredness in view of the people's understanding in Traditional Authority Chakhanza in Dowa district.
- 1.1.3 To appraise the Strength Based Approach and discuss its uniqueness that makes it more people-centered.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

The study anticipated to meet with some limitations, some of which are discussed in this section.

- 1.1.4 **Loss of Meanings:** The study anticipated minimal loss of meanings to some of the study terms and concepts in the translation process. This is largely because the research questions were translated from English to Chichewa, the local language through which most of the study will be administered. Some terms used in the study do not have a single equivalent term in the vernacular and this required some thorough explanation for people to understand them and engage with such terms.
- 1.1.5 **Limited Coverage of the Study size:** While CADECOM has been implementing projects using the Strength Based Approach in many district, the present study

particularly focuses on one area, Traditional Authority Chakhanza in Dowa district. Resource constraints have limited the wider coverage of the study. However, available project reports and literature from the other districts supplemented this gap.

1.1.6 Time Constraints to get Participants: The data collection coincides with the busy time of the year for farmers – land preparation time in anticipation for first rains. However, this was sorted out as interviews were arranged in the afternoon when most people were back from their fields.

1.1.7 Less Literature on Strength Based Approach: Not much has been written on Strength Based Approach as this seems to be a new area in the participatory approaches. This motivated the researcher to come up with a good piece of work that adds to the scarce literature on Strength Based Approach.

1.5 Relevance of the Study topic

Community engagement, involvement and participation in the development process are key elements that have the potential to enhance ownership and sustainability. This study explores the functionality of one participatory development approach- the Strength Based Approach to ascertain how it puts people at the centre of the development process. Proponents of the Strength Based Approach considered it as being more empowering to people and communities (Dureau, 2013:43). Literature reviewed on participatory approaches have often provided more discussions on the role of outside agents in the development process; with less focus on the people's involvement themselves as beneficiaries of the development process. Most studies have only discussed how participatory the process is without delving into how the approach places people at the centre of the development agenda or process. By singling out the Strength Based Approach, among the many participatory approaches, the study undertakes an in-depth exploration of the approach and draws conclusions on its people-centeredness. Unlike other studies, the present study goes into the practicalities of the SBA, discovering and exploring its people-centeredness. The distinctive feature of the present study is that while most of the so called participatory approach studies have focused on the role of outside agents, this one is centered on the role of the people themselves in their own development. Not many studies, if any, according to the literature reviewed have explored the link between Strength Based Approach and people-centered perspective of development.

Findings and recommendations made from the study add to the scarce literature on Strength Based Approach and have the potential to help governments, policy makers, development

planners and stakeholders in terms of how they can effectively engage communities for authentic participation in the development processes. Cuning and Mathie (2011) recognizes that Strength Based Approach remains relatively undocumented in development studies and this motivates the study in terms of its value addition to the development discourse.

1.6 About CADECOM

The Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) is a relief and development arm of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM). The Episcopal Conference of Malawi established CADECOM with the major function of creating awareness and empowering disadvantaged men, women and the youth at all levels to undertake development which is integral, gender and environment sensitive, sustainable and which promotes justice, and human dignity with active participation of the people themselves for their own destiny (CADECOM Statutes, 1991:8). CADECOM implements livelihoods and humanitarian projects/programs in all the twenty-eight (28) administrative districts in Malawi. CADECOM projects focus areas are: Food Security, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Environment and Natural Resources Management (ENRM), Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), gender, economic empowerment, child protection and inclusion of the marginalized people. CADECOM has been in operation since 1984 and has tested many participatory and transformative community development approaches. In 2011 CADECOM adopted the Strength Based Approach to implement an integrated community development project in Dowa, Rumphi, Mzimba and Phalombe districts with financial support from the Australian Government through Caritas Australia. This provides the background of the study area.

Chapter one has provided an introduction to the study; setting the study agenda, goal, objectives and key study questions. In the chapter the central problem that the study sets out to address has been established. Anticipated study limitations along with their mitigation measures have also been highlighted above. The next chapter delves into a more detailed study background by providing comprehensive literature review where most of the study thematic areas and concepts are discussed.

2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the reviewed scholarly and academic publications on the subject of people-centred development and Strength Based Approach. The reviewed literature puts the study into context; it positions the research in a broader academic discourse of alternative approaches to development through a coherent synthesis of existing ideas and arguments on the subject under study. Existing gaps for further research are identified from the literature reviewed and justifications for the present study question established. The chapter is divided into-sub themes, focusing on the concepts of people's participation in their self-development, community empowerment, social learning and development sustainability. Despite the increased usage of these terms there has been little efforts to critically understand an alternative development approach that is more people-centred and that can effectively contribute to the achievement of the above conceptual outcomes. In this section, different theoretical perspectives are discussed to provide a basis for the research questions. Davis and Ebbe (1995) argue that knowledge is one of the major factors that determines whether humankind will be able to create sustainable future for themselves. Literature reviewed provides the knowledge base for the subject under discussion. Strength Based Approach's theoretical framework is discussed in this chapter to set the ground for an inquest into the research's exploration of its people-centeredness.

2.2 People-Centred Development

The traditional and conventional top-down and paternalistic approaches to development are no longer proving sustainable in a world that is perpetually focusing on the intrinsic value of the people themselves in the development process (Davis and Ebbe, 1995:24). People-centred development puts people first and at the centred of the development initiatives/projects and processes. People-centred development, according to Kumar (2002), entails people's active participation and empowerment, building on people's strengths not needs, problems or weaknesses. However, most of the conventional development projects focus on people's problems not their strengths; they are need-based or problem-based. Kretzaman and McKnight (1993) one of the proponents of Strength Based Approach, argue that it is the capacities of the people themselves and their associations that build powerful communities and assemble their strengths into new structures of opportunities and sources of production, hence self-development. Unfortunately, development has largely been characterized by the needs-based

assessments, where focus is on people's problems with less emphasis on what they can do for themselves to solve their problems (Mathie, 2017:18). The emphasis in people-centered development centres on what gives people vitality rather than what problems they face. Strength Based Approach calls for the realization of the potential inherent in people, who are development beneficiaries. Chambers (1974) argues that lasting development can only take place when the people themselves, the whole community, in cases of community development, take part in the development process. People-centered development leads to self-help and presents opportunities for development; it increases people's confidence, and in the end one success leads to another (Chambers, 1974:72). Cunningham and Mathie (2007:11) further argue that recognition of people's strength as drivers of their own development is more likely to inspire their action for change.

Dauids (2014:17), a proponent of people-centeredness development, argues that development ought to be "*for the people*", meaning development should create opportunities for everyone and "*by the people*", implying that people should actively contribute in all development enterprises. Chambers (1997) in *Whose Reality Counts: Putting the First Last* further argues that traditional approaches to development have failed to put people at the center of the development agenda; the focus has been on the wishes of the project designers not the people themselves who are project beneficiaries/participants. Development ought to be centered on the people as its primary stakeholders and beneficiaries. Chambers, (1977) is critical of the top down approaches to development that do not recognize the potential and availability of the local resources, skills and capacities among the people but only their deficits. Approaches that focus on problems rather than strengths are not empowering. For instance, the needs-based approach does not provide an opportunity for the project beneficiaries to be agents of their own development. Bruwer (1994) argues that beggars can be choosers, in his seminal document *Beggars can be Choosers: In Search of a better way out of poverty and dependence*. Bruwer's argument is counter to the paternalistic approach that views development beneficiaries as having no voice. Bruwer takes a more citizen-led or people-led development which is a catalyst for people-centered development. People-centred development emphasizes the centrality of development on the people and their contexts, a contrast to the needs-based which is paternalistic. From a people-centered perspective development "*by the people*" and "*for the people*" are not mere semantic axioms; they denote what development ought to be – centered on the people in wholeness (Dauids, 2014:24). Chambers (1997), Dauids (2014) and Eade (2015) concur that development practitioners, agencies, politicians, academicians fall into the

trap of forgetting that development is supposed to be *for* and *by* the people. Eade (2015) further argues that in community development, projects must always be [perceived] in terms of how they affect people's lives and how the people mobilize themselves for self-transformation. This assertion means development is only meaningful in as far as the interventions make sense and are meaningful to the people concerned and when the people have choices and freedom to participate. Development does not happen in a vacuum; it is *for* and *about* people; it is about being of benefit to the people. People-centered development is humanist in principle; it focuses on the intrinsic value of the people and their natural resources, strengths and gifts (Kretzaman and McKnight, 1993:56). According to Kelly *et al* (2015:11) in "Community Wealth Building: American's Emerging Asset Based Approach to City Economic Development" development is about prioritizing the people, the place the changes take place, collaboration and inclusion of all involved. In this understanding, development is deeply conceptualized and rooted in the people themselves who are its final beneficiaries. Why should people be the centre of development? People/communities are not mere recipients of development, they have the strengths, potentials, resources and capacities within themselves to transform their lives. However, more often than not these strengths are less considered, if not forgotten all together in the traditional needs-based approaches which seek to solve problems rather than animate people to use their locally available resources and strengths, so as to undertake development from within (Dureau, 2013:50).

In people-centered development the welfare of the people and their involvement in the change process is central. Development is understood as about people's wants, interests, wishes, values, beliefs and understanding of their circumstances to improve their general welfare (Davids, 2014:21-22). Transformation or change agenda in this respect is always associated with and dependent on the people themselves and their active participation (Wilcox and Jenkins, 2015:1). A people-centred perspective to development pursues a return control over resources to the people and their communities so that they are used in meeting people's own needs (Manila Declaration, 1989:6). A people-centred development builds from the people's self-participation; seeking opportunities for themselves for securing livelihoods based on their utilization of resources and capacities around them (Chambers, 1997:66). The strength about people-centred approach to development is that it does not only look up to external support as the answers to poverty alleviation; it is development from within; focusing on productive use of local resources to meet people's development hopes (Manila Declaration, 1989:8).

The Manila Declaration of 1989 articulates the basic principles to people-centred development, which are: giving power to the people as owners and real actors of any social change and affirming that the role of government and any other external stakeholder is that of enabling the “citizen”, “people”, “target group”, “participants”, “beneficiaries”, “public”, “communities” and “stakeholders” to set and pursue their own development agenda. The above people-centred maxim means that people must control and use their own resources as building blocks for self-transformation and self-empowerment. People-centred development sets out controlling principles against the top-down model of development that has perpetuated community dependency and led to less people’s participation in their own development (Holmes and Potvin, 2013:12). Holmes and Potvin seem to capitulate that those wanting to assist in development work must always recognize that it is they who are participating in support of the people’s development agenda, not the other way round.

Development is considered people-centred when it involves the *active* and *voluntary* involvement of its envisioned recipients (Davids, 2014). The 2010/2011 *UNDP in Action Annual Report* states that people must be at the centred of human development, both as beneficiaries and as drivers, as individuals and as groups. This underscores the people-centeredness viewpoint to development. The report further argues that people must be empowered with the tools and knowledge to build their own communities, states and nations (UNDP, 2012: 2). People possess potential and ability to improve their own life through self-assertion. Theron and Mubangizi (2014:106) argue that people must be both the “target” of development and the “tool” with which to attain it, asserting that development must focus on the aspiration and needs of the people as defined by them. The people themselves should be empowered to undertake the desired changes. The philosophies of people-centred development enable people to influence, direct, control and own development projects of which they are a part. In this regard, empowerment entails participation of the people themselves as agents of their own development. From the Strength Based Approach perspective, people’s active participation and engagement is central; people should be drivers of their own development. Development agencies should recognize that the people themselves have the potential of leading the way to their own development not treating people as passive recipients of development. However, the questions can be asked if this is the thinking in the development world. Are people, who are development beneficiaries always put at the centre of the development process?

According to Willets *et al*, (2011:2) in “Exploring SINPAS’s Strength-Based Practice: A Learning Paper” in development initiative primary stakeholders should be key actors in the process rather than being “objects” of other people’s development plans. People-centred development is emerging as a new conceptual framework of looking at development, more so in countries that have commonly received externally driven and “hand out” conventional style of developmental support. Steve Dubb (2005) considers it as a new asset-based approach to solving social and economic problems, as it is focused on the recipients of the intervention. People-centred perspectives seek to challenge the conventional understanding of development participation by arguing that all assisting agencies in community development are mere participants in a development process that is “people-driven”, “people-led”, “community/resource-based” and “people-owned” (Manila Declaration, 1989). When development is contextually indigenized, and the community visions and aspirations become the driving force, then truly such development is people-centred (Dureau, 2013:44).

It is becoming clearer that people’s active participation is key in the people-centeredness development drive. The role of “popular participation,” “community participation”, “citizen participation”, “stakeholder participation” and “public participation” is inexorably important for the much-sought self-transformation (Holmes and Potvin, 2013:13). Therefore, people’s/community participation is another area the study explores. The subsequent section discusses people’s/community participation in light of the people-centred development perspective.

2.3 People’s/Community Participation

Understanding community development involves critical analysis of the many levels, systems, and structures that interact in a society and between societies. Davids and Theron (2014), Kumar (2002) and Chambers (1997) contend that the concept of participation is key in the discussion on people-centred development. This emanates from the observation also shared by Theron and Mubangizi (2014) that not all development planners and implementers recognize the centrality of people and their active participation in the development process; “not everyone believes that development is about people”. The United Nations Development Program (1990:9) argues that the basic purpose of development is to enlarge people’s choices; and Sen (1999) argues that it is about people’s freedoms and capabilities, and that people can only make choices in things of which they are part of. Chambers (1997) articulates in a satirical way the concept of people’s participation in development in his book *Whose Reality Counts: Putting*

the first last. He makes an assertion that if people through *active participation* should be made agents of their own development, they should do so within the paradigm where they have influence, direction, control and ownership of the development processes (Chambers, 1997:70). However, often times professionals who plan projects and programs are far removed from the people for whom the activities intend to benefit. Participation is aimed at narrowing the gap between professionals' perceptions and beneficiaries' realities (Daniel & Reardon, 1998: 63). It defeats the ingrained assertion in needs-based and problem-based approaches which consider that only outside experts can provide real help and solutions to people's problems (Cunningham & Mathie, 2011: 18).

The relevance of people's participation in the people-centred development discourse comes against a background of observable challenges of "over-centralization of power" which has resulted from limited and ineffective participation of the majority of people in their own development. This is exemplified by the much-criticized top-down approach to development, which has constrained people's motivation towards their own development agenda (The African Charter for the Popular Participation in Development and Transformation, 1990). According to Amartya Sen, development is about freedom of doings (1999), thus lack of participation gives people no space to make free choices for their life destination. The African Charter for the Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (1990) report affirms that development cannot be effective to the people and sustainable without the "popular support" and full participation of the people themselves. This calls for a more innovative approach to development that has an overriding goal of human-centeredness. It calls for an approach that realizes that more than anything, the greatest resource in development are the people themselves. An approach that recognizes that through people's active and full participation they can attain their development aspirations by themselves. Given this theoretical framework, it can be asked if the Strength Based Approach is an embodiment of the people-centred development.

People's self-participation is an inseparable part of the development process and is central to its achievement. Participatory development demands that people themselves are not viewed as mere objects of development but subjects (Mchunu & Theron, 2014:112). Currently, in the development discourse, community participation and its associated importance has become a buzz word. Active community participation challenges the top-down predetermined development projects, which are faulted for their failure to lead to people's empowerment.

Community participation is about collective efforts by the concerned people in a development initiative to put their efforts, their resources, and their energies together in a quest to attain their set objectives (Mchunu & Theron, 2014:115-116). Community participation empowers communities not as static units but fluid entities with inherent potential for self-development (Cooke & Kothari, 2001: 75).

The role of people's participation in the development process is central; it challenges the top down approach. Selman (1987) wonders how a person or institution of one world context and worldview can effectively plan and manage activities of a people with a different world context and view. Development recipients need to understand the development context in their own terms and find solutions that suit their contexts (Selman, 1987). In the top-down approach most development activities are planned in offices and corridors of a particular institution, without the participation of the concerned people. Lack of people's participation in their own development is a recipe for failure. Nuttuvuthisit *et al* (2015:68) conjures that most projects fail because of their over reliance on outsiders as the most important resource in the development process. Okamoto & Shigetomi in *Local Societies and Rural Development: Self-Organization and Participatory Development* further expound the problems associated with lack of people's participation in development work. They argue that active people's participation should be able to provide space for the people to effectively define what changes/development they aspire, and the people themselves should be able to contribute to the ways of attaining the desired change (Okamoto & Shigetomi, 2014:10). Another problem in development has been that while projects are designed in the "so called participatory manner", often they fail to recognize the inherent and existing people's strengths at play which can ensure their active participation in achieving the development goals (Okamoto & Shigetomi, 2014:14). People-centred development illustrates the significance of putting communities and their capabilities as essential to self-development rather than putting solutions to problems as fundamental (Louw & Schenck, 1995: 83). Community change is about the art and science of delivering significant organizational and/or community change with full participation of the people themselves rather than enforcing ideas of the implementing agency (Wilcox and Jenkins, 2015). How does Strength Based Approach situate people as agents of their own development?

In the old paradigms and models of problem- solving- development, "projects are often designed in the offices away from the communities'/people's reality touch" (Louw & Schenck,

1995: 88); without participation of the intended beneficiaries. In this approach people/communities are like a “*tabula rasa*”, a blank slate, on which development initiatives have to be written for the people by external agencies. These un-participatory approaches fail to recognize that local people have capacities of which outsiders have been largely or totally unaware of (Chambers, 1997:131).

Participatory development approaches, which are people-centred, emerged out of a systematic failure of the top-down approach. However, confusion regarding community participation debate in participatory development continues. Authors like Chambers (1997), Korten (1990), Davids (2014) and Dureau (2013) argue from the perspective of “development from within” that if project participants are part of the decision-making process in development projects, they are likely to be empowered, become self-reliant, assertive and become “masters of their own development”. However, the big question remains, how can people become masters of their own development? What approaches would facilitate this people-centeredness so that people’s, community’s, public’s, citizens’, target group’s, beneficiaries’ and stakeholders’ interests in the development process are well accommodated? Does the Strength Based Approach espouse this? The Manila Declaration on the People’s Participation and Sustainable Development (1989) observes regrettably that “current development practices” are based on models that do not recognize the indigenous and endogenous resources, knowledge and skills in the people because it promotes and sustains an inappropriate development model driven by external influence on the locals.. As stated by Theron (2014) the concept of people’s participation differs from agency to agency and its understanding is also varied by different stakeholders. The table below discusses what Theron defines as different conceptions of public/people’s participation.

	Form of Participation	Description/Characteristics
1	Passive Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are only told what is going to happen or has already happened. • It is top down announcement by the officials • The community remains not in the know of the issues; information belongs to outsiders

2	Participation in information giving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities “participate” by answering questions either through questionnaires or similar interviews • Communities have no influence to influence the information shared • Often this is one way, no feedback to the communities.
3	Participation by Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities’ “participation” is perceived through consultation by professionals • Development ideas, problems, and solutions are defined by outsiders, only modified at the will of the professionals, as they deem necessary.
4	Participation for material incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community participation is through provision of resources such as labour in return for food and cash • Communities have no stake in continuing with the activity when the incentives end.
5	Functional Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation which happens in a group context aimed at meeting predetermined project objectives • This participation often takes places once important decisions have already been made about the project
6	Interactive Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community participates in joint analysis and development of action plans as well as capacity building. • In interactive participation, participation is considered as a right not just a means to the attainment of the project goals.
7	Self-mobilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community participation that involves the people taking self-initiatives, independent of external institutions. • It is a recipe for transformation from within

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities retain control of how resources sought from external institutions are used for development • It is self-initiated, bottom up approach that leads to self-reliant and collective actions.
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Table 1. Different forms of participation, (Mchunu & Theron, 2014, pp 114-115).

Mchunu & Theron (2014) argue that authentic participation is when the “community” and “people” or “citizens” become key players in their own development. Again, we ask, does the Strength Based Approach provide room for this authentic people’s participation? Participation as in interactive and self-mobilization is people-centred. Within the people-centred perspective of development authentic people’s participation emphasizes on the shift of enhancing the people’s skills and capacity through the use of their specific indigenous knowledge systems for self-development. Self-mobilization enhances people’s self-dignity, self-esteem and a growing sense of ownership to the development initiatives resulting in authentic participation and empowerment (O’Meara, 2009:9). The challenge in the participatory development approaches is to determine on which approach is more realistically people-centred. The inclusion of the project “beneficiaries” or “participants” in the development process through active participation entails cultivation of a culture of mutual learning, an integration of social skills and experiences (Davids, 2014:15), of which other conventional approaches overlook in the development process.

One key ingredient of failed development is the lack of participation by the project beneficiaries (Mubangizi & Theron, 2014:102). Can the expected project beneficiaries influence, direct, control and own the development process? Are development beneficiaries empowered to undertake self-development? These are emerging questions in participatory development discourse. Another concept that is linked to the subject matter under discussion is social learning and empowerment. The next section discusses people-centred development and social learning and empowerment.

2.4 People-Centred Development, Social Learning and Empowerment

People-centred development is considered by Davids (2014:19) as the product of a social learning process; a process where people learn to use their skills, strengths and their environment in order to understand and better acquire their needs and those of others.

Social learning is an important aspect in the people-centred development discussion. Social learning is key in people-centred development discourse as according to Davids (2014:22) development is about relationships; it is not just about infrastructure creation, but about people's needs, values, customs, knowledge systems and understanding of their own circumstances. Strength Based Approach counters people's perceptions and views of themselves as incapable of initiating positive change, an attitude that leads to pervasive feeling of hopelessness among the people (Cunningham & Mathie, 2007). People exist in society where different forces interact. According to Aristotle a human being is actually by nature a social being. Therefore, human development is a product of this social nature of the human being. The social conditions in which people find themselves represent contextual elements which should always be considered when discussing development. People are social beings and they learn the art of doing through social interactions. Development has some dimensions discernible at different levels of the social spectrum. For instance, the transformational change, which is aspired in community development through "visioning" or "dreaming the future" happens at three different levels: individual, group and organization/community (N'goran *et al*, 2015:7). Social learning, in Paulo Freire's terms is likened to "conscientization of the people"; bringing people to a critical self-awareness of their potential and resources around them that can be utilized to initiate and manage change for their own benefit and that of others (Dureau, 2013: 205-206). Bingu Wa Mutharika, in *The African Dream: From Poverty to Prosperity* highlights the importance of social learning and collective thinking in a manner that connects social learning to people centeredness and strengths-based perspectives. Mutharika argues that Africans, in order to develop need to own their resources, use their resources, control their own development policies, share and learn from a common agenda of fighting extreme poverty together (Mutharika, 2010:80). A collective vision/dream has the advantage of collective efforts in fighting for its realization. Kumar links social learning to informed community participation, which he argues "stems from the understanding that poverty is caused by structural factors" (Kumar, 2002: 27). Social learning entails that development agencies, for instance, CADECOM, have to take the role of enablers and facilitators in the

development process; “giving powers” to the people themselves to be agents and actors of their own development. Communities collectively have to identify the social factors that constrain their self-development and come up with their own solutions to the identified challenges. This is community empowerment attained through social learning.

Empowerment, which is power transfer and change in the power structure (Kumar, 2002: 26) calls for the community to challenge social structures that limit their active engagement (Raszkowski, 2015:10) in anticipation for self-development. Through social learning people learn to use their own actions for self-development. Participation, social learning and empowerment are intertwined aspects of people-centered development; they all recognize active citizenship in development. However, reflection on Strengths Based Approach challenges development practitioners to recognize the strengths which people have. Development is not the provision of services to inactive citizens; it is about citizens’ active participation towards self-empowerment (Ceasar & Theron, 2014:129-132).

From the literature reviewed, development demands that its beneficiaries be situated in the design and implementation frontline so as to have their full involvement (Louw & Schenck, 1995: 81-91). Empowerment does not mean power is passed on or transferred to people; people already possess power. To empower means to facilitate, to stimulate and to proliferate the power people already possess (Louw & Schenck, 1995: 84). Empowerment is an act of skill and confidence strengthening and revitalization. Empowerment is based on the people’s inherent strengths not deficits. Development approaches that are people-centered entail that people are trusted and respected and their skills, abilities, potentials and values appreciated. Empowerment is people-centered, firstly, as it involves “moving from *insight* (inner awareness of one’s abilities and potential) to *action* (doing) (Davids, 2014:20). Secondly, empowerment is people-centered as it centres more on one-self; external support only speeds up the process of empowerment, hence empowered communities and people are able to sustain any development initiative (Kumar, 2002). While recognition is made that social learning and empowerment are aspects of people-centeredness, the question remains: which development approach is closer to bringing about realistic empowerment and social learning? Does the Strength Based Approach, which is grounded on the strength of the people espouse a more people-centered development? Is people-centred development an archetype of sustainable development? What features in Strength Based Approach makes it an embodiment of

sustainable development? The next section discusses people-centeredness and development sustainability.

2.5 People-Centered Development and Development Sustainability

The world has experienced project failures; projects have been initiated by outsiders but failed to take ground, some projects have been initiated by outsiders and took ground but shortly after the exiting of the funders projects have fallen off. Ownership, participation and empowerment are key elements to project sustainability. Development sustainability, as the ability of the communities/people to carry on with the project even when the development practitioners, agencies and politicians have exited (Daniel and Reardon, 1998: 57-64) rests on the people-centeredness of the project design. When the project is built on the strengths of the people rather than their weaknesses it is more likely to be sustained. Most projects are not sustainable as they lack ownership and people's participation. Chambers asks a very pertinent question which borders on people-centeredness aspects of development: whose reality counts in development projects? (Chambers, 1997). Most development projects are not sustainable because they do not rest on the issues which affect the people who are deemed beneficiaries of the initiatives; they are centered and premised on external intentions and wishes. Projects designed by the people themselves based on their desire for change are likely to be more sustainable (Dubb, 2005:27); they build on people's strengths not deficits. People-centered development acknowledges the wholeness and integral nature of the human persons, their symbiotic integration with the environment, their larger social fabric and context (Holmes and Potvin, 2015:13). Community transformation is possible and sustainable where there is investment in human beings and institutions, where community strengths are recognized and appreciated, and where agencies respond and fulfil their accountability to people and their aspirations (UNDP, 2012: 10). Therefore, people centeredness in development entails their sustainability.

The literature reviewed suggests that people-centred approach to development would lead to community participation, social learning, community empowerment and sustainable development. The question remains how would this be achieved? Does the Strength Based Approach provide the basis for people-centred development? The next section discusses in details literature on Strength Based Approach, establishing the theoretical framework for the study.

2.6 People-centered Development and Strength Based Approach

The philosophy behind people-centered and Strength Based Approach, as alternative approaches to development, is that people are “architects” of their own development (Davids, 2014:19). People-centered development advocates that development must arise from within; people must demonstrate the strengths and zeal for self-transformation/development (Dureau, 2013:48) and people must be valued, cherished and their skills, capabilities, capacities and values appreciated (Davids, 2014:16-18). The Strength Based Approach encourages that people must be seen to be actors not just mere recipients and or beneficiaries of the development process. Development is not something that happens from without; it is about people and people are naturally endowed with strengths and skills that can transform their wellbeing (Speckman, 2007:18). Development should emanate from people’s wish for a better life, from their vision of a better society (Mutharika, 2010, Speckman, 2007). Development initiatives or projects should draw inspiration and energy from the people themselves who are the beneficiaries of the development process itself (Nyerere, 1978). Both the strength-based and people-centered development thinking centre on the concept of participatory development (UNDP, 2012). However, participatory development in itself is condemned as not being people-centered as it does not always draw inspiration from the people’s strengths (Davids, 2014:18). We have observed that the concept of participation is highly contested in the development debate as far as to how it leads to people’s involvement and community empowerment. With rhetoric claims of people’s participation in development, project beneficiaries have not been empowered to be agents of their own change (Braun, 2005:13); a situation which keeps the question on which of the participatory approaches puts people at the centre still relevant. It is argued that Strength Based Approach brings to the fore people’s assets and resources rather than their needs and deficits, making the strengths and resources the starting point in the development process (Cunningham, 2008:23).

Strength Based Approach (SBA) is one of the many participatory approaches used in development practice to create change by focusing on people’s strengths rather than their needs (Willetts *et al*, 2011). Strength Based Approach, also called asset-based, is a paradigm shift in the development thinking that looks at reality not as a problem to be solved but an opportunity with lots of potential (Cunningham, 2008:30). Strength Based Approach offers a positivist development worldview; the focus is on the locally available resources and skills that people have and not their problems or needs. It is a worldview that sees the glass as half full not half empty (Cunningham, 2008:18). Strength Based Approach looks at the local and existing

resources, potential, skills, assets and capacities as foundational elements for people's self-development (Dureau, 2013:48). Strength Based Approach is based on a set of beliefs about people and communities, that they have inherent capacities to influence development change from within; that communities and people are rich with life changing resources and skills (Kelly *et al*, 2009). Strength Based Approach is based on contextualization and indigenization of development; a paradigm shift from the trust on "externally driven" and "hand out" style of development support that characterized development aid in Africa to a "self-driven" and "resource-based" or "asset-based" development process (Braun, 2005:65).

The next paragraph provides a detailed theoretical framework for the Strength based Approach; setting the contextual background from where the study research questions are drawn.

2.7 Strength Based Approach Conceptual Framework

The paragraphs below discuss in a tabular form the conceptual framework for the Strength Based Approach. It provides a niche of what the SBA process looks like; how the change process in SBA looks like and further discusses the glimpse outcomes of the SBA processes.

Table 2 Conceptual Framework for SBA

What does SBA Practice look like	What does the Change process for SBA look like	What do the Outcomes for SBA change process look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is based on change from within, from inside-out • It focuses on strengths not needs • It is based on people’s/community visions/development aspirations • Communities are architects of their own development • It focuses on building community relationships and trust • It is based on the principles of empowerment and social learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The people/communities take full responsibility for the desired change/development • It is actor-led development; People/communities lead their own development change • It focuses on strengths not needs • Development plans are based on the Community Visions/Development dreams • Development agencies take the “Facilitators” and “Enablers” role leaving communities/people themselves to do everything 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available resources in communities used to the maximum for self-transformation • External resources needed only to complement inner or local/community efforts • Communities have increased hope and motivation for greater achievements/outcomes • Community self-confidence, esteem, insight, knowledge and interconnections are built and strengthened • Strong ownership and sustainable outcomes observed. When everything is done communities say “We have done it ourselves” • Project outcomes and agenda defined by the People/communities themselves.



Underpinning Strength Based Approach Beliefs:

- Development practitioners hold the belief that every person is born with inherent and innate capacities, life experiences and characteristics that can contribute to development outcome.
- Any community is rich in resources (human, physical, biological, natural, social assets). In every community, something is possible.
- Development practitioners take the role of Facilitators/Enablers not “experts” on what community changes are needed and how to achieve the desired change.
- It is always motivating to start from the strengths and not problems.
- Needs and problem analysis to generate meaningful change is not necessary.
- People/communities are agents of their own change for ownership and sustainability.

Underlying SBA Philosophy

- How communities view development is subjective and context specific.
- SBA draws inspiration on positivist approach to the realities of the world.

The above theoretical framework provides the basis on where the Strength Based Approach is assessed on its people-centeredness. The theoretical framework is subjected to a critical analysis in view of people's experiences of the approach in Dowa district. The Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) has adopted the Strength Based Approach for over five years now. Before delving into the study methodology, it is important to situate the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) into the larger people-centred development discourse.

2.8 CADECOM and People Centered Development

The place of the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) in the people centered development discourse can only be explained by providing a general picture of the Catholic Church in Development. CADECOM is the relief and development arm of the Catholic Church in Malawi. The Catholic Church, through her ecclesiastical leaders and institutions, internationally and locally has spoken on the centrality of development on the people. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* – focusing on the condition of workers, which challenged the exploitative economic liberalization philosophies that prioritized profit making at the expense of the poor workers' welfare. After 40 years, following the issue of the *Rerum Novarum*, the Catholic Church, through Pope Pius XI, authored yet another people-centered encyclical *Quadragesima Anno (1931)* which further reflected on the welfare of the workers. People continue to be at the centre of the Catholic Church's thinking. In 1967 Pope Paul VI wrote *Populorum Progressio – The Development of the People*. Pope Paul VI (1967) underscored the people-centeredness perspective of the Catholic Church; arguing that the social question about development ties all people together, and that the Church has the responsibility of awakening people of their mission of self-development and that of others (Pope Paul VI, 1967:5). People-centeredness is further expounded in the exaltation that the Church dwells among people as such she has the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the time and interpret them in light of the Gospel and people's realities (Pope Paul, 1967:8). In understanding development, the Catholic Church stands that what counts in development are the people, as individuals, men and women, as groups and humanity as a whole (Pope Leo XIII, 1981:14). The Church recognizes the strength which are natural to human beings as great assets for individual and societal development. The Catholic Church believes that people are endowed with the intellect and free will; thus, each person is responsible for their self-fulfilment; people are planners of their own destiny (Pope Paul, 1967).

Walt also agrees that God does not expect human beings to develop outside their own being, their development should be through and within their own being (Walt, 2003).

In Malawi, after 30 years of dictatorial regime under Kamuzu Banda, which did not give room for people to participate in their own development, the Catholic Bishops authored a Lenten Pastoral Letter *Living Our Faith*, which challenged the authoritarian leadership as not being people-centered. The Catholic Bishops in Malawi, since 1992, have written pastoral letters which reflect on the critical social ills as they affect Malawians and have continued challenging powers that be, that in everything, including development, the welfare of the people should come first. In the Catholic Church's quest for a more people-centered development, the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) was established with the objective of empowering communities to undertake development that is integral and human centred (CADECOM, 1991). With people being at the centre of its mandate; CADECOM is involved in livelihood development projects aimed at empowering people from within themselves.

CADECOM has been in operation since 1984 and has tested many participatory and transformative community development approaches. In 2011 CADECOM adopted the Strength Based Approach in implementing the integrated community development project in four districts of Dowa, Rumphu, Mzimba and Phalombe. The project that initiated the Strength Based Approach was financially supported by the Australian Government under the Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme (AACES), through Caritas Australia. The present study focusses on CADECOM experiences in Dowa district.

Chapter two provided detailed discussion of literature related to the study subject. The review focused on the broad area of people-centered development. Concepts and thematic discussions on community participation, social learning and empowerment and sustainability were discussed as they relate to people-centeredness. Different forms of participation were explored; self-mobilization and interactive participation which were linked to social learning and empowerment. Theoretical underpinnings of the Strength Based Approach were discussed to form the basis for the study. Finally, the chapter provided an overview of CADECOM works in relation to people-centeredness on which the Strength Based Approach is situated. The next chapter provide an overview of the research methodology used in the study.

3 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The present chapter explains in details the methods and approaches used in the study; it defines the research area, study target population, research design and sampling methods, the research questions, data collection strategy, research ethics and description of data analysis. Research being scientific knowledge inquiry, the chapter helps to determine and understand the validity and accuracy of the research findings through provision of a systematic scheme of the study.

3.2 Description of the Research Area

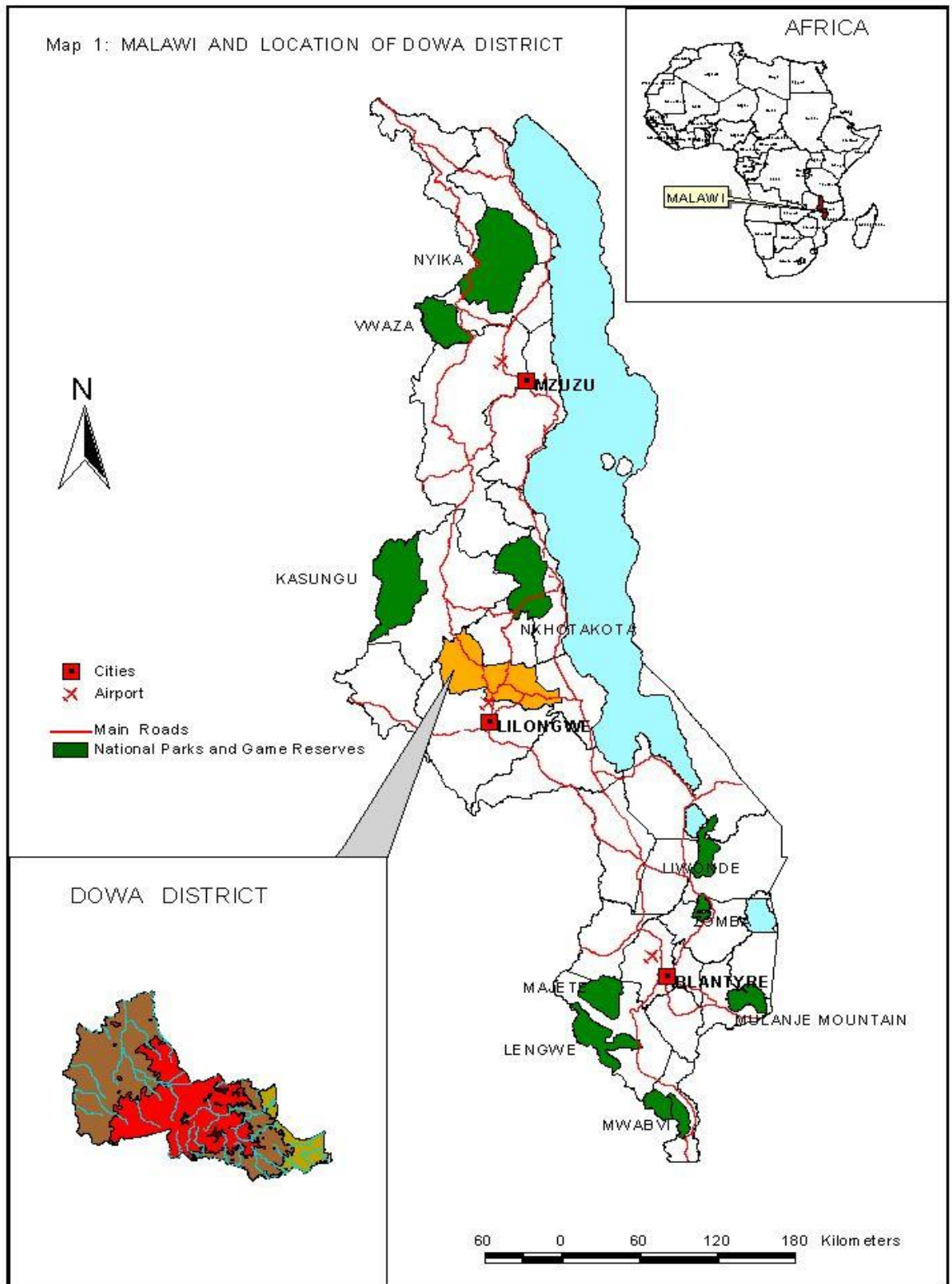
The study was carried out in Dowa district, which is located some 52 kilometres from Lilongwe, the Capital of Malawi. Dowa district borders Lilongwe district to the South, Kasungu and Ntchisi to the North and Salima district to the East. According to the 2008 National Statistics, Dowa District had a population projection of 732,343 by 2014, covering a total area of 3,041 square kilometres with a population density of 210 people per square kilometre (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2008). 49% of the population in Dowa are males with women accounting for 51%. Dowa district has one of the highest annual population growth of 3.1% as compared to the national average of 2.8% (Dowa SEP, 2015:15).

Dowa district, according to the Social Economic Profile (Dowa SEP, 2015), is endowed with many natural resources, including rivers, wetlands, forest reserves, fertile soils which offer an opportunity for agricultural production. Above 90% of the population in Dowa depends on agriculture production for livelihood and 81% of the land is used for rain-fed agriculture cultivation (Dowa SEP, 2015). In Dowa district, there has been less diversification in the agriculture sector; with most of the agriculture production being subsistence and depended on rain-fed. The agriculture sector is the key player in sustainable livelihoods in Malawi. Agriculture accounts for 39 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with above 80% of the workforce employed in this sector and contributing over 80% of foreign exchange earnings (GoM, 2015). Agriculture is the economic mainstay for the people of Dowa district.

Dowa district follows a decentralized system of governance with the full District Council in place. There are development committees at different levels of the structure which are supposed to work together for self-transformation. From a more people-centered perspective, decentralization can be considered an archetype of development from within. However, although Dowa has a decentralized structure community participation in development activities

remains a big challenge with the top down approach characterizing most of government projects. Development planning is always done at the district secretariat and pushed to the people on the community. The decentralized government system in Dowa is not even people-centered; it does not give room for interactive participation between the communities, the local government and other stakeholders.

Below is the map of Malawi indicating the location of Dowa District in Malawi.



3.3 Description of the Study Target Population

The study was conducted in Dowa district, Traditional Authority (TA) Chakhanza, which is one of the biggest Traditional Authorities in the district; covering 23% of the district's total population (Dowa SEP, 2015). TA Chakhanza is under Madisi Extension and Planning Area (EPA) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development. The study focused on two villages of Namkumba and Kachinangwa. The two villages have 420 and 280 households respectively and they were chosen as they have been part of the communities in Malawi that participated in the five year (2011-2016) integrated community development project: - the Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme (AACES), that CADECOM implemented adopting the Strength Based Approach as an approach for community engagement.

Namkumba and Kachinangwa communities provided in-depth perspectives on how the Strength Based Approach espouses people-centeredness. Through Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant interviews, members of the two communities were subjected to a systematic process of inquiry into their lived experiences and reflections on Strength Based Approach. The study further targeted officials from Dowa district council as key informants, mainly from the Department of Community Development, Department of Agriculture Extension Service, and the Department of Social Welfare. CADECOM Officers also formed part of the study target owing to their experience in implementing projects that applied the Strength Based Approach as tool for community engagement. The study further consulted and made reference to past CADECOM reports and evaluations on projects that applied the Strength Based Approach.

3.4 Research Design and Sampling

This section provides a detailed plan of how, when and where data was collected and analysed; providing an overall outline of the research questions. The study was cross-sectional motivated by its potential to compare different perspectives and use of many variables (Neuman, 2003). To achieve the set goals and objectives the study was well structured, taking an explorative assessment, in line with the Strength Based Approach philosophy. According to Burns and Grove (2003:195) in their book *Understanding Nursing Research*, research design is a blue print for carrying out a study with full control of the factors that may affect its results. Thus, the study was designed to employ purposive sampling. The Researcher conducted eight semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and eleven Key Informant Interviews. The Focus

Group Discussions (FGD) targeted groups of (1) Community Leaders, who comprised of Area Development Committees, Village Development Committees, Lead Farmers, Community Animators), (2) a group of women only, (3) a group of men only and (4) a mixed group of men and women. Four Focus Group Discussions were conducted in each community, bringing a total of 8 FGDs. Each FGD comprised a maximum of 10 people who were selected based on their level of involvement in the Strength Based Approach, thus a total of 80 people were involved in the study through FGDs. With the 11 Key Informant Interviews conducted, a total of 91 people participated in the study.

Being a qualitative study, Focus Group Discussions were opted as they provided descriptive and exploratory elements on the thematic questions under research. Participants for the FGDs were purposively chosen with common characteristics, to share their ideas and perceptions on the study questions. The advantage of FGDs was that participants would “feed off each other” (Neuman, 2003:101) in the course of the discussion and making the whole study process more participatory and engaging. Participants were allowed to confer for more insight amongst themselves in the course of the interview and the researcher’s probing allowed for triangulation of information right from the primary sources. Interviews were conducted right in the communities; a situation that allowed all members’ full and active participation in the study. Key informants were people the study considered they had more detailed knowledge on the subject matter (Neuman, 2003:105). Key Informant were chosen based on their various roles in the community and their past record of participation in the CADECOM project that adopted the Strength Based Approach. The Key Informants comprised of selected few community leaders, government officers and CADECOM officers.

3.5 Research Questions

As the study focused on the exploration of an approach that enhances effective people engagement and participation in the development process, a set of questions were set to establish if the Strength Based Approach espouses people-centeredness. The key study questions were:

- i. How does the Strength Based Approach change process look like? Is it an archetype of people-centeredness?
- ii. What are the characteristic features of the Strength Based Approach that makes it uniquely people-centered?

- iii. Whose reality counts in development work? Do project beneficiaries when SBA is used have a voice or choice on their development undertakings?
- iv. What is the alternative development approach that can be considered more participatory and people centered in practice not only in theory?

These study questions were designed in such a way to elicit more information on the subject from where general conclusions could be drawn. Two separate interviews guides were formulated based on the above general questions, one for the Key Informant Interviews and the other one for Focus Group Discussions. Both guides were structured thematically focusing on the area of community participation, people's understanding of the concept of Strength Based Approach, its characteristics and features and people's views on what a people centered approach should entail. The concepts of community social learning, community empowerment, development sustainability were explored in line with the Strength Based Approach experience. These research questions came against the background that most community development projects have focused on community problems rather than strengths, thereby failing to embrace people-driven and strength-based or resource-based strategies (Shigetomi and Okamoto, 2014) which the study assumed the Strength Based Approach promotes in its people-centeredness.

The research questions were structured with the following intentions: (1) the researcher's interest in the exploration of the communities' lived experiences and appreciation of participatory development processes, the Strength Based Approach in particular, (2) the researcher's desire to get from the participants the most salient themes which exemplify people-centeredness and (3) an interest to get to the people's suggestions on what would entail authentic community/ people's participation in the development process, what would make people become agents of their own change. The study was broadly set out to answer the question on how the Strength Based Approach is a catalyst of development from within.

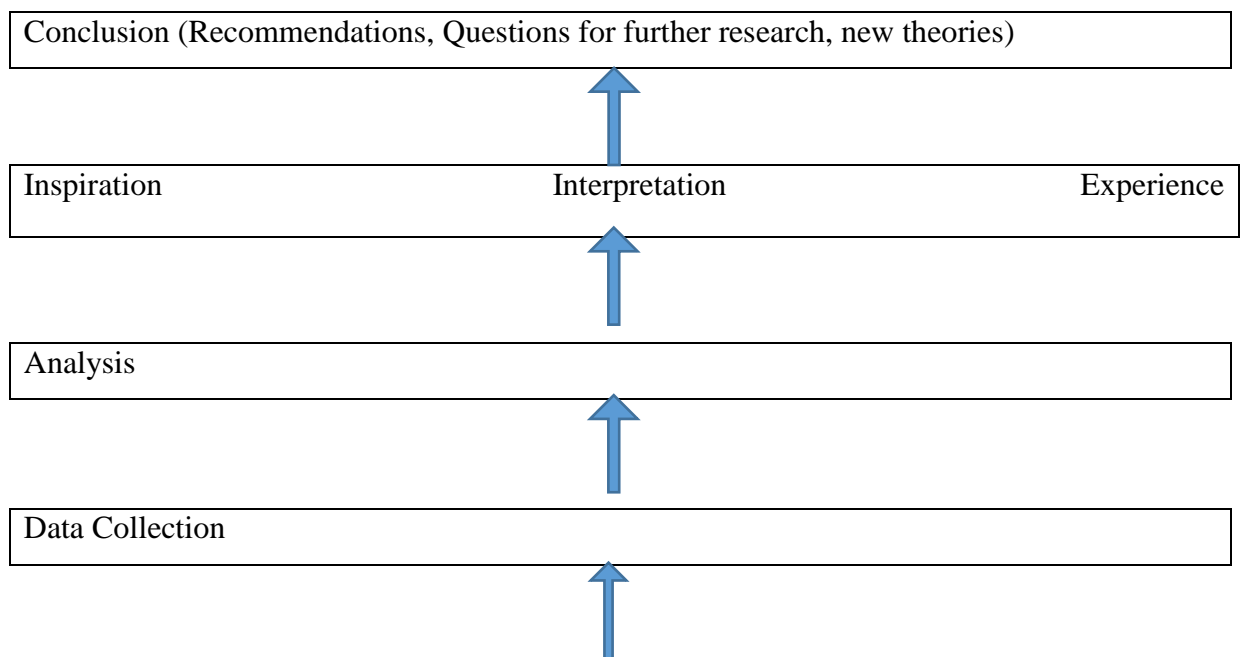
3.6 Description of the Data Collection Strategy

Qualitative research methods for data collection were employed using semi-structured interviews with the participants. The researcher opted for semi-structured interviews as it accorded the study greater and broader breadth and depth of data given its descriptive and explorative nature (Boyatzis, 1998:17). Through the use of semi-structured study question guides, which were administered to the purposively targeted individuals and groups, the study took to understand complex perceptions on people's understanding and appreciation of the

Strength Based Approach as an archetype of development from within. Qualitative research was further preferred in this study as it allowed active engagement with the people without imposing an a priori categorization of the thematic hypothesis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:10). No predetermined coded themes were presented to the participants that would have had the potential of limiting the study inquiry. The study was not purely unstructured in the sense that there were identified informants, the study respondents were discernible and the study setting was clear. The semi-structured interviews gave room for improvisation and letting respondents exercise personal judgment on the subject.

The study adopted an inductive approach of inquiry; moving from general to specific through probing and formation of generalizations. Study interviews did not only act as a *means* of finding out people’s perception on the study question but the *object* of the inquiry itself (Elliott, 2005). Secondary data from different sources, government documents on community development, NGO annual and evaluation reports, journal articles, published books, and CADECOM past project reports were also reviewed. Theoretically, the study was contextualized in the realm of people-centered development discourse, taking an inductive process; where data was collected, analysed and interpretations made from where generalizations and conclusions have been drawn.

The figure below provides a general framework for data collection and analysis from an inductive perspective.



Source: Chikwenda, 2007.

In the qualitative data collection strategy, which the study used, “good notes are the bricks and mortar of field research” (Neuman, 2003:102). During the study, the main researcher took self-notes. With permission and consent from the participants some audio recordings of the interviews were taken. The researcher was on top of all the data collection process to make sure that the data collected was reliable. The field data collection took 16 working days.

3.7 Research Ethics

As the study involved interaction with vulnerable communities, ethical considerations were made in the design of the study. The following are specifically singled out:

- i. **Confidentiality:** In this qualitative study, communities shared intimate knowledge in confidence on the subject matter (Neuman, 2003:90). In the course of the interviews assurance was provided at the onset of the discussion to the participants that the information gathered would solely be for academic purposes and that no respondent’s identity would be revealed in the final study report.
- ii. **Dealing with the Powerful:** Neuman notes that researchers are often criticized of ignoring the powerful in society as they are often biased towards the less powerful. The disaggregation of groups according to positions, role and sex was deliberately done to make sure that this consideration was met. Different groups that were targeted provided their perceptions and knowledge on the study subject according to their hierarchy of credibility (Neuman, 2003:113). The study provided space to all categories of the human society in the two target communities.
- iii. **Consent:** Consent was sought from all the study participants before the start of the interviews; and no one was forced to participate; participation was voluntary. No incentives were provided to those who participated in the study. The study adhered to all research ethical considerations, regulations and guidelines and the rights of respondents were upheld. In the findings discussions and recommendations no individual identity is revealed.

- iv. Dignity of the Human Person and Do no harm Principle: The study ensured that the dignity of the human person is preserved and respected, and that questions were asked in a way that did not cause any harm or bring shame to the participants.

3.8 Description of the Data Analysis

All data collected during the study was analysed through theme coding, concept formulation, theory/ideas building and inference of the examined patterns (Strauss, 2003:340). This involved a systematic and rigorous examination of the collected data (Neuman, 2003:123) to reach conclusions based on gathered information. People's perceptions, ideas and views were descriptively analysed through themes based on the questions asked. The advantage of a qualitative study is that triangulation of the information did not wait until all the data was collected; this was, in some cases, done right in the field. Through probing on the questions, data patterns started emerging right in the field. Another observable strength with qualitative study has been that the study focus was not given pre-established empirical units or categories; they have been defined by the gathered data and theory (Neuman, 2003:106). This has helped the researcher not to be entangled in the details of the raw data but encouraged the researcher's critical analysis of the given data. The study did not only stay at a descriptive level; it has been analytical; moving from description of a historical event or social setting (Neuman, 2003:132) to a more generalized interpretation of their meanings.

Chapter three discussed research methodology for the study. The section provided a detailed description of the research area in Dowa, defining the target population, design and sampling procedures. Details on how data was collected and analysed have also been discussed in this section. Presentation of the research ethics considerations was also made. The next chapter presents the study's findings following analysis of the collected data through Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Chapter four discusses the research findings emanating from field study. The chapter has been divided into sections that correspond to the main research questions. Each research question is further presented with its associated subdivisions covering the research themes under exploration. The four main areas are under the following thematic titles:

- 1) Community Understanding of the Strength Based Approach and its Characteristics
- 2) Strength Based Approach and People's Participation in the Development Process
- 3) Strength Based Approach, Social Learning and People's Empowerment
- 4) Views on what entails Authentic Community Participation in Development

4.1 Community Understanding of the Strength Based Approach

4.1.1 General understanding of the Strength Based Approach

The study undertook to understand people's understanding of the Strength Based Approach. In both communities of Namkumba and Kachinangwa, participants were asked about their understanding of Strength Based Approach. The study found that there was consensus among on their understanding of Strength Based Approach as a development approach that focuses on people's strength rather than problems, weakness or needs. A women Focus Group Discussion in Kachinangwa village summed it up well: "SBA is about us using our locally available resources to transform our lives without solely depending on external support; is it about our power and resources being used to change ourselves" (FGD, Kachinangwa, female). The approach has been described as a participatory process that enhances active involvement and participation of the people themselves in development. Study respondents were so articulate highlighting that the Strength Based Approach recognizes the centrality of the people in the development process: "in the SBA process we are agents of our own development; we take the leading role in achieving what we, ourselves desire, while using our own available resources, skills, and knowledge" (KII, Namkumba, male). The Strength Based Approach understanding, from this livelihood perspective, indicates that it promotes strong elements of self-mobilization; which is a key factor for community/people's participation in development.

Communities that were interviewed understand Strength Based Approach as an eye opener and a liberating force that has made them conscious of the local resources which they did not consider as transformational tools for their human development. "SBA is an approach that has

made us to see things differently; we now see things with positive lens, and are able to see opportunities where in the past we could only see challenges and needs” (KII, Namkumba, female). The above sentiments underscore the change effect of the Strength Based Approach on the people’s realities of life. “The Strength Based Approach triggers people’s self-worthy and cultivates in the people the “we can do it spirit” instead of being dependent on external support” (KII, Government, male). The study findings indicate that the Strength Based Approach has both community empowerment and self-assertive effect. The Strength Based Approach, as a development process can be identified a way of facilitating grassroots development that builds public participation. As the study understood people’s perception about the approach, there was demonstrated evidence of communities’ self-reliance and self-driven attitude to development that the approach promotes. For instance, communities attributed all the project success in the area to their own hard work, initiatives and creativity to use their strengths and resources. “All what you see as changes in this community, the nice houses, the better harvests, and our improved living standards, are all as a result of our own work; these changes were not done by CADECOM; we did it ourselves, CADECOM just helped us with knowledge on how we can improve our livelihoods” (KII, Namkumba, female). These sentiments indicate that Strength Based Approach promotes development process that is people-centered.

The study found that the project in Namkumba and Kachinangwa villages, which CADECOM implemented using the Strength Based Approach, has had positive outcomes, which are attributed to the approach it adopted. The project has increased communities’ food and nutrition security; it has increased people’s access to income; it has led to diversification of economic opportunities, it has empowered communities to drive their own development. These development outcomes are as a result of empowered communities that are geared to realize their development goals and more importantly communities that see themselves as agents of their own change. The Strength Based Approach makes people agents of their own development as a CADECOM officer underscores that “our role as CADECOM is to facilitate the development process, we recognize that the people themselves have the capacity and potential to change their own lives” (KII, CADECOM, male).

Analysis from the study discussions with the women groups, men groups, government staff and CADECOM officers on their understanding of the Strength Based Approach point to the fact that the approach changes people’s mind-set and attitudes from being pessimistic about

life to positivism. The study findings concur with Mathie (2005) that the approach provides a paradigm shift in the way development is perceived; it fosters a change of seeing the glass as half full not half empty.. The approach focuses on what is locally and readily available rather than the deficits or needs. Strength Based Approach is actually found to be in contrast to the conventional needs-based or problem-based approaches. CADECOM officer argued that “instead of conducting problem analysis, we empower communities to conduct resource or strength analysis”. The study discovered that through the use of the Strength Based Approach in project implementation, there is no needs assessment at the start of the project, rather communities conduct asset mapping, where resources are identified as foundations or building blocks for their self-development. This asset mapping exercise was made reference to during the women’s Focus Group Discussion in Namkumba Village:

When CADECOM came in our village; they took us through the process where we identified all the resources we have as a community. From the list of the resources we were able to identify what we can use to improve our livelihoods. (FGD, Namkumba, female).

4.1.2 Key drivers and enablers of the Strength Based Approach

The study discovered a number of drivers and enablers of the Strength Based Approach. Some of the key factors or enablers of the Strength Based Approach identified are: (a) the process takes through the community on a journey of discovering the past, an activity where communities/people recall events on what they have done successfully in the past on their own without external support. “The process of discovering the past makes communities feel proud of their history; proud of the things they have done before on their own” (KII, CADECOM, male). The study also discovered that community visioning, which was also referred to as dreaming the future, enables the smooth implementation of the Strength Based Approach. Community visioning or dreaming the future is “a process where communities collectively and individually visualize their development aspirations;” (KII, CADECOM, male). The visioning exercise was discovered as energizing to the community. Linked to the visioning, the study also discovered that community asset mapping was another enabler to the Strength Based Approach. “In asset mapping, communities identify different assets and resources that they have as individuals in their households and as a community” (KII, CADECOM, male). In every aspect of the process in the Strength Based Approach, people themselves take a central role in

determining their development destiny. Development plans made through the Strength Based Approach, are centered on the people's development aspirations from the visioning exercise. Through the Strength Based Approach communities decide their own development milestones and indicators which are used in the monitoring of their visions.

In both Namkumba and Kachinangwa villages people rated Visioning/ Dreaming the Future, as the main force that drives the community/people into action. "The visioning exercise opened our minds to the high potential and enormous opportunities that we have as people in developing ourselves" (FGD, Namkumba, female). It became clear that the visioning exercise helps communities to determine their development roadmaps and these visions become catalysts for community action plans. The visions compel people/communities to take action on realizing what they aspire; they define the development roadmap for the community; they make people to be at the centre of what they want to achieve for themselves. It can be concluded that any development that emanates from the visualized plans by the community is development from the people themselves, development from within. The people themselves become architects of their own development.

4.1.3 Community Role in Implementation of projects from an SBA Perspective

The study found that the Strength Based Approach triggers deeper engagement among the communities and makes people drivers of their own change. "As a community, we sit down to do the visioning and from the visions we draw plans which we then implement" (FGD, Namkumba, male). It was observed that the Strength Based Approach helps communities to reflect on areas of local pride; what they have successfully done in the past and build their development visions on that. "When implementing the project using the Strength Based Approach, we make communities owners of the project interventions; our role as CADECOM is to facilitate the realization of their desired development outcomes" (KII, CADECOM, male). The findings from the study indicate that the questions which Chambers asks on "whose reality counts in development work" (Chambers, 1997) are somehow answered in the way the Strength Based Approach puts people at the centre of the development process. To a larger extent the Strength Based Approach considers the realities of the people more; development projects are built on the people's visions. Through the visioning exercise the approach promotes joint and collective dreaming of the community's future development ambitions. In both communities, respondents applauded the visioning for leading to community consensus on the prioritized

development aspirations. “As a community, we agree on what should be done first and identify the resources we need to carry out the identified interventions” (FGD, Kachinangwa, male). The findings show that the Strength Based Approach process engages people at all levels of the development stages; from conceptualization to implementation.

The study established that the Strength Based Approach (SBA) promotes community participation in the development process, development ownership as well as community empowerment. “Since we started working with CADECOM on this project that introduced us to this thinking [SBA], we have been more involved in the project interventions; we actually own the project, this project is ours not CADECOM’s” (FGD, Namkumba, male). The visioning exercise promotes community participation in the development process. It has also been found that Strength Based Approach enhances social cohesion and inclusion among community members. “We all take part in the visioning, whether children, adults, men, women, abled or disabled; we all participate in the visioning and agree on what we want as a community” (KII, Namkumba, male). The study found that alignment of community visions to community development goals is a motivating factor for self-transformation. It transpired in the study that joint action planning informs community decisions, their participation and contributions to their own development agenda. The study further established that all community visions and action plans are informed, defined and founded on the locally available resources, assets and capacities. The Strength Based Approach makes people the centre of their own development as one respondent ably articulated it:

“Before we were introduced to this thinking [Strength Based] we used to undermine ourselves; we could feel we cannot achieve anything without external support. We did not realize that the first resource we have is ourselves; the fact that we exist is a starting point to the realization of our development dreams” (KII, Kachinangwa, male).

The study findings indicate that the Strength Based Approach defeats the mentality that foreign or external is good. Foundation for the strength-based process is built on indigenization and localization of development. The approach considers the value of the human person and the resources in their environment as the building blocks for self-development. It can be argued that the Strength Based Approach is an epitome of localized development; that is people-centered. Development that is drawn within the people themselves; in its conceptualization as well as implementation.

4.1.4 Community Lessons from the Adoption of the Strength Based Approach

The study findings emphasize the point that conventional development approaches have been inclined more towards needs-based than strengths-based or assets-based. In both communities of Namkumba and Kachinangwa, study participants agreed that before the introduction of the Strength Based Approach, they saw life with the lens of needs and problems. “Before we were introduced to SBA we could not realize how much potential lies within ourselves; we saw ourselves as resource poor because we only defined resources in terms of what we did not possess. Our understanding of resources was limited; the Strength Based Approach, more especially the Asset Mapping component opened our eyes to see how resource rich our communities are” (KII, Kachinangwa, male). Analysing these people’s responses, it is clear that communities, through the Strength Based Approach, have learned how to see the world from a different perspective; becoming more optimistic and positive about what they can do themselves to develop. Instead of focusing on their problems communities now focus on their strengths and what they can do on their own.

We are not where CADECOM found us six years ago; we used to sit on “gold” and considered ourselves poor, because we did not realize how rich we are. We have fertile lands, we have perennial rivers, we have government officers, we have trees. We are now able to utilize these to change ourselves. Thanks to CADECOM for making us realize that we are not all that poor as we thought in the past (FGD, Namkumba, female).

The empowering aspects of the Strength Based Approach were evident; communities narrated project impact which they argued that they are as a result of the change in their way of doing things: “CADECOM did not give us any material resource that we didn’t have before; they only made us aware of what we already have; their trainings have changed our attitude and understanding of poverty and development.” (KII, Namkumba, male). The Strength Based Approach can be seen to elicit people to look for development from within; making the people themselves as agents of their own development.

4.1.5 Examples of Community Project Impacts Attributable to the Adoption of SBA

The use of available resources for community self-transformation featured highly as a great impact of the Strength Based Approach. It was discovered that the use of the Strength Based Approach has resulted in a number of radical development changes in the communities in

Dowa. A government official from Dowa District Council elaborated on a number of project outcomes that are attributed to the Strength Based Approach; he said:

(1) Communities are now empowered to undertake development on their own without depending on external support (2) Communities own development projects as their own, and this is mainly because all interventions implemented arise from their visions (3) the SBA has made the communities to realize many resources around them, for instance our [Government] working relationship with the communities has greatly improved over the years. The communities, where CADECOM is using this approach [Strength Based Approach], are more active than where we continue with the needs-based approach (4) these communities are examples of positive outcomes of integrated community development; people's livelihoods in these community have change holistically (5) the approach has also resulted in strengthened social organizations and interconnections, and more importantly it has nurtured visionary leaders, because the community leaders have a task of supporting their subjects in the process of realizing their development dreams. There are many good things I can talk about the approach..." KII, Government Official Dowa, male).

Outcomes from the study indicate that the use of the Strength Based Approach makes government extension workers provide demand-driven extension services to the communities. "When communities have made their action plans they come to us for support where they see we can help them; in some cases, they go to other government department depending on the project they want to embark on" (KII, Government, female). Government officers applauded the approach that it makes their trainings and community engagements easier. Because of the Strength Based Approach their trainings and community engagements are always tailor made to respond to the list of the development visions that the communities develop. Strength Based Approach enables communities to feel empowered; it shapes their worldview with the positive attitude of "we can do it for ourselves" (KII, CADECOM, male).

The study further established that the conventional needs-based approach has not yielded the much-needed development results as compared to the Strength Based Approach. Community active engagement in Strength Based Approach demonstrates a more practical decentralized approach to community development; where communities themselves define their development roadmaps and take action to implement their desired development initiatives.

Through the Strength Based Approach, it has been found that “communities themselves are drivers of their own initiatives; the approach has helped communities to re/structure themselves into groups that respond to their visions, and different community committees take roles in planning and leading changes within their areas of focus and interest” (KII, CADECOM, female). For instance, the study learnt that while the CADECOM project’s focus in Dowa was on Food Security, through the Strength Based Approach processes, communities achieved diverse tangible results and outcomes in areas of water, sanitation and hygiene, economic empowerment, gender, child protection, environment and natural resources management, good governance among others. “These diverse results are as a result of the visioning exercise that does not limit the people to visioning along the goals of the project which they are implementing; Strength Based Approach makes them see development in a broader, holistic and integrated manner” (KII, CADECOM, male).

The study further discovered that the Strength Based Approach makes the external institutions, such as CADECOM brokers rather than implementers in the development process; as communities, themselves drive their development agenda. The Strength Based Approach was found to be supportive in facilitating communities to navigate and access services that support the realization of their set development visions.

4.1.6 How the Strength Based Approach Change Process look like

The study found that CADECOM, whose motto is “empowering communities” ardently believe that development is about people and that people should be the starting point in any development discourse. “In implementing our projects, using the Strength Based Approach we make sure that people should be the focus of our intervention and actions; desired changes are about them not us” (KII, CADECOM, male). CADECOM officers also underscored the point that the strength-based process starts by recognizing the people themselves as human beings, capable of freely initiating changes from within themselves. This resonates well with Sen’s understanding of development as freedom of doings. “CADECOM believes that meaningful and lasting community change always originates from the people themselves; and that the local people themselves are best experts on how to activate and effect the desired change” (KII, CADECOM, male). Conceptually, it transpired that the Strength Based Approach process does not dwell on deficiencies, needs and problems rather it focuses on locally available resources, capacities, strengths and aspirations as drivers for the change. The dictum that in every

community something works, holds for the Strength Based Approach; the approach has been found with potential to generate community energy and creativity.

4.1.7 Key stages in the implementation of the Strength Based Approach

The study findings indicate that CADECOM's implementation of the Strength Based Approach takes five staged steps: (1) Exploring and Setting the Community Scene, (2) Discovering the Past, (3) Community Visioning/Dreaming, (3) Community Asset Mapping, (5) Community Action Planning and (6) Finally Community Project Implementation and Monitoring. The process of Exploring the Scene and Discovering the Past was found to be specific to the implementing organization, as an entry point into the community. "In this stage, we strive to find out what has led to success and resilience in the community, we do not want to assume non-functionality of the community before our project interventions. This process helps us to discover hidden springs of life in the community, from where communities can base their visions" (KII, CADECOM, male).

The study discovered that the Strength Based Approach is a dynamic mind set and pragmatic change process that communities are taken through from the start of the project implementation throughout its life. The study found out that one unique feature about the Strength Based Approach is that the word "exit strategy" does not exist as the process is aligned to human existence – exiting would imply the diminishing of the people themselves who are the subjects and objects of the development process. The process starts with the organization understanding the community' socio-economic, cultural, religious, ethnic and political dynamics:

At this stage, our focus is on understanding the communities and it is also a point of our [the organization's] immersion into the community so that we are one with them; this helps to raise awareness to the communities on the project and make them feel that we, as an organization do not have monopoly of knowledge. We believe the success of the project rests on the strengths and local capacities to implement the project" (KII, CADECOM, male).

Cognizant that the communities have been existing long before introduction of any project, the Strength Based Approach's next phase of community engagement is to rekindle community's past glorious memories of self-driven successes. After this phase communities are taken through community visioning exercise where they outline their development aspirations. "It is important to note that communities do not always align their visions to the project timeframes;

they plan beyond any funded project; the visioning exercise is not only relevant to a specific project” (KII, CADECOM, male). The next phase of the SBA process which is Community Asset Mapping starts with definition of assets. The study found that communities are supported to broaden their understanding of assets, as something of value. Anything of value is listed as an asset that can be used to transform people’s lives. “A great lesson on our part [as CADECOM] has been the realization that with the need- based approach communities tended to undermine the resources and potential around them, and the Strength Based Approach awakens communities from their slumbers to become conscious of what they can do with the resources locally available.” (KII, CADECOM, Male). After mapping the assets, it was discovered that the communities are helped to link/align their assets to the visions; a process that leads to Action Planning. “After we have identified our resources we then see which of these can be used to help us realize our developmental dreams” (FGD, Kachinangwa, female). Probing further into how the action plans are implemented in situations when the community vision cannot be realized only using the resources locally available in the community, the study found out that CADECOM also introduced the Rights Based Approach to the communities. Through the Rights Based Approach, communities are empowered to demand from duty bearers, development services they cannot attain on their own. “When we realize that certain things cannot be achieved on our own without external support we have the right to demand such services from the government and or other organizations, but first we do our part” (KII, Namkumba, male). It is interesting to note how communities made reference to themselves as being central in the development process.

The study established that Monitoring and Evaluation in Strength Based Approach is more complicated; each community comes up with its own project indicators from their visions. The task of consolidating indicators into one logical monitoring and evaluation framework rests with the implementing agency. “It is our role to put together all the Community Visions, determine areas of synergies and consolidate the indicators of change for monitoring of the project” (KII, CADECOM, male). However, it was observed that a project that uses the Strength Based Approach requires a complex monitoring and evaluation framework as project indicators and milestones are determined by the community visions, which are different in each community. Further investigations are required to understand the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the Strength Based Approach; a study is needed to unpack the complexities in monitoring the Strength Based Approach.

4.2 Strength Based Approach and People' Participation in Development Process

4.2.1 People's level of Participation in Community Development Activities following introduction of the Strength Based Approach

Community participation in development work is a controversial subject. Active community participation has been a tall order to realize in rural and community development work. The study findings indicate that the Strength Based Approach, enhances high level of community participation. "In the first place the people themselves define their own development destiny through the visioning exercise; thus, by default they have to work for what they aspire to achieve" (KII, Government, female). It has been highlighted in the study that the Strength Based Approach makes people the central focus of all development interventions. The approach spurs community active participation, since all development plans hinge on the community visions. The study found that communities were able to acknowledge that the Strength Based Approach gives them more space to participate in the development process:

The CADECOM way of implementing projects makes us more involved in the interventions than before; in the past, we would just receive already planned activities for us to do. With the CADECOM way [SBA] we are able to present before them our visions and project activities are made according to our visions. For instance, in this village our dream was to have a solar powered irrigation scheme; when we had put this on our development vision list, in the following year CADECOM helped us to realize this dream. Of course, we did our part as a community to make sure that this dream materializes. (FGD, Namkumba, male).

All the groups interviewed rated their level of participation in the development processes of their community highly; they attributed this active participation to the way the project activities are designed from the plans outlined in their community visions.

After the visioning exercise and action planning we consolidate all the plans, and it is from these plans that our subsequent project activities are drawn. The idea is that we want to implement activities that have been desired by the community themselves. This simplifies our work because we just facilitate implementation as communities themselves work hard to realize their development dreams (KII, CADECOM, female).

The power of the SBA in community participation was further underscored by the government officers who applauded the approach saying:

It is one unique participatory approach that has made our work easier; we do not struggle to push communities to do things because all they [communities] do through this approach is to implement what themselves want. Of interest to us, as government, is that the approach has even made our activity planning easier; we now just consolidate the community visions and action plans into the district development plans (KII, Government, male).

Community participation has been a long-standing debate in the development discourse. The study findings indicate that through the Strength Based Approach, implementation of action plans, which are developed from the community visions, requires the community' active participation. Community visions become community development roadmaps and implementation of the same is based on people's prioritization of their visions; thus, the process enhances active participation. One other observed strength, of the Strength Based Approach, is that communities themselves plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the project interventions. "On any development initiative in the community people are able to say 'yes, we did it ourselves', meaning they own the process" (KII, CADECOM, male).

What has also come out clearly in the study is that the Strength Based Approach has incited mind-set change among the people in their own development undertakings. People see opportunities and pathways for development through their own capacities, strengths and resources. It has been discovered that leveraging of external support acts as both a stimulant and a resultant of active participation. "The SBA gives us courage and confidence to actively engage with ourselves and other stakeholders for our self-development" (KII, Kachinangwa, male). People's active participation in the projects, through the Strength Based Approach, was also evidenced by the unequivocal statements such as "this project is ours" across all the groups interviewed and well-illustrated here:

The CADECOM way [Strength Based Approach] of working with us has made us realize that the project is ours; it has instilled in us ownership of all what we do. We work hard, together as a community, to make sure that the project does not fail. Because when the project fails it is not CADECOM which has failed but we have failed ourselves since the project is centered on our development aspirations" (FGD, Kachinangwa, female).

In relation to people's participation, which is a key dimension in participatory development discourse, CADECOM's incorporation of the Rights Based Approach in the project helped communities to fully participate in the project in their quest to achieve their visions. "Where communities realize that they cannot attain certain development wishes using local resources they are empowered to demand these [their development aspirations] from the duty bearers and other service providers" (KII, CADECOM, female). The Strength Based Approach does not only enhance communities' attitude change but also increases project ownership through active participation, increasing agency and at the same time reducing external dependency. The active participation of the communities in the project has led to creation of stronger and productive relationships among community members themselves, through associations, and between community and the local governments. "Implementation of projects using the SBA creates good synergies between us [government] and the communities; we have also learnt from the project to align our [district council plans] with the community action plans" (KII, Government, male).

4.2.2 Observable community/people's changes in the community in relation to people's participation to development following introduction of the Strength Based Approach

The study found that there were numerous changes in people's participation to development resulting from the use of the Strength Based Approach. The practice of Strength Based Approach has redefined working relationships with communities, in that the role of CADECOM in the project has been described as that of a "facilitator" and "enabler" not implementer. "CADECOM has played a facilitation role in this project letting the communities do the work on their own" (KII, Government, male). This kind of working relationship was endorsed as more participatory by the government officials. "The SBA approach made our [government's] work easier; it enabled pro-activeness and self-organization among communities to take action on development initiatives on their own" (KII, Government, male). This understanding was further underscored by a government official who said:

Our work as government officers has been made easier because these communities are now self-motivated. Since introduction of the Strength Based Approach, we have seen communities pushing the development agenda on their own; they do not wait for us [government extension workers] to push them to participate in the implementation of development activities. Communities are now well organized at the local level, and

actively participate in development activities with the involvement of their local leadership. Our role now is just to monitor them and check how things are moving; and because of the active involvement and participation, in every community you go there is always progress; people have the desire to see themselves transformed (KII, Government, male).

The study findings also reveal the attitudinal changes which the SBA has made on the people themselves and the government officers as well. The female government extension worker in Dowa summed up well when she said:

We need to admit here that before the introduction of the Strength Based Approach we used to impose project interventions on the people. With the Strength Based Approach project imposition on communities has changed; we now work in a more participatory manner because people are more aware of their development needs and articulate them well in their visions. It is true that community participation is a pathway to their self-development (KII, Government, male).

It is evident from the government perspectives that the Strength Based Approach culminates into positive working relationships between stakeholders and the communities, a situation which in contemporary development discourse is a missed link, where development recipients and planners do not dialogue. The Strength Based Approach has redefined power dynamics, where delivery of development interventions is always in response to community aspirations; with the people's active participation and less dependency on external support.

4.2.3 Differences in experiences and changes resulting from the use of Strength Based Approach in comparison to other development approaches

Observable differences were identified in Strength Based Approach in comparison to other development approaches that are needs-based. It was understood in the study that the Strength Based Approach values people and the community context as rich in resources in contrast to the needs-based which is problem-focused. While the Strength Based Approach considers communities as rich, problem-based approaches perceive people as poor, lacking and dependent. "Until we were introduced to SBA, all along we thought we were poor, yet very rich with resources that have changed our lives" (FGD, Namkumba, male). In terms of the

designing of the project, the Strength Based Approach was applauded for engaging people in all the process from the beginning; through consolidation of community visions and action plans to its implementation. “SBA presents a contrast approach from the top-down approach to bottom up approach, where communities are empowered to actively participate in the development processes” (KII, Government, male). One community member had this to say:

The way CADECOM implemented the project in this community, unlike how the case has been with other projects; we were not only informed of what the project is all about but we were part of the whole development process. All project activities were responsive to our development aspirations (KII, Kachinangwa, female).

The study found that the focus on the people’s strengths rather than their deficits has helped the community to see opportunities, which in turn have become catalysts for their action towards self-transformation. The needs-based approach, because it is about problem-solving, without much focus on opportunity exploration, limits innovations and creativity, which the Strength Based Approach is strongly praised for. “These other approaches [needs-based approaches] have a pre-packed project design that is problem-based not strength-based” (KII, CADECOM, male). It was discovered, in the study, that the SBA calls for community input in the project processes at different levels and this strengthens community ownership and sustainability of the interventions compared to needs-based approaches.

In the Strength Based Approach communities carry out their own actions, which they derive from the Visions; there is less dependence on the outside assistance. Implementation of activities commences with the local resources available in the communities. Activities in Strength Based Approach are informed by community’s own priorities (KII, CADECOM, male).

The study further learned that the Strength Based Approach is a catalyst for citizen-led development. It became clear in all the Focus Group Discussions and key informant interviews that the approach empowers communities to be architects of their own development. There is more community engagement in the Strength Based Approach processes that makes it distinct from other approaches which are moved by the external support only. “In this community, we do things on our own and seek outside support where it is really necessary” (FGD, Kachinangwa, female). The government officers remarked that the Strength Based Approach

has made the communities more active in their development undertakings, different from passive communities which depend on external support, mainly through handouts. Communities themselves testified how participatory the approach is:

In this project, we [communities] know exactly what is happening, and we participate in the decision-making process; it is different from the past when we could receive things which we did not know how to use, but were brought to us as development. We have a number of such things which came here through the government or non-governmental organizations which did not mean so much to our development priorities (KII, Namkumba, female).

Chambers' question on "whose reality counts in development work" (Chambers, 1994) has also been a contemporary development issue in the donor world, where people question the place of the communities in development projects. The above sentiments underscore the point that the Strength Based Approach would be an answer in the quest for the reduction of white elephant projects that have characterized the donor aid. One government official indicated that:

I wish all organizations adopted this approach of engaging the communities in the design of the project and building the project activities on people's desired visions; this would increase ownership and participation of the people in their development. I have seen that this approach centres on what the people want, a thing which is far much better than these other projects which are designed outside in the offices without the community engagement (KII, Government male).

The study findings suggest that the Strength Based Approach is more people-centered, encourages community participation and engagement, it makes people the focus of the development process and delivery.

4.3 Strength Based Approach, Social Learning and People's Empowerment

4.3.1 Strength Based Approach, Social Learning and People's Empowerment

The study findings denote that the Strength Based Approach has changed the development conversation for CADECOM as an organization and the government in Dowa district. "Since we started implementing projects using SBA, we have been a changed organization, even us, as CADECOM staff, we feel empowered by the approach; it has changed our way of going

about development. SBA has made us perceive development with differently; we are now more positive about communities doing things on their own without being pushed by us as extension workers” (KII, CADECOM, male). In terms of social learning, it has become clear that Strength Based Approach empowers people to think collectively with communitarian principles that promote self-reliance, innovation and entrepreneurship. Communities argued that:

All what we do in this community now is built around our collective vision. Of course, this does not mean that we do not have individual ambitions, but we reason together on what can transform our lives. Through shared visions, we have witnessed development changes at household as well as community level. For instance, in this community we have an irrigation scheme, where we all work in our individual fields, but the management of the scheme is communally undertaken. We take it as a communal resource that we have and those who do not own land around wetlands, we apportion them some pieces of land for them to cultivate on (FGD, Namkumba, male).

It has emerged during the study that the use of Strength Based Approach, as an alternative pathway to development, places decision making power in the hands of the communities themselves. It is also clear that the approach supports multiple indigenized livelihood strategies as it builds on local resources. Community visioning aspect of the Strength Based Approach makes the approach relationship based; communities vision together. Relationships play a crucial role in this process and the togetherness and mutuality lead to common reciprocity towards what is to be achieved. “The Strength Based Approach challenges portrayal of communities as being multifaceted with problems and needs; it shifts their mind to look at strengths of their associations” (KII, Government, male). The Strength Based Approach defeats people’s perception of self-inadequacy and dependence from out outside agencies for solutions; it makes the people take lead in defining their own development needs and setting actions. A female respondent from Namkumba Village summed up this way:

Once we have set our visions together as a community, we strive to achieve them collectively. We do what we can on our own, and we have realized that most things which we thought we needed external support we are able to do them on our own. For instance, we do not need someone to come and till this land for us, we have the strength to till it ourselves, all we need is knowledge on profitable farming methods and

techniques, which we ask the Agriculture Extension Officers, present in this community to teach us (KII, Namkumba, female).

Through the Strength Based Approach communities are empowered through formal and informal associations. From the stories told in Dowa, it has become evident that the approach organizes communities to rethink about their own role in development and take action for their own change. Through visioning, communities are activated to take collective actions; based on the resources and capacities they have. “Through the SBA we have learnt to respect community members as adept and active citizens rather than dependent clients of service delivery” (KII, Government, male). The approach can be said to promote the thinking of “power within” where the communities themselves are viewed with a great sense of own capacity and self-worth.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

Following a thorough discussion, and analysis of the study findings, a number of conclusions and recommendations, for policy makers, project designers and academic researchers have been drawn from the study. The next paragraphs discuss conclusions and recommendations made from the study:

5.1.1 Strength Based Approach Leads to Collective thinking

It has been observed that the Community Visioning/ Dreaming the Future aspect of the Strength Based Approach makes communities collectively agree on what success should look like for them. The Community Visioning is the hallmark of collective thinking; as communities determine their aspired destiny together. During the interviews with communities in Namkumba Village, a rich in meaning adage in the vernacular Chichewa was introduced: “*Tingathe Kusintha Miyoyo Yathu*”, an ideological development maxim which translates into “*Together/On our own We Can Change Our Lives.*” This development aphorism explains the sense of collectiveness as well as realization of self-doing, that the Strength Based Approach inculcates in the people. Strength Based Approach makes people the centre of their own development; it marks a shift from the dependency syndrome that looks up to external support for development initiatives to a more interior and self-worth approach.

5.1.2 Strength Based Approach: A Catalyst of Holistic and Integrated Development

The study has discovered that when it comes to visioning a possible future, people/communities are not limited to what they can aspire; communities come up with many developmental aspirations, which are implemented one by one depending on the resources available. One CADECOM officer summed it up well with an example:

Our project at inception focussed on food security, but in the course of implementation, through the use of SBA we ended up realising many outcomes even in economic empowerment, human rights, child protection and women empowerment, areas which communities themselves brought into the project through their visions (KII, CADECOM, female).

It is clear from the findings that through the Strength Based Approach communities undertake development holistically, not confining their visions to one project interventions; in a way, the Strength Based Approach is not a project based approach, it is more holistic and integrated. It opens up communities to a wider scope of possibilities.

5.1.3 In any community, something works

The study has also discovered that through the Strength Based Approach, which is characterized by the mind set shifts in how communities perceive realities, something works in any community. The Strength Based Approach processes unearth varied possibilities and opportunities for community development based on the local resources and assets. The study has found that no community or individual is too poor to develop themselves. People/communities are endowed with resources and opportunities around them that when exploited have the potential to change their lives. Communities have diverse resources and capacities around them that can be used to move them out of the shackles of poverty. The Strength Based Approach triggers positive outlook to development and instils in people a sense of “we can do it” that propels them to turn around their situation through positive thinking. The Strengths Based Approach is found to generate energy and creativity among communities.

5.1.4 Strength Based Approach Enhances Project Ownership and Sustainability

The study findings mean that the Strength Based Approach puts communities/people at the centre of any development initiative. The communities or the people themselves become agents of their own development. During the study, communities attributed any project outcomes to themselves; “we have done everything on our own and we are proud of the changes in this community, CADECOM only gave us the knowledge, but we acted on it” (KII, Namkumba, male). The fact that communities initiated most of the development interventions through the Visioning Exercise means that whatever they are doing is taken as part of their life. It was interesting again to learn from CADECOM that using the Strength Based Approach, they do not talk about Exit Strategy in projects, rather they talk about post project planning, as once the project has been introduced in the community through the Strength Based Approach it remains for the community. “Our Community Visions are not aligned to CADECOM project timeframes, they are our own, so we determine the time frame when we want to have the visions achieved” (KII, Namkumba, male).

5.1.5 Strength Based Approach has Institutional and Structural Change Effect

The study findings also reveal that CADECOM’s adoption of the Strength Based Approach has resulted in institutional changes as far as development understanding is concerned.

The approach has helped us to take stock of our perception to community engagement; we used to think we have answers to community problems, but we have been made to understand, through the use of Strength Based Approach, that communities have answers

to their own problems, our role as external agents is only to support communities attain what they desire to achieve (KII, CADECOM, male).

CADECOM has decided to adopt the approach in all its livelihood and humanitarian programs/projects in view of the approach's strong elements of encouraging community participation. The government has also been very supportive of the approach in Dowa such that the study discovered a government call that "we wish all nongovernmental organizations used this approach; it makes us easier to work with communities that know what they want for themselves" (KII, Government, male).

5.2 Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations which should be considered by development project designers, policy makers, researchers and the academia..

5.2.1 Broadening the Scope of Strength Based Approach visa-a-vis other participatory approaches.

The study recommends that while it is important to focus on available resources, capacities, skills and local knowledge for self-transformation, communities/people should be empowered to conduct stakeholder/service providers analysis to determine areas of external support where they cannot reach on their own. The danger with much focus on strength-based approach, is that emphasis is put on local resources. In such a way, developmental initiatives attained are limited to the corresponding available capacities and local resources. Along this line of thought, there is need for agencies implementing Strength Based Approach to empower communities/people with skills in other approaches such as the Rights Based Approach (RBA). While there was mention from the communities on the use of Rights Based Approach, the outcomes arising from the hybridization of Rights Based Approach and Strength Based approach did not come out clearly. Communities after undertaking their visioning exercise they should have the skills to engage service providers or duty bearers, and demand the services they cannot meet on their own from a right based perspective. The study recommends a research on the impact of the hybridization of Strength Based Approach and Rights Based Approach so as to identify their complementarities.

5.2.2 Who is Driving the Community Development Agenda?

The question on who is driving development is not fully answered through the Strength Based Approach. Much as the study conjures that the approach is people-centered, the question

remains, who is driving community development? For instance, the question remains that while Strength Based Approach is empowering to communities, it is an approach that is introduced externally from the people to help them shift their mind and perspectives of reality. In this case, whose agenda counts? The study finds that the question which Chambers asked decades ago on “whose reality counts in development work?” (Chambers, 1994) still stands to be answered in full. While the Visioning Exercise, which the Strength Based Approach promotes, has been credited for putting people at the centre of the development initiatives, the whole process is in principle externally driven.

5.2.3 The Question of Accountability of the Development Results and Outcomes

The study findings also observed a dilemma in terms of accountability of development results and outcomes. During the study, it was evident that communities took credit to themselves for any transformation that has taken place in their communities. “We have done all these things on our own, and we are proud” (KII, Namkumba, female). With the upwards accountability which most donor partners promote, one government officer pointed out that “if the donors do not understand this approach (SBA), an external evaluation can make the organization look like it has done nothing, as communities are empowered to undertake development as their own and on their own.” A detailed study on what accountability mechanisms works for the Strength Based Approach, either downward or upward, would be required to answer some of these pertinent questions.

5.2.4 The Role of Illiteracy in the Adoption of Strength Based Approach

The study findings have unearthed the relevance of the concepts of social capital, social psychology of community mobilization, enhancement of community capacity, citizen-led development, the role of multiple stakeholders among others areas, but given the high levels of illiteracy in rural communities, there is need to understand how education plays a role in the approach adoption. Would adoption of Strength Based Approach vary across communities that have different educational backgrounds and standards? A study on the role of literacy levels in the self-transformation agenda would be interesting, especially considering that those illiterate and literate would in some cases be exposed to the same potential resource.

This chapter drew conclusions and recommendations from the study findings. It has been concluded that the Strength Based Approach promotes self-reliance and independence among people and communities, to aspire change from within themselves, by focusing on what they

have not what they do not have. It has also been established that community participation in the development process, which is motivated in the Strength Based Approach through the visioning, and asset mapping exercises, is central to the development process; it puts people at the centre of the development agenda. Recommendations have been made on how the Strength Based Approach can incorporate other participatory approaches, such as Rights Based Approach, so that even in cases where the local available resources or strengths cannot attain the desired community vision; communities should be able to stand up and claim the same from duty bearers or other service providers.

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7 APPENDIXES

7.1 Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. What is your general understanding of the Strength Based Approach?
2. What are the key drivers or enablers of the Strength Based Approach?
3. What is the community role in the implementation of the project from Strength Based Approach perspective?
4. What have you learnt to do differently since you started using the Strength Based Approach
5. What are some of the examples of project impacts that you can attribute to be resultants of the adoption of the Strength Based Approach in this community?
6. How does the Strength Based Approach Change Process look like?
7. What are the key stages in the implementation of the Strength Based Approach?
8. How do you assess people's level of participation in community development activities following the introduction of Strength Based Approach?
9. What are observable changes in relation to people's participation in development in the community following introduction of the Strength Based Approach?
10. Are there different experiences and changes in development understanding and practice arising to the adoption of Strength Based Approach in comparison to other approaches you have used before?
11. How does the Strength Based Approach promote Social Learning and people's empowerment?

7.2 Appendix 2: Key Informant Interviews' Guide

1. What is your general understanding of the Strength Based Approach as a community engagement mechanism?
2. What would you consider to be the key drivers or enablers of the Strength Based Approach in terms of its implementation?
3. What would you consider the community role in the implementation of the project from Strength Based Approach perspective?
4. As an officer or key community member, what have you learnt to do differently since you started using the Strength Based Approach
5. What are some of the examples of project impacts that you can attribute to be resultants of the adoption of the Strength Based Approach in this community?
6. Elaborate on how the Strength Based Approach Change Process look like?

7. What would you consider to be the key stages in the implementation of the Strength Based Approach?
8. How do you assess people's level of participation in community development activities following the introduction of Strength Based Approach?
9. What are observable changes in relation to people's participation in development in the community following introduction of the Strength Based Approach?
10. Are there different experiences and changes in development understanding and practice arising to the adoption of Strength Based Approach in comparison to other approaches you have used before?
11. How does the Strength Based Approach promote Social Learning and people's empowerment?