Blueprint for Change

By Sahlan Diver

Some years ago, I forwarded to a friend an email I had received containing an official report on the future of Subud. My friend replied enthusiastically, saying how nice it was to see such a report, especially one which had apparently made an effort to consult widely with the membership and get their input. A few hours later I received another email from my friend. He had now read the report in depth and was sorry to say that he considered it to be "the same old thing—just tinkering".

From time to time one sees that type of report emanating from national committee meetings, from international meetings or from Congress brain-storming sessions. One wonders if Subud can ever achieve a real change for the better from an invariably lightweight collection of ad-hoc ideas, such as "put more books in libraries" or "hold more helper/committee meetings". We need more substantial plans than these. In particular we need plans that are both *integrated* and *strategic*.

> *Integrated* planning requires that we look across the board at everything that is wrong. Some might say, "Proceed cautiously, don't try to change everything at once." The problem with this "fix one thing at a time" approach is that what remains unfixed may be sufficiently bad to scupper our good efforts. Think of the annual road test on a car. The engine may be perfect, the bodywork may be perfect, the tyres may be perfect, but if the brakes aren't working, there is no way the car is safe to let out on the road. Similarly, Subud may not be safe to let out into wider society until we have investigated and fixed everything that we can find seriously wrong with it, so that it is in full working order.

> *Strategic* planning involves devising the best mechanism by which a set of aims can be achieved. For example, if some changes are not only good in themselves, but also can help make other changes easier to achieve, then such multiple-benefit changes should get priority. Furthermore an agreed aim may be achievable in more than one way. In choosing what to do we must weigh up the limiting factors such as speed of change, amount of effort required, our resources in terms of manpower or money, and so on. Cobbling together a random collection of feel-good ideas from a brain-storming session is not the way to devise a strategy. Ideas need to be crafted into a workable package.

In this article I will attempt to propose an integrated and strategic plan for positive, far-reaching change in Subud.

The proposal is presented as a sequence of topics. Each topic has:
- The topic heading, describing the essentials of a proposed change.
- A discussion of the proposal.
- A bullet-point summary of principles that must be followed, or things that must be done, for the proposed change to work.

Be aware that this is an outline plan, discussing mainly first principles. A plan having sufficient detail to cover and fully justify everything proposed would require a great deal more space than a single article can allow. Also, there are matters where one cannot be sure that a given approach is the right course to take, and therefore one can only indicate a direction towards which we must move, taking advantage of the opportunity and the willingness to experiment.

## 1.	Change should be local not global

An article in a Subud periodical contrasts the atmosphere at gatherings with the average member's experience of their group. It describes how members are increasingly turning to the large national and international events for sustenance. These serve up a powerful spiritual and social cocktail: multiple latihans, a friendly atmosphere, enjoyable cultural events, testing with helpers whom you don't know and therefore can get along with, and the opportunity to meet up with old friends from around the globe. The conclusion: "Gatherings are good for you." Not a wrong conclusion but it would have been better if that article's focus had been on devising solutions for the often poor local situation of Subud rather than just promoting gatherings as some sort of palliative.

- The local group is the "sharp-end" of Subud, where the benefits and problems of Subud are persistently experienced by the members and where ultimately Subud will succeed or fail. Accordingly, our efforts for change should be concentrated at the group level.
- Change may be needed also at the international level, but there is a danger that much energy could be expended on inward looking issues that have very little direct relevance to the members. Better to improve the local situation first.

## 2.	Change cannot be driven internationally

Subud has an upward structure from group to region to country to zone and finally to WSA. However, this structure does not function in a strictly hierarchical manner. Each level operates with a certain amount of autonomy, so the question is not, "Who should give the orders?" but "Where should the impetus for change best come from?" Subud is a truly international movement that has spread to many different countries right around the world. This becomes a weakness for decision making at the Zonal or WSA level due to the difficulties of communication, language translation, and reaching consensus amongst points of view originating from very different cultures and material situations. For purely practical reasons, therefore, it is difficult to imagine a comprehensive plan for change emanating from and being manageable by the international levels of Subud.

- The best way to drive change is within an individual country. Communication, decision-making and feedback of results can all be achieved much more efficiently and quickly than at the zonal or the international level.

## 3.	Change can only be independently driven

Subud does not choose its committee officials by voting on their "political platform" nor on the basis of their ability, drive or qualifications. They are mainly chosen on the basis of willingness and because testing says they are okay. This is not a system that can guarantee us people with the skills necessary to manage substantial change. Furthermore our system of rotating committee posts at annual, bi-annual or four-year intervals works against effective continuity.

If we accept that Subud's current organisational structure is not suitable for promoting and managing major change, we are left with the question of how such change should be promoted. The only answer is to form an independent organisation, a kind of service organisation which will gather people with appropriate expertise in management and which can help Subud to change.

- Change cannot be effectively driven through the existing committee system of

tested in and rotating volunteers. An independent and permanent service organisation is needed to drive change.

- The service organisation would not be an alternative power base to the national committee. Its role would be to promote, advise and to provide support for change.
- Some would say we don't need another layer within the existing Subud bureaucracy. I agree. The service organisation should be fully independent of the Subud committee system. As a reader previewing this article remarked: "The last thing you want is a committee set up to review the recommendations."
- A service organisation might even be a private initiative having no official sponsorship.

## 4.	Prescribing member behaviour won't work

We need to look at how a service organisation can bring about change, but, first, to pre-empt misunderstanding, we must eliminate any suspicion that it will be prescribing how members should behave.

In case the reader has been lucky enough not to have been a victim of attempts to prescribe behaviour in Subud, here are two examples:

Example 1: "Subud is ourselves!"
A favourite lecture topic of speakers at meetings. It is insinuated that if everyone were "doing their best for Subud" or "taking the trouble to truly feel their responsibilities" then everything would magically work out for the better. By the same logic, the mayor of London could claim that traffic congestion does not need a re-examination of parking policy, building light rail systems, incentives for car-pooling and so on—the only thing that is needed is for every commuter to "do their best" and "feel strongly their individual responsibility".

Example 2: "Build member closeness through frequent socialising"
While a modicum of social interaction is certainly good for group cohesion, it is a fallacy to assume that a large increase in the amount of social contact will lead to a proportional improvement in members' attitudes to each other. If the number of social events is overdone, they can easily be felt as a burden or imposition, both for the participants and the organisers, leading to long-term friction and even to a longing for greater separateness rather than greater togetherness.

- While it can sometimes be worthwhile pointing out where members' behaviour in general may be lacking and where we could make improvements for our collective good, we must be careful not to take such exhortations too far, so that we then seem to be imposing a behavioural code on the membership.
- Any attempt to prescribe behaviour may be felt as an infringement of personal liberty and as such will be tacitly resisted, thus not achieving the intended benefits.
- Whether or not members conform to the prescribed behaviour is something over which we have no control, and therefore cannot be part of a reliable strategy for change.

5. Sign up to a flexible framework

What is good organisation? A good organiser does not dictate every aspect of what people should be doing. He/She creates an environment in which people are enabled to contribute their talents and energies, following their own initiative, towards an agreed set of aims. At the same time, a good organiser does not allow a free-for-all situation. There will be clearly-stated, enforceable guidelines, designed to prevent

actions which work against the common good.

An example of a flexible framework in practice is the SubudVision project itself. Two Subud members devised the framework, (which is described in detail on www.subudvison.org/faq.htm) and then asked other members to sign up to the idea as editors or as authors. The framework allows authors to write about any topic they want, and to be as critical as they want, without fear of censorship of their expressed opinion. At the same time the framework states rules, such as "no personal accusations" and "an author is required to back up statements with a proper supporting argument". The various rules were designed not to restrict authors but to work to their collective advantage by encouraging a high quality debate. So we have freedom and rules working hand in hand.

- The service organisation for bringing about change in Subud should provide a flexible framework for change that empowers people to help the development of Subud by using their energies and creativity guided by their own initiative.
- At the same time the framework design must learn from past experience and provide enforceable rules to prevent a recurrence of those wrong situations in Subud that disrupt our efforts and work against our collective success.

6.   Create a microcosm of what Subud is supposed to be

*"*The mission of Subud can be divided into the core mission, which is the practice of the latihan, and the broader mission—loosely, the manifestation of the latihan in the world. Bapak spoke many times about what would be considered the fruits of the latihan as a natural extension of the practice. People with true human qualities are able to see beyond their own needs; they experience a wish to be charitable, to help others. Likewise the area of creative expression—human culture—is an outgrowth of the latihan. The impulses that arise from the practice of the latihan have the potential to provide tangible proof of what the latihan can do and can touch others.*"* (from Lusijah Rott's article "Presence in the World", on SubudVision)

I place my cards on the table here. Unless Subud finds an outlet for the latihan through the promotion of entrepreneurial, cultural and charitable projects that can engage members' interest, talents or support then I believe that Subud will continue to implode and will not survive.

The service organisation should become a repository of expertise in small-scale project development centred round the development and support of members' individual talents. Subud enterprise should no longer be engaged in on the scale of Anugraha (Kalimantan excepted, as that is still on-going). Anugraha could have worked at the time, but now such projects would be too risky, too remote, and too far removed from members' everyday experience of Subud. If we ever can raise capital again we can spread it more widely and effectively on projects that are close to home.

It may be that prospective projects will lack for certain key people who cannot be provided by the local Subud group. In that case enlist help from the wider community. Activity attracts active people. Such people may even join Subud as a result of being involved and such people are just those whom we should value as potential new members.

One word of caution: when we engage in projects we should be doing them for their inherent benefit, because they are good things to be involved in, not so that we can boast about them or make claim to be more special than anyone else. Let us not repeat the "SICA mistake".

The name S.I.C.A stands for Subud International Cultural Organisation. It is a sub-organisation of Subud, intended to promote the development of culture in its broadest sense, similar to the way the sub-organisation, Susila Dharma, so skilfully promotes and supports Subud's charitable aims. Unfortunately, in the minds of many members, "S.I.C.A." the organisation has confusedly transmuted to "SICA", the invented human quality. Suddenly all other culture, past and present, is inferior, lacks inspiration from God, is nothing more than "performers on ego-trips", and so on and so on. Some exhort us to walk round all day with a "SICA glow". Others have even been known to "test their SICA", which is quite an achievement considering that we don't have a "SICA"; it is only an abbreviation! Let's drop this kind of idiocy once and for all and instead adopt a more level-headed and humble approach to our ventures, heeding this warning from the writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: "It takes talent to recognise genius, but mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself."

- Bapak warned us in his talks that we must put the latihan into practice or it may not turn out to be the source of enlightenment that we hope for. The service organisation should develop expertise and provide support for the development of projects at the group level that provide an outlet for the developing talents of individual members, whether this be in the field of business, culture or humanitarian activities.
- Actively seek partnership in these projects with the wider community as a way of raising the profile of Subud and perhaps also attracting new, active and capable members. This can include working in partnership with other organisations as well as with individuals.

7.   Fixing leakage is worth a try but may not work

In an article for SubudVision, Edward Baker proposes that Subud organisations introduce some sort of systematic feedback process so they can gather and collate accurate information about why members leave. In the absence of such data the best we can do is guess, and a reasonable guess might be that there are two types of reason for leaving:

1)   What Subud offers in terms of members' or helpers' behaviour or our general culture does not live up to expectations. Over a period of time these contradictions with Subud's status as a spiritual movement increasingly rankle, with the result that the member eventually leaves.
2)   The latihan is a slow and often difficult spiritual path. Therefore it may be a matter of simple statistics that the majority of those opened will not stay the course, even if the helpers make every best effort to assist those members experiencing doubts or difficulties.

If option (1) were the main reason for leakage, then with more precise knowledge we might be able to do something about it, and for this reason there could be great value in collecting data in the way that Edward proposes in his article. One might even suggest that a retrospective survey should be carried out, contacting members who have left Subud over, say, the last five or ten years.

However if option (2) were the main reason for leakage, then concentrating our efforts on trying to retain members would be a waste of time. We would need to accept that a high percentage of leavers is an inherent characteristic of the spiritual path of Subud, and instead concentrate our energies on increasing the number of joiners by changing our promotional methods.

This is not an either/or choice. In practice we would expect maybe both types of reason to influence a member who decides to leave, but, if it turns out that reason (2)

is the more significant, then the possibility of boosting our numbers by fixing leakage may be more limited than we hoped.

- We should instigate research and the collection of information for ascertaining why so many members leave. At the same time we must prepare for the possibility that the greater majority leave for reasons which are not the fault of the helpers, members, or the Subud organisation in general, and which therefore are beyond our power to fix.

8.   Improve and widen the appeal of our publicity

If we can't fix the decrease in our numbers caused by members leaving, then we need to attend instead to why not many people are joining. In fact we very much need to attend to this in any case.

There are many articles on the SubudVision web site pointing out the contradiction between the image we would like to project of Subud as a non-religious, non-dogmatic, guru-free spiritual way, and the image we actually project through our leaflets, web sites and general culture, which is of something more like a cult or sect, with many internal rules and practices, and an apparent reverence for a guru and his written texts. Clearly we need to clean up our act.

If we really believe ourselves to be religion-, guru- and dogma-free then we must rewrite our leaflets and web pages to reflect this philosophy. For those worried about diminishing the importance of Bapak, I suggest we have already diminished him—by so demonstrably failing to take to heart his constant urging that he was merely a caretaker and not the centre of the Subud experience.

In her article for SubudVision, Helen Bailie warns us against "Bait and Switch". Her warning should be heeded. We may well revamp web sites and printed literature to improve our presentation of Subud, but that is not the end of the story. If the publicity is saying "religion-, dogma- and guru-free", but our attitudes and spoken philosophy as encountered by applicants and new members is saying the opposite, then we have only solved one half of the problem.

- Our web sites need to be revamped to present a clean dogma-free, guru-free, religion-free image of Subud.
- Our concepts of what is important in Subud and what is peripheral need re-examination, so that we can back up our publicised image with a reality that conforms to, rather than contradicts, that image.

9.   Experiment with changing applicant procedures

Some writers on SubudVision have queried the applicant waiting period, saying that it is too long in the context of the pace of modern society. Another question that arises is, should we always make the opening subject to testing about whether it is the right time or not?

We should be willing to experiment with the applicant waiting period. Here's a suggestion. The waiting period is supposed to give the applicant time to gain an understanding of what they are letting themselves in for. If this can be achieved through a smaller number of applicants' meetings, then why not open the person sooner?

- Experiment with the applicant waiting period. Assess results. At the moment many members join and leave quite soon, despite the three-month waiting period, so

we have no evidence that the existing arrangement is working either.

10.   Promotion must be pro-active

There are those who say that attempting to increase the membership numbers should be no concern of ours because "God is the One who leads people to join". What one usually finds is that proponents of this viewpoint do not have a problem with putting Subud books in libraries, or creating Subud web sites or information leaflets. It is as if they are saying, "It's all up to God, but nevertheless we need to give God a helping hand." But there is an inherent contradiction between someone saying, "It's all God's will," and at the same time saying, "We ourselves can decide the extent and the limit to which God's will needs our help."

One suggestion has been to target "likely converts" by putting leaflets in new-age venues, and so on. There is no harm in this, but I suggest we can potentially attract a lot more numbers by targeting people who don't know yet that they want to join a spiritual movement. If you find this idea a little crazy, I ask you to consider this—how many people before the 1980s considered that they needed a personal computer? How many people, in fact, knew what a personal computer was, or even knew that such a thing could exist? By contrast, how many of us nowadays could do without a computer, even if we only use it for email? Those early computer manufacturers did a clever thing. They didn't just advertise to "techies". Instead they packaged and advertised the computer in a form acceptable to a mass market, thus creating a need that people didn't know they had.

Similarly, we believe that Subud, in its ideal, dogma-free, religion-free form is something that could appeal to anyone, if only they could be made aware of it. How many people in fact are aware at the moment that such a thing as Subud could exist—where you can just walk into a room, and without any imposition of religious or philosophical belief, without any compulsory sacrifice or lifestyle change, and regardless of whether you are of good or bad character, immediately start to receive something of benefit for yourself not only for this world but maybe even for the next world? Like the early computer manufacturers we must publicise with a broad appeal and not just target that much smaller subset of people whom we assume, perhaps mistakenly, would be our natural audience.

I propose that we should create a "shop-window" for Subud by renting or leasing commercial property in shopping street locations. Note that I don't say "purchase", because of the larger financial outlay and risk. With a consistent "logo" and shop-front style we would create permanent awareness of the existence of Subud, and such premises could become a focal point for organising, supporting and promoting the projects described in Topic no. 6. Note that I am using the term "shop-window" in its metaphorical sense—it doesn't literally have to be a shop that sells things. Neither would we want the place to seem like a thinly disguised spider-web just for distributing propaganda. Such premises would have to be set up and managed with skill, and open and honest professionalism. The service organisation would have a crucial advisory role here.

- Create a "shop-window" for Subud through renting property in shopping street locations to provide a centre for information, for co-ordination of projects, a social centre and so on. The usage adapted to whatever best matches the entrepreneurial, cultural and charitable activities of the local group.
- The service organisation would as a priority develop and provide expertise in the setting up of such centres as viable, effective propositions.

11.   Stop governing like a tribe

Success in pro-actively publicising Subud could be wasted if we don't also fix the worse excesses of our committee and helper systems. This topic looks at the committee; the next topic looks at the helpers.

Have you noticed how similar our Subud group meetings are to a tribal pow-wow? Members gather from far and wide, sit round in a circle and everyone has their say. Like the ancient tribes there is no paper communication of the issues in advance, no proper preparation or consultation with experts, no follow-up reporting; it's all done in and for the moment. And just as in a tribal situation, the "elders", i.e. those people who have gained the greater social status, always seem to enjoy a disproportionate amount of influence.

An organisation that can only make major decisions through consensus in a meeting is bound to foster disharmony and discontent when those meetings are insufficiently representative. Unlike the ancient tribes, we in the modern world can't all gather conveniently on receipt of a smoke signal. There are those too busy to attend, and those who don't perform well at meetings and shy away from them. Subud's meeting-obsessed culture quickly becomes unrepresentative. We need to prevent the stranglehold of governance by these cliques.

In countries where email is commonplace, vote by email on important issues so that everyone can be involved. Allow objections to policy to be raised and debated without insisting that a meeting be called to validate the objection. Establish minimum standards for reporting and feedback so that all the members get the opportunity to comment and vote on issues in an informed way, and are not just told "we had a meeting at which the attendees decided such and such".

For those who say we have to do everything through meetings because without personal contact Subud projects can't possibly be made to work, I say that is pure spiritual bunkum. In our own small and modest way, we have disproved that idea with the SubudVision project, the whole thing including the book production being debated and organised through email alone (2000+ and counting). Several of the organisers have not even met each other.

- Revamp our system of committee governance. Some ideas are suggested in this section, but it is a big topic and there is insufficient space to cover and justify proposals in detail.
- The service organisation would create a handbook of good practice, promote a proper standard of information flow and reporting in Subud, and monitor the establishment and maintenance of democratic systems that prevent members' opinions from ever being marginalised.

12.   Repair flaws in the helper system

In an article for SubudVision, Rosalind Priestley undertakes a detailed analysis of the helper system and points out its inherent flaws and pitfalls. Before agreeing with Rosalind's conclusion that we should replace the helper system, it is worth a try to see if we can introduce some improvements.

Firstly, there is a case to be made for helper training. This is not at all a revolutionary idea. For the *kejiwaan*, they already do train through helper latihans, meetings, and testing together as advised by Bapak. There is however an aspect of helper work of equal importance to the *kejiwaan* that many helpers do fail badly at, and that is skill in dealing with people. How many of us have not witnessed a helper behaving in a presumptuous or arrogant manner towards someone who comes to them for testing? Quite often the result is that the person avoids testing with that helper again, maybe

even avoiding testing with any helpers. A bad experience of this nature can also cause a member to have serious doubts about Subud and the spirituality of its members, such that they eventually leave. It should not be beyond our wit to devise training courses in people skills for helpers, in an attempt to pre-empt at least the worst of these kinds of incident. Additionally, such skills are of course of paramount importance when talking to applicants.

Secondly, there is a case to be made for "helper pools". In the '70s Bapak decreed that the number of helpers should be greatly increased. This reduced the feeling that the helpers were elitist and also eased the burden of work on the existing helpers. Why not increase the numbers again, but instead of them all being active at once, have a rotating pool of helpers? For example, if a group has ten helpers, have six active at any one time, and, say, every year two helpers become temporarily inactive while another two become active again. This system would increase the number of members involved in helper activities, thus further reducing elitism where it exists, and it would give the helpers a break of a year or two every so often, distributing the burden of helper work more fairly and evenly.

Thirdly, create a formal system for acknowledging that helpers are only human and will sometimes get things wrong. Institute a respected mechanism for those wrongs to be put right. I will call it the "helper audit". This will be an opportunity for any member who feels they have been inappropriately treated in a testing session, or over some other matter concerning the helpers, to lodge a complaint, and have the matter discussed by the helpers' group as a whole. The aim is not a witch-hunt, nor public exposure of the helper's alleged wrong-doing. It is intended to be a confidential and sober process by which the helpers can collectively look at a problem, determine what went wrong, learn for the future, and find a way to make amends to the member so that the bitterness does not continue to fester.

- We should experiment with devising and evaluating helper training courses to improve helpers' skills in dealing with people.
- Create helper-pools, periodically rotating the helpers who are currently active or inactive. This will strengthen participation in and enthusiasm for helper activity by sharing the burden.
- Hold periodic "helper audits", where members can confidentially air grievances and hopefully have them resolved through discussion and, if necessary, testing. If the member's complaint is upheld, the helpers can all learn from this experience. A regular audit could do much to patch up problems and maintain good relations within a group. It is very important that the helper audit should be a *formal* system and a regular occurrence, because this makes it very much easier for members to raise issues without having to feel that they are causing unnecessary disturbance.

Conclusion

I have outlined a scheme for revitalising Subud at the group level. The limited space of an article unfortunately prohibits more in-depth discussion and has only permitted a taste of some of the things that could and should be done. I have suggested that it will be necessary to form an independent service organisation to guide and support groups instigating the proposed changes. This would have a permanency and continuity not enjoyed by Subud committees, enabling it to develop long-term expertise through experience.

A reasonable question is how an independent organisation, like the proposed service organisation, could be given any authority to act? The answer is: by showing that the proposals for change actually work in practice. However, it is unrealistic to expect Subud as a whole to adopt ideas which aren't yet proven. Better to trial the scheme

through one or two interested groups. The scheme itself would of course benefit from the feedback from such experiments and would thereby undergo further improvements or design changes.

There may be some readers who support the ideas for change, but who are concerned about the proposed service organisation becoming an alternative Subud organisation. I have to come clean at this point—that's Plan B.

Plan A, the preferred plan, is for change to come about within Subud. I am currently unconvinced that members have a strong enough desire for change but my hope is that the experiments with change through a few initially interested groups would lead to more and more being persuaded to embrace the changes as time goes on.

However, what should we do if it turns out that the majority of members have locked themselves into a passive, rigid mindset from which they have no easy escape route? Then, I see no reason why Subud should continue to enjoy its current monopoly over the spread of the latihan. Hence, Plan B. The new organisation unfettered by the mistakes and prejudices of the past may be able to make a much better job of it. After fifty years we can hardly claim that Subud hasn't been given a fair chance.