

Common Ground Initiative Peer Learning Programme

Strategic Planning Workshop Report

22nd February 2011

1. Welcome and opening session

'I want to think about how to make my strategic plan come alive, not just for myself, but so that it can be empowering for my organisations' stakeholders'

(participant at the start of the workshop)

The workshop opened with Cornelius Murombedzi from INTRAC stating that the ethos of the day was to learn from one another, rather than to receive teaching. Participants said what they hoped to get out of the workshop. Several mentioned that they were reviewing their strategic plans and wanted to learn helpful processes. Others wanted to explore communicating their strategic plan to partners, engage trustees and staff in the process of strategic planning, and challenge their thinking.

Cornelius then outlined 'process objectives' for the workshop: to (1) explore experiences of strategic planning, and (2) share learning with one another; and 'results objectives', to increase our understanding of (3) the process and (4) the use of strategic planning, and (5) increase competencies in strategic planning.

2. The what and why of strategic planning

Rick James, INTRAC

Rick started by saying that many problems which development organisations face are linked to strategy. Common dilemmas around strategy include:

- There are endless needs which are closely interrelated, so where do you draw a line when there are always good reasons for getting further involved?
- Strategy is often closely linked to funding – how can you guess how strategy will relate to the funding environment?
- The world we operate in is complex and dynamic, and so strategies will always face unexpected changes from the external environment.

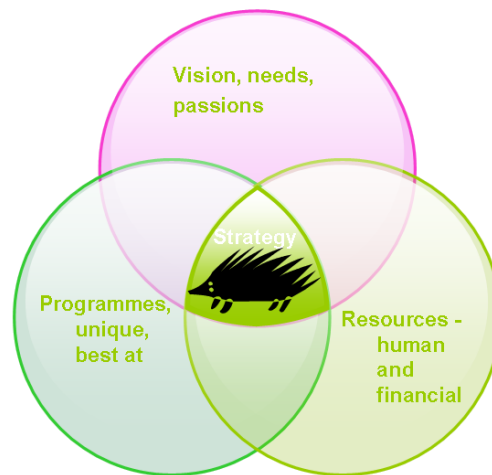
Mentioning the overwhelming amount of information out there on 'strategy', and exploring participants various understandings of the term, Rick emphasised the point that strategy means different things to different people: there is not 'one answer' to strategic planning - but there are good principles about what works and doesn't work.

Rick went on to mention different models for strategic planning – with a note of caution that 'all models are wrong but some are useful'. The first was the 'hedgehog concept', from Jim Collins' work with the commercial sector. The idea behind this is, like a hedgehog that has one very effective strategy when threatened (rolling up in a ball), strategy should be based on identifying what your organisation does very well. There are three sets of questions to ask which can help identify this strategic focus:

- What are the vision and the passions of our organisation?
- What are the unique strengths of our organisation? What can we do best compared to others? What is our 'calling'?
- What are the human and financial resources that we have?

The important thing is to draw a tighter focus as you ask these questions, working down from a broad vision to looking at what your organisation can do where all three areas overlap. This will involve drawing boundaries and saying no - which is

challenging – it is easy to find yourself doing things that are useful, but not what you are uniquely and best called to do.



Another model for strategic planning is to use the picture of a road or path. This involves identifying where your organisation is now, where you want to be, and thinking of strategy as mapping out the path to get to the vision. Again, this involves drawing boundaries – distinguishing between areas where you will and will not go.

Rick then invited participants to discuss what two Malawian proverbs might tell us about strategy:

- *Ichi chakoma, ichi chakoma, pusi anagwa m'chagada* - here delicious things, there delicious things, the monkey falls flat on its back
- *Pakadafunda padajiwitsa galu* - a dog sitting on a warm place does not move despite warnings of approaching lion

Discussion revolved around issues of opportunity – that, like the monkey in the proverb, organisations without a clear strategy can find it difficult to focus on their unique contribution in development when there are opportunities, which can distract. Like the dog in the proverb, a lack of strategy can lead us to stay with what is easy and comfortable, especially in terms of what funding is available for, even when staying in this position will be dangerous in the long term.

So from these reflections, what conclusions about the 'what and why of strategic planning' can be drawn? Rick set out his vision – that strategy is:

1. **Knowing who you are**
2. **Analysing what actually brings change**
3. **Predicting changes in environment**
4. **Appraising self honestly**
then
5. **Making choices**

The process of strategic planning involves the first four elements, after which choices can be laid out in the strategic plan itself.

Knowing who you are: questions of identity will need to be clarified when thinking about strategy. You need to revisit questions like: Why does our organisation exist? What do we bring to the world?

Analysing what actually brings change: this doesn't mean focussing on the indicators and the deadlines, but thinking about what actually brings change. What does change look like? Who is empowered? We need to engage with the assumptions we have about how change happens, our 'theory of change'.

Predicting changes in environment: this is difficult, but something that we should attempt. An illustration of this is the story of an ice hockey player who said the secret of his success was 'skating to where the puck will be', the gap it is travelling towards rather than where it is at the present moment. It does involve risk, but it is important to take action early by looking at opportunities and threats around you, rather than waiting until changes happen to you.

Appraising self honestly: this simply means being brutally honest as an organisation about your strengths and weaknesses. What are we good at? What are we not good at? The organisation needs to be able to be self critical.

Making choices: finally, after the four elements above have been taken into account in the process, a strategic plan is documenting the choices that emerge. The strategic plan should not be a 'shopping list' of things we want, but documenting choices that the organisation want to make. Strategy is emergent and the plan will need to be revisited. The strategic plan is a 'big picture', directional document which should last 2-5 years, and should be complemented by an operational plan which focuses on shorter term goals.

Rick ended by reminding participants that strategy involves drawing boundaries, that a company that is able to say what it doesn't do has a strategy. While development organisations are often good at vision, they are not necessarily good at priorities and choice. He added a cautionary note – that although strategy is very important, it is not the answer to all the problems we face - giving an anecdote about a 'strategic planning' job he was asked to help with, where the issues were really those of leadership and corruption, and couldn't be solved with strategy.

Reflections

Makonen Getu, INTRAC associate

Looking back at the 'hedgehog concept' where the first step in strategy is identifying vision – visions should be about the people who the organisation serves – if not led by that, strategy will stumble. In considering the people we serve, it's important not to 'address needs' but to 'develop potential'. Going out to identify potential will build on people's positive pride rather than resulting in a sad story of needs. Thus we should be 'potential-based strategising' not 'needs-based strategising'. We should also be cautious of being too strongly confined by 'resources available' in case it results in being 'donor driven'.

Efua Dorkenoo, Equality Now

Working in the women's human rights sector, a lot of the work undertaken can be complex, even explosive, and this leads to a difficulty in strategic planning. In this situation it can be problematic to take a 'whatever the partner wants is fine' approach to strategic planning – and it can be easy for strategic planning to get confused by different ideological positions surrounding the issues.

Kenny Ewan, Cafedirect Producers Foundation

When CDF was set up, a huge, beautiful strategic plan was written, but it was not very useful. As a small organisation in particular, it is crucial that the strategic plan is not a pile of jargon, but attempts to capture some key things, and is useable. Rick added that strategy should be taken seriously and lightly at the same time.

3. PLP members' strategic planning experiences

Peer Learning Programme members

Survivor's Fund – David Russell

David began by explaining his role in the organisation – that he had taken over as Director in 2009 after working alongside the organisation for several years. Coming as the first director after the founder-director, he had a good opportunity to try and develop a strategic plan 'owned' not only by the organisation but the partners. He took 10 lessons from the process:

1. **Scope broadly:** he looked widely at the strategic plans of organisations of a similar size, with similar work or with a similar geographical focus, and picked out the best. He noticed that many large organisations had short strategic plans, which prompted to think about how to express things concisely.
2. **Consult widely:** first with the Board (made up of a mix of survivors of the Rwandan genocide and development professionals) and then took it to partners and staff.
3. **Regularly review the plan:** it was decided that 3 years was a appropriate length of time to review the plan, as long enough to allow the plan to address bigger questions and short enough to remain practical.
4. **Should be practical:** even when it is broad, should be able to work out an operational plan from it.
5. **Publishing and sharing the plan once it is developed:** its important to publish and share beyond the board and donors. Survivor's Fund decided to make it quite prominent on the website and distributed among partner organisations in the hope it would help them in their strategic planning.
6. **Process is as important and product.**
7. It should be **succinct and easy to remember.**
8. It should be **contextualised, including to the funding environment.**
9. It should be **aligned with organisational choices and priorities.**
10. **Ask difficult questions from a bigger perspective:** this was easier to do as a director coming from 'the outside'. For Survivor's Fund this involved asking tricky questions such as 'should we be looking to wind down?'

GHARWEG – Yen Nyeya

Yen gave a brief history of GHARWEG, which started as a small diaspora organisation in 1985. It emerged not with a plan and strategy, but as a group of African individuals who had ended up in the UK for political reasons. Yen stated that a major achievement of the organisation had been to survive and maintain their services.

He then went on to outline GHARWEG's strategic plan: that their mission and vision is to see 'a society in which migrant and disadvantaged groups play a full part'. He talked about how their strategic focus had evolved beyond an initial focus on African groups only. This has been prompted by their practical experience – that other marginalised groups use their service and attend their programmes – even the white working class. The overarching vision translates into three main aims, which filter down into objectives; and activities, resources and timelines needed to meet these.

Yen ended by saying that there are limitations in the current approach, but that strategic planning was an evolving process for GHARWEG, that is being revisited through the peer learning programme, amongst other things.

Africare – Charles Oduka

Charles introduced himself as chair of the Board of Africare, a diaspora organisation who were established to meet the needs of those facing HIV/AIDS in the UK, and whose work has evolved to support work with those facing HIV/AIDS in Uganda. Their current strategic plan is coming to an end this year and they are revisiting it.

Charles went on to reflect on a few challenges Africare has seen in strategic planning. Firstly, it is a challenge to bring the UK and international facets of their work together, both in terms of communicating this coherently, and how they work in practice. Secondly, there is a challenge in developing a strategic plan that is alive for: a) themselves as an organisation; b) people they work with; and c) donors and external stakeholders. Related to this is the dilemma of staying 'true to yourself' whilst leveraging resources.

4. Group discussions: Strategic planning experiences

Participants split into three discussion groups, focussing on the question: What can we apply from the experiences of others that we have heard?

Group A

- Importance of looking at the difference between the idea of planning and strategy, and looking at how everything fits together.
- Plan time to motivate others, to develop a plan which speaks to strategy.
- Identify an independent person who can help facilitate process.
- Need for renewal every three years (five seems too long) – its good to provoke hard questions in our organisations, to 'throw the bomb!'
- 'Review, renew and learn' annually, and present succinctly

Group B

The group came up with key questions that had been provoked by the day so far:

- How do you engage your stakeholders?
- How do you get a representative picture of the needs of the beneficiaries?
- Who should the strategic plan be for?
- How do you get all stakeholders to buy into the need for a strategy?
- Keep it simple!
- How do you best address problems in getting the board involved?

Group C

This group used David Russell's '10 lessons' as a framework for their discussion:

- Scope broadly
- Consult widely: with partners, board, beneficiaries, and volunteers
- Regularly review
- Practical/feasible: the strategic plan should be a practical tool
- Publish/share: the plan is linked to organisational identity. In writing it should factor in all audiences, it should be a universal document.
- Process is as important as product: strategy should be linked to planning
- Succinct

- Contextualised: the funding environment and political environments are helpful
- Aligned: with organisational choices and priorities
- Big questions: it should be about the larger perspective

Finally, the group reflected that strategic planning links to good annual reporting.

5. How to do strategic planning

Rick James, INTRAC

Rick explained that while there is not really an easy 'how to' answer to strategic planning, there are things that will stand you in good stead: asking some simple critical questions, clarifying which stakeholders to involve and why, and sticking to a few key principles.

He referred to one possible framework for strategic planning (see handout) highlighting that operational planning is very different from thinking about long-term strategy, and it is good not to leap too soon into operational planning but to reflect on strategic dilemmas, such as:

- Do we give a little help for many or more intensive support for few?
- Do we treat the symptoms or try to get to the cause?
- Do we provide services or campaign for change?
- Do we focus or do we diversify our services?
- Do we hold virtuously to our beliefs or are we tempted by new resources?

Participants discussed these dilemmas. One participant from a small organisation part of a larger commercial parent organisation mentioned the conflicting pressures they face from the impetus for 'good marketing' and the dilemma of holding true to doing activities that are true to their mission. Other commented that being 'tempted by new resources' required a balance of judgement between times to hold to our strategy and responding to new good opportunities.

A small organisation talked of the relevance of the 'services vs campaigning' dilemma for her organisation – that they saw that moving towards advocacy was important for the future but were worried about their and their partners lack of capacity in this areas. A diaspora organisation agreed that the advocacy/ service delivery dilemma was particularly tricky for small and diaspora organisations, but argued that it doesn't need to be an 'either/or' dilemma – service delivery should inform advocacy and vice versa. Rick commented that this is true – but very good management is required if you are to do both. One diaspora organisation commented that you need a certain level of capacity to even consider and address these questions – and that we should keep a realistic view of capacity.

From these discussions, Rick outlined two critical strategy questions:

- **Who do you exist to serve?** If you get this clear it often makes things easier.
- **If they knew what you could offer, what would they ask you to do?** If who you exist to serve knew you intimately and clearly, what would they ask you to help them with so their lives would be changed in the long term)?

After this there was discussion around who needs to be involved in strategic planning, around questions such as.

- What is the role of the board in strategy development?
- What is the role of staff?

- What about other stakeholders? Donors? Government? Partner organisations? Beneficiaries? How do you think they should be involved?
- What methods would be appropriate for the different groups?

There was animated discussion around the role of Boards in strategy development, with some participants feeling that they needed to push the process from the start, and set out expectations for having a strategy. Others felt that if the Board had too much weight that the strategy could be taken in a direction different to one that would work on the ground, and they needed to get the views of staff and partners clear and strong before Board input. An INTRAC associate commented that in principle the role of the Board is as custodian and ultimate holder of the strategic plan for the organisation – and should be able to ask big questions of strategy well – however, in young organisations Boards are often dominated by founders’ friends and can have a weak understanding of their role. It was confirmed that one of the forthcoming workshops will be on Organisational Governance.

Rick ended with five key principles for strategic planning, saying that if participants could take these into their processes, their strategic planning would be stronger than many other organisations.

1. **Listen and learn**
2. **Make hard choices**
3. **Ensure leadership driving**
4. **Get staff ownership**
5. **Keep it simple**

Listen and learn: Firstly, strategic planning should take evaluations and past experiences of both the organisation and its beneficiaries into account seriously. This means that evaluations and strategic planning should be interlinked: forward-looking evaluations, and strategic plans based on long experience. Secondly, strategic plans should be based on what is known about good practice – many organisations have a lot of good learning that is not applied. Thirdly, both faith-based organisations and others should leave space for reflection and discernment.

Make hard choices: There will be hard questions to ask about what we do that makes the most different, and this links to issues of resources, though those should not be the primary driver of the choices. Exercises such as portfolio analysis can be used. Prioritisation is crucial so that we can *‘take change by the hand and lead it where we want to go, rather than waiting for it to grab us by the throat and drag us where we don’t want to go.’* There may need to be ‘strategic funerals’, celebrating elements of your work that have been good, but are no longer a priority.

Ensure leadership driving: Strategic planning can be a profoundly sensitive process, often bound up with leaders’ identities, and founders’ role and leaders may need to change their views, or in some cases, need to change their role.

Get staff ownership: The process is very important – strategic plans might look good, but if they are not owned by staff then they will not use it. This will not always be easy, and consensus will not always be there, but staff should be encouraged to look to the interests of the whole organisation, not just their particular segments – this links back to the need for strong leadership. Another facilitator commented that the ownership of beneficiaries should also be sought and the final document and its implications should be clearly explained to them.

Keep it simple: Looking for the essence of what your organisation wants to be and do is important. Often a simple image, characterisation or metaphor, such as 'a bridge' or 'yeast' will capture the essence of your strategic aims.

6. Group discussions: Sharing and applying learning

In three smaller groups, participants discussed

- Their own experience of strategic planning with the peer group
- How could this be improved in future?
- Action points to take forward

Group A

This group reflected on 'how things can be improved' in their organisations' strategic planning:

- Engage beneficiaries and partners more effectively through 'bottom up' strategic planning – issues around language will be important here
- Be more vision-led - with longer term dreams
- Strategic planning should become a part of a capacity building with partners
- Clarify what is visionary and what is resource driven
- Undertake regular reviews that inform strategic planning
- Process is as important as product – the process could be facilitated / written by consultant but must be owned by organisation and staff
- Strategy needs to have the beneficiaries at the core – need to empower / build their capacities

Group B

This group reflected on how we engage our partners in strategic planning processes:

- Recognise the need for two way communication.
- Challenges:
 - Power dynamics - a view of UK organisations as 'funders'
 - One dominant person in partner NGO can affect relationship and staff participation in partner organisations
 - Creating and agreeing on a common vision
- Some ideas for engaging partners:
 - Questions sent to partners in advance to gauge their positions
 - Need to keep it simple, recognising that time is an issue even if they are keen to input
 - Process also has added value of leading by example – collective responsibility
 - Face to face contact is important for learning, fostering openness and participation
 - Sharing outcomes at end of participatory process
 - Draft documentation shared

Group C

- Challenges can include dominant people as a block to participatory planning
- But if managed correctly, strategic planning can be a really helpful process
- Linking evaluation to strategy is a useful principle to keep in mind
- The group was comprised of different sized organisations and this gave both a challenge and added interest to sharing their learning with one another.

7. Summary

Participants had the opportunity to ask questions of Rupal Mistry (Comic Relief), Karen Goodman-Jones (Workshop participant - Woodford Foundation), Makonen Getu (INTRAC Associate), and Rick James (INTRAC)

Rupal - What are Comic Relief's expectations around strategic planning? How does Comic Relief engage with grantholders around strategic planning?

It is very important to Comic Relief, and part of wanting to see grantholders learn and develop. Firstly, Comic Relief are interested in looking at the 'big picture' of where organisations are going when assessing how they will support certain projects – what is the project fitting into? Secondly, focus on learning has changed over the last few years, they are not just interested in learning in programme work 'on the ground' but learning that is about the relationship between you and your partners. Therefore your strategic direction can tell us about those elements. Comic Relief engages with grantholders around strategic planning in impact workshops and learning workshops.

When we develop strategy processes who are we accountable too? How do needs of both donors and beneficiaries feed into the process?

(Rupal) Comic Relief sees a great deal of value in supporting local partners, and to us, partners are a key target group as well as beneficiaries.

(Makonen)The organisations in this programme have shared passions to empower potential in others and fight poverty – this forum enables you to channel power to work and serve more effectively. I feel inspired and encouraged from having visited you – big visions, lots of commitment, and often little resources. So with partners, you can interact with the same ethos of 'peer learning' with your partners. Take ways of working from this, and be inspired to interact and form a network to influence donors and recipients and you will make a powerful impact.

Makonen - how do we create spaces for partners so that they can drive us forward?

Identify what is there rather than going in with assumptions about what partners need or will be like. Our assumptions can be very empowering or disempowering. If people in partner communities want the same as their leaders then much can be achieved.

Rupal - How long do you expect a strategic plan to be?

There is no right or wrong answer – obviously something like 50 pages would not be appealing for a donor like Comic Relief to read. In general, succinct is good.

Karen - Have you challenged your thinking today?

Yes – I have learned a lot from everyone here – and it has been good to reflect on the fact that strategic plans are not a static document, but to be used.

Could you say more about Theories of Change and how to fit them into strategy?

(Rupal) Its an important part of strategy that you will test as you go along – there is no set way – we know that every strategic document will look different so it is about what suits your organisation.

(Rick) Some diagrams are very complex – but its about your assumptions about how change actually happens. INTRAC can put some examples of 'Theories of Change' on the upcoming PLP website.