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PLANNING PROCESS MANAGEMENT

While planning is one of the keys to success in most activities, people find all kinds of reasons not to do it. Where there is a reluctance to plan even from day to day or month to month, it is literally impossible to think sensibly about development (adapting existing policies, activities or services or creating new ones to meet new and different needs) or about long-term strategic planning. This inability to think ahead can put the organisation at a serious disadvantage because donors or service users constantly demand evidence that organisations are capable of delivering agreed services or organising activities over a period of three or more years.

This Resource Material includes:

- definitions of types of planning and commonly used planning terms;
- Development and Planning Model;
- Sample terms of reference for an executive development committee;
- guidelines for developing a development plan, strategic plan or business plan;
- project planning and management.

Resource 15 deals with risk recognition and management, and Resource 16 looks at how organisational change can be managed effectively. Resource Papers 17 and 18 cover metrics, monitoring and evaluating performance.

Types of planning

Planning can be divided in several ways:

- Strategic planning: long-term, with a broad view of policies, current and potential new activities;
- Strategic planning: steps to implement a strategic plan or achieve long-term goals;
- Recurrent or cyclical planning: for events and activities that happen periodically, e.g. quarterly reports, annual financial reports, monthly supervision sessions with staff;
- Project planning: for specific, time-limited work;
- Operational planning: enables the organisation or team to function smoothly and be able to carry out the work assigned to them;
- Daily planning: specific tasks that need to be done immediately;
- Contingency planning: emergency and contingency planning.

Crisis management is about dealing with one crisis after another, rather than planning and seeking to limit the risk of them occurring. Even if a crisis is managed adequately, it is not good management. In reality, most crises are not unpredictable, they can be anticipated and appropriate action planned.

Strategic planning almost always refers to long-term planning. Tactical, operational and project planning can be medium or short term. It is not easy to define what is long, medium and short as they are different concepts for each organization and for different activities within it.

A plan is a means to an end; it is not an end in itself. A plan is only useful if it leads to action.

Language of planning

Vision

The vision is a long-term picture of what we want to achieve: a world without poverty, a community where everyone feels included. The vision is something we strive for, even if it seems unattainable.

Strategic and specific objectives

The concepts of ,short term goals', ,long term goals', ,general goals' and ,specific goals' are interchangeable. They all mean ,what we want to do or achieve'. What matters is not what they are called, but the period of time to which they refer.

The strategic goal represents a shared aspiration: what the organisation would achieve if it were 100% successful. It defines why the organization exists, its purpose, its reasons for being. It is sometimes called (in organizing documents) a mission or core purpose.

Specific goals are what the organization wants to achieve within a certain timeframe. All of the organisation's specific objectives, whether for the long, medium or short term, and all of its activities must be consistent with the strategic objectives.

The time horizons of strategic goals in a reasonably well-organized small or medium-sized organization can be three to five years - long, two to three years - medium, and 12 to 18 months - short. For a large organization, the long period may be 10 to 20 years, while for a new organization the long period may be one year.

Short-term or immediate goals (for this year, this month, this week) can be called general goals, end goals, or specific goals.

Strategy

A strategy is a plan to achieve specific and strategic objectives. In the context of organizational work, it usually refers to long-term planning.

- The development plan and development strategy define what the organisation wants to do and achieve in a certain timeframe. It includes new activities, changes to existing activities or new users.
- The strategic plan looks at how all the activities fit together and the role of resources (people, money, time, equipment, premises).
- The business plan identifies the projected costs of the organisation's activities, the expected income, the cash flow (when the income will come in and when payments are due), and the financial requirements to cover the costs.

These terms are often used interchangeably. If a donor is interested in them, it is important to clarify exactly what they want.

Policies

Policies define the framework within which an organization makes choices about its priorities, activities, or procedures to achieve its strategic objectives (see Resource Material 21). Clear policies and procedures make planning, priority setting and decision-making much easier for everyone in the organisation.

Operational activities

Operational activities are what the organization actually does.

In a campaign, these activities may be called tactics (steps in the campaign) and include research, publications, lobbying, petitions or demonstrations.

In a community group, these can be services: welfare advice, building a playground, providing training. For an arts group, activities might include running theatre productions or forming a poetry group.

Sometimes operational activities involve the provision of facilities and equipment, for example an estate agency provides houses and flats; a community group may provide rooms to rent or photographic equipment.

Operating activities also include the production of goods for sale or free distribution.

The management of the organization includes activities such as fundraising, financial management, decision-making, advertising and cleaning.

Operational activities do not fall into these exact categories! Whatever operational activities the organization carries out, they must be planned.

Projects

The project is a time-limited work. It can be for a short period (Easter events) or stretch over a very long period (building the Olympic Village for the 2032 Games). Specific project management issues are discussed later in this resource.

Priorities

When an organization decides that certain activities are most important or most necessary to achieve specific goals, it must set its priorities.

Setting priorities always means saying no to activities for which there is not enough time, energy or resources. Many CSOs do not want to do this and try to get everything done.

In small organizations, this can be achieved, but as they grow, they can fail if they continue to fail to prioritise. Failure to prioritise can also have a serious impact on staff (see Resource 13 on stress and overload).

Systems and procedures

Procedures define the way an organisation carries out its activities: the people, the documentation and the actions required to get something done. A set of procedures is sometimes called a system.

Spiral of action

One way to think about development or change planning is in the form of a spiral that starts with the need for change and includes:

- clarifying or confirming the organization's core purpose and overall objectives;
- assessing the needs, requirements and the context in which the development will take place;
- information gathering;
- setting common goals;
- planning;
- performance;
- monitoring of progress on short and long-term targets;
- evaluation - which becomes part of the assessment of needs and requirements for future development.

This spiral is appropriate whether the development is based on expansion (deliberately taking on new activities or expanding existing ones), evolution (the emergence of new activities from existing ones), or contraction (due to staff or resource cuts). It is also suitable for general purposes such as: finding new premises, restructuring the board, involving users in decision-making or planning fundraising, advertising or lobbying campaigns.

Rigid adherence to the achievement of set goals limits rather than supports organizational and individual development. But if applied wisely, it can lead to a clear and commonly accepted framework for setting priorities, directing people's energies and the organization's resources, and achieving real and noticeable results that would make everyone proud of their work and of the organization.

The context for development

Development usually arises from some strain on the organization.

It can come from:

- Current or potential users or members, donors, councillors, staff or volunteers;
- strain on resources (time, money, premises, equipment);
- social, economic, demographic, political or legislative changes outside the organisation;
- Awareness of new or unmet needs.

In many organizations, the response is to respond immediately to any new need or pressure. This leads to chaotic development, internal conflicts if resources are inadequate and a waste of energy. Development occurs much more smoothly if it is planned.

Confirmation of the substantive and general objectives

Development processes must fit within the context of the organization's overall goals, core objectives, values and spirit of the founding documents.

In many organizations, the people involved have very different ideas about the actual purpose of the organization. This needs to be clarified early in the development process. A community centre whose strategic aim is to become a focus for activities involving large numbers of people is likely to take a different development path from a community centre whose focus of work is with specific groups who, because of discrimination or pressure, have usually been denied access to activities and services.

The actual goal should stretch over general objectives, such as „developing work that directly involves a very wide range of local organizations and people“ or „developing activities for the growing number of refugees arriving in the area.“ If the organization has great resources, it can achieve both goals. But in a period of heightened need and limited resources, there must be clarity about what is most important for the organization to achieve.

If the substantive and overall goals of the organization are already clear, they only need to be confirmed at this stage.

Activities will then be developed within the framework of these overall objectives. The first community centre might develop counselling sessions run by volunteers and might involve dozens of small local groups in organising an annual community festival; the second might focus its energies on organising English classes, counselling sessions with interpreters, in-depth casework and activities that bring local and refugee children together.

Each new activity must be evaluated against the main objective. If the organisation intends to move towards new objectives that are not aligned with the main objective, it may be time to reassess the latter.

Collection of information

The next stage of the spiral is to assess the need or situation and the capabilities of the organisation and whether it is appropriate to do something about it. It involves carrying out research or gathering and assessing information about, for example, the extent of a particular problem, what needs to be done about it and similar situations in local and other areas.

Initial information may cover requirements and needs from beneficiaries, donors, the board, or staff; potential changes in beneficiaries (planned or unplanned); or actual or potential changes in legislation, society at large, or the community served by the organization. Information may come from statistics about the current situation, projections or forecasts for the future, personal observations, or historical data (statistics or observations about the past). Statistics are something called objective data, while observations and opinions are subjective data. However, the way statistics are presented and used can be very subjective.

The next step is to gather and assess information about resources, services or activities external to the organization to meet needs or address the situation. The organization may not need to start something new; it may simply refer people to other organizations. If the need cannot be met elsewhere, the organization's position should be assessed. This starts with determining whether it has clear policies for initiating this type of work and how it should be done.

Then comes the exploration of the organization's resources and whether it has or is likely to get the money, people, time and space it needs.

Other factors to consider at this stage include:

- commitment and energy: even if there is enough time and money, there may be no desire to start a new activity;
- Resistance to change: from staff, users, donors, board, others concerned with what might happen;
- external factors: political changes, legislative restrictions, possible changes in other organisations.

Goal setting

The next step is to decide whether to undertake any activity, clarify what kind and set objectives. Or if the organization is downsizing, this is the time to decide what to cut, combine or streamline.

At this stage, consultation is particularly needed to allow as many people as possible to have a say in what the organisation should do and how it should do it.

- To analyse the information collected at the survey stage. What does it mean in relation to the specific organisation, its service users and members?
- To develop and clarify the organisation's policies for meeting needs.
- Decide whether the organisation has the commitment and resources to undertake an activity to meet this need and, if so, what is most appropriate. Or decide how activities can be adapted or shortened because of new constraints.
- Set clear, time-bound targets. They should be as specific as possible: not just „to organise counselling sessions by volunteers“, but „to recruit and train at least 10 new volunteers by 31 October, to hold the first counselling session by 1 November, to gather at least 18 trained volunteers and three 30-minute sessions per week by 31 March.
- Think SMART/SIPRO: goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.

- To set appropriate deadlines and more precisely target dates - the key dates by which the main objectives must be achieved.
- Determine appropriate performance indicators for quality, quantity, outcomes and/or cost (see Resource Material 17) and decide which of these are the key performance indicators.
- Set a time to check progress: evaluate the goals to make sure they are realistic and make the necessary changes.

Planning

Now is the time to turn goals into concrete ones and plans. What needs to happen to achieve the goals? Who will do it?

- Think about what needs to happen each year, quarter, month and week. Make sure things are in a logical order, with enough time allotted for consultation and decision-making.
- Secure the necessary resources (especially time) to make this happen.
- Make sure that everyone involved in the work knows what needs to be done, and when it needs to be done, check dates and performance indicators that will be used to assess progress and how it will be reported on.

Implementation

It is only at this stage, after considerable time and energy have been spent thinking, analysing information and planning, that the organisation actually starts (or stops, in the contracting phase) doing the activity.

Monitoring against short-term targets

During the implementation phase, the person or people involved should constantly check and adapt the plans. Timetables and targets should be like shirts, but not restrictive: they should fit the organisation and its employees, but should not restrict movement. If deadlines and targets have not been met, check why.

- Were they unrealistic to begin with? Goals and timetables may need to be reviewed.
- Is there other work that is preventing us from meeting the deadlines? It may be necessary to confirm priorities and improve time management (see Resource Material 22).
- Do we lack the information, skills or equipment to proceed with the work? It is clear what needs to be done to overcome this.
- Has the situation changed? Perhaps these objectives are no longer appropriate and need to be reviewed.

Monitoring against long-term objectives, verification, evaluation

These stages are discussed in Resource Material 18.

Monitoring means gathering information about something as it happens; verifying means offering information in a user-friendly form; evaluating means analyzing the information.

The evaluation will show whether the activity has been successful, what has gone well and what has failed, and whether there are needs that remain unmet or problems unresolved. These needs and problems become, in turn, the starting point for the next round in the spiral of action.

In most organizations, of course, there are several spirals of action going on simultaneously, relating to several aspects of the organization's work.

Strategic planning

The development plan

The strategic plan begins with how the organization will evolve over the agreed time period.

It includes:

- Programme development: mainly relevant or current services and activities for users or members, accompanying campaigns, etc. This includes ongoing activities as well as new ones.

- Project development: one-off or time-limited activities, campaigns, etc. A successful project may, over time, develop into an active programme of the organisation or may lead to the creation of an independent organisation.
- Product development: refers to an organization that produces goods or sells its services.
- Organizational development: builds and sustains the organization, e.g. membership, advertising, fundraising, developing new revenue sources, networking, partnering with other organizations, and staff development.
- Operational development: e.g. administration, finance, archives, computerisation, premises.

For each area of development, the plan actually describes:

- what the organization is doing now;
- what will remain the same;
- for what the organization will do more;
- for what the organization will do more bit;
- which activity will be completely discontinued;
- what will be done differently;
- what new activities will be launched.

The process

A development plan or a strategic one can be drawn up and imposed by one or two people, but this is not good practice. It is better to find time to involve a large range of people in discussions about how they would like to change and develop the organisation and its activities. Before this happens it is important to have clarity about:

- who will make the final decision on what to include in the plan and what not;
- how they will get the information they need to make these decisions;
- how they will get necessary professional advice, e.g. on legal issues, fundraising strategies, development costs;
- who the organisation should consult;
- who should be informed in advance that a long-term plan is being drawn up, even if they will not be directly consulted or involved in decision-making;
- who should see the plan then.

Counselling can be most effective if done before anything is put down on paper. As soon as ideas or suggestions are reflected on paper, they are accepted by some people as fixed and irrevocable. The best process involves:

- consultation sessions with relevant people;
- discussing their ideas in the working group or forming a subcommittee;
- discussing issues of finance, staffing and premises on development proposals with the Development Working Group or Executive or other relevant people;
- access to professional advice, if required;
- one or two people drafting the project proposal;
- consultation at different levels of the organisation;
- compiling a second revised version, based on consultations;
- final approval by the governing board or other body having the power to make the final decision.

All this requires significant amount of time.

Differences and conflict

Strategic planning goes to the heart of the organisation, the most basic responsibilities and values of the people involved and sometimes their very narrow self-interests. The process of deciding what the organization should focus on, what priorities it should set, and how it should change is never painless. What is positive for some users or employees may be perceived as negative by others. It is important to take the time to discuss these differences and reach an agreed course of action.

Resource Paper 16 looks in more detail at the change management process and resistance to change.

The Strategic Plan

A strategic plan designed for managerial application in the organization will differ significantly from a plan designed primarily to impress potential donors or supporters. Strategic plans do not always follow the same format, but the steps described below represent a starting point. A plan need not include all of these stages.

Introduction

It is an overview of the nature of the organisation, what it does and what is proposed in the strategic plan.

It includes:

- what the organization and its strategic or substantive goals (mission) are;
- a general statement of the main activities, users or members of the organisation and sources of fundraising;
- period, enshrined in the strategic plan;
- who was involved in the process of drawing up the plan;
- a brief description of the main changes expected in the period covered.

Context of change

For a strategic plan to make sense, people need to understand why certain choices have been made. This section can be very long or very short, depending on the situation. It can include:

- factors external to the organisation, such as political at local or national level; new legislation; unmet needs of the organisation; economic, social or demographic changes; changes in donor priorities; changes in other organisations (e.g. pressure on one organisation because another has ceased operations);
- needs, requirements or pressure from current users or members;
- needs of potential users;
- factors within the organisation itself, such as use of premises or equipment; time constraints; pressure for or from staff, volunteers or the board; the need to diversify income sources;
- risks arising from making changes or not making changes (see Resource Material 15 on risk assessment).

Programme development

For any area of current or new activity or service:

- the purpose of the activity or service (why the organisation does it or why it should do it);
- what the organisation does and for or with whom;
- factors to be taken into account when planning a specific period;
- specific targets for the period for each activity or service;
- implications for time, staffing, premises, equipment, policies and procedures, management and administration;
- impact on other activities or services;
- how much it will cost and where the money will come from;
- assess the level of risk in undertaking development;
- plans and implementation schedule;
- how monitoring will be carried out;
- how the activity or service itself will be monitored and evaluated and against what criteria or performance indicators (see Resource Materials 17 and 18).

Project Development

For each current and new project as described above. Projects have timeframes, so there should be precise guidance on what will happen at their completion or how the decision will be made. This is called an exit strategy (see below for more details on project planning and management).

Development of the organization

For each aspect of organizational development as described above. It may include, for example, membership recruitment, an advertising campaign, the development of a new source of revenue, the development of contact networks, or suggestions for involving users in the organisation.

Operational Development

For each aspect of operational development as above. This could include, for example, moving to new premises, creating policies (see Resource Material 21), tidying up the filing cabinet or developing training for staff and the council.

Implications for staff

What will the development of the proposals mean in terms of recruitment and introduction of volunteers, staff and volunteer training, supervision.

Implications for the premises

What the development proposals would mean in terms of the premises.

Implications for equipment or other facilities

How the proposed activities will affect the use and need for equipment and other facilities.

Management and Administration

How the development of the proposals will affect management and administration.

Prices and fundraising

In a development or strategic plan, this section may be relatively brief; in a business plan, very detailed.

It will include:

- proposed prices, with inflation and other factors, for each area of the organization's operations
- assured income for cc strong field of activity
- possible sources of other revenue;
- a projected surplus or deficit for each area of activity and how the deficit will be covered;
- cash flow: when the money comes in, when it has to go out, how the cash flow shortfall will be covered.

Budgets are developed by applying different assumptions, such as different levels of inflation, increases and/or decreases in donations at different levels, or different levels of subscription fees for membership or services.

As some people find budgets difficult to understand, the basics need to be explained in text.

Schedule

For each major area of activity, there should be a schedule of targets and dates when progress will be checked. The schedule can be in quarterly periods for the first year, in six-month periods for the second and third years, and in annual periods thereafter.

The timetable will also indicate when the strategic plan as a whole will be reviewed and updated. This will normally be 12 to 18 months after its implementation, but may require a major review before then if there are significant changes in fundraising.

Project planning and management

The term project is used in many ways, but in the context of planning and management, it usually means a time-bound activity, service or campaign with a deadline. A project must meet the strategic objectives of the organisation, but is a separate element.

In this respect, anything that has a deadline can be defined as a project and can be managed according to the basic rules of effective planning, time management (Resource Material 22), monitoring and evaluation (Resource Materials 17 and 18). There may be a designated project manager and team dedicated exclusively or mainly to delivering the project on time, but this is not always the case - project management inevitably forms part of any manager's job.

The stages of project planning and management can be divided into:

- defining the overall objectives and clarifying what needs to be done to achieve them, the people needed to do it, the likely cost and timetable;
- bringing the project team together and agreeing key objectives (checkpoints);
- developing detailed plans and schedules, often through the application of project planning mechanisms;
- Confirming the budget and setting financial controls;
- recognising risks and taking steps to mitigate them (see Resource Material 15);
- carrying out the work, with continuous monitoring of quality, deadlines, budget and risks, and adapting plans as required;
- Providing a clear exit strategy - a framework for bringing the project to completion, handing it over, or moving on after completion;
- completion of the project;
- lessons learned from the project planning and management process.

Project management literature usually describes the scope of project planning and management tools, such as flowcharts or analysis (listing all tasks and linking them to diagrams showing each to be done and in what order), such as ladder diagrams or Gantt charts (showing the people or other resources needed at that stage). These tools can be useful in breaking down complex tasks into logical steps.

List of Questions for Effective Planning

Does the organization have a strategic or development plan for a three-year or five-year period (or longer for larger organizations)? If not, why not?

Is the organization effective in establishing annual, quarterly, monthly and weekly work plans?

Are long and short-term plans regularly checked to see if work is being done as planned and plans revised accordingly?

Are projects planned effectively with clear exit strategies?

Are the board and staff clear about each other's priorities and plans? If the organization has separate teams, departments, projects, or offices, are they mutually aware of each other's priorities and plans?