



# Incubation Hub

CENTRE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

## STRATEGY

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

ZIMBABWE  
2024

## Introduction

It has become fashionable for a vast majority of civil society organisations to develop or hire a team of consultants to help them develop a strategy. The processes guiding strategy development vary- some include all members of the team together with the board whilst others are led by consultants. In previous decades donors would insist that CSOs develop a strategy but today it has become fashionable to invest in the process of strategy development. There is a growing consensus or realization on the need to ensure that all team members are involved especially in the processes of suggesting what needs to be in the strategy. In some organisations, strategy has been limited to the development of 3 or 5-year plans. However, whilst there is a strong case for developing organisational strategies it remains unclear if strategy has contributed towards stronger and effective CSOs.

This material provides clarity on the essential components of a strategy and what a strategy-driven organisation should focus on.

## Objectives

- Develop an improved understanding of strategy development and organisational performance
- Nurture the growth of strategy led organisations

## What is Strategy?

It is considered to be a way through a difficulty, an approach to overcoming an obstacle, a response to a challenge. The core of strategy is always the same: discovering the critical factors in a situation and designing a way of coordinating and focusing actions to deal with those factors. A good strategy recognizes the nature of the challenge and offers a way of surmounting it – (note- simply being ambitious is not a strategy). A good strategy should have cohesive response to an important challenge. It consists of a coherent set of analysis, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that respond to a high stakes challenge.

Strategy is futuristic- it is about how an organization will move forward – Doing strategy thus is to figure out how to advance the organisation’s interests. A good strategy acknowledges the challenges being faced and provides an approach to overcoming them. The greater the challenge, the more a good strategy focuses and coordinates efforts to achieve a powerful competitive punch or problem-solving effect. It is the application of strength against weakness- it also creates strength through the coherence of its design. The purpose of strategy is to offer a potentially achievable way of surmounting a key challenge. Good strategy is thus coherent action backed up by an argument, an effective mixture of thought and action with a basic underlying structure. There are many other ways of doing strategy and the Table below provides a description of existing practices.

## Hallmarks of a bad strategy

| Fluff   | Failure to face the challenge   | Mistaking goals for strategy   | Bad strategic objectives  |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>A form of gibberish masquerading as strategic concepts or arguments. Uses inflated words and apparently esoteric concepts creating the illusion of high level thinking. A superficial restatement of the obvious combined with a generous sprinkling of buzzwords. It masquerades as expertise, thought and analysis</p> | <p>Bad strategy fails to recognise or define the challenge (problem). When you cannot define the challenge you cannot evaluate a strategy to improve it</p> | <p>Many bad strategies are just statements of desire rather than plans for overcoming obstacles. Most of the goals out there are performance goals but have not relationship with strategy</p> | <p>Strategic objectives are “bad” when they fail to address critical issues or when they are impracticable.</p> |

## Characteristics of Bad Strategies

Bad strategies tend not to have an adequate grasp of the challenge that they seek to address. They lack coherence, coordinating actions and policies. In many instances, strategy is reduced to courage, boldness, motivation, and push. In many organisations, strategy is made up of 3-5-year rolling budgets with activity plans. Calling this a strategic plan gives people false expectations that the exercise will somehow result in a coherent strategy. Planning is an essential part of management but it is NOT strategy. The strategy should provide a pathway to substantially higher performance. To obtain higher performance, we must identify the critical obstacles inhibiting progress and then develop a coherent approach to overcoming them.

## Bad Strategies: template-based approaches

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Vision</b>     | Fill in your unique vision of what the organisation will be like in the future. Currently popular unique versions are to be “the best” or “the leading” or “the best known”... fill in the blank |
| <b>Mission</b>    | Fill in a high sounding politically correct statement of the purpose of the organisation   |
| <b>Values</b>     | Fill in a statement describing the organisation’s values. Make sure they are non-controversial   |
| <b>Strategies</b> | Fill in some aspiration/goals but call them strategies   |

## Common Mistakes in Strategy Making

Careful analysis of these documents will reveal pious statements of the obvious presented as if they were decisive insights. Template-style approaches to strategy free the people behind the process from the onerous work of analysing the true challenges and opportunities that exist. In some instances, CSOs mistake goals for strategy. Goals such as, “we will grow revenue by at least 20% each year” do not exactly demonstrate how that will be done. The strategy must develop a point of leverage- by identifying a key strength within the organization or a change in the sector that opens new opportunities. A long list of ‘things to do’ often mislabelled as ‘strategies or objectives is not a strategy- it is just a list of things to do. Should address a specific process or accomplishments such as halving the time it takes to respond to a customer. Blue-sky objectives- a statement of the desired situation or of the challenge- skip over the annoying fact that no one has a clue as to how to get there.



## Components of a Good Strategy

A good strategy should define a critical challenge and build a bridge between the challenge and action, between desire and immediate objectives that lie within it. The core content of a strategy is a diagnosis of the situation at hand, the creation or identification of a guiding policy for dealing with the critical difficulties and a set of coherent actions. A good strategy thus contains 3 elements: (i) diagnosis, (ii) guiding policies and (iii) coherent actions as per the figure below:

| <b>Diagnosis</b>  | <b>Guiding Policies</b>   | <b>Coherent Actions</b>  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>It should be able to clarify the nature of the challenge/ issue/ problem and if the challenge is not defined, it is difficult or impossible to assess the quality of the strategy. Make a difference between symptoms of a problem and the causes of the problem. Explain the WHY of a situation</p> | <p>An overall approach chosen to cope with or overcome onstacles identified in the diagnosis. Good guiding policies are not goals or visions or images of desirable state - rather they define a method of grappling with the situation and ruling out a vast array of possible actions. Specifies the approach to dealing with the obstacles called out in the diagnosis</p> | <p>The design of a configuration of actions and resource allocations that implement the chosen guiding policy. Feasible coordinate policies, resources commitments and actions designed to carry out the guiding policy.</p> |

## Diagnosis

- At a minimum diagnosis should clarify the situation, linking facts into patterns
- This should suggest where more attention is needed (initial prioritization)
- An explicit diagnosis permits one to evaluate the rest of the strategy
- This allows the rest of the strategy to be revisited and changed as circumstances change
- A good strategic diagnosis also defines a domain of action
- If you fail to identify and analyse the obstacles you don't have a strategy- instead you have either a stretch goal, a budget or a list of things you wish would happen

## Guiding Policies

- A good guiding policy tackles the obstacles identified in the diagnosis by creating or drawing upon sources of advantage
- A guiding policy creates an advantage by anticipating the actions and reactions of others,
- It should reduce complexity and ambiguity in situations

## Coherent Actions

- These are steps that are coordinated with one another to work together in accomplishing the guiding policy
- The actions should be coherent, i.e resource deployment, policies and manoeuvres that are undertaken should be consistent and coordinated
- Coherence is not ad-hoc it should be imposed on a system by policy and design
- Problem-solving leading to results
- Coherent actions- are not implementation details
- A strategy that fails to define a variety of plausible and feasible immediate actions is missing a critical component

## Hallmarks of Strategy Making

The Process- should be inclusive, open, and informed by the immediate past and current situation. Some good questions lead to discovering strengths within an organization such as:

- What have we seen that others have not?
- What have we got that others do not have or realise they have?

These two questions lie at the very edge of our creating of a pivotal objective and the creation of an advantage.



## Strategy at a glance

### The Vision Statement

**The vision statement describes how the world would look like if you completed your mission.**

A vision statement should be short and straight to the point. An effective vision statement is inspirational and aspirational. It has to create a mental image of the future state that the organization wishes to achieve and should challenge and inspire employees to work towards achieving organisational goals. When writing, you should ask yourself a few questions first. What is the issue that your organisation addresses? What would the world look like if this problem was solved? Do you have a timeline for when you would like to meet your goals?

### Mission Statement

**The mission statement is the bare-bones proclamation of what your organization does and why you exist.**

A mission statement is an action-based statement that declares the purpose of an organization and how it serves its communities. This can include a description of the company, what it does, and its objectives. A mission statement provides perfect clarity behind the “what,” the “who,” and the “why”.

### Values

**Values are the basic fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate organizational conduct**

Organizational values are the guiding principles that provide an organization with purpose and direction. They help manage interactions with both stakeholders and employees. Values help organisations to:

- Differentiate itself from its competitors
- Guide its employees in decision-making
- Boost its chances of attracting, recruiting and retaining top talent
- Be more likely to attract stakeholders with the same values
- Inform its organizational strategy
- Boost employee engagement and motivation

## The Goals

### The goals express the overall values and desires

Goals should be SMART enabling organisations to clarify their ideas, focus their efforts, use their time and resources productively, and increase chances of achieving organizational mission and vision. SMART is an acronym for:

- **Specific:** This means that your goals should be simple, sensible and significant
- **Measurable:** They should be meaningful and motivating
- **Achievable:** Goal setting means the first process of creating something that is attainable and agreed upon
- **Relevant:** Goals should be reasonable, realistic and resourced as well as results-based
- **Time-bound:** Time is a vital component of goal setting. This means goals should be time-based, time-limited, cost limited, timely and time-sensitive.

Each time staff members sit down to set up their goals for their strategy they should ask themselves if their goals are SMART. An evaluation of each goal is needed to ensure they are satisfactory. Other authors have suggested that the acronym be updated to reflect the importance of efficacy and feedback. However, some have expanded it to include extra focus areas; like Evaluated and Reviewed to make up the acronym SMARTER.

## The Objectives

### The objectives denote specific project/operational goals

A good strategy transforms goals into a coherent set of actionable objectives. The objectives of a good strategy should stand a good chance of being accomplished, given existing resources and competence. A good strategy works by focusing energy and resources on one or a very few pivotal objectives whose accomplishment will lead to a cascade of favourable outcomes.

## SWOT Analysis

For an organization to set SMART goals they should also use one of the most effective strategic planning tools called the SWOT analysis to evaluate themselves and their environment. A SWOT analysis looks at the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats for the organisation. This is a process that gives an organization confidence and a better idea of what strategic direction to take. It also helps organisations to have an idea of the issues that need to be dealt with. Therefore this implies that an organisation should not just be established and managed blindly. The SWOT analysis tool should be to empower your Civil Society Organisation and make you more sustainable. Organisations should leverage their strengths and opportunities, and learn from and prepare for weaknesses and threats.

The most important thing to remember when drafting out your SWOT is to dive deep and interrogate all the organisational issues. This analysis should not be a solo exercise therefore be sure to bring on board as many members of the organisation as possible if not all. Different perspectives can be enlightening and help members to own the vision of the organisation for better performance.

If you're starting a new civil society organisation, a SWOT should be done in the early planning stages once you have the idea and mission down. However, it is also very beneficial to do the process if you're already established and want to evaluate any changes or pivots you've made or are planning to make.

### Important Points to remember:

- **Be thorough with all the organisational issues**
- **Do not be too general in your answers**
- **Be sure to involve multiple people in your organization.**
- **Be as honest and thorough as possible for better success.**

Since a strategic plan is a process that seeks to overcome a hurdle or challenge the organisation's vision, mission and goals should be aligned towards addressing the problem and the strategy must demonstrate how the organisation intends to contribute to solving that problem or challenge.

## Conclusion

Strategy does not eliminate scarcity and its consequences- the necessity of choice. To have a strategy rather than vague aspirations is to choose one path and leave out others. When our strategy works, we will hopefully look and remember what was accomplished instead of the possibilities that were set aside.

## Remember

- **strategies focus resources, energy, and attention on some objectives rather than others.**



## Strategy - Exercise

- Evaluate your organizational goals using the SMART guideline

| Goals | Specific | Measurable | Achoevable | Relevant | Time-bound |
|-------|----------|------------|------------|----------|------------|
|       |          |            |            |          |            |
|       |          |            |            |          |            |
|       |          |            |            |          |            |

- Use the table below to carry out a SWOT analysis for your new organization or already established organization.

| Strengths | Weaknesses | Opportunities | Threats |
|-----------|------------|---------------|---------|
|           |            |               |         |
|           |            |               |         |
|           |            |               |         |

Use the following marking points to evaluate yourself.

- Are your goals really SMART?
- Are you honest with your answers to your SWOT analysis?
- Have you exhausted all the points?
- Did you include other team members?