

ACT – CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION (CSO)

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (OD) INFORMATION SHEET

STRATEGIC PLANNING

The **purpose** of this OD Information Sheet is for the ACT Programme to introduce CSOs that have not participated in its Training, Coaching and Mentoring support to the importance of developing a Strategic Plan. A Strategic Plan provides a roadmap for a CSO, enabling it to document and share its vision, mission, values and goal, and the approach it adopts to achieve them.

Introduction

By developing a Strategic Plan, or Strategy, a CSO can follow guidelines to stay on course and ensure that all of its future projects and programmes align with its overarching Vision, Mission, Values and Goal. It is normally developed for a period of 3-5 years, and regular reviews of the strategy during this time allow for the CSO to re-consider where it's going and how it's going to get there, in line with contextual change. However, it is important for the CSO to develop a document that it is useful and not a lengthy, jargon-filled document that remains on a shelf. It is important to see the Strategic Plan as a 'living document' that navigates the direction of the CSO's thinking, planning and decision-making – that can be reviewed and modified as agreed at governance and leadership level.

This OD Information Sheet aims to highlight some of the principles of how to develop a Strategic Plan well, in a way that makes Strategic Planning more meaningful and achievable. The process of developing a Strategy is as important as the final document.

There is no set process or template to develop a Strategy, but this OD Guide provides a suggested approach, offering examples that may be followed. Even though the context and situations of all CSOs differ, there are important principles to follow regardless of the environment of each CSO and the needs of its constituents.

In line with ACT's commitment to Human Rights and Gender and Social Inclusion (G&SI), it is recommended that a CSO's strategy demonstrates the mainstreaming of G&SI and the adoption of a Rights-based approach.

What is a Strategic Plan?

A Strategic Plan outlines the approach that will be used by a CSO to reach its specified goal and outcome(s) – it is a description of how the plan will be implemented.

The Strategy is the approach the CSO will take - its overall plan, approach and its direction for an agreed period of time (3-5 yrs). It facilitates the management of a CSO by providing a clear outline in response to the purpose of the CSO, stating clearly what it wants to achieve

and how it is going to achieve it. The CSO's Strategic Plan ensures that all its programme and project plans are in line with its organisational Vision, Mission and Values. It ensures that the CSO does not plan on an ad hoc basis, without focus or clear direction.

Characteristics of a Strategy:

- ▶ Time bound (usually 3-5 yrs)
- ▶ Specifies: Who, What, When, How, Where
- ▶ Uses clear and precise language
- ▶ Is feasible and achievable

The Strategic Plan should enable the CSO to answer the following questions:

- Who we are
- What are our Vision, Mission and Values
- What we can realistically achieve
- What are the key problems that we are addressing
- What is the difference we want to make
- What are the critical issues that we are responding to
- What our priorities are (to guide the allocation of resources)

When the CSO is able to answer all of those questions, it is then possible to answer the following:

- What should our Goal, Outcome and Objectives be?
- How should we organise ourselves to achieve these?
- Who will do what, and when and where?

The Strategic Plan is not rigid, it provides those parameters within which the CSO should work. Usually during its lifespan there will be a mid-term review to ensure it is on track and to make modifications based on the findings. This is why it is important to base the Strategic Plan on a solid understanding of the external environment and of the CSO's organisational capacity - with a full understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. It is important not to have a direction in the heads of only a few people, so by writing it down it can be shared with, and understood by, staff, volunteers, board of trustees, donors, constituent groups and wider stakeholders.

Why develop a Strategic Plan?

The process of consulting with others to develop the Strategic Plan and agreeing a joint way forward provides the CSO with the opportunity to:

- Reflect back on the impact it has had in the past – learning from experience
- Look up from its day-to-day issues and try to see how it fits into the bigger picture, now and for the future
- Build teamwork and expertise among staff and volunteers
- Listen to and build better external relations with a diverse variety of stakeholders
- Bring coherence to plans for projects, making sure that all sections/departments are pulling together towards the same objectives
- Prioritise where to focus its energies and resources in order to maximise potential for towards achieving its vision

Does our CSO need a Strategic Plan?

Initially the Senior Management/Board members should consider the following:

- Does the CSO have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve, if so, has it been shared with others?
- Has the CSO agreed a Value base, and does it guide decision-making?

- Does the current Mission statement of the CSO reflect what it does, for whom, where and why it is important, and is this reflected in its overall objectives, programmes and projects?
- Do the CSO's projects/programmes regularly reflect on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (with a G&SI perspective)?
- Do the CSO's projects/programmes have clear Goals (Long-term Impact), Purpose (Medium-term Outcomes) and Objectives (Immediate Results) statements?
- Does the CSO find it easy to prioritise, making a distinction between what it must do, what it should do and what it would like to do within the resources available?

How to prepare for the Strategic Planning process

Time needs to be put aside for careful planning, it cannot happen in an ad hoc way or through staff meetings. The process is to set up the parameters for the work of the CSO over the next 3-5 years, so it makes sense to spend time and energy preparing for the process.

It is recommended that the CSO focuses on the following questions and answers, regarding the timing of the Strategic Planning:

- Q:** When do we need to carry out the Strategic Planning process?
A: The CSO needs to start the process as soon as possible when there is no Strategic Plan in place or when its current Strategic Plan is drawing to a close.
A: Don't do a Strategic Planning process more than once in every 2-3 years, or unless the internal or external context changes significantly.
- Q:** How often do you need to undertake a strategic review? (When a Strategic Plan is already in place.)
A: A strategic review should be carried out every 1-2 years, or at the mid-term point of a 5 year plan.
 How? This is a straight-forward process where the CSO (together with key stakeholders) should spend a day or two to look at the current strategic framework against internal and external change(s) – as a reality check - and to check that the current approach remains valid. It is an opportunity to make modifications in the strategy for its remaining period, if agreed.
- Q:** How long should a Strategic Planning process take?
A: It is not possible to carry out a thorough Strategic Planning process from start to finish in less than two weeks. In order to gather the information required it is necessary: to carry out a detailed situational analysis; to carry out a full stakeholder mapping and analysis; to carry out a participatory assessment of the situation to ensure plans respond to the real needs at community level (problem tree and objective tree); to agree the strategic framework (Goal, Outcome(s) and Objectives of the CSO), building on previous learning, feedback, sectoral strength and focus, and finally to receive the approval and sign-off of the Strategic Plan at governance level.

Who should be involved in the Strategic Planning process?

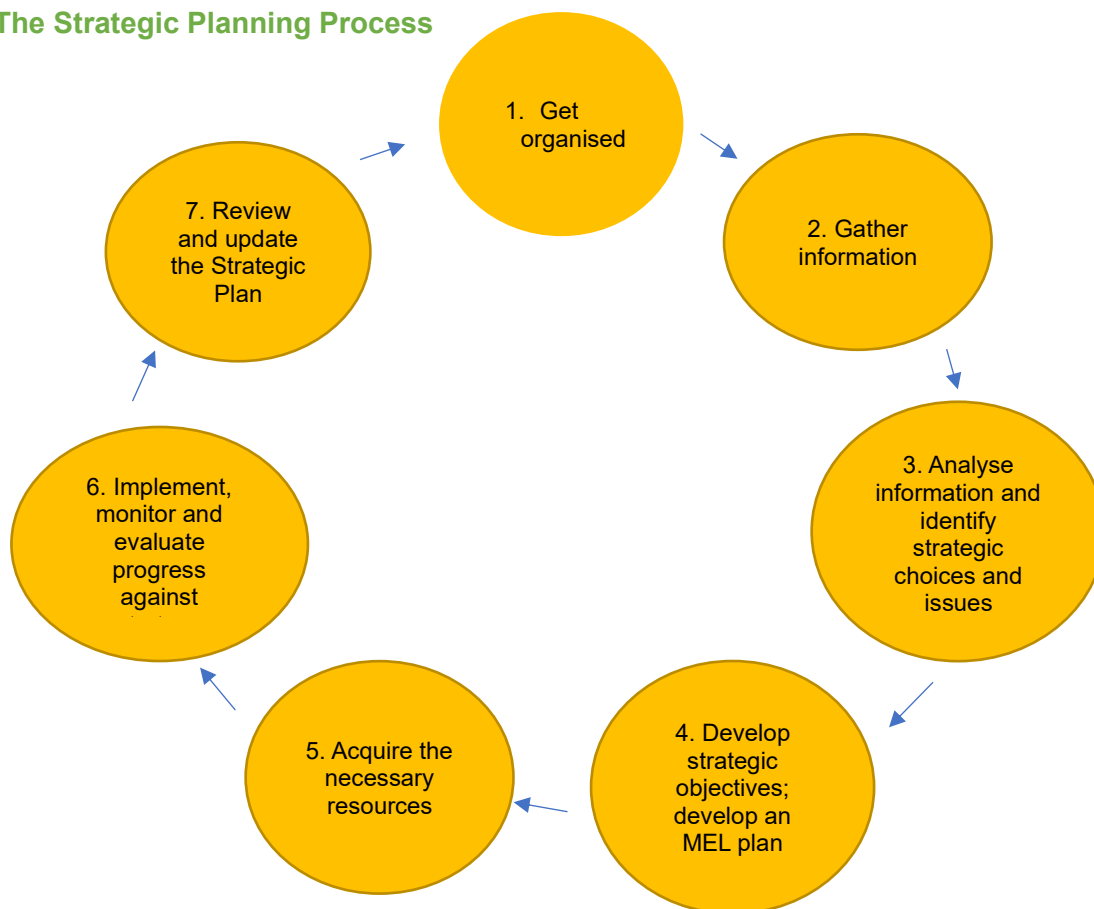
The Strategic Planning process helps a CSO to clarify its strategic framework. Embedded in the framework are its Vision, Mission and Values. This means that it is very important for the whole CSO (staff, volunteers, Board members + key stakeholders) to engage in the planning process. Roles and responsibilities are outlined below:

Activity	Who should be involved
Planning the process	ED/Senior Management Team (SMT) of the CSO

Understanding the process and context	All staff/Board members + key external stakeholders (possibly using the findings from a Political Economy Analysis (PEA)).
Vision, Mission, Goal, Objectives – discussion and agreement	The basis of these are drafted following in-depth discussion with key stakeholders, including constituents at community level. All staff, long-term volunteers and board members need to engage at this level to ensure all perspectives are heard, operational issues, etc, and considered. It also encourages ownership.
Review of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (with G&SI mainstreamed)	ED/SMT, Programme/Project staff + finance/admin/operations and board members if possible
Organisational structure	ED/SMT (following consultation with all staff)

In summary, internally - the ED/SMT and Project/Programme staff should be involved throughout the process. To encourage finance, operations staff and board members to engage with the development side of the work of the CSO's work, the ED/SMT might wish to invite them to all stages where the project/programme (development) staff are involved. This encourages full ownership and commitment from the outset.

The Strategic Planning Process



HOW TO CARRY OUT A TYPICAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS:

1. Get Organised

By the end of the process the CSO (inc: board, staff, volunteers) needs to have a comprehensive understanding of the context that informs the strategy. Preparatory work includes:

- a) Thinking about the context: look at the development context – globally, nationally and locally; the CSO sector – globally, nationally and locally; the CSO's area of expertise - globally, nationally and locally – to get an overall perspective beyond the CSO's point of view.
- b) What are the challenges and threats facing the CSO from the external environment?
- c) What are the opportunities to take advantage of in the environment that will: help the CSO to achieve its mission; make the CSO's work more sustainable?
- d) What information is there that is important to share with others in the Strategic Planning process?
- e) Thinking about the CSO: what weaknesses/issues are preventing the CSO from achieving its vision?
- f) Is the CSO clear about its vision, mission and values?
- g) What challenges has the CSO failed to meet in the past 2-3 years and why?
- h) What is the most important Outcome that the CSO would like to see emerging from this Strategic Planning process? Why is it so important?

2. Gather information

Carry out a Situational Analysis (focus on the key issues faced by the CSO's constituent group). Guiding principles: Participatory/Outward Looking/Learning from others/Data/fact-based – not anecdotal.

In advance it is important to consider: **WHAT** – what do you want to achieve? What would happen if no decision was made or solution found? What do we need in order to find a solution? **WHY** – why do we want to achieve a solution? Why did the problem or opportunity arise? Why do we need to find a solution or a way forward at all? **HOW** – how will the situation be different? How will we improve the situation? **WHERE** – where did the issue arise? Is the 'where' important? If so, why? **WHO** – who are we trying to please? Who cares about the situation? Who is affected? Who is involved – who do we need to access information? Who do we need for support/help? - who are the stakeholders? Who needs to be involved in gathering the information? **WHEN** – when did the issue arise? When do we need to act?

The Strategic Planning process is an excellent opportunity to gather the views and wishes of the CSO's constituents, senior staff, volunteers, donors, other CSOs, local Traditional Leaders, other stakeholders of the CSO and its projects. Acknowledging different views of stakeholders, even if they're not closely linked, can give legitimacy to the exercise. A participatory approach to Strategic Planning can lead to positive 'spin offs' such as – team building, better collaboration, improved communication, and it can signal a commitment to changing the organisational culture. Participation creates a sense of ownership in the process, and ownership encourages commitment.

Strategy development should involve partners (constituents/beneficiaries) of the CSO in some way. Often their voices are excluded when deciding what a CSO should focus on and how it should work. If this is the case, the development remains 'top down'. The critical question is "*how do we involve our partners in a meaningful and cost-effective way?*"

To define who should be involved in a Stakeholder Mapping and Analysis exercise – use a brainstorm exercise to map out all the stakeholders that are relevant to the sector, the work and the location of the CSO. Once the details of the people and organisations that affect the

work of the CSO or are affected by the work of the CSO are mapped, from that list it is important to identify those who the CSO needs to engage with closely, and those that have to be kept informed about the CSOs work. It is important to ascertain those who have influence or power over the CSO - this can be positively or negatively.

3. Analyse the information gathered and make strategic choices

No CSO can operate in isolation and there are parameters that define or limit what it can and cannot do, based on what it can do well. The strategy enables the CSO to work within its agreed parameters that are defined by its understanding of the problems it aims to address, and what causes them – as well as by the expertise within the CSO. The parameters will be defined by the Problem Analysis. The strategy must aim to solve significant problems, or address the root causes of those problems which need to be identified through evidence-based knowledge and understanding from those affected by the issue. The intention of the CSO is to make a significant positive and sustainable difference to those affected by the issue - in line with its vision, mission and expertise.

The stakeholders – partners, constituents, donors, LGAs, other CSOs, etc. Knowing who they are, and their roles and responsibilities, influences what the CSO does and how.

The CSOs distinctive competencies (and vision) – what the CSO focuses on in terms of its sector, eg: supporting the rights of people with disabilities; girls education, etc. This helps the CSO to stay within the limits of its planning parameters (and not be guided just by the problems identified).

The CSO's competitive advantage – what makes the CSO more appropriate than others doing similar work? Does the CSO have a good track record in its sector?

The CSO's values – if the CSO believes, for example, in the importance of G&SI, then its strategic options will be bound by this belief.

Access to resources – is the CSO aware of the resources it needs to achieve the strategy?

Assumptions – to analyse information it is important to understand underlying assumptions.

Risks – Analysing the potential risks that the CSO will need to mitigate against in order to achieve its goal is very important.

4. Develop Strategic Objectives and an MEL plan

With the groundwork done, the CSO is ready to develop the content of the Strategic Plan, by developing the strategic framework, which includes:

- A clearly stated Vision (long-term future expectations of change)
- Clearly articulated Values (specific attitudes based on integrity and morals)
- A clear Mission statement (how work is done - fitting with values and vision)
- The overall Goal of the CSO - Impact (ultimate goal of the work of the CSO)
- The Purpose statement - Outcome (medium term change that will be seen)
- Key Result areas (Objectives (Outputs)) (immediate results following activities)

All these elements need to align and complement each other. The strategic framework should give coherence and clarity to the work of the CSO.

The Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) plan will ensure that project staff think clearly about what they intend to do for MEL before implementation of activities begins. These need to be carefully documented. The MEL plan should provide the collection of Indicators against each of the statements in the Strategic Framework – to show that plans are in place to monitor progress by collecting information based on the Indicators, and using appropriate sources of verification, which also need to be provided. Details of the person

responsible for collecting information and the timing. When collecting monitoring information, usually disaggregation based on gender and disability is required.

5. Resource Planning

The Strategic Plan can be used to provide information to donors and wider stakeholders. It can give legitimacy to the CSO. CSOs are encouraged to develop a Fundraising strategy (see the ACT Toolkit 'Developing a Fundraising Strategy') in line with the Strategic Plan.

Step 1: The CSO should provide an engaging reason as to why a donor should support the CSO, eg: Details of the problem; the difference the CSO will make if project is successful; what will happen if the CSO doesn't address the problem; why the CSO is uniquely qualified to tackle the issue.

Step 2: Decide on potential sources of funding, a mixed portfolio is recommended rather than dependence on one donor, eg: Trusts and Foundations; Institutional donors such as EU, FCDO, DANIDA, etc; Companies; Individuals; Local such as churches, mosques, events.

Step 3: If the CSO knows which potential funding sources to approach, it needs to structure its fundraising approach – eg: following up a Call for Proposals.

Step 4: Research – take the choices from Step 2 a stage further and identify specific donors for the CSO to target. A plan is necessary to reach potential donors and supporters and to gain an understanding of donors' specific interests before making contact.

Step 5: The CSO should be able to explain how it will match its needs with donors' interests and levels of funding they make available. The CSO may wish to consider which donors they should share their Strategic Plan with, to whet their interest!

Step 6: Ask for money – following written proposal templates and guidelines from donors. Crowdfunding may be considered by the CSO, or making presentations to local groups.

Step 7: Relationship building – think about how to build long-term relationships with appropriate donors, report back on progress and the difference the donor's contribution has made and continuing to involve them in the CSO, keeping them informed where possible.

6. Implement, monitor and evaluate progress against the Strategic Plan

It is now time for the CSO to start to implement its Year 1 Plan, and use its MEL tool to learn, to adapt and to monitor progress, seeking evidence of change that can directly be attributed to the actions of the CSO.

7. Review and update the Strategy

Based on the agreed timeframe it is recommended that the CSO holds a 1-2 day session with staff and key stakeholders to review progress of its strategy towards achieving its agreed objectives. This provides an opportunity for the CSO to revise its approach and plans, based on their learning. This often takes place mid-way through the period of the Strategic Plan, or on an annual basis. A review of the Strategy is a useful exercise for the CSO – the Strategic Plan is not carved in stone, it can be amended, based on learning and in a controlled way, providing there is collaborative agreement. (An individual should not amend the Strategic Plan in the absence of a full review and senior management/board approval.)

Call to Action

CSOs are strongly encouraged to develop a Strategic Plan that articulates their robust programming. It will optimise its potential to make lasting and sustainable change through their effective and inclusive development partnerships and activities that are embedded in the needs of their constituents.

The benefits to the CSO developing a Strategic Plan include the following:

- Build teams and develop a common sense of purpose
- Gain clearer overall direction and establish a clear focus for work.
- Prioritise their approach, location, constituents
- Improves communications
- Learning from past experience
- Improves quality of programme by formalising plans, which assists in decision-making and monitoring of programmes.
- Determines how human and financial resources can be used most effectively
- Determines how teams should develop to meet the needs of the programme
- Guides collaborative working internally and externally
- Turns broad strategic aims into programmes and projects of action, with agreed objectives about what is to be achieved and indicators to measure progress
- The Strategic Plan guides planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting in ways that encourage analysis, learning and adaptation

Elements within a CSO's Strategic Plan (sample):

- *Executive Summary (one page only)*
- *Background: When the CSO started and its progress of development (one page only)*
- *Key supporters and funders to date (no more than half page)*
- *Achievements to date*
- *Identity of organisation*
- *Vision*
- *Mission*
- *Values*
- *Strategy Process (an outline of the process - briefly how was it done and who was involved)*
- *Analysis of external environment*
- *Analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the CSO (outcomes of SWOT and PESTEL analyses)*
- *Strategic Priorities*
- *Choices made – details of prioritised core roles/programmes/approaches over next 3-5 yrs) based on findings from participatory planning*
- *Strategic Framework:*
 - *Vision; Mission; Values*
 - *Goal (long term Impact)*
 - *Purpose (Medium term Outcome)*
 - *Objectives (Short term results)*
 - *Key Activities*
 - *Implications for CSO – e.g. structure, staffing, capacity*

In addition, the CSO is encouraged to develop the following guiding documents, in line with its Strategic Plan:

- *A Strategic Budget*
- *A Fundraising Strategy*
- *A Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Strategy*
- *A Staffing and Resources Plan*

See the [ACT Toolkit \(hyper-linked here\) on 'Strategic Planning'](#) which provides References, more detailed tools, and Glossary is for access by all CSOs.

Find out more

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