



The importance of strategy for CSOs

For civil society organisations (CSOs) to have a significant impact, it's important to be able to reflect and respond strategically to what is going on around them. This article highlights the importance of strategy and the challenges inherent to developing strategies with CSOs. It also explores our learning about how we can support CSOs to develop their own strategies. It is our hope that this article will fuel debate on this topic.

Well Grounded's support in strategy development consists of helping CSOs become aware of their identities, their options, their ability to take action and to support them to analyse the aspects that are beyond their control: their external environment.

This document will present three case studies to illustrate the problems faced by African CSOs, and the way in which Well Grounded assists them throughout the strategic thought process:

- A CSO that no longer wishes to follow the lead of other national and international stakeholders, that is tired of being something of a passive recipient, and that wishes to set a pace that suits its own communities and to break with the cycle of dependence on external organisations.
- A CSO that finds itself in great demand and which is questioning its ability to meet this demand and its ability to resist the temptation of projects that are attractive but not necessarily in line with its direction or its vision. It would like to be strategic when choosing its partners.
- A CSO that believes it is coming to the end of its current phase of development and wants to reinvent itself, convinced that its actions must be adapted to the current context in order to stay relevant.

The final part of this analysis will focus on what Well Grounded has learned from working with CSOs on their strategic processes. Indeed, we hope that this learning can be of use to all those who are concerned about the effectiveness and longevity of African CSOs.

THE CHALLENGES

The CSOs that we support were all created by their members to protect the environment, and to represent and defend the interests of marginalised people and communities.

But today, the question is whether these organisations play this role effectively. And if not, why not?

One factor is the context: the effectiveness of development projects is increasingly being brought into question, and donors are insisting more and more on evidence-based results, impact and cost effectiveness. In order to get funding, CSOs have to demonstrate the pertinence of their projects, how effectively they are managed, their added value, their ability to manage funds, how they complement other initiatives, clear objectives and a long-term vision in terms of actions, and their ability to make a link between local actions and more global challenges and processes.

Institutional donors and other financial partners put out requests for projects to which CSOs and the public and private sectors are invited to submit a bid. Then ensues a long selection process during which you have to stand out to win; you have to be the 'best' – according to the often externally-established criteria. It's the era of competition; the non-profit sector has now become competitive, that is the reality.

Faced with this dynamic, CSOs sometimes tend to adopt an opportunistic attitude, pitching their actions depending on the available funding. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to launch initiatives and chart their own course, and to make strategic decisions based on the real

IT'S THE ERA OF COMPETITION; THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR HAS NOW BECOME COMPETITIVE, THAT IS THE REALITY.

problems observed, on their own objectives and priorities. Simultaneously, CSOs are becoming increasingly 'project-oriented' resulting in isolated actions that are often aimed at addressing immediate problems and cannot guarantee long-term change, and the

organisational structure is tailored to the structure of the project, which does not allow for long-term strategic thinking or internal development.



It is becoming increasingly difficult for [CSOs] to launch initiatives and chart their own course.

At the same time, since they are sometimes the only players in the field that they operate in, CSOs are often confronted with many challenges, all of which are critical for the communities they support. It can be difficult for them to prioritise. In such situations, often, they become involved in several different projects that meet the most pressing needs but which don't tackle the root cause of the problem. So they spread themselves thinly, they become less effective and, sometimes, lose sight of their objectives and their initial vision.

With pressure from donors, the complexity of meeting needs, and the need to organise under a more or less formal structure, CSOs can be at risk of losing their own direction.

OUR APPROACH TO STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

When faced with a situation as described above, it is important for some CSOs to take the time to think about their situation. From Well Grounded's perspective, some of the key issues to consider are the following:

- What the CSO wants to achieve for their target groups and for themselves;
- The long-term change they seek to effect so as to not let themselves be directed by the agendas of other actors;
- Their strengths: what they excel at, what assets they have to help them achieve their outcomes;
- Their identity: their essence, their "soul", what they have that is special, which makes them unique.

A STRATEGIC THOUGHT PROCESS SPEAKS TO THE ORGANISATION'S EFFECTIVENESS AND STABILITY, WHEREAS PLANNING IS A MEANS TO CARRY OUT ITS STRATEGY.

Another element that we have observed is that it is not clear what equates to strategy and what does not. According to Well Grounded, strategy and planning are two different things. A strategy is an assumption: 'If we do X and Y then we will have an impact on Z', whereas planning is operational. **In a strategy, one does not have to write down each activity/project that the**

organisation is going to carry out but rather what the organisation's main focus should be in order to make the change that it wishes to see. As such, a strategic thought process speaks to the organisation's effectiveness and stability¹, whereas planning is a means to carry out its strategy.

We have also observed that most CSOs and their partners sum up strategy development work in a 3 to 4-day workshop that produces a written document. For us, it isn't enough to work once with an organisation, for just a few days. We see this work as an iterative process that is built over time and there has to be time and space in between these cycles of deep reflection so that people can internalise the information and the decisions made and begin to incorporate them into their day-to-day activities. **As a result, we offer a series of working sessions for our clients. This enables them to deconstruct, build and incorporate their strategy step by step...**

¹ Nelson, F., Long, C., 2015. Strengthening African Civil Society Organisations for Improved Natural Resource Governance & Conservation. Available at: well-grounded.org/strengthening-african-civil-society-organisations-improved-natural-resource-governance-and

We believe that there are 4 basic elements that underpin a strategic thought process: identity, the external environment, strategic objectives and organisational capacity.

1. IDENTITY

The organisation has to ask itself: Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we do? For whom do we do it? Why do we do what we do? What are our limitations? How do we interact with our target groups and players, and with ourselves internally? Having answers to these questions allows them to define the space in which the organisation operates and how they want to do so. The direct result of this strategic thinking is that everything becomes clearer: the vision, the mission, the target groups, the beneficiaries, the core business and the organisational values.

2. THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

An organisation does not operate in a vacuum: the environment in which it works is critical and in order to be effective, a CSO has to understand the context it is working in. This includes understanding key actors and conditions that determine the current situation and what the organisation hopes to influence or change.

3. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Following the process, the organisation defines what is going to guide its work over the next 3-5 years and the outcome of this process will be the development of medium-term objectives. The projects designed will be in line with these objectives.

4. ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

the organisation needs to explore what it must do to effect the change it wishes to see and what investments it needs to be make in order to effectively achieve its mandate. This thinking results in the organisation identifying its existing expertise, the necessary key skills, the type of structure required, the development sought by the organisation and the mechanisms that will enable it to continue to develop internally.

Once this in-depth thinking has been done the organisation can prepare for action by drafting an annual plan in line with these objectives.

Over the past three years, we have supported around 20 organisations in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo review their *raison d'être*, to find meaning in their actions together, and to reaffirm their identity. We are going to present three cases here.

CASE STUDIES

Case no.1 – A CSO that no longer wishes to follow the lead of other national and international actors, and which wishes to break the cycle of dependence.

A community-based organisation (CBO), created approximately a decade ago around the transfer of a conservation project initiated by an international non-governmental organisation (INGO). This organisation's *raison d'être* is to fight the destruction of its country's rich biodiversity at a local level. This transfer was made with a view to the community taking ownership of the initiative.

The CBO was created by a few of the INGO's national employees. The founders were thus field agents, with rich experience on the ground, but not people with experience as project managers or managers of organisations. They were not sufficiently prepared for the transfer and,

THIS CBO BECAME TIRED OF BEING LED BY OTHER PEOPLE'S PLANS AND VISIONS, OF BEING SUBJECTED TO OTHER PEOPLE'S PRIORITIES, AND NOT SETTING A PACE THAT SUITED ITS COMMUNITY; IT DECIDED TO BREAK THIS CYCLE.

in particular, for what managing an organisation requires. Fortunately for them, many authorities and international donors were keen on the project because it tackles a global issue.

During the first four years, the CBO did not have too much difficulty finding funding and carrying out activities. However, it focused on projects and did not have a long-term

vision. After some time, the context changed. There was no more 'easy-to-get' funding and the organisation had to be competitive in making bids to access additional funds. This CBO was made up of field experts, not managers and fundraisers, but since its members had field expertise they were often called upon by other organisations from the capital to carry out field activities on their behalf.

After some time, the members of this CBO became tired of being led by other people's plans and visions, of being subjected to other people's priorities, and not setting a pace that suited its community; it decided to break this cycle. The CBO contacted Well Grounded for support on determining how it could really be at the helm of what it wanted to do; how to be less dependent on others' agendas; how to forge win-win partnerships. It is in this context that we supported this organisation with its strategic process. It spent a lot of time analysing and defining what it wanted to do and how to do it. The organisation is now at the stage where it can clearly explain why it does what it does, how the various components of its programme are linked and how each one contributes to a shared vision. The process has strengthened its capacity to decide which opportunities to go for and which ones to put aside.

Case no. 2 – A CSO in high demand wanted to make sure it stays true to its mission, to the reasoning behind its choice of partners; it is asking itself questions about its ability to meet the demand, its ability to resist temptation.

A CBO working in conservation created twenty years ago around an initiative to protect a rare species is developing quickly and is in high demand. Its visibility grew when it announced the existence of an endangered species in its development zone. It was believed that this species no longer existed in the area where it operates, but this CBO demonstrated that that was not the case, which in turn generated interest from various stakeholders. The founder saw this discovery as an opportunity for his community: to protect this species was both in the global interest in terms of biodiversity but also in the direct interest of the communities and their development.

THE CBO IS IN VERY HIGH DEMAND AND IS CONCERNED ABOUT ITS ABILITY MEET THIS DEMAND.

Since the CBO's announcement, other actors have expressed an interest in working in the area (INGOs, scientific

researchers, conservationists, etc.). The CBO is in very high demand and is concerned about its ability to meet this demand, and whether it can be strategic when choosing partners and resist the temptation of projects that are attractive but not necessarily aligned with the organisation's vision or the interests of the communities. This CBO's team had never worked together on the vision, the mandate, the approach, etc. and decided to seize this opportunity to work together in making these strategic decisions. The CBO thus called upon Well Grounded to support them in this strategic thought process.

Case no. 3 – An organisation that believes it is coming to the end of its current phase of development is losing its influence and wants to reinvent itself, convinced that its actions must be adapted to the current context in order to stay relevant.

The organisation has existed for approximately twenty years. It was able to distinguish itself from the competition because it is one of the rare organisations that are clear about their identity, their strengths and their weaknesses. It has made an impact, including one particularly memorable campaign having a significant impact on national import policy, with a view to protecting local producers. It is an organisation that is well regarded by other organisations in the development sector.

It is also one of the rare organisations to be frank about self-assessment. As a staff member explained: “we have done our time, we have had the impact that we wanted to have but it is as if the clock has stopped for us”. It is therefore asking itself questions: **Do we still meet a real need? Does our way of working take into account the new challenges of our target groups? Are our relationships with other actors still relevant? What new direction should we take? What should be our new image? How can we bring new blood to the organisation?**

This organisation achieved the results that it had set itself: the community cooperatives that it supports are autonomously managing their local initiatives. The organisation was wondering whether the time had come to hand over the lead to these cooperatives, yet was unsure of the exact role it could play to stay relevant.

It also felt that it was at the end of its course: it had the impression that its projects no longer interested donors. The organisation was wondering what it could do with the experience gained over 20 years, and yet it wanted to start a fresh cycle. The organisation called upon Well Grounded to create a space for reflection so that its members could discuss the next steps for the organisation, its renewal, and its new image.

KEY LEARNING

We have learned a lot through these experiences, including the following:

- **EACH SITUATION IS UNIQUE** - Even when two organisations are looking to carry out a strategic process, they are approaching us for different reasons; they have different histories and different internal dynamics. The point of entry of any strategic process depends on their situation. It is impossible to have a predetermined programme for the process – it has to respond to the particular situation of the organisation itself.

- **STRATEGIC WORK CANNOT BE DONE IN ONE WORKSHOP** - strategic work is a process. Discussions begin before any formal meeting or workshop and must continue within the organisation on a regular basis. The page must not be turned after a session of work; the most important result is the members' own awareness of the organisation's situation and the integration of these strategies in everyday decisions and activities.
- **A STRATEGIC PROCESS TAKES THE TIME IT TAKES** – We first dedicate the time required with each client in order to better understand why this is the right time for them to develop or renew their strategy. The process takes the time required by the team to discuss and make choices that suit them. It is not a race against time or about getting to a predefined outcome as quickly as possible. The result depends on each group and is achieved over time and in several stages.
- **WORKING OUT A STRATEGY IS ALSO AN ORGANISATIONAL DIAGNOSIS** – Discussing a strategy often involves reviewing the way in which work is conducted within an organisation, the way the team works and what it needs to better take charge of the task at hand. It allows you to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation. It is a participatory diagnosis.
- **THE PROCESS IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK ON THE TEAM'S COHESION** – It gives participants the feeling that they are building something important together, it increases the esteem of each person that has participated and motivates the team to make progress.
- **THE STRATEGY DOCUMENT IS JUST A STAGE IN THE PROCESS AND NOT AN END IN ITSELF** – Although CSOs' financial partners often request this document, it must be part of a process and the result of in-depth reflection. The document should not be the ultimate objective – it must not become more important than the process itself.
- **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROCESS DEPENDS ON THE PEOPLE INVOLVED AND POST-WORKSHOP SUPPORT:** Strategic thinking is not the sole work of directors and senior level management. Supporting the director and involving all staff and members ensures that everyone takes ownership of the strategy and that there is organisational anchoring.

CONCLUSION

African CSOs in the field of natural resource governance and community rights are both development actors and a counterweight to the political power and private sector in their respective countries. At a time where economic policies, in Central Africa in particular, are oriented towards growth and the pursuit of becoming “emerging economies”, CSOs have an essential role to play in ensuring these policies take the interests of communities and populations into account. In the age of globalisation, they need to be strategic and clear about their fight to influence regional and global policies.

Well Grounded has chosen to support the development of civil society organisations in Africa so that they can achieve their full potential and bring about real positive change in favour of environmental and social justice.



Helping CSOs to develop their strategy is paramount to their sovereignty and sustainability.

Helping CSOs to develop their strategy is paramount to their sovereignty and sustainability because, on the one hand, it enables them to clarify and reaffirm their identity, their raison d'être, their target group, their uniqueness, and the change they wish to see in the world and, on the other hand, they can improve their internal functioning and put elements of the strategy into place and be credible and competitive.

CSOs have difficulty finding funding for these types of processes: their strategy development work and operational plans. Each partner wants to exclusively fund the activities that are directly linked to the project it is financing and does not see strategy development as a basis for better project management and so that projects have a more significant impact. At a time when funding partners consider the 'strategic plan' a key document when assessing granting funding to CSOs, they should place more importance on the process and on funding this type of activity to ensure the pertinence of the actions carried out by the organisation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the clients that have placed their trust in Well Grounded and those that I have supported specifically. They have enabled me to learn with them and to give new meaning to the work that I do as an organisation development practitioner. I would also like to thank Davine Thaw and Will Campbell whose experience allowed me to build my own and to forge my own vision of how to facilitate strategic processes and thinking.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Thaw, D. (1997). *Ideas for a change. Part 1: strategic processes: how are you managing organisational change?* 3rd ed. Durban: Olive Publications

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mireille Kayijamahe is Congolese and has worked in the development sector and alongside civil society and humanitarian organisations in Central Africa and the Caribbean for the last ten years. Her experience with national and international organisations gives her a comprehensive perspective of the development challenges faced by organisations in the African context. Since 2008, she has worked with CSOs as a facilitator and trainer strengthening individuals and systems. She joined Well Grounded and the organisation development and coaching field in 2012. Since that time, she has been supporting Well Grounded clients in the Congo basin.



ABOUT WELL GROUNDED

Well Grounded provides organisation development support to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa so they have real and sustainable impacts on natural resource governance and community rights. We offer support to CSOs in the following areas: strategy development, leadership, team building and development, planning and evaluation and relationship and interpersonal skills. We also believe that connecting people and organisations is an important element of achieving positive change.

THE DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

This is one of a series of discussion papers published by Well Grounded with the objective of prompting debate and discussion about key organisation development issues relevant to CSOs in the Congo Basin. The papers do not present much theory – many other authors do that very well elsewhere – but are rather the fruit of our own observations and learning in our day to day practice in working with CSOs. They are designed to share the lessons we have learnt through our practice and to promote further debate and discussion on the development of African CSOs.