

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING

PRACTICE PAPER



STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

MARCH 2020



ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING PRACTICE PAPER

PeaceNexus is a Swiss-based foundation that aims to strengthen the capacity of organisations that play a role in building peaceful and inclusive societies. PeaceNexus supports its partners in three main areas i) organisational development support to peacebuilding organisations, ii) enhancing the capacity of government, civil society and businesses for conflict-sensitivity and iii) facilitating inclusive dialogue with business to develop solutions to local peacebuilding challenges. By strengthening the competencies of, and collaboration between, peacebuilding partners, PeaceNexus aims to increase their effectiveness in building peace.

As it celebrates its tenth anniversary, PeaceNexus is launching a series of Practice Papers that share lessons from its work with a broader audience. This Practice Paper, the first in this series, focuses on lessons learned in Organisational Development. PeaceNexus believes that organisational development is crucial to increasing the effectiveness of peacebuilding work, yet it is a neglected and undervalued area of donor support. As such, this paper aims to increase the visibility of this work.

PeaceNexus has provided Organisational Development support to more than 30 peacebuilding organisations since its inception. Its partners range from small civil society organisations that work on local conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues, to large multilateral agencies that have peace and security as their core mandate. This support is provided at our partners' request and remains demand-led throughout the process. Most of our Organisational Development partnerships include support to strengthen organisational strategy, either by developing a new strategy or reviewing an existing one. This paper shares lessons learned from our experience supporting these processes, collected through interviews with PeaceNexus staff, partners and the consultants that accompanied them.

Rather than serving as a 'how to' guide on strategy development, this paper collects insights of partners and staff who have been through a strategy process. Our aim is to share what our partners said they wished they had known at the onset with other peacebuilding organisations that are embarking on a strategy process, so that they don't need to 'learn the hard way'.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF A STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS?

Peacebuilding organisations work in particularly volatile, unpredictable and risk-prone contexts, making flexibility, conflict sensitivity and continuous adaptation essential. It is often a stressful environment, leading to high staff turnover or burnout in some cases. In addition, peacebuilding organisations face a particularly challenging funding environment. They receive mostly short-term project-based funding that is not conducive to long-term strategies to achieve social change. They face pressure to demonstrate concrete, immediate results in relation to intangible, long-term objectives. The increased polarisation and volatility of today's global context directly impacts their work, including by increasing its risks.

These circumstances lead many to consider strategy development to be obsolete. Why invest so much time and resources in a document that will be out-of-date as soon as it is published? Why go through a strategy process when much of what we do is driven by what donors will fund? Yet, in the experience of our partners, strategy development is more relevant than ever.



When asked ‘Why did you feel the need to develop a strategy?’ our partner ABAC (‘Association Burkinabé d’Action Communautaire’) repeatedly said ‘On naviguait à vue’ (we were navigating by sight). As a result of the process, they now have a clearer picture of who they are and where they are headed, which helps them in their day-to-day decision-making. They posted their key priorities and principles on posters all over their office and refer to them in every internal meeting.



First and foremost, a strategy provides direction. A good strategy outlines the organisation's vision for the future and commits it to action toward that vision. It provides a clear sense of purpose to the staff, board and supporters, and becomes a shared reference point to guide decision-making. It presents strategic decisions on how the organisation can best contribute to its vision. These strategic decisions not only inform the organisation's programmatic work, but also shape its governance, operations, internal structures and policies. When a strategy presents a clearly articulated, coherent voice to the world, it becomes a powerful tool to mobilise resources and support for the organisation's agenda. Many of our partners have found that having a clear strategy strengthened their position in their funding environment and helped build genuine and more equal partnerships with donors.



The process of developing a strategy is as important as the final product it delivers. A strong strategy process gives an organisation the opportunity to (re-)align behind a common vision, building unity and strength of purpose. It can re-energise a team and open up new opportunities. Reflecting on organisational principles and priorities can surface gaps between espoused values and day-to-day practices. It can create space for staff to identify underlying dynamics, power relations and aspects of organisational culture that impede performance and impact. Which in turn allows them to dialogue and problem-solve around these issues, initiating a deeper process of organisational change. Indeed, in hindsight, many of our partners recognised benefits they gained from the process that they had not initially imagined.

A good strategy process leads to a culture of strategic reflection. The process involves reflection on where the organisation sits within its environment, how fit for purpose it is, where its niche and comparative advantage lies, and how it can optimally contribute to its vision. Contexts change, organisations can start to drift, or they can become complacent and no longer innovate. The conscious process of stepping back, having a fresh look at the context, getting feedback from external voices and reflecting on one's positioning is a necessity, not only during a strategy process, but routinely in planning and other organisational processes. When a culture of ongoing strategic reflection is not yet present in an organisation, a strategy process can jumpstart it.



In reality however, strategy processes do not always live up to these expectations. Too often organisations see a strategy as a burden or requirement imposed by their board or donors, rather than a process that can add value to the organisation. Sometimes strategy writing is outsourced to a consultant, and not internalised. Even worse, the staff may feel forced to go through a process in which they do not feel empowered and see no benefit. This can drain their resources and even reinforce unhealthy organisational dynamics. In some cases, poorly executed processes lead to strategy documents that are so broad, or jargon-filled, that they are meaningless as a guide for decision-making.

Knowing what a strategy process can deliver, and what harm it can do, is essential knowledge for any leader wishing to embark on such a process.



The 'Haute Autorité à la Consolidation à la Paix' in Niger, a governmental agency with a strong peacebuilding mandate introduced new tools for context analysis into its strategic planning process. The tools are now embedded in other organisational processes, ensuring ongoing analysis and adaptation of their annual work plans. As a result, the agency doesn't just have a new strategy but a much stronger organisational culture of reflecting on past activities and adapting accordingly.



When exploring its mission and values, our partner UNOY (United Network of Young Peacebuilders) realised that while its values remained the same, the role it played as a network of youth-led peacebuilding organisations in the emerging field of youth, peace and security was changing. With the help of a communication consultant, it developed a clear description of this new role and its potential to add value for its members and donors. This framing proved to be very valuable in securing a three-year core grant to implement the vision it had developed.

EXAMPLES OF BENEFITS OUR PARTNERS GAINED FROM THEIR STRATEGY PROCESS

- A more cohesive, united team.
- A shift to a culture of continuous learning.
- Renewed clarity on their role and ability to communicate it.
- Improved dialogue and relationship between staff and board.
- Stronger, more equal relationship with donors.
- Better understanding of the context and its evolution.
- Changes in internal communication, e.g. how meetings are run.
- New insights and skills.

COMMON MISTAKES / UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

- The process reinforces existing power imbalances or creates factions
- The process leads to the lowest common denominator, not the best collective thinking.
- Participation is low or the process is hijacked by a few people.
- Strategy fatigue; too much analysis and consultation, no more energy for important debates.
- A jargon –filled document that doesn't inspire.
- No agreement on decision-making criteria; the process or product is not considered legitimate.
- Internal process only with no reality check with external actors.
- No operational plan or an overly ambitious road map.

DESIGNING AND MANAGING THE PROCESS

Designing a strategy development or review process is an art in itself. The strategy process typically includes the following components: clarifying the purpose, scope and expectations of the process; analysing the organisation and the context in which it operates; determining the future strategic direction and priorities; and analysing the changes to organisational structure and management associated with this new direction. Although there is a general progression—from defining the scope, to the analysis, to determining direction and prioritisation, to operationalisation—these components are all interlinked and progress isn't unidirectional and linear. Careful process design is key. When possible, it is a benefit to bring in an organisational development expert to design and steer the process. Still, no process will unfold exactly as planned, and adaptations will always be necessary.

The purpose, scope and depth of the process needs to be clarified upfront. It is not always necessary to engage in a deep review of the strategy and the organisation's fitness, sometimes a light review is all it takes. With limited time and resources, the organisation will first need to clarify the purpose of the exercise: why do we want to embark on this process? What do we hope to achieve? What would success look like? What is 'good enough' for us?

Perspectives on the main purpose of the strategy process often differ among the stakeholders involved, including the board, the senior leadership and the staff. If some stakeholders understand the exercise as a simple target-setting one, whilst others hope it will lead to a complete re-think of organisational priorities or internal structure, the process is bound to disappoint.



The Executive Director of our Senegal-based partner ONG-3D saw the strategy development process as an opportunity for him to change his role. After interviewing him – and other key stakeholders – the consultant hired to support the process encouraged him to share his vision with his staff, rather than keep this private. His announcement at the first planning meeting that the new strategy was an opportunity for a transition in leadership and for the next generation to step up, completely changed his team's understanding of the process and significantly increased their engagement.



The level of ambition for the process needs to match existing time and resources. Strategy fatigue is a real risk. If the process starts to feel never-ending, commitment wanes. Many of our partners have learned not to be over-ambitious about the scope and depth of the exercise. Investing sufficient time upfront to reach a consensus on the purpose, expected outcomes and scope of the process is a step many of our partners regretted not having taken.

Strong ownership of the process by participants is key to success. Engagement and commitment of a broad range of actors creates a holistic picture of the organisation and its environment, lends legitimacy to the process and the final document, and helps to build a sense of shared purpose. The process design needs to carefully consider ownership and how to keep people fully engaged and committed throughout.



It is important to consider power dynamics when designing the process. An organisation's culture determines the degree of freedom staff feel to engage openly in a process. Even a process that is designed to be participatory may not, in effect, be open if staff feel disempowered, subdued, or fearful. Existing frictions and power relations, including gender relations and cultural factors, such as norms related to showing respect to seniors, can stand in the way of achieving a truly open process. The leader of the organisation, or consultant accompanying the process, needs to consider these dynamics and take preparatory steps if necessary, such as making clear statements of intention and modelling new behaviour.

Metamorphosis, an independent NGO based in Skopje, North Macedonia, recognised that staff should be actively involved in shaping the strategy, not just passively engaged, as had been the case in the past. There was a Change Team established, with membership from different parts of the organisation. The directors were included but did not have ultimate decision-making power. Instead, the team as a whole made decisions. This was particularly important because there had been a significant level of frustration built up. Now the staff felt empowered to exercise leadership.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

DESIGNING AND MANAGING THE PROCESS

Building consensus on the purpose and scope of the strategy process best involves a range of actors. To involve diverse perspectives early in the process, many partners have found it useful to form a 'strategy committee' made up of representatives of different parts of the organisation (a combination of management, junior staff, and sometimes a board member). This committee, sometimes with the assistance of an external consultant, can elicit perspectives on the utility of the strategy process, for instance through interviews or surveys; define the appropriate scope; and facilitate dialogue and generate consensus around it.

Distinguish ownership and consultation. Broad ownership is crucial, but does not necessarily require full participation of all staff at all times. Overly consultative processes can undermine staff motivation and buy-in. When a process drags on for months, staff may begin to feel they add little value, especially if the process is still dominated by a few voices. Many of our partners have learned that it works better to create working groups with selected staff, while at the same time communicating their findings to other staff members and giving them opportunities to engage or provide feedback on them.

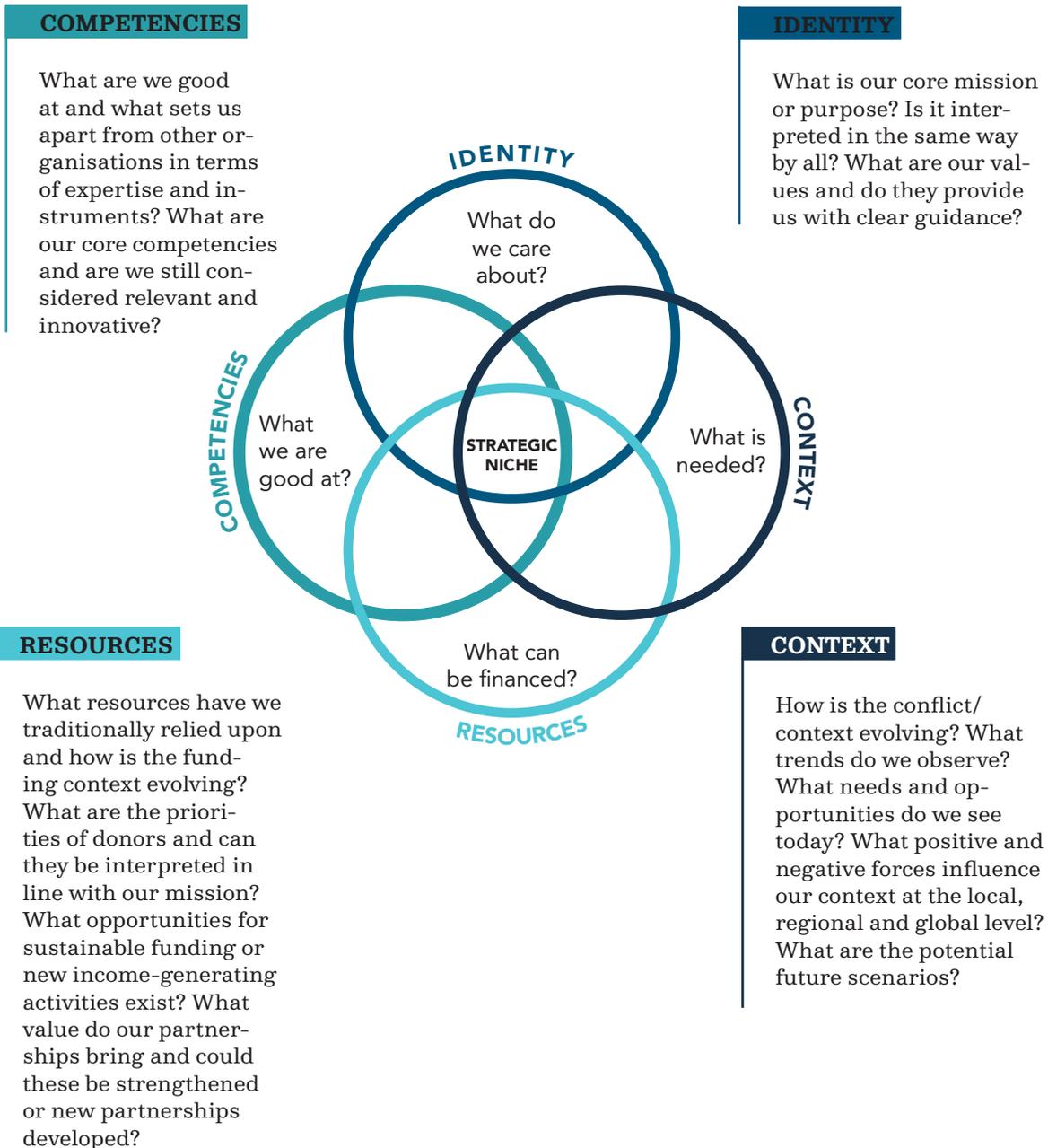
Provide clear and timely information about the process as it unfolds. One of the lessons often learned the hard way by our partners is the importance of keeping everyone briefed on where the process stands. Staff that are not directly involved in all steps of the process can easily feel lost or alienated. It is essential to communicate to staff and other stakeholders throughout the process so that they understand its objectives, why it is shaped the way it is, where it currently stands, where it is supposed to lead, and what their role is in it.



ANALYSING THE ORGANISATION IN ITS ENVIRONMENT

The strategy process includes a review of the organisation and the environment in which it is situated. This involves unpacking the organisation's core identity, the context in which it works, available resources and competencies. The analysis helps identify the organisation's strategic niche, where its mission and competencies overlap with programmatic priorities and available resources.

Four key areas are typically examined



The analysis must be customised and circumscribed, so resources are invested wisely. The analysis is crucial to the strategy process. Yet, it also can quickly eat up time and energy or paralyse the process if it is overly comprehensive and fails to focus on the most strategic and relevant questions.

It is therefore important to define the scope and purpose of the analysis and to focus on priority questions. Different sources and methods (context analysis, scenario-building, focus groups, interviews with key partners, donor mapping, desk review of government or donor strategies, staff surveys, capacity audits, etc.) may be used, depending on how comprehensive the analysis of each area needs to be.

The real value lies in joint reflection on the findings of the analysis. The analysis should provide a picture of the alignment between different dimensions of the organisation and its environment. Is its mission and vision in line with what the context requires? Do staff capacity, knowledge and skills match the demands on them? Are resources available for the kind of work the organisation wants to do? Joint reflection on these questions is the first step to bringing these dimensions back in line, and building a sense of ownership around the changes that may be needed.

It can be useful to reflect on organisational imbalances, or the implications of placing too much focus on any one dimension, at the expense of the others.

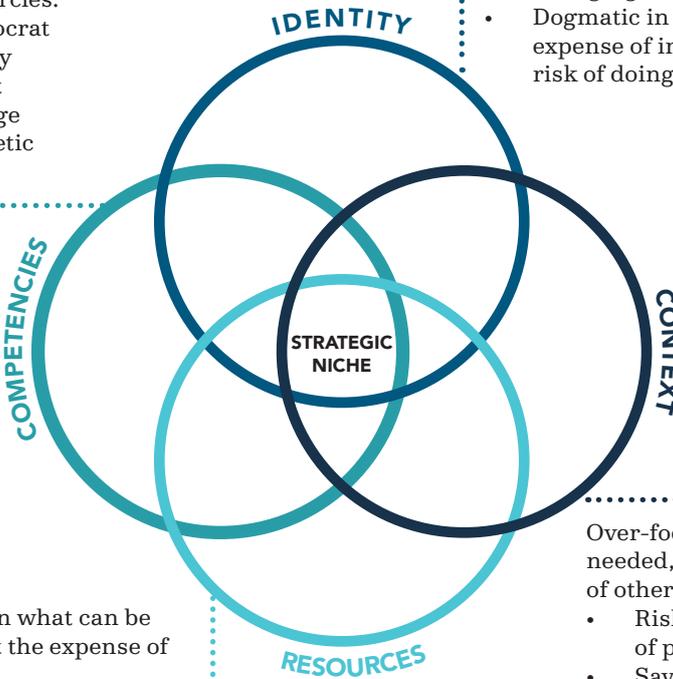


Over-focus on what we are good at, at the expense of other circles:

- Loose your soul - technocrat
- Don't adapt methodology and expertise to context
- No longer want to change the world – loose prophetic voice

Over-focus on what we care about, at the expense of other circles:

- Get out of touch with a changing environment
- Dogmatic in values – at the expense of impact and with risk of doing harm



Over-focus on what can be resourced, at the expense of other circles:

- Donor-driven
- Out-of-touch with your base
- Not focused on sustainable impact

Over-focus on what is needed, at the expense of other circles:

- Risk of burn out and loss of passion
- Save the world syndrome
- Too stretched for real impact



At the suggestion of their consultant, our partner ABAC reviewed the Burkina Faso National Development Strategy and conducted one-on-one interviews with key actors and partners. Until then, the organisation had focused exclusively on their community's needs and had not fully considered how it fit within the wider system. The analysis broadened their understanding of the context for their work and helped them position themselves in relation to the authorities and donor agencies. It very quickly translated into new funding and partnerships.

SCENARIO PLANNING

Peacebuilding organisations need to find ways to deal with the unpredictability of the fluid and volatile environments in which they operate. It may be useful to invest in scenario planning, to ensure that the organisation's strategy is not too narrowly focused on today's world.

Even if it isn't possible to formulate a strategy that fits all possible future scenarios, thinking about multiple scenarios is valuable. It helps build a culture of strategic reflection and adaptation, and reduces the risk of the strategy becoming meaningless when the context changes.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

ANALYSING THE ORGANISATION IN ITS ENVIRONMENT

As a general principle, the more participatory the analysis is conducted the better. Joint analysis builds shared understanding. It provides an opportunity to build staff skills and confidence in their own knowledge and competence. It also reduces the risk of the process being dominated by a few individuals. However, staff time may be very limited. Collectively gathering and analysing data can create a crippling 'strategy fatigue' before the hard questions are even asked. Outsourcing analysis to a consultant does not necessarily reduce ownership, and may even lead to fresh insights. What is essential is that the reflection on the analysis is done jointly.

Bringing in external perspectives helps to challenge existing assumptions. Engaging key external stakeholders (donors, implementing partners, beneficiaries or representatives of one's constituency) in conversations about the strategic niche and relevance of the organisation almost always adds real value. They can provide a broader perspective on the context and new thinking. Some organisations have gone so far as to organise 'town hall' or community meetings, and found them very useful.

Analysis can serve as a mirror to see the organisational culture afresh. The analysis can help the organisation identify potential gaps between what they stand for and what they do. Acknowledging such disconnects, rather than brushing them under the carpet, is key to developing new ways of working that increase commitment and impact. An external facilitator can be particularly helpful in guiding discussion of uncomfortable issues, challenging blind spots by holding up a mirror, and giving voice to what may be otherwise only whispered.

CLARIFYING THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION AND SETTING PRIORITIES

The analysis provides a foundation to adapt the organisation's strategic direction and set priorities. In the process of analysis and reflection, some convergence on the strategic direction and niche of the organisation usually emerges, although further clarification and refinement is often necessary.

Many of our partners have found that clarifying the identity of the organisation – the core values, vision, and mission – is a key lever. Once this is clear, the rest tends to fall into place more easily.



Often consensus starts to break down during the process of determining strategic priorities. Ultimately prioritising is about choosing. There can be resistance to making choices for a variety of reasons: the desire to address all needs and injustices one is confronted with, the pragmatic fear of missing out on funding opportunities, or the inability to force a decision in the case of opposing points of view. Peacebuilding organisations often fall into the trap of compromise-based decision-making, where different options are simply all included in the strategy. This results in strategies that read like a shopping list and provide no direction. Another pitfall is to take decisions based on the strength of personality or power of those advocating for a particular priority. Carefully unpacking the alternative options available and being clear about the basis for prioritisation is a way to avoid these pitfalls.

ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY

Organisations usually define themselves through their mission and a set of principles or values. These are useful to orient the organisation but are often too broad and unspecific to provide a strong shared identity and sense of direction. Exploring collectively what these values really mean and how they are to be applied in practice can be very useful to strengthen unity within in the organisation.

The exercise can also be highly revealing, when there is a gap between the espoused ideal and reality. Values like inclusiveness and tolerance, for instance, are not always exercised in the day-to-day management of the organisation. Certain values can also be over-emphasised. Peacebuilding organisations typically value consensus, sometimes at the expense of healthy disagreements.



IDEA_Central Asia, one of our youth-led partners interviewed its beneficiaries as part of its organisational development process and realised there was a disconnect between the organisational values and the staff's unconscious beliefs. They discovered they had been disempowering the very youth they aimed to empower, as they were reproducing in their curriculum and activities many of the stereotypes they sought to abolish. They courageously confronted their own biases and came out of this challenging experience with a new conviction and a stronger sense of purpose. This led them to adapt all their methods and ways of working.

PRIORITIZATION TOOLS

The most common prioritisation tool in a workshop setting is the coloured voting dot, useful for its simplicity and immediate transparency. It can be however misleading as participants understand the questions differently. It also often fails to capture the complexity of the choices that need to be made.

Dots can still be useful when used as an indicative vote and mapping the options in some visual manner can be very helpful, for instance along two axis in an xy graph (e.g. mapping potential impact and risk).

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

CLARIFYING THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION AND SETTING PRIORITIES

Integrate lessons from the past.

This creates continuity, fosters appreciation for learning and experience acquired over time, and helps to build staff ownership in the process. This is easier when there is an on-going culture of learning and reflection, but the exercise can also help create an organisational culture that more strongly values learning.

Deeply explore and unpack various options before moving into prioritisation mode. In any organisation, there are opposing views on what should be prioritised, and which options are the most strategic. This is healthy, and a great source of creativity and innovation. It is worthwhile to spend significant time carefully exploring the pros and cons of the

different options, before moving into decision-making mode, where the battle for one's preferred option begins. What is essential is to ensure there is a stage of unpacking the various options and holding them up against the mirror of the vision, mission and identity of the organisation. Having teams or individuals advocate for a non-preferred option can also be helpful.

Agreeing upfront on the criteria for prioritisation leads to better decisions. A process to agree upfront the criteria for selecting options creates a more systematic and transparent process. It helps prevent rushed or emotional decisions, and, importantly, it helps staff understand the rationale for the final choices,

even if they don't reflect their preferences. These criteria should flow logically from the analysis and the emergent consensus on the organisation's vision, mission and identity.

Clarify the decision-making process. It is important to establish upfront how decisions will be taken in case of no consensus. Failing to be clear on who will make the final decisions and how they will be made can create false expectations and risk undermining the legitimacy of the whole process. For example, if participants have been given the sense that they own the process and then suddenly feel the final decision is taken over their heads, by senior management or the board, this can be demoralising and undermine staff buy-in.

THINKING THROUGH THE ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW STRATEGY



Our partner Metamorphosis was surprised to see how much organisational change was necessary in order to put its new strategy into place. An initial decision to restructure the organisation led them to realise the need for a new strategy. This, in turn, required adapting many policies and systems to ensure full alignment. Due to the strong ownership felt over the process, they successfully managed to see these changes through, but it took more time than initially expected.

The process so far should have enabled the organisation to answer its key questions relating to its identity, context, resources and competencies and to define its strategic niche: what the organisation is best positioned to deliver, why, how and by when. Some strategy documents include inward-looking organisational objectives, such as growth or capacity objectives, whereas others only have outward-looking programmatic objectives.

Depending on what choices have been made, aligning the organisation with its new strategy may require small adjustments or substantial changes to its structure, staffing and policy. This may include closing down projects or departments, developing new internal systems and policies, hiring new staff that bring in needed expertise, or even a complete overhaul of its governance. These implications are often not very well thought through in the strategy process and, in the experience of our partners, these changes often go deeper than what was initially expected.

Ideally, every aspect of the organisation's operations should be examined in the light of the new strategy: is our current internal structure the best vehicle for our new ambitions? Are changes needed to our recruitment practices or our talent development policy? What adaptation will be required in our reporting and financial systems to deliver the results we have committed ourselves to?

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

THINKING THROUGH THE ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW STRATEGY

Check that the strategy is understood in the same way by all stakeholders. A consensus on priorities does not mean that everyone agrees on how they should be operationalised. Such differences in interpretations can create major resistance to the steps then taken by the leadership to implement the strategy.

Ensure sufficient time and energy is dedicated to thinking through the operational implications. Leaders often regret that too much time and resources were devoted to articulating programmatic priorities, with no energy left to examine the organisational development changes required, and develop an action plan for them. If the internal reforms needed to implement the new strategy are not unpacked and planned, the organisation may find itself in an undefined, endless 'transition period' that will drain it of its most vital resources.

Be realistic about how much change an organisation can absorb. Over-ambitious and unrealistic expectations for how much change the organisation can absorb can erode the benefits of the strategy development process. The organisational changes required can take several months if not years to implement, and usually come on top of already heavy workloads. A lesson learned is to focus on the most needed changes first, whilst actively committing to and sequentially implementing the other changes over time.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Strategy review and development processes can have real benefits for peacebuilding organisations. The process can strengthen its position within a volatile and risk-prone environment and increase its clarity of vision, so that it can live up to its potential. However, the process is also very challenging and can get derailed in different ways.

PeaceNexus strongly believes in the power of strategy processes to help organisations to become more responsive to their contexts and more effective peacebuilding agents. When peacebuilding organisations are centred in their own strengths and competencies, they can more meaningfully contribute to building sustainable peace in the challenging environments in which they work.

Over the years, our partners have shared with us many inspiring stories of transformation as well as some regrets. Some wished they had realised the full potential of the strategy exercise earlier, had planned the process more carefully, and invested time and resources differently. We have shared some of these experiences, lessons learned and words of caution, hoping they will be of use to other organisations that are considering the future direction of their efforts towards a more peaceful and inclusive world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Practice Paper was written by Carole Frampton-de Tscharnier and Frauke de Weijer. It draws on a process of broad consultation and individual interviews of our partners, the Organisational Development consultants that have supported them, as well as our PeaceNexus colleagues in Prangins, Switzerland, West Africa, the Western Balkans, Central Asia and Myanmar.

A first version of the Paper was reviewed at a PeaceNexus' Organisational Development consultants peer-learning event, which took place over two days in September 2019.

We would like to thank all those that contributed their time and wisdom to this Paper, and hope that they will recognise their voice and find it a useful reference for future strategy processes.

