

Thinking Strategically about Non-formal Education

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This paper is intended to put forth some proposals on how to take into account those dynamics of non-formal education that make it challenging to plan and manage at a national level. The paper suggests considerations for thinking strategically about planning and managing non-formal education.

“Strategic thinking” and “strategic planning” are popular concepts, throughout not only the corporate world, where they were first coined and where big business spends millions on such activities, but also among organisations in the developing world and even in the education sector of the developing world. But what is the value of strategic planning and strategic thinking for those of us working in non-formal education?

Strategic planning, simply put, is the process of setting goals and making the best use of resources to reach those goals. To be successful, strategic planning must include goals that are realistic in terms of resources available. It must also lead to a creative use of resources—finding them and employing them efficiently in view of the goal. What makes the strategic planning process challenging is its dynamic nature: goals and resources can and should change as time goes along, so strategic planning is not a one-time event. It is a constant process of adjustment.

Strategic thinking, then, is the mindset, attitude, skills and tools required for this constant process of strategic planning. It is asking the simple questions over and over again, What do we want to do? Why? How? The “why” question is important, because it takes us to deeper levels of understanding our ultimate goal, and it gives us more options for answering the “how” question.

Goals: Vision or problem-oriented?

Let us now apply these very general statements about strategic planning and strategic thinking to non-formal education at a national level. We will look at the fictitious case of Farland, which is actually a merger of two real cases in which departments of non-formal education have been planning to expand their programs significantly.

Those who are engaged in strategic planning generally begin by stating goals, either in terms of a vision to be achieved or in terms of a problem to be solved. In Farland, the department of non-formal education, which is in the ministry of education, considered several alternative goals. Two of these alternatives were goals stated in terms of a vision of the future. One envisioned a non-formal education system that served every man, woman, and child who lacked a primary school education. The other vision was of a nation free of illiteracy. The department also considered some problem-oriented goals. One was to solve the problem of large numbers of young men who cannot find employment because they lack the basic skills needed for holding a job in the modern sector of the economy. Another “problem” goal was to reduce the high drop-out rate in primary schools by helping parents learn to read, write, and do math so they could support their young children in school. A broader, sort of “meta-problem” was to improve on the poor quality of services currently provided to school dropouts and to parents.

What kind of goal, vision-oriented or problem-oriented, is more “strategic” for a department of non-formal education? Vision goals are appropriate for an organisation that wants to strengthen its own accomplishments or position in the economy or society. An electronics company, for example, will set its vision in terms of gaining significant market share in its products, or earning a reputation as the manufacturer of the highest quality electronic appliances worldwide. A ministry of education will

set a vision of building a school system that allows every child to acquire a good-quality primary education; a teachers college will aim to ensure that every teacher is well trained. For the electronics company, the ministry of education, and the teachers college, these visions are suitable and may well be feasible.

Goals stated in terms of a vision, however, seem less appropriate for non-formal education. Even though non-formal education is often a unit of the ministry of education and therefore expected to function like a formal school system, in fact it is very different. A formal school system is intended to meet the common needs of all children to acquire accredited basic skills and to channel them through the system, with increasingly diverse—but very limited—options as they mature. Non-formal education, in contrast, picks up the pieces and looks for those whom formal education has missed. The clients, or beneficiaries, of non-formal education are not longer in the system. In fact, it is their “outsideness” or disadvantage that brings them into touch with non-formal education programs. Thus, to set a goal of meeting the needs of all disadvantaged men, women, and children is not likely to be feasible through a single, monolithic program and therefore not very “strategic.” Because non-formal education is aimed at different groups with different needs and requiring different approaches, strategic goals in non-formal education programs are better conceived in terms of problems that must be solved.

Let us look more specifically at goals in the area of literacy. Farland officials were certain that they wanted to include literacy among the programs of the expanded non-formal education department. They were midway into a nationwide campaign in basic literacy. Once the campaign had been completed, how should they define a new goal in the area of literacy? They considered two alternatives. One alternative was in terms of a vision: for example, making every youth and adult self-sufficient in literacy. This would entail a post-literacy campaign to follow up the basic literacy campaign, providing out-of-school youth and adults with training that would consolidate their literacy skills. In order to be rolled out efficiently, such a campaign would have to rely on a fairly standardised curriculum. Yet learners who have been given basic skills, come to a post-literacy course with different levels of competence, different needs, and different interests. A standardised course would be difficult to teach in these circumstances.

An alternative goal was in terms of a problem: breaking the barrier between out-of-school youth and opportunities for their participation in productive work, community involvement, and family care. This would entail a variety of integrated literacy and practical skills training programs, each aimed at a specific group of adolescents or adults who had opportunities for immediate application of their new literacy skills.

Instead, the goal of a literacy program should be set in terms of problem solving. For example: The goal of the organisation is to improve the management of crop pests by teaching farmers to read information on integrated pest management. Or, the goal is to reduce childhood illness by teaching mothers to read simple healthcare manuals; or, to improve civic responsibility by teaching community members to read locally published newsletters.

This kind of strategic thinking is certainly not new to leaders of effective non-formal education programs, most of which have well-defined beneficiary groups and goals. What about more far-reaching goals of organisations with a broader mandate, such as the department of non-formal education in Farland? Officials there were reluctant to limit the department’s goal to one of helping to solve the problems of a few groups of people, such as crop farmers or young mother recognise that a “vision” goal of every person applying literacy skills was well beyond their resources. To think strategically about goals for a national department of non-formal education, they needed to probe further into some organising principles of non-formal education.

Organising principles of NFE programs

What principles guide the design of non-formal education programs and thus should guide strategic thinking about non-formal education on a large scale? In formal education, policy-makers, teachers and administrators can more or less dictate what students must learn and even how they must learn, because they hold the keys to certification and advancement through the system. Educators in non-formal programs do not have these incentives to offer. They can only attract people who want to learn something in order to improve their lives and or to gain access to opportunities otherwise out of reach. In other words, people who choose to participate in non-formal education programs are usually those who have taken responsibility for their own learning and achievement. An effective non-formal education program recognises this important quality of its learners and keeps the learner in control of his or her learning.¹ So one principle guiding non-formal education is that the learner must be allowed to take charge of his or her own learning. A corollary is that communities of learners must be encouraged to take responsibility for opportunities for their members to learn. A good non-formal education program begins with activities that ensure that the community is in charge and that providers of education are following their lead.

A second principle, as we have discussed, is that non-formal education providers must be responsive to learners' needs and interests. One size does not fit all. This means that non-formal education providers must help create curricula and materials that respond to the specific needs of specific groups of learners. The provider must work with the group to clearly identify the problem to be solved and the resources needed to solve it.

A third principle is that, more often than not, those resources will entail more than just training. For example, women in a community who want some economic freedom may need credit, equipment, and supplies as well as skills training. The non-formal education provider may not furnish more than training, but it may need to help the women find the complements to the training that will make it useful.

These three principles—learners taking responsibility for their own learning, providers responding to learners' needs, and the need for resources that complement training—argue against nationwide campaigns or other programs that put the government in the driver's seat and deliver a "one size fits all" package throughout the country. Unlike formal schools, with their uniform, nationwide curriculum—at least through the junior secondary level, each non-formal education program is targeted to a small, difficult-to-reach group of learners, who learn only when they take responsibility for doing so.

Resources: How to stretch the limits?

In recognition of these principles, Farland wanted to help provide literacy skills to groups of people that urgently needed literacy skills, and they knew they might have to set some priorities among those groups. But they could not make these decisions without facing the other aspect of strategic planning: matching resources to goals.

Farland, like most African governments, had been putting a much larger portion of its national budget into primary education over the last decade. With its limited monetary resources and pressure for financing of higher and secondary education as well as primary education, the ministry had little left for non-formal education. What limited role, then, could government play in the provision of non-formal education? Many non-formal education programs had already been well established in Farland by non-government organisations and other government agencies. None of them had large

¹ An exception is non-formal education programs for children that effectively supplement the formal primary school system; these offer the same incentives as formal schools.

budgets, but about ten large ones were funded by international donors. Another hundred or so were new but eagerly seeking funding. About a dozen line ministries had training activities that could be characterised as non-formal education, including agencies in the ministries of agriculture, health, labour, and local government. What could an underfunded department of non-formal education do amidst this complex, variegated field of programs for small, targeted groups of learners? How could government officials think strategically about non-formal education in this context?

Farland's first step was to discard formal education as a model for thinking strategically about non-formal education. Unlike the formal system, where the government's goal is to envision and build a system that accommodates all children and most youth, the government in non-formal education can help those who have missed out on the formal school system—to incorporate training and education into the solution of their problems. Instead of helping teachers and administrators authorise students to move from one level of the system to the next, the non-formal education department can help non-formal education providers to authenticate courses that have practical, immediate application in learners' lives. Instead of a uniform formal curriculum, the non-formal education department can foster myriad curricula. Instead of maintaining professional support systems such as teacher training colleges, and administrative and infrastructure support systems such as payroll and construction, the non-formal education department must encourage disparate groups of learners to find their own support. These tasks are not easy, and they may explain why governments and funding agencies are much more willing to build large school formal systems than to support the non-formal education sector. Non-formal education does not lend itself to bureaucratic strategies.

Farland's next step was to invite the other providers of non-formal education—NGOs and other government agencies—to participate in its strategic planning. This invitation resulted from the department's thinking strategically about resources. Officials recognised that the department's budget was unlikely to grow much more than its current level, which covered 20 government service officials and the cost of the one-time basic literacy campaign, which was scheduled to end within four years and had no excess. They also recognised that by far the largest share of funding for non-formal education went through NGOs, and that a sizeable amount went through other government agencies.

The department's *strategy*, they concluded, should continue to rely on NGOs and other government agencies to provide non-formal education in the country. This was not simply because government did not have the funds to replace NGOs or take over their programs but because NGOs were better situated to provide non-formal education. They were small, flexible, and mobile. Thus, one NGO or agency could help address the problems of one or more limited groups of people. Among them, they could use a variety of methods to help solve a variety of problems. They could form alliances, including alliances with organisations and agencies that provided complements to education and training, such as credit, equipment, supplies, and even work.

Government's role: What is strategic?

We have defined strategic planning as the process of setting goals and making the best use of resources to reach those goals. What makes planning *strategic* is creative thinking about choices among goals and among resource uses and among the dynamic interaction between goal choices and resource choices.

If the government adopts a problem-solving goal, and if it relies on NGO and other government agencies to provide resources to non-formal education, what then is government's role? Or, in terms of strategic thinking, how can government facilitate the use of available resources (mostly those of other organisations and agencies) in meeting its goals (problem solving)? In full consultation with all non-formal education providers, Farland has arrived at useful role of government in this situation, and thus it has set its goal: to help non-formal education providers improve the quality of their

services. To do this, the department of non-formal education will work with providers to set standards, share information, and improve accessibility of services.

To set standards, the department has considered several options. One is to write exemplary curricula in several courses, including literacy, that non-formal education providers could adopt or adapt to their own programs. Another is to certify service providers to offer certain courses and perhaps to regulate providers, outlawing any that were not certified. A third is to prepare tests in literacy and math that would allow learners to certify their acquisition of skills equivalent to those taught in primary school. Farland is still considering these options and which is the best to pursue.

To share information, the department established a sub-goal of offering workshops and forums at which non-formal education service providers within the country could keep informed about best practices and other developments. Forums would allow providers to regularly share with each other information about their programs, challenges, successes and problems. Workshops would allow those with some expertise to train others; they would also allow providers to present particular challenges and ask for help, and they would bring in experts from outside the country. The department would also help finance visits by providers to regional meetings and to other countries with strong non-formal education programs.

To improve accessibility of services, the department wants to convert the temporary centers it established for basic literacy training into more permanent village-based centres for non-formal education where non-formal providers could offer courses and information. This is a challenging goal, and officials are defining various options for reaching it. They are thinking strategically about its feasibility, including the likely need to limit this program to selected villages—at least in the near future. They are also looking for ways to mobilise local resources in establishing and operating village centres.

Farland officials recognise that in order to meet two of its three sub-goals, information sharing and service improvements, the department should operate closer to the local level. Though the country is small, rivers, mountains, bad roads, and other barriers make it difficult for people to travel easily to the capital, where the department staff is located. Thus, they plan to open three or four offices at the regional level within the next year and have asked for new posts to be created. Officers at the regional level will have authority and discretionary budgets that allow them to hold information-sharing events and to help villages establish non-formal education centres.

Thus, Farland has worked with its partners in non-formal education to determine its strategy for improving the quality of services. It has thought strategically about goals, opting for addressing solvable problems rather than aiming at an unachievable vision. It has thought strategically about resources, opting for collaboration in mobilising a range of resources rather than building its own monolithic structure.

Farland has not yet finalised its strategy, and officials realise that they never will reach the end of the road. Non-formal education will never be a static field, with all the necessary structures in place and resources on track. As the country develops, its economic and social needs change continually, and the role of education and training in meeting those needs changes as well.

Summary

The department of non-formal education in Farland has begun and will continue to think strategically about its goals and resources. The department has found that the strategies best suited to supporting non-formal education are extremely different from those suited to supporting formal education. It has decided to frame its goals in terms of problems to be solved rather than visions to be achieved, and it has set goals in view of available resources. These resources are not limited to what the ministry of education budget can provide. Instead, they mobilise resources in the non-government sector, in other government agencies, and even in communities.

The department has established good working relationships with NGOs and other government agencies that provide non-formal education. It has set up mechanisms for continual dialogue with these organisations on problems that non-formal education can help to address. Working together, the department, NGOs, and other non-formal education service providers will regularly assess how well they are doing at helping to solve priority problems. They will also consider together what new problems are arising, and what shifts in priorities they want to adopt.

Not every department of non-formal education would choose the same strategy that Farland has developed. But every department should think strategically about its choices. It should examine the differences between vision-oriented and problem-oriented goals. It should also take into account the differences between the sources and amount of resources available for formal and non-formal education. Finally, every department should think about the interaction between goals and resources—formulating goals that match resources and mobilising resources among all those who participate in non-formal education.

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