

Model of educational strategic management tools

In the context of national education development, the term of strategic planning is increasingly referred to. Countries and agencies have been engaged in planning and managing the development of education systems more and more strategically, due to various reasons, including the following:

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First, one may wish to plan all the activities deemed needed, but without necessarily achieving the expected results and ultimate goals.

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Secondly, more resources do not necessarily stand for better results. The way one uses these resources also matters.

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Thirdly, it has become difficult to plan everything one would wish to do. One ought to make choices through a balanced decision-making process.

One cannot say that there is a “perfect way” to conduct strategic planning. However, what is generic to strategic planning and management are certain typical stages involving similar activities carried out in a similar sequence. Any management involves four basic stages: analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. In the education sector, the management operations related to “upstream”, planning work consist of: (i) system analysis; (ii) policy formulation; (iii) action planning.

Sector analysis consists of conducting data collection on and critical analysis of how the education system functions (internal dynamics) and examining various contextual factors (the environment of the system).

Critical analysis of the educational system undertaken during the sector analysis leads to questions about what the education sector must do in order to address the major issues, challenges and opportunities. These questions include what overall results (strategic goals) the system should achieve and the overall methods (or strategies) to implement policies.

Action planning is a process whereby one translates the policy directions into executable, measurable and accountable actions. In a broader sense, action planning includes specifying objectives, outputs, strategies, responsibilities and timelines (what, what for, how, who and when).

Generally speaking, planning is a process whereby a direction is mapped and then the ways and means for following that direction are specified. There are many forms of planning with several types of activities involved in this process. A plan is the product of the planning process and can be defined as a set of decisions about what to do, why, and how to do it.

A plan of action implies that: It has to serve as a reference for action, built on the consensus, agreed upon by all those concerned as well as by those contributing to its implementation; It is designed as an indicative, living framework, in such a way that allows for adjustments in light of new developments during implementation; It includes not only policy directions, but also information on the implementation strategies, actions and benchmarks for implementation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as the expenditure frameworks.

More and more, education managers are “constrained” to think and plan more strategically, due to the reasons including:

- First, one may wish to plan and carry out all the activities that people deem necessary, but without achieving the ultimate goals and results.
- Furthermore, more resources do not necessarily stand for the best results. The way one uses these resources can lead to different levels of benefits and results.
- Thirdly, it has become more and more difficult to plan everything one would wish to do. One ought to make choices, often tough ones, through a balanced decision-making, tradeoffs across the education system and through a consensus building process.

Over the recent years, the contexts in which education planning is conducted have evolved, some of which include:

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- All education systems, in varying degree, are subject to rapid changes, most often driven by globalization, the marketization of some educational services, IT development, competitions, shift of traditional values and paradigms. The planning cycle has become shorter and more frequent. This involves the need for planning to be flexible and continuously adjusted to the changing demands of the society and individuals.
- There is a plethora of plans and programmes in many countries. Frequent changes of governments with differing agendas, numerous international and

regional initiatives (e.g. MDG, EFA, ESD, etc.), the search for resources and results, and the multiplicity of partnerships, to name a few, lead to a diversity of the planning processes and subsequently numerous, and often fragmented development programmes.

- The high mobility of national cadres has often been at the expense of the education sector. In countries under difficult economic situations, the teaching and financial conditions offered to the education sector have become more and more unattractive, often resulting in national cadres espousing the education profession as a last resort.

The Strategic Management Cycle

An Overview

Like any other systems, education has inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes: Inputs to the education system include resources such as teachers, instructional materials, equipment, buildings, etc.

These inputs go through a process (throughput) whereby they are mixed (input mix), combined and/or moved along to achieve results. Educational outputs are tangible results produced by processes in the system, such as enrolments, graduates and learning achievements.

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Another kind of result, which can be called outcome, is the benefits for the students, their families and/or the society as well. As a way of strategic management, education systems should be analyzed and thought out from the perspective of the input, process and output, as well as in terms of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability: for example, one will wonder whether the inputs to the education system are relevant for addressing the needs, to what extent the processes (utilization of resources) are efficiently driven and how well the anticipated outputs are effectively produced. Outcomes should be weighed in terms of their impact and sustainability.

The Strategic Management Cycle

There are a variety of terminologies used in strategic management and a variety of approaches to carry it out. One cannot say that there is a “single perfect way” to conduct strategic planning. Each institution has its own particular interpretation of the approaches and activities in strategic management. However, what is generic to strategic management are certain typical stages involving similar activities carried out in a similar sequence.

Any management involves four basic stages: analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. More precisely, we can say that strategic management is a continuum of successive stages such as: critical analysis of a system, policy formulation and appraisal, action planning, management and monitoring, review and evaluation. Experience and lessons learnt from implementation, monitoring and evaluation provide feedback for adjusting the current program or for the next cycle of policy formulation and action planning.

pattern of strategic management:

Any management cycle begins with analysis, whereby the current situation of a system and the critical issues pertaining to its status and functioning are first analyzed.

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Findings and remedial options are then formulated and appraised, thus providing policy orientations. When the system is analyzed and the future directions are traced, one can proceed with planning the necessary actions to correct or improve the situation. A plan can be long range (6 to 10 years), medium term (3 to 5 years) or short term (1 to 2 years).

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Operationalization consists of taking the necessary reform and institutional measures that are conducive to the smooth implementation of plans or programs and before the actual execution starts, including:

- Designing specific development projects or programmes and/or mobilizing resources required to implement the planned actions and activities.
- Planning and management are subject to feedback-providing operations, i.e. monitoring, review and evaluation.

In the education sector, the management operations related to “upstream”, planning work consist of: (i) system analysis; (ii) policy formulation; (iii) action planning.

In the past, planners usually referred to the term “long-range planning”. More recently, they use the term “strategic planning”. Although many still use these terms interchangeably, strategic planning and long-range planning differ. Long-range planning is generally considered to mean the development of a plan aimed at achieving a policy or set of policies over a period of several years, with the assumption that the projection of (or extrapolation from) the past and current situation is sufficient to ensure the implementation of the future activities. In other words, long-range planning assumes that the environment is stable, while strategic planning assumes that a system must be responsive to a dynamic and changing environment. The term “strategic planning” is meant to capture strategic

(comprehensive, holistic, thoughtful or fundamental) nature of this type of planning.

With regard to operational and strategic planning, a narrow definition would be that strategic planning is done with involvement of high levels of management, while operational planning is done at lower levels.

A strategic plan in the education sector is the physical product of the strategic planning process and embodies the guiding orientations on how to manage an education system within a larger national development perspective, which is evolving by nature and often involves constraints.

Three Stages of Strategic Planning

Sector Analysis

Sector analysis is the first stage of sector development planning. Sector review, situation analysis, diagnosis, etc. are sometimes used interchangeably. Basically, sector analysis consists in conducting data collection on and critical analysis of the aspects relating to (and surrounding) the education sector. Planners and managers carefully examine both internal and external aspects of the education system. In other words, they:

- review how the system functions (internal dynamics) to meet people's needs and economic demand;
- examine various driving forces behind the education system and external conditions (the environment of which education is a part), e.g. macro-economic and socio-demographic situations and developments.

Planners and managers can look at the above aspects from the perspective of the system's strengths, weaknesses, lessons and opportunities regarding educational development. They also examine the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the inputs, processes and outputs of the system in its current setting. This helps to identify critical issues, challenges and construct remedial actions and policy provisions.

The main categories of aspects to be considered when conducting an education sector analysis (ESA) and/or when describing the diagnostic part of an education sector development plan are: (i) macro-economic and socio-demographic frameworks; (ii) access to and participation in education; (iii) equity; (iv) quality and relevance of education; (v) external efficiency; (vi) costs and financing of

education; and (vii) managerial and institutional aspects. The aspects (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi) and (vii) can be documented by sub-sector (pre-school, primary and secondary education, technical and vocational education, higher education, non formal education, etc.)

Policy Design

Education sector policies represent the government's public commitment to the future orientation of the sector. A clearly formulated policy can play an important "operational" role as a reference for action. It can help to guide decisions and future actions in educational development, including the interventions of international and bilateral cooperation agencies, in a coherent way. It is important that policy promote the coordination and success of programs and projects. The formulation of a "good policy for education" is a necessary step in promoting the emergence and effective implementation of action plans, programs and projects.

Action Planning

A national policy should establish the framework for its implementation by giving the main goals and priorities, as well as the strategies to achieve them. It should be credible: that human and financial resources are available for carrying out the policy. Action planning is the preparation for implementation. An action plan aims to translate into operational terms the policy directions that education authorities intend to implement in a given time horizon. It is a tool for "clarifying" to some extent the goals and strategies in relation to the education policy, programming the activities required, establishing the timing, indicating the necessary resources, distributing institutional and administrative responsibilities, preparing the budgets, etc. It is important to consult and negotiate with the various development partners throughout the action planning stage if the country is to mobilize their support for plan implementation.

It is necessary to differentiate between an action plan/program and an investment program which often deals with the infrastructures and equipments to carry out the action plan and the recurrent expenditure incurred by such investments. The duration of an action program, in general, is five years. One of the criteria of an action plan – in order for a plan to be called action plan - is to go beyond mere policy statements and lists of activities to further define and prioritize the actions, activities, and required resources in a coherent manner. These actions and resource projections should be defined within a given macroeconomic framework using appropriate technical tools such as a simulation model.

In general the education policy framework document concerns the whole of the education sector. The action plan, which is linked to this policy framework, should also be sector-wide. Sometimes, a policy statement may concern either a particular sub-sector (secondary technical and professional education, for example) or a cross-cutting theme (improvement of the quality of education, for example), this within an overall, sector-wide development framework.

Different methodologies and techniques of action planning have been designed and used by different countries and agencies. Among them, two instruments are emerging as reference tools in developing action plans in the education sector: the Logical Framework Approach and simulation modeling. In reality, these two and other approaches are used, not in isolation but to complement each other, resulting in the preparation of a credible and coherent action plan for educational development.