

Networking Training Course - Unit 5: Strategic Planning

Key Scriptures

Network Development Reflection Day 1 | p.39-40

Planning brings Clarity to our Work: Luke 14:25-33

Main Themes

A network must have a clear purpose that leads it forward and a plan of action to achieve that purpose or goal. This plan of action is called a strategic plan. In this section, we will look at how the network can develop a strategic plan. We will cover the following areas:

- Defining the heart and vision of the network
- Defining what makes the network distinct
- Developing the Strategic focus
- Statement of Strategic Direction
- Developing a Strategic Plan
- Writing a Strategic Plan

It is important to remember that developing a strategic plan for a network is different to developing a strategic plan for an organisation or NGO. A large part of developing a network strategic plan involves nurturing the network platform to deliver the change the network wants to see in a collective way.

5.1 Heart and Vision

In Unit 2, we looked at how a network develops a strong identity by defining its vision and purpose. A network's vision statement is a description of a desirable future situation for the network and children within the area. We are asked you to consider the foundational principles from Unit 1 and to think about what you are passionate about. To develop a strategic plan, the network should define or revisit the network vision and the 'heart' of the network.

Ask

- What did the people who started the network believe the network would achieve? What did they believe God's intentions were for the network? In comparison, what do the current leadership believe? (It is natural for the vision statement to be updated over time)
- What motivates us? What is the 'heart' of the network? Why does the network exist?

Refer to Viva's 'heart' statement and try to produce something similar for your network

Going back to the heart of what the network set out to achieve and why the network exists can help in planning for the future, making sure that the network is true to its original calling. Try and write down the heart and vision of the network. See if it resonates with other leaders within the network and continue to shape it until you feel you have capture the more 'collective' heart of the network. This is vital to have at the core of the network Strategy or the final written words will not of a Strategy are

Heart and Vision Checklist:

- Statement of network 'heart'

5.2 Network Distinctives

Next, we should pick up again from the early work we did in Unit 2 and look consider in a more concentrated way as to our distinctives. You should define what makes this network different from other NGOs/organisations and even other networks in the city; what makes this network unique. Sometimes saying what we are not also helps to clarify what we are. Once you can identify this, you will know where to focus your efforts as you have a clearer idea of the added value your network brings to changing the situation for children in your location.

Defining what makes you distinct also helps to engage supporters and new network members who will have a clearer idea of what joining the network can lead to. Combining this with your passion and heart you will have a winning combination.

Network Distinctives Checklist:

- Statement of network distinctives
- Statement of the added value of the network
- Promotional description of why people should join or invest in the network

5.3 Statement of Strategic Direction

Once the network knows its heart, and distinctives, it should use the findings from the situational mapping research to decide which particular area it wants to focus on regarding improving the situation of children in the city. This is the strategic focus of the network.

This strategic focus must take into account

- Political context, findings from the mapping report and needs of children in the city
- Expertise, strength and experience of network members
- 'Heart' and vision of the network
- That all network members need to feel engaged and committed to contributing to a collective action response around this strategic focus

It is now important for the network co-ordination team and steering group to formulate some thoughts or ideas about the strategic direction for the network and develop a statement or 'position paper' that can answer the following questions in one or two sentences:

Refer to Viva's 'template to help you to define your strategic direction and produce a suitable statement or document.

1. What is the current purpose of the network?
2. What do you currently say the network is doing? (How do you describe the network in your promotional material?)
3. What change is the network trying to make for children (individual and collective)?
4. What change are you trying to make in the church (individual and collective)?
5. What is distinctive about your network approach that is different from most of the other agencies in your city?
6. What are you passionate about in what you do and the way you do it? What is on your heart? What are your dreams and prayerful considerations?
7. What are the main foci of the network members individual work – strength and expertise?
8. What sort of programmes over the next few years will deliver the change you want to make?
9. How will you strengthen the network as you deliver the programmes?
10. How will you attract new members/participants to the network, and include them in the programmes?

At the right time, this process needs to be opened up to the wider participation of the network and the process formalised.

Developing Strategic Focus Checklist:

- Development of a strategic focus
- Development of a Statement of Strategic Direction

5.4 Developing a Strategic Plan

Developing a strategic plan for the network requires a larger group than the network co-ordination team. Involving network members in decisions can create more ownership of the plan. However the co-ordination team needs to decide how much time they want to allocate and how many people they want to include

Striking the right balance here is important but the crucial part is to define in advance the plan, duration, people included. A good facilitator can help to guide the process through to the conclusion required.

Please see Viva's Guide to Strategic Planning and its extensive Toolkit of exercises and approaches to complement each stage of the process

Steps in developing a strategic plan include:

i) Revisiting the Strategic Direction Questions:

Take a larger group through the strategic direction questions. It is important to capture everyone's views but also to look for areas where answers and thoughts are similar and priorities begin to emerge.

The group should be able to settle on a specific focus for what the network does to change a situation for children. The focus is a problem that network members will work on together to address. It should be easy to communicate and help everyone to understand the purpose of the network

If required, Viva's Network Consultants can lead the network through a strategic focus workshop. This involves collecting information from network members through a questionnaire. Based on the information collected, a workshop then helps them to collectively to decide on the network strategic focus.

ii) Developing a plan towards the Strategic Direction

Once the specific focus has been identified, new research may be necessary to identify the root causes of the problem, the current response, the latest thinking of experts and best practice in the area.

Doing in depth research of the focus problem means that activities in the strategic plan meet identified needs. It also helps network to find funding to address the problem from external donors, since they often need evidence that research has been undertaken.

The Situational Mapping Report produced in accordance with Unit 2 may be sufficient but it may on reflection be too general and more detailed information needs to be gathered around the Strategic Focus that has now been defined. The same templates and processes will still work but the questions need to be more tightly focussed.

When developing a plan to address the focus problem, the network needs to think about the change it wants to see in the lives of children as a result of the collective action of the network members. Once the network has defined its long term goal of change, (strategic goal), it can think through how it can achieve that change with smaller specific actions or changes within a specified time period. To chart the progress that the network is making in achieving these specific changes, the network should develop indicators of success, which can be measured.

This thinking can lead to the development of **a theory of change**, although you may need technical assistance from your Viva contact, which is like making a roadmap that outlines the steps to achieve the strategic goal of the network. Participants are helped to develop indicators of success and activities to achieve those indicators. Planned activities should chart out the next 3-5 years in sufficient detail to guide thinking and more detailed planning.

A strategic plan may have implications on the network coordination. It is important to consider what may need to change to deliver this strategic plan by asking the questions:

- What needs to be done and how?
- Who will do it?
- By when must it be done?
- What resources are needed to do it?
- What needs to change ?

Remember:

- **Please don't be daunted by strategic planning.** It is good to have some sort of plan in place. As networks develop, the process gets easier as they have more experience and expertise to draw upon.
- **Networks are different from NGOs.** As networks, we want to change the lives of children **and** join up the Christian response in our city. **Our distinctive is the network platform** with an average of 100 local churches and organisations in each city with a heart for children – therefore a big part of our Strategic Plan must be to build and nurture this network platform in order to be able to deliver the impact through its collective action. **Note:** NGO advisors will not include this and focus on programmes only, but as a Viva partner network this is a critical and non-negotiable part of the Plan.

iii) Writing the Strategic Plan

All the information collected in the strategic planning process needs to be written into a strategic plan document. This sets out how the network will move from the present position to the one it aspires to reach by the end of the identified period (usually 3 to 5 years).

The format of the strategic plan will depend on the network's needs and who you are communicating the plan to. But most strategic plans usually contain:

- Background and context of network
- A clear statement of the networks values, vision and mission
- The distinctive of the network approach, summary of the network's performance so far and reasons for this.
- The situation of children in network location and the key issues the network will tackle (the focus of the network)
- The specific changes (or outcomes) the network wants to deliver
- Strategic priorities and goals for the coming years (give timeframe)
- Clear objectives to help the network achieve its strategic goals

- What approaches the network will use to address its strategic goals
- The type of activities that the network will engage in to achieve its objectives
- A theory of change. This shows the logic of how activities achieve objectives and objectives achieve the strategic goal.
- Plans for how the whole network will change/restructure to deliver these priorities, delivering programme whilst still building the network, recruiting new members and retaining the old.
- An analysis of potential opportunities and challenges for the network in the future
- An outline of how the network will track the progress of this strategy, including indicators of success.

Ideally, the Strategic Plan should be written in one document, but it could work just as well as a collection of short summary documents with a few illustrative diagrams, for example. And you might want to consider a range of formats for different audiences, from posters and fliers, to presentations and one-to-one conversations.

A well-produced, published and illustrated Strategic Planning document can be a very useful tool for fundraising and sending to potential donors. Once the strategic plan has been written, it should be shared with and endorsed by all the network Steering Group and network members.

iv) Implementing the Strategic Plan

To enable you to implement the network Strategic Plan, you'll need to make sure that you communicate your strategy to all network members so that they understand and support it and can play their part in making it happen. As well as communicating what the strategic plan says, you may want to help those implementing the strategy to be more strategic in their own work and to develop their ability to monitor and evaluate their own progress.

You will also need to set time aside to fully design any programmes contributing to the achievement of the networks Strategic goals and objectives. Programme Design and Planning are covered in other Viva Resources and your Viva Network Consultant can assist with.

As a network, you will need to revisit strategic planning, evaluate how you are doing against the plan and make any changes to the plan as circumstances change. It is important that the process of strategic thinking does not stop once the strategic plan has been produced.

If new opportunities present themselves to the network, it is always useful to reflect back to see whether these fit within the vision, mission and values of the network as written in the Strategic Plan.

Developing Strategic Plan Checklist:

- Strategic Planning process
- Written Strategic Plan

Strategic Planning and the Viability and Sustainability Benchmark

Benchmark Criteria 2: Clear Purpose and Vision

- A clear vision/mission statement
- Promotional description of why people should support the network
- Description of what makes the network distinctive from other NGOs/ministries/networks
- Description of the network heart/calling/passion/values

Benchmark Criteria 3: Strategic Plan

- Written statement of Strategic Direction
- Written strategic plan for next 3-5 years

Reflective Questions

1. At this moment in time, do you think your written Strategy documents are sufficient to direct you for the next 3 years or do you need to update them?
2. How widely have you shared them and how much have your network members agreed or owned the findings?
3. If you were to review or update your documents – what sort of process would you propose and who would be involved?
4. How will you ensure that the further development of the network platform is an equal part of the Strategic Plan as potential programmes and capacity to run them?
5. What aspects of your Strategic plan have you or could you include in your network communications, both internal and external, to demonstrate your credibility that you are clear where you are heading?

Action Plan

- What actions do you need to put into place as a result of this unit, particularly to achieve the required benchmark criteria?