

SECTION 3 A Strategic Approach towards Sanitation Planning

3.1 What we mean by strategic planning

To avoid confusion when we talk about strategic planning, it is useful to define what we mean by the terms 'strategic' and 'planning'. A *strategy* may be defined as *a way of tackling a problem or working towards an objective* (Kneeland, 1999). The term is equally relevant to a 'high level' task such as deciding to involve the private sector in aspects of infrastructure provision and a relatively 'low level' task such as planning for improved sanitation and drainage in a particular neighbourhood. In practice, it is usually used in relation to higher-level goals. For instance, FAO (1995) has defined strategy as "a set of chosen short, medium and long-term actions to support the achievement of development goals and implement water-related policies".

In essence, to plan is to think ahead about a problem and the way in which it is to be tackled. So a strategic plan could be defined as a document that looks ahead to a range of actions to be taken to achieve overall goals in accordance with relevant policies. This definition says little about the ways in which goals and the actions designed to lead to them are determined. Cities are complex and changing entities and many decisions regarding development issues have to be made on the basis of incomplete information. In such circumstances, a 'blueprint' approach in which all aspects of the actions that are to be undertaken and objectives that are to be achieved are set out from the beginning will almost certainly fail. Rather, the need is for a flexible approach, which allows plans to be adapted to suit changing circumstances and the availability of improved information. Rondinelli (1993:170) suggests that strategic planning in such circumstances should '*start with what is known and attempt to broaden the base of knowledge and to formulate alternative interventions that will set other changes in motion*'. He contrasts this approach with attempts to bring about sweeping and comprehensive reforms, the effectiveness of which cannot be predicted.

This 'adaptive' approach to strategic planning underlies the thinking set out in this note. Acceptance of it leads to recognition that longer-term actions and programmes will usually have to be modified in the light of the experience gained from their shorter-term counterparts.

Acceptance of the approach also has implications for thinking on where strategic processes can start and who should be responsible for them. In contrast to 'blueprint' plans, which are invariably prepared by professionals on behalf of government, adaptive planning processes should seek to build on experience from a variety of sources. While senior government decision-makers are likely to be involved in developing strategic plans, strategies for municipal sanitation provision can and do emerge from the activities and ideas of non-government stakeholders acting more locally.

3.2 Three questions that provide the framework for strategic planning

Three basic questions define the framework for strategic planning:

1. What is the current situation or *where are we now?*
2. What are the objectives of the planning process or *where do we want to go?*
3. What options are available for moving from the first to the second or *how do we get from here to there?*

Where are we now? - Grounding plans in the current situation

To be grounded in the existing situation, a sanitation plan or programme must:

- *take account of what already exists*, recognising that existing facilities, including those provided by individual householders, community groups and the private sector, represent a considerable investment
- *respond to actual problems and deficiencies*, recognising that sanitation problems are as likely to stem from management deficiencies, inadequate operation and maintenance and poor coordination between stakeholders as from an absolute lack of facilities.

Unless plans are grounded in this way they risk finding solutions to problems that do not exist while failing to address real problems and needs.

At a deeper level, plans that do not take account of the ways in which people think and institutions operate are unlikely to be implemented. When developing a strategy, it is important to consider the existing institutional reality and the limitation this places on possible outcomes, at least in the short term. Institutions should be viewed not just in terms of structures and systems, but also in the way they routinely think and respond to problems and issues (Carley *et al* 2001:17).

Where do we want to go?

This question can be answered at several levels, depending on just how we define objectives. At the most basic level, it is useful to develop a shared vision of the future sanitation situation in the town or city as a whole. The vision should be :

- *Equitable* in that it is concerned with the needs of all including the urban poor; and
- *Environmentally acceptable* in that solutions to local problems do not cause deterioration of the wider environment or use resources that cannot be replaced.
- *Sustainable* in that it continues to address needs over time. This means that its focus should be on services, including not just their provision but also their subsequent operation and maintenance.

There may sometimes have to be short-term trade-offs between solutions to people's pressing needs and a concern with the environment as a whole but sanitation planners should be aware of those trade-offs and look for solutions to problems that minimise adverse environmental impacts.

While a vision provides guidance on the general direction to be taken, it does not define verifiable objectives and indeed may say little about the forms that those objectives might take. These more concrete objectives of the strategy, which may be described as its goals, will normally be difficult to define at the beginning of the planning process, particularly when information is limited. This is not necessarily a problem, provided that the strategy has an explicit commitment to define them over time.

There are likely to be situations in which resource limitations mean that change at the level of the city as a whole will be unattainable. In other situations, it may be that an individual or group has a strategic vision but no remit to work beyond a particular locality. In both of these situations, immediate objectives may need to be defined in relation to a particular area, but it will be important to ensure that the approach adopted can be scaled up to cover other similar areas at a later date.

Getting from here to there – how to move towards objectives

If a strategy is essentially a way of tackling a problem, what makes for a successful strategic plan? The answer to this question has two aspects, the first concerning the process to be followed to arrive at a strategic plan and the second concerning the principles that underlie the plan.

In an uncertain world, strategic plans need to be flexible and adaptable, with later interventions influenced by the outcomes of earlier activities. This suggests the need for a stepwise approach to setting, refining and working towards objectives. Early activities provide opportunities to gain an improved understanding of problems and possibilities, allowing intermediate objectives to be defined and/or refined. As the process develops, the overall vision can be developed into a more concrete set of goals. Even after the individual components of the strategic plan have been decided, there will be a need to review longer term actions and objectives in the light of the experience gained as the plan unfolds. The practical implications of this adaptive approach will be set out in more detail in Section 4.

The problem with this adaptive approach is that it will sometimes be difficult to determine whether a particular action will take us where we want to go. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to identify the fundamental principles that must be respected if efforts to improve sanitation services are to achieve overall objectives and thus be truly strategic in nature.

3.3 Principles for effective strategic planning

Principle 1 Respond to informed demand

Recent thinking on service provision stresses that infrastructure schemes must respond to user demand by providing what potential users want and are willing to pay for. This 'demand-responsive' approach has replaced the old emphasis on supplying what professionals think is good for users, regardless of whether the users want what is supplied or are willing to pay for it.

While clearly an improvement on the old supply driven approach, the pure demand-responsive approach is also inadequate in a number of respects.

- i) It is based on what intended service users know, thus limiting scope for change and innovation.
- ii) It ignores the fact that service users are likely to be concerned only with their immediate surroundings, so that demand for local improvements may be at the expense of the wider environment.
- iii) In equating demand with willingness to pay, it perhaps overlooks the fact that the main problem may be either that sanitation providers are unwilling to charge users for the full cost of services, or that poor people are unable to pay for the full cost of the services.
- iv) It fails to pay sufficient attention to the capacity of service deliverers to respond to demand. This is a particularly important point where existing service delivery systems are weak.

Therefore, a strategic approach to service provision must consider both supply and demand. It must first *establish* demand for improved services, then *inform* it, in terms of what is possible and what is needed to bring about real change, and finally *respond* to the informed demand in an effective way. The last will often require capacity building, together with efforts to convince government officials and politicians of the need to recover costs from service users. Complex willingness to pay exercises should not be attempted unless there is a basic acceptance of the need to charge for services.

Principle 2 Focus on sound finances

Expansion of sanitation systems will not be possible unless an institution or group of individuals, preferably the intended users, is willing to pay for the new facilities required. Even when facilities have been provided, they will fail sooner or later unless funds are available to cover their ongoing operation and maintenance. So, it will be impossible to first provide and then sustain services to cities as a whole unless the finances of those who are responsible for providing and managing them are sound.

Progress towards achieving sound finances can be made by increasing the amount that sanitation users pay for services. However, this is only one side of the equation, particularly in low-income areas in which people have limited ability to pay for services. It is equally important to consider the ways in which the cost of sanitation services can be reduced. Options in this respect include:

- *Choose an affordable technology.* In many situations, on-plot or local sanitation facilities will be a lot cheaper to build and operate than centralised sewerage. However, experience in Africa has revealed that not all on-plot facilities are equally affordable. For instance, VIP latrines can appear to be an unaffordable luxury to those on low incomes. The experience in Mozambique with pre-cast slabs for simple pit latrines shows that other, more affordable, options can be found. (Saywell and Hunt 1999)
- *Select an appropriate level of service.* Urban services need only satisfy the level of service that is appropriate to communities need and relates to the communities willingness-to-pay for the service. For instance, stormwater drainage systems need not be sized to drain the largest flood events and may be designed for a six month rather than a 10 year return period storm.
- *Select design standards in the light of the local situation.* Design standards should be developed in relation to the function that the facility is intended to perform. For instance, shallow sewers with inspection chambers rather than manholes may be appropriate in areas with narrow access ways that do not carry heavy traffic.
- *Improve management efficiency.* This may be achieved by encouraging the involvement of private sector and/or civil society organisations in aspects of sanitation provision, thus reducing costs and helping to make services more affordable. Involvement of civil society organisations and local entrepreneurs is likely to be particularly appropriate for local services and we will return to this issue shortly when we consider the options for devolving responsibility for such services.

When setting intermediate objectives, consider which actions are appropriate in the local situation. The need will usually be for integrated action involving a variety of initiatives. For instance, increased tariffs will tend to exclude the poorest and so there may be a need to explore other ways in which they can be provided with an adequate yet sustainable service.

Principle 3 Develop incentives for good practice

Incentives help to ensure that individuals and organisations act in a way that ensures the ongoing availability of functioning sanitation services. Incentives can take the form of:

- *Rewards for beneficial actions* - for instance, increased funding for municipalities that succeed in implementing effective sanitation programmes and promoting government officials who carry out their duties efficiently and effectively; and
- *Sanctions against harmful actions and/or failure to act* - for instance, a ban, supported by fines, on the use of untreated sewage to irrigate crops.

Incentives will only be effective if there are clear *rules* for implementing them and *referees* to see that the rules are enforced. Referees, in the form of regulatory bodies, will be particularly important when the private sector is given a large role in sanitation provision. At the local level, informed and organised users may be the best guarantors of effective services.

Incentives can and should be applied at the local level. However, incentive structures are often decided at the 'centre' by higher levels of government and so the development of incentives for strategic planning and action should be viewed as an essential facet of the development of a supportive context. We will return to this issue in Section 5.

Principle 4 Involve stakeholders in appropriate ways

Stakeholders are people, groups and organisations with an interest in some particular subject, in this case sanitation. They include both *primary stakeholders*, those who will either benefit directly from or be adversely affected by any proposed sanitation improvements, and *secondary stakeholders*, all others who may be involved in developing the policy context for sanitation provision, delivering services and acting as intermediaries between service users and service providers. Note that some aspects of service delivery the local level may be the responsibility of primary stakeholders and the organisations that represent them.

There are two aspects to stakeholder involvement in sanitation provision. The first relates to the planning process itself. Different stakeholder groups possess different types of knowledge but all can contribute in some way to the planning process (see Figure 2).



The key to successful involvement in planning lies in ensuring that the various stakeholders are involved in ways that are appropriate to their interests and capabilities. For example, members of a particular community are more likely to be interested in discussing options for primary (local) solid waste collection services to their area than they are in the location of the municipal landfill (unless of course the latter is close to where they live).

Figure 2 Participatory planning with community members in Faisalabad, Pakistan

The second relates to the fact that responsibilities for sanitation provision can be 'unbundled' (divided and devolved) with different stakeholders taking responsibility for services in different areas (horizontal unbundling) and/or at different levels in the service hierarchy (vertical unbundling).

It will be important to match responsibilities to interests and abilities. In practice, this will usually mean the following:

- **Government** will usually have statutory responsibility for sanitation planning and provision and therefore plays an important role in sanitation planning and provision.
- **Community groups and organisations** may take responsibility for providing and managing local services, sometimes with support from **non-government organisations**. Their direct interest in the functioning of services means that they may carry out these tasks more effectively than would a remote government department. When they pay for services directly, they reduce the financial burden on cash-strapped government departments, allowing them to focus their efforts on higher-level infrastructure, thus ensuring a more effective use of limited resources. If they are organised and informed, they play an important role in lobbying for better services and ensuring that service providers fulfil their obligations.
- The **private sector** may take over responsibility for networked services such as sewerage and can also be involved in sanitation provision at the local level. Like the involvement of civil society organisations, private sector participation (PSP) can help to remove resource constraints by providing access to capital and skills that are not available within government. It can also *increase efficiency and cost effectiveness* - because private sector organisations are not subject to the rigid rules that often bind government departments.

You should not assume that any of these benefits will accrue automatically but rather assess the possible contribution of civil society and private sector organisations to sanitation provision in the light of the local situation. When considering PSP, do not assume that the only potential partners are large multi-national companies. It may be that small to medium scale initiatives, based on partnerships with local companies may be the best way forward.

Unbundling is not something entirely new and you are likely to find that many individuals and groups are already involved in sanitation provision, albeit in some cases informally. The challenge for planners will often be to integrate this local more or less informal activity into the mainstream. This will require:

- *Recognition of the validity of stakeholder efforts;*
- *Agreement on roles and responsibilities;* followed where necessary by
- *Changes in legislation and procedures* as necessary to formally recognise the agreed roles and responsibilities

The first will often require major changes in attitude on the part of government officials. There is no easy way of achieving this although the current emphasis on participatory planning approaches may help to change the climate of opinion. The argument that devolving responsibilities allows limited government resources to go further may help to convince doubting officials of the need to integrate stakeholder efforts into strategic plans.

Analysis of the current situation will often reveal poor coordination between the various stakeholders. This is a major issue, full consideration of which is beyond the scope of this note although a possible structure for coordinating the development of a strategic plan is suggested in Section 4 of the note. For the moment, the important point to note is that, where there is already a de-facto division of responsibilities for sanitation provision, efforts to unbundle stakeholder responsibilities must, at the very least, be matched by efforts to improve coordination between the different stakeholders.

Principle 5 Take a wide view of sanitation

Sanitation strategies should look beyond local solutions to narrowly defined problems to recognise the links between different sanitation services. Excreta disposal, solid waste management and drainage are inter-related and the impact of improvements in one will be reduced if they are carried out without regard to the others. For instance, plans to replace drains with sewers must take account of the fact that existing drains may have a dual role as carriers of both foul and storm water. Uncollected solid waste tends to find its way to drains and sewers, greatly increasing maintenance requirements. Some excreta disposal methods (for instance pit latrines) may require separate provision for sullage disposal.

Taking a wide view also implies the need to go beyond local solutions to local problems to consider the wider environmental impacts of proposed initiatives and activities. Where sanitation services at the household level are poor, the first priority of householders will normally be to remove excreta and wastewater from the living area. However, the potential that technologies will have wider environmental impacts should not be ignored and preference should be given to approaches that achieve local objectives with the minimum possible impact upon the wider environment.

Principle 6 Take manageable steps towards intermediate objectives

This last principle is derived directly from the incremental approach to the development and implementation of strategies identified when we considered the options for 'getting from here to there'. The challenge for planners is to identify manageable steps towards achievable objectives that:

- are consistent with the need to move towards overall objectives
- are large enough to permanently overcome the fundamental problems that they set out to solve so that they result in sustainable benefits;
- are framed in the light of existing systems and resources ; and
- help to change systems and develop resources in a way that enables more ambitious follow-on steps to be taken in the future.

Keeping these requirements in mind will help to ensure that intermediate objectives are meaningful in the context of the overall strategy.