

#13 GOOD PLANS - BAD IMPLEMENTATION

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In development work one often hears the phrase, “we have good plans but bad implementation”.

For example, the Department of Environmental Affairs has developed clear policies and legislation governing new development along the countries coastline, but inappropriate coastal development continues. The Department of Education has developed a plan to distribute new school textbooks, but come the New Year the text books are not delivered on time. A local municipality consults with its ward committees and develops a five year Integrated Development Plan, but the municipality has to return funds to treasury each year for under spending. A municipality appoints consultants to develop upgrading of informal settlement plans for a number of identified settlements, but two years later after the plans have been approved by council there is still no change in the living conditions of informal settlement residents. And a municipality appoints a contractor to build a new sports field, but 5 years later the community complains that the field is still incomplete.

Is the ‘good plans – bad implementation’ statement true? Where is the problem? Is it in our capacity to implement the plans, or is it that the plans are not actually implementable?

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If we assume that the plans are good, then the problem could either be that we don't have the right people in place to implement the plans, and/or the systems, procedures and institutional arrangements for managing implementation of the plans could be inappropriate.

An example of 'wrong people' would be where the people don't have the necessary skills, and/or the wrong people are being appointed to implement the plans. Examples of 'weak systems' may be that there is no coordination between departments to secure budgets and coordinate activities between departments; no one wants to take decisions for start implementation as they are scared that if something goes wrong they will be held accountable; and/or there is weak consequence management for failure to implement.

If on the other hand we assume that the problem is that the plans themselves are inappropriate (i.e. the statement of 'good plans' is misleading), this could be because the plans are weak and/or the planning process is inappropriate.

Examples of 'weak plans' could either be because (1) the plans are too detailed and complicated in that the plans try to achieve too much, the person implementing the plan has to read through too much information to work out exactly what they have to do, and/or the actions that are set out in the plans are beyond the capability of the person who has to implement the plans; or (2) the plans are too simple in that they do not provide enough information and guidance as to what needs to be done, they leave information out, or they do not cover all the issues.

An example of an 'inappropriate planning process' is one where the plan that is developed is based on incomplete information. There may be attempts to determine what the existing situation looks like but often this does not really give an adequate picture of the true situation. It may be misleading as to what the issues are that need to be addressed and as a result the solutions and plans are not properly aligned to the real situation on the ground. Another example of an 'inappropriate planning process' is one where conditions are changing so much as plans are being developed that by the time one wants to implement the plans the plans are out of date and inappropriate; or conditions change as the plan is being implemented as a result of unanticipated feedback from previous actions identified in the plan, making subsequent actions identified in the plan inappropriate.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE IMPLEMENTATION

In this section possible strategies are explored to address each of the four identified problem areas identified in the previous section that are associated with the 'good plans - bad implementation' statement¹.

Weak people – build human resource capacity

Strategies to address the problem of lack of capacity to implement the plans includes: getting the right people into the implementation job by improving the recruitment processes and by having a more vigorous job interview process; training those that are already in the job in how to project manage and implement plans; implementing talent retention plans that focus on keeping good people in their jobs; and/or supporting innovation and risk taking so that those in position to implement plans are encouraged to try different approaches and do whatever it takes to get the plans implemented.

¹ For more on good plans – bad implementation see: Dick Ruhe (2013) Good Plans vs. Good Execution—Which Needs the Most Attention?

<https://leaderchat.org/2013/09/30/good-plans-vs-good-execution-which-needs-the-most-attention-2/>

Weak systems – improve systems and procedures

There are multiple strategies that could be used to address the problem of weak systems and procedures for managing implementation.

For projects and programmes where more than one role-player is involved, improved coordination between role-players improves implementation. For example, with good coordination, one department is able to secure funds while another department acquires the land, another puts in the services, and a further department builds the house.

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Another strategy to address weak implementation systems and procedures is to establish programme teams or units with their own dedicated capacity to take full responsibility for planning and implementing a comprehensive programme. These teams could be area based or sector based. An example of a sector based team is a housing programme where a housing department has its own urban planners, engineers and house builders who are all managed as part of a single housing programme unit. An area based team is where a team of planners, engineers, builders, etc. are all coordinated by a unit responsible for development in one particular geographic area. The ability to implement plans is enhanced in both the sector and the area based approaches if the necessary funds needed for implementation are also ring fenced and set aside specifically for implementation in that particular sector or area.

Improvements can also be made to the project management systems that are used, and the creation of a central data base where planning and implementation information can be collated that will also make it easier to manage implementation.

In order to improve implementation systems and procedures, consideration could also be given to establishing a 'two tier' programme/ project monitoring approach, where the spotlight is shone on specific strategic programmes and projects that get special attention in the form of additional skills and resources, while the remaining projects continue to be implemented through conventional project management procedures of the institution concerned.

Further examples to address weak systems and procedures include: involve planners in the monitoring and evaluation phases of implementation so that they can play a role in making sure that the plans they have developed are implemented according to the plan; involve the public in the planning and implementation process by holding regular meetings and being transparent and open with all information, plans and data bases so that those responsible for implementing the plans can be held to account; and implementing consequence management systems to deal with failure to implement.

Weak plans – simplify or expand the plans

If plans are too complicated then an appropriate strategy would be to simplify the plans by reducing the jargon referred to in the plans so that it is very clear who has to do what and by when, when it comes to implementation of the plans; reducing the objectives of what the plan attempts to achieve (for example, in a plan for new bulk water supply project, just focus on installing the water pipes and do not complicate matters by also trying to use new labour based local procurement procedures with alternative water sources etc.). Complicated and big projects can also be broken into phases and into separate smaller plans. If on the other hand the plans are too simple, then the solution is to be more specific in what output and outcome the plan aims to achieve; and/or provide more detail in the plan, making it clear who is responsible for undertaking the steps required to successfully implement the plan.

Inappropriate planning process – adopt an adaptive planning approach

A strategy to address the problem of an inappropriate and inflexible planning process is to follow a more adaptive planning approach. An adaptive planning approach is one that is able to adapt to changes in the broader environment while the plan is being developed and implemented. Instead of following a rigid set of steps as outlined in a master planning approach, an adaptive planning and implementation approach is one that follows the following process:

- articulate a broad vision that is used to inform future development interventions;
- identify key programmes that help move towards this vision;
- identify catalytic projects within these key programme areas;
- plan these catalytic projects and secure budgets;
- implement the identified projects; and
- per programme, review the next set of catalytic projects that need to be implemented and repeat the process.

THE IMPLEMENTATION ENVIRONMENT

In deciding what type of intervention strategy is appropriate in a particular context one needs to determine whether the plan is being implemented in a static or a dynamic environment². Static environments are environments where if one follows specific steps as outlined in a plan then by the time all the steps are completed you will achieve the desired end result. The projects (or programmes) for which a plan has been developed could range from simple to complicated projects, like building a standard community hall (a simple project) to building a new suspension bridge or conducting a new advanced business training project (which are examples of more complicated projects).

The master planning approach is an example of a planning approach that is more suited to a static environment, where planners are able to determine what they would like a particular area or project to look like at some date in the future: and they then outline the steps that need to be followed by various stakeholders to achieve this desired future state, and these stakeholders then rigidly follow through with these steps as outlined in the plan.

Dynamic (or also called complex) environments on the other hand are environments where it is difficult to predict what the outcome of following a series of steps will be. This uncertainty could be because the environment is changing while the plan is being developed and implemented. The environment could be changed as a result of feedback from the implementation of previous steps or simply as a result of changes in the environment that are outside the control of those implementing the plan. By the time a new step is implemented the environment may have changed to such an extent (since the plan was developed) that the next step may now be an inappropriate one. The implementation of an Integrated Development Plan or the implementation of a new integrated agricultural and rural development strategy for a municipality are examples of plans and projects that operate within more dynamic or complex environments.

² This section draws on information from:

Richard Hummelbrunner and Harry Jones (2013a) *A guide for planning and strategy development in the face of complexity*, ODI, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8287.pdf>; and Richard Hummelbrunner and Harry Jones (2013b) *A guide to managing in the face of complexity*, ODI, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8662.pdf>

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANS

For improving the implementation of projects that can be classified as simple (e.g. building a new community hall) the solution to poor implementation is likely to be found in changing the systems and procedures for managing implementation and possibly to a lesser extent in building capacities.

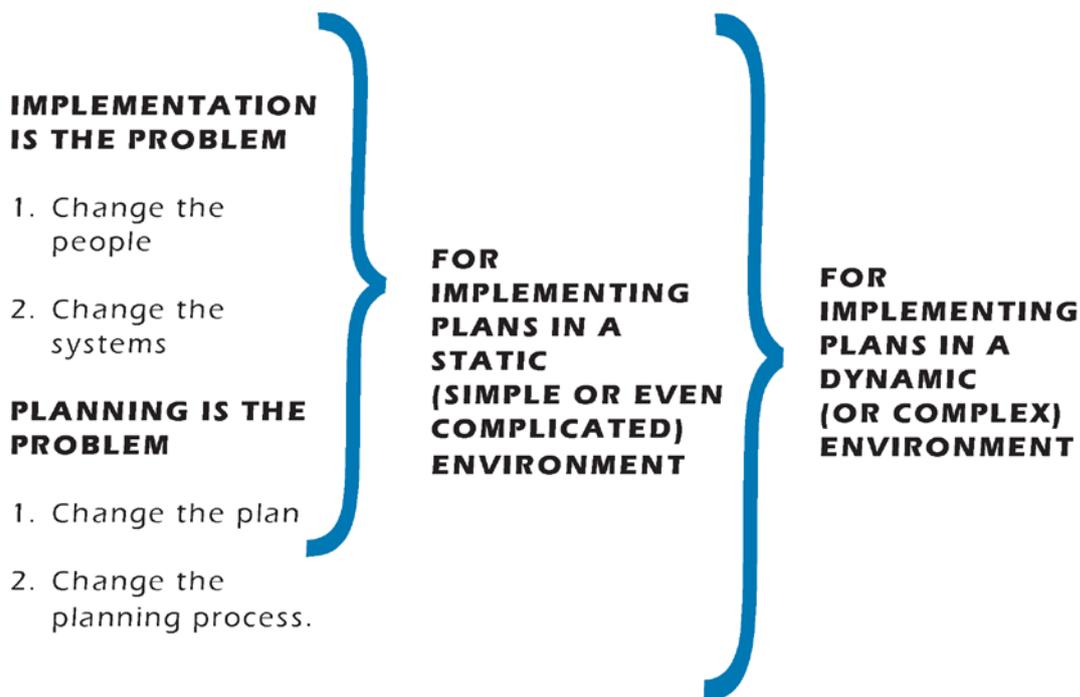
For more complicated projects (like building a new suspension bridge) the solution to poor implementation will likely involve both developing the capacity of the people responsible for implementing the plans as well as improving the systems and procedures for administering plan implementation. Additionally and/or alternatively, complicated plans could be simplified by making it clear in the plan who is responsible for doing what activities, and by breaking the plan into more manageable sub projects that can be implemented separately.

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For improving the implementation of projects/ programmes that can be classified as complex (e.g. implementing a new integrated agricultural and rural development strategy), it is likely that more effective solutions will involve changing the way that planning is done from more master planning approaches a more adaptive planning approaches.

Referring to diagram 1, if it is felt that the problem leading to bad implementation is found in the implementation phase of the project then the solution to the problem will be found in changing the people responsible for implementation (either by getting different people or building the capacity of the existing people) and/or by changing the implementation systems and procedures. If on the other hand it is felt that the problem leading to bad implementation is actually to be found in the planning phase of the project, the solution will depend on whether the environment wherein the project is being planned is either static or dynamic. If the environment wherein the project is being planned and implemented can be described as static, then the solution lies in changing the plan (making it more simple or detailed depending on circumstances). Whereas if the environment is dynamic then the solution probably lies in changing the planning process itself (but could also include using one of the other proposed intervention solutions).

Diagram 1: Strategies to improve delivery



CONCLUSIONS

Whether the underlying challenge to poor execution of plans lies in 'bad implementation' or having 'bad plans', one way to address these challenges is to involve 'implementers' in the planning process, so that their insights can be brought in to ensure that the plans that are developed are appropriate, as well as involving 'planners' in the implementation phase, so they can help interpret the plan and be on hand to help guide any plan adjustments that may be needed during implementation (as a result of changing conditions etc.).

Most of the interventions that have been undertaken in the past and are being undertaken at the moment to try and address the 'bad implementation' challenge are interventions related to building capacity and improving systems and procedures for implementation. Much less attention is being given to finding possible solutions that fall in the 'improving the plans' category.

We therefore call on government and those responsible for developing plans - depending on the context - to either find ways to simplify and make the plans less complicated (making it much easier for those who have to implement the plans to know exactly what is expected of them during the implementation process), or to be more specific in outlining the steps that are needed to implement the plan (so those who have to execute the plan know exactly what is expected of them). However, in contexts where the environment is more dynamic, we call on government to pilot and test new planning approaches along the lines of the more adaptive planning approaches suggested in this learning brief.

This learning brief has shown that there is more to the 'good plans and bad implementation' statement than one may initially think. Solutions to 'bad implementation' may not just lie in improving implementation as many think, but may also lie in improving 'bad planning'.