



# NGO Self-assessment through a SWOT exercise

## **Step 1:**

**Analyse your NGO's Capacity** > page 2

## **Step 2:**

**Do the SWOT Exercise** > page 5

## **Step 3:**

**Make a Strategic Plan** > page 8

## **Step 4:**

**Implement, Monitor, Evaluate** > page 11



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## Before you begin...

### Think whether this is something you need to do

From time to time, your NGO has to take stock of how it is doing. Probably your organisation is strong in some ways and weak in others, with a strong/weak balance that can change over time. If you identify the weak parts, you can make a planned, conscious effort to improve them with a Strategic Plan.

**If you are an HIV/AIDS NGO:** we recommend a manual written by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, “NGO Capacity Analysis” (80 page PDF). It has a purpose similar to this one but written especially for HIV/AIDS NGOs. It can be downloaded at this address: [www.aidsalliance.org/sw7443.asp](http://www.aidsalliance.org/sw7443.asp)

## Step 1: Analyse your NGO's Capacity

### What is Capacity and what is Capacity Building?

Capacity means ability to do the job. An organisation has capacity if it can do what it needs to do to reach its objectives. Capacity in different areas may be good enough, or patchy, or poor.

If it is patchy or poor, some capacity building is needed. The NGO may need a number of different strategies. Perhaps the Board, the Director or the staff – or all of them – need to gain new understanding – perhaps new skills. Perhaps the NGO needs a new way for people to work with each other or the community. Perhaps it needs more people or more money.

**If your pipes spring a leak — Mend them**

**If your NGO has a problem — Fix it**

That is why you need to look critically at your own NGO, to see which are the strong and the weak parts; and then to make a good plan for improving things.

What areas do you need to look at? Every NGO has to have some capacity in four areas:

### THE FIRST AREA OF CAPACITY: **Managing the vision, the future, the projects and programmes**

The Vision of the NGO is what you all hope your NGO could be like in the future; The Mission of your NGO is the guiding principles and values that should make you different from other NGOs in the same field. Your Strategy is how you put your Vision and Mission into practice and they should be clearly expressed in the kind of projects and programmes you run. If your projects are appropriate, successful and efficient your NGO must have good capacity. If not...

### Questions to consider

- ★ Is there a clear line that joins your Vision to your Mission, then runs through your strategies, and then comes out clearly in your Projects?
- ★ Do the leaders of your NGO have good skills – did they, for example, use strategic planning when beginning the projects? Do they know how to monitor and evaluate?
- ★ Are gender issues well incorporated into the NGO?
- ★ Is there a clear plan for keeping the NGO and its projects sustainable?

## THE SECOND AREA OF CAPACITY: **Managing people**

People are the best resource of any NGO. An organisation with the capacity to manage people well has enough people with the necessary skills to do the job. The employees and volunteers feel that their skills are being well used, that they are well appreciated, well supervised and appropriately paid.

### Questions to consider

- ★ Does each employee have the support of job descriptions, supervision, feedback? Are pay and conditions adequate?
- ★ Is the NGO using the skills of every worker to the best of their ability?
- ★ Is there a programme of continuing education?

## THE THIRD AREA OF CAPACITY: **Managing the office**

A good office keeps everyone in touch through emails, letters, memos etc; it acts as the hub of the wheel so that when staff members are out working they know they have back-up. It make sure that staff gets paid on time. It keeps correspondence, confidential files and financial records filed, safe and accessible.

### Questions to consider

- ★ How are you doing in managing your office?
- ★ Is it ensuring that information and communication flows to everyone involved?
- ★ Do you have a clear framework to use when looking at the office –the different sectors and tasks –the skills that are already present and the skills needed in each sector, e.g. financial accounting, financial reporting, transparency, computer skills?

## THE FOURTH AREA OF CAPACITY: **Managing the money**

This involves finding money for current and future projects; having funders that encourage growth not dependency; the use of accurate and transparent accounting.

### Questions to consider

- ★ Is there an overall plan for financial management - managing the money being one part?
- ★ Is there a strategy for fundraising, advocacy and networking?
- ★ Does the NGO have good skills in transparent budgeting and accounting?

## So where is your priority?

Four areas have been identified:

- ★ **Managing the vision**
- ★ **Managing people**
- ★ **Managing the office**
- ★ **Managing the money**

And within each area there are various important topics. Because your NGO cannot solve all its problems at once, this is a good time to start selecting an area on which you are going to concentrate as the priority.

It could, for example, be whether staff is used in the most productive way. Whatever your priority, wherever the NGO needs to consult rather than decide at the top, you could plan a **SWOT Exercise...**

## Step 2: Do the SWOT Exercise

A SWOT exercise is a tool that has been found useful in many NGOs. SWOT stands for the **S**trengths and **W**eaknesses within your organisation; plus factors outside your organisation that offer **O**pportunities or pose **T**hreats. You take a section of your organisation and consider it from these four points of view. And at the same time you are scanning the organisation as it is at this one moment of time.

### The basic SWOT questions:

<b>INTERNAL FACTORS</b>	<b>STRENGTHS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ What do we do well?</li> <li>★ How do we know – do we have good targets and good ways of monitoring our progress towards the targets?</li> </ul>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ What could we do better?</li> <li>★ What measures would demonstrate that we are now doing better?</li> </ul>
<b>EXTERNAL FACTORS</b>	<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ What are the factors outside the NGO that could help us do better?</li> </ul>	<b>THREATS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ What are the factors outside the NGO that might be unhelpful to us doing better?</li> </ul>

### Example of a SWOT:

An NGO in Lesotho did a SWOT analysis to look at its own Sustainability.

The Steps of this SWOT were:

1. The Director of the NGO found a good facilitator. The facilitator had experience with group training, was an outsider, had a good analytical mind and understood the culture and identity of the organisation.
2. Staff and some of the board came together to form the SWOT working group, to discuss how capable the NGO was to sustain its current activities over the following five years.
3. Once the agenda was settled, the people split into three pre-arranged groups for discussions, working through the four SWOT words. (more about groups below) The facilitator moved between the three groups, listening and making suggestions. He made sure that the groups did not focus only on weaknesses and threats, but devoted a lot of time to achievements and strengths. Strengths were highlighted and used to give perspective to the weaknesses and threats.

## NGO Self-assessment through a SWOT exercise

4. He also told the groups to do everything possible to separate issues from personalities. The SWOT discussion was kept focussed on functions, processes and procedures and not on the performance of individuals. He made it clear that the process was not a staff performance appraisal. If the NGO felt that it had a serious issue linked to an individual, he would have suggested that it be dealt with through other means.
5. The groups then came together for a plenary session. Each had long lists of the issues they saw. The facilitator and the NGO Director then had re-write the list contents into some new categories: “high priority” / “some priority” / “low priority”. This is a difficult step in the workshop as people may feel distressed if something they see as important becomes low priority. But the aim of the process is to make changes and the NGO can only tackle problems one by one. Low priority issues do not have to be forgotten.
6. A priority finding of the workshop was that Board members had a lack of commitment to the basic goals of the NGO, and that this was an institutional weakness that needed to be addressed. A sign of poor commitment was that too many Board members missed meetings.
7. A Strategic Plan was developed to change this:
  - Firstly, there was a very careful, tactful discussion on whether the right Board Members had been chosen, whether they actually had the time and means to do a good job. From this discussion, the NGO came to a consensus on a future profile for Board Members and the procedure for selecting them.
  - Secondly, it was agreed that the Board members should have training. This was done.
  - Thirdly it was agreed that the District Office Co-ordinator should raise the interest of Board Members; this he did by visiting individuals at home, introducing individuals and their skills to the meetings and raising her own profile as an example. Board members were also encouraged to read NGO literature and documents.
8. As a final step of the SWOT workshop, a reunion was planned after a couple of months to see how well the strategic plan had been implemented. Progress was found to be good. Then all participants were thanked and the workshop closed.
9. This example shows how a workshop can identify a weakness, find organisational and institutional answers and agree on the steps to take to address it so that the weakness no longer exists. These actions together also raised the motivation and standing of the Members.

### Other ways to run a SWOT exercise

This is not the only way to run a SWOT exercise. You can organise it in different ways to meet the needs of your own NGO. If this is the first time you are doing a SWOT exercise you need to be clear about its scope or width. How many problems

can you fix after the exercise? Whatever its scope, whatever your approach, do not lose these two aspects:

- ★ That the workers really participate; and
- ★ That the approach is aimed at problem solving – not dreaming dreams or running a social event.

### How much time would you need?

If you want to look at a serious topic, treat this activity as a serious workshop. You could set aside a couple of days during which the NGO will not be able to carry out its normal activities.

### Who should take part?

It is better to work with as many of your NGO people as is reasonable. If you want three working groups of eight each – you have room for 24 people. At the end, you want ideas and plans that excite everybody. If more people rather than fewer contribute to those ideas and plans, more effort will be put into putting the plans into practice.

There should be at least one person from your Board; at least two people from the field. If the staff and positions in your organisation allow it, there should be a balance of female and male. There should be representatives from all sections and layers of the organisation with, ideally, two of each kind so that they can support each other. Suppose your organisation works with people with a physical disability, then representatives with physical disabilities should already be present on your Board and working in the organisation. And they should of course participate in the SWOT exercise.

### Group methods

You want to hear the voices of the shyest people and groups. So ask yourself who they are, perhaps the people with a physical disability, perhaps the women – people who can find it difficult to talk in bigger groups. If you have such groups, ensure they can meet before the bigger meetings so that they can decide on their viewpoint and have it put as effectively as possible. They can appoint a spokesperson or have time allocated in the bigger meetings. Another way to make sure that everyone has their say – both noisy people and quiet people – is like this: put a question to the group, then give time for thinking; then ask everyone to write their opinions on bits of paper without putting their names. The facilitator can group these papers on the board, move them around or regroup them differently. This process can start or redirect the general discussion.

As the groups work, they need to write up their findings. You can find a wall space for each group and stick big sheets of cheap paper up on the wall. Then felt pens or chalk can be used. If you can find enough blackboards, groups can use these with chalk sticks or with paper taped to the boards and pens.

## Step 3: Make a Strategic Plan to meet your priority problem

After the analysis, you have decided what you want to change or what needs to be changed. But how are you going to bring about these changes? What is needed? The process of all this is called strategic planning.

The use of strategic planning is to transform the desired changes identified in the SWOT analysis, into clear objectives. This needs to happen in all layers of the organization and in all sectors. People need to be able to relate the objectives to their own work responsibilities.

### Objectives

Objectives are specific, measurable results to be achieved by a specific point in time. They need to be realistic and feasible. Each will require resources, financial and human, and these must be available or possible to acquire.

Here are two objectives...

— One is long-term: *“In three years time, all staff will have received training relevant to their job description”*

— One is short-term: *“By October every staff member will have a job description and discussed it with their supervisor”*

Ask yourself whether these two objectives are relevant, feasible (do-able) and measurable.

Now, in order to reach each objective, you need to define how you are going to do it – and that is a strategy.

### Strategy

Strategy is the way the organization will meet the needs of its members and its objectives. How are you going to do it? Which road will you take?

### Action plan

From the objectives and strategies the action plan can be shaped, materialized. When the objectives have been clearly formulated, the next step is to turn the objectives into an action plan. An action plan consists of several elements:

**Activities:** Which activities need to be undertaken in order to reach the objectives? When, where, by whom?

**Required input:** What do we need? Human resources? Financial, physical, material resources? Time?

**Expected output:** What do we expect to achieve? What will be the result of the specific activities and inputs in the course of the project?

**Effects:** What effect will the action or activity have on the stakeholders?

For example: providing more pay, motivation, training and standards for staff will make them more productive and motivated but may reduce the money available for project activities.

**Indicators:** These are how we measure the achievements of the objectives.

(An example indicator: in three years time, all staff will have received training relevant to their job description and will be delivering projects at a higher standard)

**Assumptions:** These are factors that are important for the project, but which are outside its scope. Assumptions are the answer to the question “What external factors are not influenced by the NGO’s activities, but may affect its plans?” An example might be: the NGO has been assuming that the duties of female and male staff outside work are not eating into work time and energy – but this assumption may not be true and needs to be examined

**Time line:** An action plan needs a time line. When will you conduct certain activities? When will you expect results? When will you measure the expected effects?

During these planning sessions you can build up a list of desired changes...

### Desired changes

For the objective of improving staff performance these could be that each staff member...

- ★ Is paid enough to cover the needs of a family.
- ★ Is better motivated and working at a higher level – doing a job worth doing but not being overworked.
- ★ Gets training to carry out their job description to a higher standard.
- ★ Has someone to whom they report and from whom they receive supervision, encouragement and recognition.
- ★ Can reasonably hope for promotion.



Using the list of desired changes which you have decided on, you could divide the participants into small groups and provide each group with an objective or ‘desired change’ to work on. Each group could then present their proposal in a general discussion later on.

**The general idea behind each plan is...**

- ★ How can we strengthen our strengths?
- ★ How can we overcome our weaknesses?
- ★ How can we use the opportunities?
- ★ How can we evade the threats?

Each group should work on the following:

**Objectives:** Describe the change that is needed and define exactly what the objectives will be.

**Strategies:** Think of applicable strategies. Write these down. Ask if these strategies can be used, how, when, where? Are there alternative methods that could be used? (See also notes below).

**Activities:** Describe the activities to be done (Where, when, by whom).

**Input:** List what resources (human, material, financial, time) are needed.

**Output:** Describe what you expect to achieve. What will be the result of the specific activity and input?

**Effect:** Define the possible outcomes, in terms of what each plan will contribute to gender relations, mainstreaming or gender equality.

**Indicators:** To indicate is to point in a direction – sign-posts are indicators. For each objective you need indicators used to measure the achievements, the desired changes. For example...

*Objective:* In three years time, all staff will have received training relevant to their job description and will be delivering projects at a higher standard.

*Indicator 1:* You could make a list with a timeframe showing the name of each staff member and specifying the training they should receive. As each is trained, the box is ticked.

*Indicator 2:* Before the training, you could agree with each staff member how they could do their job to a higher standard. This would be written on a further table. On-the-job supervision would confirm that the standard has been reached.

*Indicator 3:* The whole group of staff concerned with a specific project could discuss and agree on indicators that would show whether after training the project is more accessible, acceptable, effective or whatever.

**Risk and assumptions:** Discuss possible obstacles that you might encounter and conditions that you need for this strategy to be implemented.

## Step 4: Implement, Monitor, Evaluate

### Implement

The next step is the implementation of the action plan. This a period in which people will learn by doing, by discovery, by being confronted with problems, their causes and effects. If things go well, if staff members are motivated and are involved in the decision making, they will start feeling responsible for what they are doing, which will create 'ownership'. The feeling of ownership is essential if staff members are to feel dedicated and believe in what they are doing.

### Monitor

The process of change needs continuous monitoring. You need to check if you are on the right road or if you have taken a wrong turn. If the results are not what you expected, things may go slowly, people lose motivation and action must be taken. A change process is like a child learning how to walk: falling and getting up again. Do not get discouraged, enjoy the positive outcomes and adapt your strategies on the negative ones.

Monitoring is a continuous process for the duration of the project. It is an activity based on data collection. The knowledge and skills required for monitoring are the same as for assessment and analysis. Monitoring is essential in a changing situation. The purpose of monitoring is to find out whether the programme and activities are taking place on time, are effective, and whether strategies need to be adapted to ensure the best possible results.

Simply put: we made a plan; now, are we carrying it out, in good time and using the right means, people and approaches?

#### What you have to monitor...

- ★ The planned activities and progress in their implementation
- ★ The process - how the plan is being carried out
- ★ The people
- ★ The impact and changes in the situation.

#### To plan the monitoring, you need to think about...

- ★ How will you do it? Who is going to be responsible for what?
- ★ What is needed? The funding, the human and material resources, the means of communication and reporting.

Set up a checklist – what do you want to count or measure? Look at the ‘desired changes’, the indicators and the time line in your action plan. Go back and read about indicators (page 10).

Some projects are easier to monitor than others. If you are vaccinating children, you count the kids and calculate the proportion of all children covered and not covered. Changes in attitudes or behaviour are more difficult to monitor, but the use of good indicators from the very beginning will facilitate this process.

For more on monitoring, you can download the manual “Information, its collection and use” at [www.networklearning.org/books/collecting-information.html](http://www.networklearning.org/books/collecting-information.html)

### Evaluate

Evaluation is an activity in itself. It is often the last part of a project or process but at the same time the beginning of the next phase, extension or new proposal.

The practice of evaluating one’s own effort is a natural one: women will look to see if spots have been removed from shirts after washing, a mechanic will check if the motor he repaired is working properly, a carpenter will run his hands over the wood to decide when a piece is smooth. If not, they might need to change their approach, tool or means.

Staff of the organization can do an internal evaluation. Or an independent outside agency can perform an external evaluation, often at the request of the donor. The whole group of staff concerned with a specific project could discuss and agree on indicators (see page 10) that would show that after training the project is more accessible, acceptable, effective or whatever. These would be indicators used to evaluate.

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the actual results of an activity.

An NGO could ask about:

**Effectiveness:** To what extent have the objectives been achieved? And at what cost? If objectives were not met, what are the causes behind this?

**Strategies and action used:** Which were the strengths in the strategies/actions? And which were the weak points?

**Objectives:** Are objectives still valid or do these need to be adapted? Which changes need to be made in order to reach the objectives?

**Efficiency:** Are the costs in proportion to the benefits? These costs refer to resources: human resources, time, energy, money and materials.

**Impact:** What has been the impact on the staff, the organization and the stakeholders? What changes have been brought about by the project? These changes can be the ones that were planned, but also unexpected ones.

During evaluation, be it internal or external, discussions should take place in a participatory way with all stakeholders involved, women and men.



Nowadays an important practice during evaluation is to assess the 'Lessons learnt':

- ★ What went well? What not? Why?
- ★ What did you learn from the practices and approaches implemented?
- ★ Which methods worked well, which didn't?
- ★ Which were the best practices? Which the bad ones?

Identification of these lessons will help you with future planning. Best practices can be used again. Practices which do not work can be eliminated.



**Self-assessment takes bravery and a SWOT exercise is not easy. However, building the capacity of your NGO is worth doing - Good Luck!**