

# Strategy and Impact: Why it's the thought that counts

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## 1. Introduction

This conference is examining, among other things, the hope that spatial planning will bring improved environmental outcomes for New Zealand's land and sea. High-level concepts like spatial planning, like ecosystem-based management, like integrated catchment management planning, stand or fall on their application— on how well we support, design and implement their plans, programme by programme, project by project, catchment by catchment, agency by agency.

So what happens to the best of planning ideas once they hit the ground? We have an existing laboratory to answer that question. Across New Zealand there are hundreds of active catchment-based programmes and projects seeking to deliver improved environmental outcomes. They are variously designed and delivered by government departments, regional and local councils, iwi authorities, communities, or NGOs. They diverge widely in scale from community focus on a part of a stream to a multi-agency integrated programme covering a whole catchment. There is also diversity in approach, priorities, available resources and partnerships. But many of them share an unfortunate common theme: lack of strategic thinking.

Strategic planning is, in essence the ability to plan and implement programmes that are likely to solve clearly identified problems. It is the essential link between vision and consequence. For strategic planning to be effective it needs to be evident throughout the programme cycle – from developing the vision, through understanding the operating environment, identifying the stakeholders and what influences them, designing strategies for implementation; clarifying objectives; listing actions; drawing up monitoring and evaluation plans and then actually implementing the entire plan in an intelligent, informed and observant manner. The process requires a certain discipline and logic, but not a university degree in management. It requires us to test our assumptions and accept sometimes politically painful consequences but without it we spend money, we act, and nothing much changes.

Nationally our catchment management programmes - those thin green lines constructed to protect the sea from land use – are worryingly short of strategic thinking. My own

conclusion (having participated in a national review of ICM scale<sup>1</sup> and having worked with a number of individual programmes) is that lack of strategy is contributing to a waste of resources and a shortfall of achievement in environmental outcomes. There are examples of well designed programmes that are being implemented strategically. It is important that we work towards ensuring that spatial planning outputs fall into the latter camp.

Failures in strategic thinking can materialise at many levels. In this presentation I examine a four of them. All the examples I use are from actual recent cases around New Zealand.

## **2. Strategy One: Clearly identify the problem**

*Be clear and specific about the issue or problem you are addressing. Make sure you're focused on a priority.*

Identifying the real problem you need to solve requires big picture thinking and a willingness to discover the root causes of the issues you face. Being clear about the problem helps clarify the focus and scope of the programme you design, pointing it towards a solution that is actually going to address your priority problem. If you have heavy metal pollution in your estuary your problem isn't a lack of environmental education in primary school children, or at least not as an immediate priority.

Instead of clearly identifying the problem at the start of a programme, organisations commonly fall into one of the following traps:

### *Problem substitution*

Staff from most regional councils who are charged with managing catchment programmes have commented to me that they have difficulty in articulating the big picture of catchment management because they feel it is too complex and the problems too vast. This is understandable. Unacceptable levels of nutrients bubbling up through ancient aquifers (an 'environmental time-bomb' as one person put it), will terrify the boldest of regional council staff especially when the solution lies in a complete and expensive re-think of dairy farming and the majority of your councillors are of this trade. Traditional reluctance in interfering with farming decision-making delays solution-finding allowing the problems to grow.

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<sup>1</sup> *Integrated Catchment Management – a review of literature and practice* 2010, Feeney, Clare, Will Allen, Annette Lees and Maree Drury. <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/water/integrated-catchment-management/index.html>

By contrast, sediment control with fencing and riparian revegetation solutions is a much tidier, visible and all round easier problem to own up to. As a result, it will be often picked as the problem of choice in this situation. The urban parallel is to focus on point sources of pollution which are easier to regulate and clean up than the far more complex diffuse sources of pollution.

Problem substitution is fiddling at the margins. It solves *a* problem but not *the* problem. The big problem doesn't go away but it frequently sinks from view, delaying its resolution and usually making the problem even bigger. Opportunities to build strategic alliances to resolve big problems can be lost in the mean time.

The strategic approach is instead to face the problem squarely, define it, map its dimensions and if it is beyond your agency alone to resolve (which most of the most important problems are in fact), seek partnership. Your specific problem remains the nutrients in the aquifers or the diffuse source of pollution, but the issue that your strategic planning will point to for your resolution is your inability to solve the problem on your own. Strategic thinking in this case may lead you to exploring a collaborative governance approach. Building partnerships, engaging all relevant parts of your council, involving stakeholders, opening up with information and inviting collaboration are strategies that will get you much closer to the solution than problem substitution. At the very least you will be raising political awareness of the reality of the situation which is the first step to constructing the big solutions.

#### *Looking sideways.*

The problem may be resolvable within your current resources but not be what you want to hear. One council rather hoped the problem in the catchment belonged in the paddocks and designed a fencing solution accordingly. But the key threats to that particular catchment and receiving harbour were instead a lack of adequate integrated planning, regulation and policies within the council concerned, and a lack of coordination and consultation between key players. No additional funding was required – only political and bureaucratic will. Effective strategic planning would have led programme managers to this conclusion and provided a platform for discussion and potential change within that council.

#### *Inventing problems*

Sometimes there isn't a problem. Best, then, to prioritise your funding elsewhere. This logic did not prevent one regional council from implementing a sediment control programme in a catchment that did not have, and because of local geomorphology, was unlikely to ever have, a sediment problem in the receiving harbour.

Effective spatial planning should eliminate this specific risk by identifying priority catchments based on good science rather than political preference, but only if the high level findings and decisions do in fact filter down to catchment-based decision-

making. For this to happen, there needs to be strong strategic links between the big picture and the site-based implementation.

### **3. Strategy Two: Design a solution that will solve the problem**

*Conduct a sound analysis of the causes of the problem to be solved and design a solution that addresses those causes.*

If the problem is a massive dump of sedimentation into an estuary by poorly planned regular forestry harvesting events, you don't solve the problem by conducting community planting days on council reserve land. Similar to the requirement to ensure you're facing the problem fair and square, the solution also needs to be focused and demonstrably able to solve your priority problem.

Designing effective solutions is one of the hardest tasks you can undertake if you don't use strategic planning. Common errors include the following:

*Enact the solution before you've identified the problem.*

All too commonly, solutions are designed well before problems have been clearly identified (the phrase 'adaptive management' can cover this). Indeed the three to five year programme cycle is sometimes completed before the real problem, and actual solution, are thought through. Such 'solutions' are being implemented in catchment programmes all over New Zealand. Based on pet projects, councils' areas of existing expertise, the 'tried and true', friendly consultants selling their wares, or concerned communities wanting immediate action, a worryingly large portion of the environment budget is spent on solutions to unidentified problems.

Designing your solution takes some analysis. You need to understand your operating environment, your stakeholders and their motivations, your regulatory and policy boundaries and opportunities and above all, your problem.

*Resting on your assumptions*

Catchment management planning is riddled with assumptions, particularly about the nature of communities. Here are some real-life costly assumptions that were proved wrong in recent catchment programme implementation:

- 'The community' is a single entity that can speak with one voice.
- The community wants to be involved
- The community does not want to be involved
- The community can be expected to provide voluntary labour
- Rural dwelling means farm-owning
- Building resilient communities will lead naturally to positive environmental outcomes.

- We can't partner with other agencies, only consult, because our objectives and vision must prevail
- Awareness-raising will solve the problem
- If we wait for the science we'll know how to act
- There is no need to wait for the science, we know what the problem is
- Peer-pressure will bring in the reluctant farmers
- At the end of three years we'll be handing this over to the community

Programmes worth several millions of dollars have been confidently launched on such assumptions. Strategic thinking invites you to check on these and any other assumptions you have tucked into your programme design and at least undergo a little risk analysis.

### *Paralysis by complexity*

Local government staff are tasked with turning great policy and clever planning concepts into programmes that require implementation. Without the guidance of skilled strategic planning, even talented staff become unstuck. Broad-based planning programmes such as ICM, spatial planning or ecosystem-based management require balance, integration or at least consideration of several streams of development (the four well-beings: environmental, social, cultural and economic). While this is arguably a critically important component of sound planning at the conceptual level, its practical implementation usually comes down to one or two council staff trying to build these components into a single project. Interviews with regional councils across New Zealand reveal that in the practice of implementing the four well-beings, staff report feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of designing and implementing ICMs at this level. When balance between the four well-beings doesn't come easily, solution-finding enters an elaborate hide-and-seek. Not solving the environmental problem? Never mind, we're advancing social goals. Avoiding cultural issues? At least it's economic. Strategic thinking blows the fog away from such circular thinking, requiring a clear match between problem and solution.

### *The model approach*

Solution-finding often gets stuck on the 'model project' approach.

One project is deemed successful. The community really got behind it and took ownership. The council was able to pull way back and save ratepayers' dollars in the process. All the farmers got onside and voluntarily reduced stocking numbers. Iwi played a critical governance role. Even the quarry owners came earnestly to the party. Hundreds of local school children turned up to the community planting days. Long forgotten fish turned up in the local stream. The whole thing made national TV news. The place is now a site of field trips for councils from all over the country.

Hopefully the inspiring hard-working young champion won't be moving to Australia. (Was the programme independently reviewed? See below.)

We all want that project, those farmers, that particular iwi and those quarry owners - anyone but our ones. We're unlikely to get them because our project is unique which is why examples of models jumping sites ('upscaling') are extremely rare. Models, blue-prints, by their nature, are one-offs. Models receive special attention in their design and implementation. Often they are fully funded in a way that is unlikely to ever be replicable. They may receive the direct attention of a number of experts keen to experiment or prove a point. While it is often acknowledged that these factors are unique to the model site, models are justified by their potential to trial a new idea that would otherwise stay untested. The difficulty is that it is usually the non-replicable components of the model (funding, expertise, 'blue-print enthusiasm') that are the most critical to have in place for any project site.

Models can usefully contribute to the bank of best practice but even best practice is dependent for its effective implementation on a maze of unique interactions within each site between the environment and people.

What *is* transferable is strategic planning. The focus has to be on getting to know your own site and making the most of your own advantages. Learning from other places is essential intelligence gathering but nothing quite substitutes for solid strategic planning for your own place.

#### **4. Strategy Three: Develop clear objectives**

*What is your desired outcome?*

The simplicity of this question belies the fact that it is so rarely asked. Assessments of Integrated Catchment Management Programmes (ICMPs) in the Auckland Region have shown that most objectives are framed in ways that makes it impossible to measure progress towards or achievement of them<sup>2</sup>. Internal logic linking objectives to vision and outcomes is weak. One \$5 million project was launched and operated for half a decade with no objectives at all.

There is a certain comfort in this for the protagonists. Without the strong logic and powerful problem solving that draws a good strategic plan together, the hard-to-do things easily

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<sup>2 2</sup> Kouwenhoven P and Feeney, C. 2009. Integrated catchment management plans: review of plan logic and plan synergy. Prepared for Auckland Regional Council. Auckland Regional Council Internal Report IR2009/014.

become best-ignored. Clear objectives put the desired outcome squarely in your face. *This* is what we need to achieve. The objectives are measureable - your good name rests beside their success or failure.

## **5. Strategy Four: Learn and improve from your experience**

*Your work needs to be monitored to ensure you understand how it is unfolding. It needs regular independent review to ensure you get the complete picture. A learning organisation incorporates learning, growth and improvement into its management.*

Monitoring, review and evaluation of programmes are the last, and arguably the most important, tools for effective strategic planning. They ask the questions: Is it working? Are you achieving your objectives? Why or why not? What could you have planned and delivered differently? What is the overall impact and effectiveness of your work? What do you (and your organisation and your stakeholders) do now with this information?

In the course of work I have done on catchment management, most agencies record that monitoring and review are woefully inadequate for their programmes. The following themes are evident.

### *Learning lessons*

Monitoring and review is very often recast as ‘lessons learned’. There is a plethora of literature on lessons learned for catchment management (‘involve stakeholders from the start’, ‘use an independent facilitator’, ‘ensure you have sufficient budget for all actions’.) ‘Lessons learned’ can provide us with sensible advice and assist in building up a common knowledge of best practice.

But comparing lessons learned across scores of projects reveals they would be better termed ‘lessons learned but soon forgotten’. In fact, it is a rare project that seriously takes into account lessons learned from anywhere else, usually because ‘anywhere-else’ is so different from where-you-are. More normally, organisations repeat the same mistakes to generate fresh ‘lessons learned’ documents. This is a cycle that sound strategic planning would rudely interrupt.

The belief that there is a reproducible approach to catchment planning – a model that we should be aspiring to – contributes to the lessons learned approach to review. If we only knew those golden lessons we’d all be living in clean catchments. Lessons learned tend to focus outward, usually at the outputs end of the planning cycle, and particularly on the community engagement. Often, however, it is the internal story – that from within the council or other implementing agency – where the real lessons need to be learned.

To move beyond the ‘lessons learned’ approach to evaluation, it should be realised that review is of most use while a programme is still active. Too often, the review comes at the very end when the budget is spent and the programme closed. Lessons generated then enter the ether in the hope that they will settle on someone else’s shoulders who is beginning a new programme. Review instead should be in the hip-pocket of programme planners and implementers, to be drawn out at pivotal decision-making points while the programme is still active, so findings can be incorporated into on-going programme design and implementation. (Notice how much more pertinent are the questions at the beginning of this section when they are in the present rather than past tense.) Good monitoring helps to pick those moments.

### *Independent review*

Independent review of all programmes is essential. Fresh eyes see things that those close to a programme can never see. Vested interests have to take a back seat. Everyone braces themselves.

Despite its critical benefits, independent review of catchment management programmes is worryingly rare. One decade-long urban programme with a budget of between \$3 and \$5 million a year has never been independently reviewed. Unsurprisingly, internal reviews of progress here are glowing, even self-congratulatory about all their lessons learned. Research agencies have the best record of being openly engaged with review. Regional councils have the worst record. No regional council interviewed for the 2010 MfE ICMP review had completed a full and formal independent review of its ICM programmes. Many commented that this was for political reasons, with staff fearful that a negative review will result in politicians cutting programmes. Other factors mentioned include: no budget for monitoring and review as it is seen as non-essential or low priority; a lack of base-line data – and even objectives – against which impact can be measured; a perception that change is too difficult to measure; fear that success would be measured too rigidly; and belief that it is too costly.

These are not insurmountable problems. A cost-effective and useful monitoring and evaluation programme can be constructed for every programme – it is a matter of scale and of high-level commitment to the full strategic planning cycle.

### *Learning organisations*

The real impact of review should be seen at the organisational level. A core component of review findings may relate to the way an organisation is governed, managed, structured, incentivised, supervised and resourced. These factors can be critical to programme success or failure. Review needs to find its way back to the very top of an organisation so recommendations for improvement can be discussed and embedded with leadership support.

## **6. Conclusion**

A twenty minute presentation like this cannot cover the full dimensions of strategic planning nor how it intersects with environmental programme design and implementation. But the few examples given here illustrate the depth and extent of the problem of poor planning and thinking that is so evident in the field nationally. Strategic planning will underpin the success or failure of spatial planning as it has done for integrated catchment management programmes and all variations on this theme.

Supporting strategic thinking and planning is arguably the most cost-effective intervention that any organisation, council or agency could make for an environment programme. Councils and other implementing organisations should examine how they can reward strategic planning skills in their staff, and engender a culture of strategic thinking. This will require commitment, skills and understanding of strategy by senior staff, and for staff to be held accountable for strategic outcomes.

Without such interventions we'll be doomed to read 'lessons learned' for many more decades, while wondering why our thin green lines between land and sea are not addressing the problems that we thought they were designed to solve.