



# Technical Notes

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## Using Workshops for Strategic Management of Policy Reform

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Among the management technologies the IPC Project uses to assist developing country managers with the implementation of policy reforms, workshops have proven to be highly effective in establishing and supporting strategic management processes, and in providing opportunities for participation in policy change by affected parties. Effective workshops contribute to economic efficiency gains by improving coordination across implementing agencies and sectors, elaborating jointly understood operational roles and rules, and disseminating information to clients and user groups. Workshops generate political benefits in the form of establishing common ground and areas of agreement, increasing support for policy issues and solutions, and building constituencies and ownership for reform. This technical note provides some background information on workshops, describes the ways workshops can be useful for participatory policy implementation, elaborates how to use them in the IPC context, and provides an example of a strategic management workshop conducted in The Gambia as part of institutional strengthening for the finance ministry.

### Workshops as a Management Tool

A workshop can be defined as an organized meeting, usually from one-half to four days in length, with the following features: a) a custom-tailored set of objectives, tasks, and outcomes; b) a blend of learning a new tool or approach with applying it to an immediate task; c) a participatory orientation that engages attendees actively in both learning and application; and d) a limitation on attendance to those

with some direct link to the workshop's objectives and tasks. These features differentiate workshops from other meetings of limited duration, such as: seminars, where the emphasis is on more general instruction and learning with attendance open to anyone interested in the subject at hand; conferences, whose orientation is similar to seminars but usually includes exchanges of experience in the subject area between invited speakers and attendees; or briefings, where the focus is on one-way information transmittal to a recipient audience.

In the management context, workshops integrate the technical with the process side of managing. They serve as tools that help groups of people work more effectively together on common tasks. Workshops serve as mechanisms for team building and decision making, often as part of an organizational development (OD) program intended to improve an organization's performance by helping it use its resources more effectively. These workshops usually combine external consultants, who design and conduct the workshops jointly with a team from the organization. The organization's staff members (and sometimes its clients) participate in the workshop and carry its outcomes and learnings back into the workplace for application. Much of the OD literature deals with workshops for team and consensus building, and performance improvement (see, for example, Dyer 1987, Miles 1981). OD started in the private sector, but quickly spread to public agencies (including the military), and to non-profit voluntary organizations as well. Workshops are widely used in all three sectors.

In the international development arena, workshops as a management tool evolved in the context of donor agency and developing country concerns with project implementation and management. Evaluations of project experience found that failure to undertake detailed implementation planning with the staff of the agencies actually responsible for project implementation (either as part of project design or start-up) accounted for a significant portion of the management weaknesses that projects suffered from. Further analysis revealed that the process side of implementation was frequently neglected as well, i.e., clarifying objectives, agreeing on roles and responsibilities, and building ownership and commitment for objectives and plans. This oversight resulted in misunderstandings, disputes, and conflicts among project staff, donor agency personnel, and beneficiaries. This finding suggested the applicability of the OD approach to development project implementation teams.

As a means to improve project implementation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) began to support the development of workshop methodologies that addressed implementation planning and team building in tandem, particularly targeted at the transition in the project cycle between design and implementation. Initially employed on an experimental basis, the methodology was refined, and now has become standard procedure in several donor agencies. In USAID such workshops are called project start-up workshops or team planning meetings (TPMs); in the World Bank they are referred to as project launch or action planning workshops (see Eckert and Kettering 1984, Edwards and Pettit 1987, Jones 1988, Schmidt and Kettering 1987, Silverman et al 1986; see also Liebler 1994).

After their original international development application to project start-up, workshops were integrated into institutional strengthening projects as a management technology that could be used at any phase of the project cycle: problem identification, design, implementation, and/or evaluation. Further, the technology can be transferred to developing country managers for use in their own operations, whether linked to a donor-funded project or not. The workshop methodology, referred to as action-training, has become a cornerstone of management training efforts (EDI 1989, Kerrigan and Luke 1987), and of institutional capacity-building (for example, Brinkerhoff 1990, Cassels and Janovsky 1991, Foster et al 1990, Jones 1990, Schmidt 1991).

## **The Place of Workshops in the Strategic Management of Policy Reform**

IPC works with developing country managers to provide them with strategic approaches to deal more effectively with managing the process of policy reform. Thus, tools and techniques related to management process, such as workshops, are at the heart of IPC's technology transfer. Because they combine learning and application, workshops are appropriate mechanisms for introducing strategic management tools. Since most IPC field activities involve working in teams that combine external consultants with developing country personnel, workshops for team-building and action-planning have a key role to play at various points in the technical collaboration process. For example, at the start of an activity, TPMs are routinely used in preparing IPC consultant teams for country assignments and with in-country task groups as well.

Workshops are also useful to advance the policy reform process itself. The strategic management process, as used by IPC, can be thought of as a nine-step cycle (see Crosby 1991). The steps include: 1) agreement on and initiation of the process; 2) clarification of the organization's mission, objectives, and current strategies; 3) identification of the organization's internal strengths and weaknesses; 4) assessment of external threats and opportunities; 5) identification of key stakeholders, their interests, and expectations; 6) delineation of key strategic issues facing the organization; 7) design of strategic options and choice of a strategy; 8) implementation of the strategy; and 9) performance monitoring, strategy review, and adaptation. Workshops can be used at each of these steps to bring together the appropriate people who need to be involved, undertake the tasks required at the particular step, gain understanding of the outputs to be produced, and agree upon what needs to be done next. Given the nature of the tasks in the steps of the strategic management process, participation of a variety of groups increases the quality of the outputs and the likelihood that those outputs will be "owned" and supported by those involved. Workshops are ideal settings for achieving these outcomes.

Because policy implementation crosscuts the nominal authority and statutory responsibility of any individual agency, management of the implementation process calls for mechanisms that bring together the relevant parties in ways that reduce the potential for conflict and increase the possibilities for effective coordination. Workshops can serve effectively as one

of these mechanisms. They are non-hierarchical and participatory, their objectives explicitly target building consensus and agreement, and their emphasis on practicality can assure that participants address issues concretely in terms of what is to be done and who is responsible for which actions.

The use of workshops throughout the life of a policy reform reinforces the strategic management process cycle by creating periodic venues for taking stock of progress, comparing targets with accomplishments, revising plans, addressing conflicts, reinforcing or renegotiating agreements, and sustaining new behaviors among participants. These outcomes serve to operationalize the iterative, adaptive nature of strategic management in a way that is clear, visible, and practical.

### **Guidelines for Designing and Conducting IPC Workshops**

A common misperception regarding workshops is that the major expenditure of effort takes place once the workshop starts. Effective workshops, however, call for significant attention to design and preparation to lay the groundwork for success. These guidelines are divided into suggestions for the preparation phase and for actual conduct of the workshop.

#### **Workshop Preparation**

**Clarify workshop objectives.** The first step in workshop preparation is to determine the purpose to be achieved. Why hold a workshop and what is to be accomplished? This step establishes the foundation for all subsequent decisions. A good way to answer these questions is to begin with some interviewing of key stakeholders. Several of the reasons why policy managers might want to hold workshops have been reviewed in this note, for example, team building, consensus building, analyzing a problem, developing an action strategy and plan, identifying and agreeing on roles and responsibilities, etc. These can be used as starting points for discussions with relevant personnel. Once this first step has been initiated, the following guidelines are applicable. Although presented here in a linear sequence, in practice these actions tend to take place simultaneously and/or cyclically up until final decisions on workshop preparation and design are taken.

**Build ownership for the workshop.** The interview process to clarify the workshop's purpose and define objectives can also serve to plant the seeds of ownership among senior officials, potential workshop

participants, agency clients, and other relevant actors. The workshop should have formal sponsorship from one or more of the agencies responsible for the policy's implementation. Even if top-level officials do not participate in the workshop, their recognition of its importance and attention to its outcomes are critical for the application of the workshop's products. Incentives for participants to take the workshop seriously are enhanced when they know that their superiors have an interest in the activity. To reinforce this message, a senior official can be invited to preside over the workshop's opening and/or closing session(s), and participants can present a summary of results to the official as part of the final session.

**Select participants.** Without the right people at the workshop, the desired outcomes will not be possible. To some extent, selection takes place as part of the discussions around workshop purpose. As a general rule, broader participation from multiple levels increases the probability that: a) relevant information and perspectives will not be overlooked, b) potentially debilitating conflicts can be averted, c) better understandings can be reached, and d) key actors will not feel left out and therefore will be less prone to engage in obstructionist or subversive behaviors later. Selection can become a sensitive issue, however, if there are too many trade-offs between who needs to attend for technical reasons and those whose presence is dictated by political considerations. One solution is to hold separate sessions, or even separate workshops, for different categories of participants; for example, organizing a formal "supporting" forum for politically important attendees, thereby fulfilling their participation needs and desires.

At a certain point, though, logistical considerations enter in. Workshops with more than about 40-50 people become difficult to manage, and the ability to reach operationally concrete outcomes is hampered. Again, size is partially dependent upon purpose. If the workshop has a major focus on building understanding of what needs to be done to implement a particular policy and create consensus, then a larger size might be appropriate. If the aim is to do detailed operational planning for a specific set of activities, then a smaller group is likely to be more efficient and effective.

**Determine workshop length and timing.** Most of the people who are involved in policy implementation are busy. Those at the higher levels of government tend to be especially overloaded. For management workshops, shorter is better. Getting the right people to attend means adjusting workshop length to their availability. Three days is usually the maximum that can be

realistically programmed. One solution in cases where availability is a problem is to include within the workshop a shorter session geared to high-level personnel attendance, with the majority of participants attending for a longer period.

Timing is determined by the particular policy situation. If the workshop is a TPM to prepare a team for an assignment, obviously it must be held prior to the start-up of team activities in the field (and generally will last one day or less). If workshops are being programmed as part of a long-term policy implementation effort, it can be possible to establish dates and times in advance, for example, quarterly. This kind of advance planning can increase the likelihood that participants are able to build attendance into their schedules.

**Identify location and facilities.** In some situations, the sponsoring agency will want to hold the workshop at its own facilities, which may or may not offer the best physical set-up for the sessions. Budgetary considerations often enter in as well, putting limits on what is possible. The ideal is a location that minimizes interruptions to workshop activities, where participants cannot easily be drawn away to attend to routine business. Because of the action-oriented nature of the workshop and the fact that outputs from previous sessions usually are inputs to subsequent ones, having participants drop in and out of sessions is highly detrimental to achievement of intended objectives. Sometimes local training institutes can be a suitable location for workshops. If participants are coming from other cities or countries, hotels are the preferred option, funds permitting.

Facilities need to include at a minimum a meeting room large enough to accommodate all the participants comfortably, and several smaller rooms nearby where task groups can work (break-out rooms). The set-up in the large room should be arranged to facilitate interchange and discussion. Classroom and lecture hall formats with rows of tables and chairs all facing a central podium are inappropriate. Avoid any facility where chairs and desks are bolted to the floor. The ideal is a U-shaped layout with space at the open end of the U for the session leader or facilitator to present material or guide discussion, and to move into the U. There should be adequate space in the plenary room for side tables for trainer/facilitator materials, overhead projectors (if needed), and coffee/tea and snacks.

Other desirable features in facilities include: blackboards and/or flipchart stands, walls that will not

be damaged by taping flipchart paper to them, air conditioning and adequate ventilation (particularly if smoking is permitted), sufficient lighting, and availability of telephones. Obviously, workshop organizers will need to be flexible about the physical layout, since in most situations the choice of facilities requires some trade-offs in amenities available.

**Prepare workshop design.** Content details for individual workshop sessions clearly depend upon the particular situation. However, IPC workshops share a common design framework. The underlying structure for workshop design is a flow that begins with developing mutual understanding of the issues to be addressed, the objectives to be achieved, and what needs to be done to make progress; moves to reaching agreements on tasks and responsibilities; and culminates in preparing action/monitoring plans, and determining next steps. Within this general structure, workshop design reflects several basic principles.

The first is simplicity. Designs should concentrate on achieving a few critical objectives, based on a realistic assessment of what can be done in the time available, given the backgrounds and capacities of the participants. Pressing people to do too much is counterproductive; marathon sessions quickly reach the point of diminishing returns. Overly complex and ambitious designs lead to frustration and disappointment, plus a feeling that policy implementation is an excessively daunting endeavor.

The second is flexibility. Just as in implementation planning itself, not all actions can be completely specified in advance. The design should allow for changes in sessions, reallocation of time if some activities take longer than anticipated, and slots where new activities can be inserted if necessary. Designs can usually accommodate these changes by being generous in session time estimates, which builds in slack that can be used when called for.

The third principle is action. In practice, this means a design that mixes presentations and discussions with small group exercises, preparation of work products, and decision-making. IPC workshops do not program extended periods of time where participants sit passively for speeches, lectures, or other kinds of exposition. If background information is important, the design includes distribution of material to participants beforehand with a clear expectation that reading is to be done prior to attending the workshop. IPC workshops as a rule avoid prolonged plenary discussions where "air time" is limited to a single speaker at a time. The preference is to design small

group discussions where more interchange among greater numbers of participants is possible, followed by plenary sessions that highlight the key points of the small groups' thinking and synthesize conclusions for all participants.

### **Workshop Conduct**

Conducting the workshop successfully blends attention to content with concern for process. As mentioned earlier, the substantive content of the workshop will be determined by the key issues the policy addresses, the objectives and plans established, and the particular policy implementation situation, thus it is difficult to provide general suggestions. Guidelines here focus on the process side of conducting the workshop.

**View the design as a roadmap as well as a destination.** As noted in the guidance for workshop preparation, the design should be flexible. The workshop agenda is not a blueprint. The aim is to achieve the purpose of the workshop, not pursue the planned sessions as scheduled. The organizers should use the design to monitor progress. If it appears during the workshop that more or less time is needed for particular sessions, the agenda should be modified. For example, workshops that combine participants who do not previously know each other, or who have not worked together before, require a certain amount of "breaking-in" before the group can become fully functional. This factor calls for flexibility in determining session schedules.

**Treat the participants as adults.** Because so much of people's experience with learning takes place in schools, workshop organizers and participants alike sometimes have a subconscious tendency to transfer the attitudes associated with early educational experiences to the workshop. Organizers act like parents and teachers; participants readily take on the role of children. IPC workshops, however, consider participants as self-directing adults who share responsibility with the organizers for workshop success and outputs. This perspective is made operational, for example, by clarifying expectations for the workshop at the opening session, and by involving the participants in decisions about modifying the agenda. A useful technique is to begin each day's sessions with a summary review (by a preselected participant) of the previous day's activities with commentary from the group, and a presentation of the agenda for the day with an opportunity for questions or changes.

**Focus on learning in combination with operational relevance.** This recommendation relates to treating participants as adults in that adults learn more readily by confronting and consolidating new knowledge with their own experience. IPC workshops give participants the opportunity to apply directly new techniques, tools, and approaches to the immediate tasks of managing policy change. Throughout the workshop, session leaders should stress the links between new material and operational applications. Part of this linkage is assured by the design, which follows presentations with small group exercises to apply what has just been presented. In addition, organizers can reinforce the connections during discussions and question-and-answer periods.

**Emphasize participation.** Since a key feature of IPC workshops is to bring together the major actors associated with a particular policy reform, it is important that the knowledge and perspectives of everyone be brought out. Organizers should be attuned to the patterns of communication in both plenary and small group sessions. If some participants remain silent or appear reticent to share their views, they should be gently encouraged to express themselves. The work products generated during the workshop will be more useful to the extent that they include everyone's expertise and reflect all participants' points of view. Also, people will be more apt to accept the results if they feel that they contributed to them. Sessions should include opportunities to ask the group explicitly if everyone understands what is under discussion and if there is agreement on implications, intended outcomes, next steps, etc.

**Use facilitators.** IPC workshops frequently employ a co-trainer approach that pairs someone with expertise in the technical content of the policy being implemented along with a specialist in training and workshop process, known as a facilitator. Facilitators manage the process of the workshop to assure that objectives are met in a way that builds participants' abilities to work together effectively and produce the intended outputs, but they do not take positions on the policy or workshop content. The advantages of using a facilitator are: a) the important process dimensions of the workshop are effectively handled, b) the workshop sponsors are freed to participate on the content side because the facilitator is managing the process, and c) the workshop results are better accepted because a neutral facilitator can defuse the potential suspicion that outcomes were engineered in advance by the organizers. The OD and workshop

literature cited in the bibliography offers a variety of step-by-step guidance for facilitators.

### **An Example from The Gambia**

USAID/Banjul turned to IPC to assist the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (MFEA) to improve its capacity to plan and manage The Gambia's economic policy framework in support of the fiscal, financial, and market reforms being undertaken by the government. The capacity-building intervention consisted of three steps: a) analysis, b) planning and action-training, c) implementation of the plan and follow-up support. The first step was a management audit of the MFEA. Three consultants spent two weeks helping the MFEA, through interviews and discussions, to analyze its organizational objectives, structure, strategy, human resource base, and operating environment; and laying the groundwork for

the launching of a strategic planning process using the workshop methodology.

The second step centered around a strategic management retreat for the MFEA. During this stage, the MFEA established a steering committee to oversee the intervention and serve as the main contact point for the IPC consultants. A three-person IPC team worked with the steering committee and ministry leadership to customize the draft workshop design and facilitate the three-day event for the staff. The workshop brought MFEA personnel together to address four objectives: 1) introduce the basic concepts of strategic planning and management, 2) lay the foundation for strategic planning at the MFEA, 3) clarify the ministry's objectives and mission, and 4) analyze the organizational strengths of the MFEA and the challenges it faces. Meetings were held following the retreat for the MFEA taskforce to identify strategic options and develop an action plan for a performance improvement strategy. The retreat design and schedule is presented in Exhibit 1 below.

## **Exhibit 1**

### **MFEA Strategic Management**

**28-30 January 1994**

#### **Friday, 28 January**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 4:00 - 4:15 | Opening Remarks by the Minister and Permanent Secretary, MFEA   |
| 4:15 - 4:30 | Introduction to the Workshop<br>Review of objectives of workshop, schedule and format   |
| 4:30 - 5:00 | Concepts of Strategic Management<br>Presentation on what is strategic management, why do we care about it, what is its relevance to the MFEA? |
| 5:00 - 5:15 | MFEA Mission Statement and Objectives<br>Presentation on mission statements and their links to an "objective tree"                            |
| 5:15 - 6:00 | Small Group Sessions on MFEA Mission and Objectives   |
| 6:00 - 6:30 | Small Group Presentations   |
| 6:30 - 7:00 | Discussion, Summary, and Plenary Group Consensus  |
| 7:00 - 8:00 | Cocktail Reception  |



Presentation on classifying strategic issues and identifying performance problems

- 1:45 - 2:30 Small Group Sessions
- 2:30 - 2:45 Coffee Break
- 2:45 - 4:00 Small Group Presentations and Plenary Discussion
- Discussion of small group results and plenary consensus on strategic issues and performance gaps
- 4:00 - 4:30 Closing Remarks
- Wrap-up and commentary on the retreat by the Minister and Deputy Permanent Secretary; discussion of the next week's agenda and mini-workshops for taskforce members, and links to the retreat.

The taskforce that emerged out of the retreat was charged with implementing the action plans developed in the post-retreat meetings. This was the third step of the capacity-building effort. Ownership of, and responsibility for, the plan rested with the MFEA taskforce members. The IPC team's role has remained one of periodic follow-up, providing short-term process facilitation and technical support to the members of the various taskforces, helping them to

identify indicators, track progress, and revise strategies as needed. Satisfaction on the part of the MFEA with the assistance from IPC is high, and ministry leadership credits the initiation of a strategic planning and management process with greatly enhancing the MFEA's confidence and ability to deal with its ambitious mandate.

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