

LONG-RUN STRATEGIES WITH SHORT-TERM POLITICALLY SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

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Long-Run Strategies With Short-Term Politically Sustainable Results

Track: Operations Strategy

Abstract: The centralization of benefits in middle size and large cities can lead to many problems for which city councils develop corrective rather than proactive strategies, despite the fact that these are usually expensive and inefficient. This paper discusses the use of strategic political planning, instead of executive operational strategies. Education, though aiming at providing a better quality of life in the long run, is an effective way of achieving intermediate goals in the short run. Among such goals are the following: reducing malnutrition rates, generating opportunities related to sport and leisure, decreasing criminality, improving the health of the population and their ability to work, since all of these contribute to a better standard of life. All of this is discussed with the Brazilian situation as the background scenario.

Keywords: strategic planning, city management, quality of life.

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Introduction

The use of strategic planning in city management may decrease the need for investment in corrective actions, improving the efficiency of the actions being taken and the effectiveness of the plans for the maintenance and improvement of the population's quality of life. Strategic investment requires long-run objectives, but short-term goals must be emphasized and achieved, in order to provide those in charge with the political support and credibility necessary to make long-term targets feasible.

Political Strategic Planning

When some areas of a city are chosen by the local administrators for the development of very special actions, benefiting only local residents, this may attract people from other areas, causing traffic jams as well as increased amounts of time wasted and lower productivity, along with an increase in air pollution, more traffic accidents, and a lack of resources for investment elsewhere. When the work-place, leisure facilities, housing and school are all located nearby, many of these problems tend to disappear, reducing the need for corrective action.

Many politicians, while dealing with contingency problems, discover useful corrective solutions, although they are not strategic from a political point of view. According to Vickers (1995), it is important to understand the difference between political and executive decisions. Executive decisions are responsible for the feasibility of political decisions and the maintenance of the system.

Lacking resources and restricted by legal constraints, public administration organizations need to adapt quickly to the population's new requirements, evaluating the risks and possible benefits of stand-alone solutions, and thus avoiding solving one problem by creating another larger one. Pollution-related environmental problems caused by exhaust emissions of cars, trucks and buses in large cities, the overcrowded transportation system – which causes stress and accidents -, the lack of infra-structure and proper housing conditions, school absenteeism due to failures in the educational system and the expensive and inefficient health care system in Brazil, should not be considered as isolated problems, since they all add up to form a complex and intrinsic relationship.

According to Bortolanza (1999), problems related to the economy, social and environmental issues are only made worse by the uncontrolled and unplanned growth that is found in most if not all of our major cities. These problems are not being addressed in a systematic and integrated way, mainly due to the lack of resources for good conscious city planning. Exponential growth of the major cities over the course of the last few decades has made it difficult for city planners to perform even corrective urbanization work. Even planned cities were unable to foresee the speed of growth in their planning and the impact of technological innovations on urban problems.

It may be that the lack of room in hospitals does not result from the infrastructure being insufficient for the requirements, but is instead a consequence of the transportation system that kills and cripples so many people every year, without even mentioning those injured or killed by criminals. Such things can be seen as causes of the problems, but they are also the consequences of previous causes. The definite solution for any of these matters is to look for the roots of the problem, though it is not easy to find out what the real causes are and what their contribution is, in order to properly prioritize actions.

About 400 years ago, Shakespeare (1988) already had a good understanding of the importance of causes to problems. In Hamlet, Act II, Scene II, Polonius says "*That we find out the cause of this effect, / Or rather say, the cause of this defect, / For this effect defective comes by cause*", when referring to prince Hamlet, from Denmark, whose madness needed to have its causes identified.

Education - a Strategic Solution

The revolution in the education of young Brazilian children that Brazilian mayors promise during their electoral campaigns is still far from becoming a reality in the majority of Brazilian municipalities. Education (or the lack of it) has been considered as the root of many of the country's economic and social problems. Without real changes in this area, development of Brazil will be an uphill battle.

To provide schooling close to where students live has been a difficult task for most of the country's local government bodies. To try and get students to attend school while their families go hungry is an even more challenging problem. Many parents in the country areas prefer to teach their children to follow in their footsteps, rather than sending them to schools that are old-fashioned, unsafe and unqualified, and often far from where the family lives.

Both the schools and the educational system insist on teaching and demanding that their students learn things that have almost nothing to do with their own personal experience and of are very little use in their daily lives.

According to Nunomura (1999), Turmalina, a city in the Jequitinhonha valley, in the State of Minas Gerais, reduced school absenteeism from 17.44% to 2.6% of the students, over a 3-year period. They copied a model that was used in France during the 30s, in which students in country areas spent fifteen days at school and fifteen days at home. Almost half the students in the rural area of Turmalina attend Escola Família Agro-industrial (EFA). The long rides to school every day were thus eliminated and students could spend some time with their parents, applying in agriculture the knowledge they acquired at school.

Problems of school absenteeism have several causes in a country with such diverse cultures and environments. The Institute for Economic and Social Development of Paraná (Instituto Paranaense de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social - IPARDES), carried out research in Curitiba and its metropolitan area, which confirmed the fact that children's labor constitutes the main reason for school absenteeism and that of those children aged between 10 and 17, 79.9% have not finished elementary school. Work ends up taking 40% of the kids out of the educational system (Samek, 1996).

Low family income is responsible for kids quitting school in order to help their families, collecting recyclable waste, watching cars parked on the streets and, in some regions in the country, performing dangerous and unhealthy activities. Prostitution, drug consumption and criminality are just some of the consequences of the lack of orientation and care on the part of both parents and the government. According to Dieguez (1999), a study carried out by a group of psychologists with young criminals kept in prisons and institutions for the recovery of young delinquents in Rio de Janeiro and Recife, has shown that 80% of them were children of broken families or single mothers. The absence of the father, the need for the mother and older children to work, cause the younger children to be exposed to the world of crime, especially among low-income families.

Some municipalities in Brazil have invested in assistance programs for poor families, trying to avoid school absenteeism through the distribution of food and other goods in exchange for guarantees that the families will keep the children at school. The provision of monetary assistance has been another measure that attempted to keep poor families' children at school, but the lack of financial resources makes it difficult for the municipalities to keep paying the families an incentive for that, so they are always looking for creative new alternatives.

Both local governments and the population seem conscious of the fact that "prevention is better than remedy", and they are getting rid of taboos that stopped them from dealing with some important issues in the past. Nowadays both families and schools are more involved in providing the kids with sexual education, discussing drug addiction as well as its prevention, along with safe driving, environmental issues and rights and duties of the citizen. These are all part of the reality with which our youth come into contact, more and more at an even earlier age. It is possible that such measures help to make hospitals, jails and police stations less crowded in the long run, while also saving government resources spent on unemployment pensions, treatment of drug addiction and other governmental programs that consume a great deal of money.

Despite the fact that Brazil is one of the world's major food producers, it is also one of the leading countries in terms of wasted resources and exhibits some shocking figures regarding child malnutrition. With the help of schools, churches and community associations, some initiatives are attempting to teach children and parents about the good use of food and the proper nutritional balance in feeding.

Lack of infrastructure in terms of drainage along with malnutrition are the main causes of infant death in Brazil. Programs aimed at accompanying the growth of very young children support their mothers during the initial months of their babies' lives, reducing malnutrition rates and infant death figures dramatically. Some local government bodies have health teams that walk round the suburbs and rural areas providing families with guidance and medical help, without them having to leave their homes. This kind of action, in the health field, represents an attempt at returning to the old-fashioned concept of the family doctor. He/she, better than any specialist, can properly evaluate most of the causes of health problems by visiting people's homes and checking hygiene conditions, among other things. Programs that have doctors visiting families in their own environment reduce the costs of hospital care and allow for greater trust and a better contact between the population and the health teams.

Simple, but well thought out and planned solutions may have a beneficial effect on complex problems because they do not rely so heavily on governmental budgets and the good will of the politicians. The adaptation of the requirement to the population's culture has to be carried out beforehand, in order that the success and effectiveness of simple projects can be achieved. A local, low-cost strategy carried out by the World Health Organization in the state of Amapá consisted of a program to train midwives and distribute kits with basic equipment for their job, reducing the number of cesarean deliveries and bringing the state of Amapá into line with world standards (Diversificação, 1999). Pregnancy and childbirth began being followed up by trained people, who were not only much more inexpensive for the state but also able to reach the population and reduce levels of both infant and mother mortality in areas where doctors are hardly ever to be found.

An Objective for the Long Run

Short-run solutions usually neutralize the effect of the problems only temporarily. When local administrations have as their objective the elimination of causes, rather than the effects, they have to analyze the scope of the program and set up priorities for actions. Bortolanza (1999) states that "in most cases, the local government concentrates on solving the major consequences disturbing the population, without any deep analysis of the roots of the problems". Such a paradigm of controlling the effects makes it so that the mayor is always a fireman, taking care of reactive actions. No doubt reacting actions are necessary when there is an emergency; however, in most cases they are expensive and only slightly effective, only being efficient for "extinguishing the fire".

In Brazilian municipalities, strategies drawn up by the mayors and their teams are usually oriented at producing fast results. In Brazil, mayors are appointed for four-year terms, which is all the time they are given to produce results to their customers (the population). For certain kinds of investment, four years may be considered a suitable time frame, but when one thinks about strategic local government planning, it is a very short time indeed.

Although long-run strategies seldom achieve their major objectives in less than four years, it is nonetheless possible to partially attain some of the goals (see Figure 1). The increase in the cultural level of the population and the easy access to information are responsible for a better understanding of the major goals.

See Figure 1

Means are a way to reach the goals and objectives. In order to improve the quality of life of the population, some short-run goals can be established, even when they are stepping-stones to the major objectives (see Figure 1). They provide sustainability to the long-run objectives. The keeping of students busy at school may solve several fundamental problems related to the quality of life of the young. And of course that also reflects on the quality of life of people in other age groups as well.

In order to meet the partial goal of improving the quality of life of youngsters and achieve targets concerning the quality of their nutrition, sport, leisure, health and safety, one can establish means such as investment in education, and improvement of legislation pertaining children and teenagers and their access to education. When kids are fed at school, for example, families' expenses are reduced. This also helps in improving the fitness and intellectual development of the students as well as their overall health. All this has an impact on their intention to continue attending school, even if the conditions are not exactly the best.

Sports and leisure activities are also good for distracting and improving physical and mental fitness of children and teenagers attending school. They also relieve their stress, which in recent years has also been found among children. Hygiene principles can be taught at school, helping avoid the spread of disease and improving the quality of life of students and families in a short span of time.

Conclusion

Education can be considered both as a mean and as a goal, during the elaboration of local government strategies, as it is a key factor in solving many other social problems. The main objective here is not the reduction of levels of illiteracy, but to improve the population's quality of life. The reduction of illiteracy levels may be part of a secondary

objective, i.e., the result of the means rather than a goal on itself. Local government investments in schooling, though having as their main goal the improvement of the quality of life of the population, may also be vital to saving money in other areas such as health, safety and social security. Such investment also generates jobs directly related to education, feeding and leisure, besides producing a qualified workforce in the future. All of that affects the quality of life, improving it again and again.

Figures

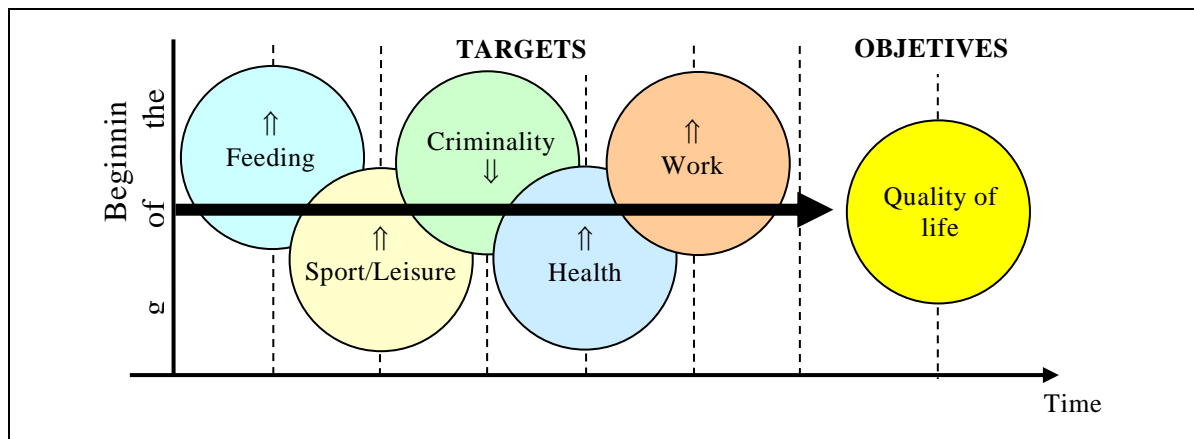


Figure 1 – Objectives and goals.

Source: Graeml (2000).

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