

# Using Strategic Planning to Build Partnerships



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## The challenge

Our countries have major gaps in public financial management that are hindering economic development and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. As Heads of SAIs we have a vision of our SAIs playing a strong role in addressing these gaps. For this, we need a major strengthening of our SAIs and to deliver more and better audits.

Given our challenging contexts, such capacity building is difficult. Both our SAIs have previously made ambitious strategic plans, but only implemented some parts of them. The question is then: How can we secure real strategic changes to bring our SAIs up to the higher level of performance so vitally needed in our countries?

In 2018 our two SAIs embarked on a process to prepare new strategic plans and seek out support for their successful implementation. We then knew this would not be easy considering our human and financial resources and the need to galvanise greater national support for our SAIs. In creating our strategic plans, we wanted to find ways to fully involve our staff and external supporters, so they felt they owned and were committed to the changes we were seeking to achieve.

We were also keen to make sure that our plans were not just a long list of aspirations which we would have no way of achieving with the kind of resources we could access.

In this story we would like to share how we were able to develop and launch our strategic plans and secure quite a lot of support for their implementation. How did we get there and what are the lessons learned for other SAIs in similar situations?

## The actions taken

In 2018 we joined the Accelerated Peer-support Partnership programme (PAP-APP)<sup>1</sup>, which provides intensive support for SAIs in challenging contexts. Together with the peers in the programme, we set clear targets for both strategic planning and partner mobilisation for the period 2018-2020. The main steps we embarked on were as follows:

- Conducting a self-assessment of where we were as a SAI in terms of international standards and best practices
- Engaging key stakeholders nationally on their expectations for our SAI
- Developing a 5-year strategic plan as well as operational plans for the first years
- Bringing potential donors and technical partners together in a defined group, and conducting meetings with them regularly to clarify what projects could be supported for the implementation of our strategic priorities

In practice, each of these steps had many challenges to overcome, which we will try to summarise here.

### Conducting the self-assessments

In planning for the future, we knew we had to be brutally honest about where we were at the start. It was no good trying to smooth over our weaknesses or the threats we might face in trying to bring about changes. If our plans were built on weak foundations, they would not stand the test of time.

We also felt as leaders of our institutions that we needed to be the ones driving the assessments. We did not want to farm out the job to outside consultants because we genuinely wanted it to be our project and to retain the knowledge we acquired.

Ownership was crucial. If staff did not buy into the assessments, then they would be reluctant to implement the changes which were inevitably going to be needed.



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<sup>1</sup> In 2018, IDI, AFROSAI-E and CREFIAF established a partnership to support the SAIs included in the Global Call for Proposals Tier 2 initiative by the INTOSAI Donor Cooperation. Intensive support is provided to enable the SAIs to establish long-term strategic capacity development programmes. The programme is called the Accelerated Peer-Support Partnership or Partenariat d'Appui Accélééré par des Pairs in French (PAP-APP). The name highlights the peer-support and partnership emphases of the programme. For 2018 – 2020 funding has been provided by the Austrian Development Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iceland, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, UK FCDO, SAI Qatar, Irish aid and IDI basket funds. In-kind contribution has been provided by AFROSAI-E, CREFIAF and the SAIs of Gabon, Ghana, Namibia, Norway, Senegal, and Sweden. See more here: [Accelerated Peer-support Partnership \(PAP-APP\) \(idi.no\)](https://www.intosai.org/en/accelerated-peer-support-partnership-pap-app)

The main tool a SAI can use for assessing their status and performance is the SAI Performance Management Framework. This is an excellent tool, but we decided to apply a simplified approach within the same analytical structure to assessing our status and needs. This was so we didn't spend too much of our limited human resources on the assessment, as this task had to be balanced against other critical ongoing tasks in our organisation.

We then applied a set of key questions to the main areas of SAI capacity and performance using a guide developed by the PAP-APP programme. It sought to examine how robust and effective our audits were, how effective we were at managing the SAIs, and how we were interacting with the world outside our SAI including auditees, government, parliament, civil society organisations and donors. In the assessment we paid extra attention to our contribution to the development of our country. We kept asking ourselves constantly how what we were doing was making a difference to the lives of ordinary people, and how we were contributing to national and local plans for the socio-economic development of the country as a whole.



The emerging findings were discussed time and again with staff so that they agreed that the portrait of our SAIs were accurate. It was not always easy admitting where we were failing, where we were weak, but this was always done in the spirit that we are going to improve, slowly and progressively. The results were put in a "SAI Status and Needs report" which were then shared openly and widely.

There were risks in this, of course. Some outsiders could have used it to reduce trust and respect for our organisations. However, we were not defensive. We believe that good leaders are risk takers, and we were prepared to take risks to make our institutions better places in which to work, more effective agencies for holding our governments to account, and a source of ideas and recommendations for improving the services provided to our citizens.

### Engaging with external partners

The next step was to engage key national stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, what we were seeking to achieve through the overall process were major overhauls of what we do as SAIs. In Madagascar, this would require a revised legal framework for the SAI, as well as more financial, human, and physical resources - but most of all it would require new attitudes amongst the elites of our societies. From presidents down, we needed our stakeholders and partners to understand where we wanted to head and to support us on that journey. We wanted them to see what we were doing in the context of not just broader improvements in public financial management, but all the activities and service delivery of the state. We wanted to present our organisations as part of a solution to national problems.

In Niger, we convened a major workshop, bringing all our partners together at one time, and we presented our stark assessment of our position and sought their inputs on how we might improve. Before this, the SAI President and other senior SAI staff held one-to-one meetings with invitees so they had the time to understand what was in the self-assessment and could attend the major workshop primed and ready to contribute to the next steps. The workshop helped to further elicit partners' expectations and to obtain their commitment to doing what they could to work with the SAI to help achieve improvements.

In Madagascar, this process provided an opportunity for the SAI President to meet directly with the Acting President of the country and to present a vision of how the SAI could contribute to the development of the country. Having won the support of the President, it became easier to engage with other senior politicians and public servants and to gain increased funding to drive through reforms.

### Developing the 5-year Strategic Plans

The main step of developing the strategic plans followed. As SAI leaders, we sought to practice what we were preaching. The whole process was itself carefully planned as a major project, with timelines established and monitored. As with the self-assessments, there were widespread involvement of staff to chart solutions to the weaknesses identified and to agree priorities. This was not always easy. The plans had to deliver manageable actions. It was not possible to tackle every desirable improvement, and so at times peoples' pet projects had to be put on hold, at least in the short term. We tried to ensure that the plan had a mix of short and long-term gains, so that staff, and external partners, could see some immediate outcomes, some immediate improvements.

To ensure our strategic plans would be result-oriented, we started to define the main changes in government we would like to contribute from the SAI – the SAI Strategic outcomes. Then we identified the key outputs - both in audit results and stakeholder engagements – that the SAI could deliver to contribute to these outcomes. Finally, we set out the capacities in our SAIs needed to produce the required outputs.



In Madagascar we kept asking ourselves, how the proposed action contributes and adds value to the National Development Plan. Peers were invited to talk about their own experiences and provide critical feedback on the proposed items for inclusion in the plans.

In Niger, we put considerable work into prioritising the specific audits which needed to be carried out, even down to the challenges facing different sectors and localities in the country. In doing this we sought to understand the specific skills knowledge and experience needed to conduct such audits and, if these did not exist within our SAI, how they might be obtained through training and development.

### Regularly engaging with potential donors

We sought to engage potential partners regularly throughout the whole process. We knew we had to source donor funding to get both technical and financial support for our strategic priorities. To ensure that they were kept involved, we created groups bringing all interested donors and technical partners around the same table. In this way they could all hear the same message and, as SAIs, we could make it



clear what assistance we were seeking. In this way we could be in the lead rather than being asked to bend to the priorities of individual donors.

These meetings were not always comfortable. The donors could often be very probing, though in time



the investment in transparency and openness paid off with mutual trust developing among the donors and partners. At the same time, as SAIs we had to be careful not to be seen to be doing the donors' bidding. We had to strike a delicate balance and show nationally that we were managing this relationship as independent institutions. In both cases, this strategy was successful in drawing in more coherent and joined-up funding packages from the donors while not causing adverse political backlash. We do not want to be seen as instruments of other countries and their donor agencies. For example, in Madagascar we published a highly critical report on the mining sector, which shows widespread irregularities and unlawful actions. This resulted in considerable discussions between the experts in the mining sector as well as the politicians and risked the SAIs being seen as a foreign agent of the donors. However, by careful management of the relationships and reporting, the SAI is still being seen as an honest messenger.

Similarly, in Niger we reported Covid-19 related audits which were highly contentious and political. There was a risk the government would see the audits as an attack rather than an attempt to cast light on what was happening and improve future allocation systems. The work undertaken in building relations and understandings during the strategic planning process made it easier for us to gain the trusts of all sides of politics, and for difficult audit matters to be raised objectively and neutrally without earning the opprobrium of either sides of political divides.

## What are the results and lessons we have learned?

### Results

Already, we are both starting to see positive results from the way we approached the strategic planning. We have a much greater understanding of our institutional strengths and weaknesses and feel we have set relevant goals and priorities going forward.

Internally we have achieved greater ownership among staff and externally there are more supporters among our nations' elites. We have also been effective in mobilising greater and more coherent, longer-term, donor support.



At the same time, these are early days of strategic plan implementation. The plans have set out our direction of travel, but we will need to keep monitoring that we are delivering what we promised and make adjustments if we are not. The world does not stand still, and we will need to adapt the plans to new realities. Strategic plans are not rocks which cannot be moved, but maps with many routes to arrive at our destination.

## Lessons

So far some of the key lessons we have learned are about embracing:

- The overall importance of leadership and vision to enable challenging processes of strategic planning and partner mobilization to be successfully implemented over a longer time period
- A culture of openness in the SAI to stimulate progress and contribution of staff in strategic planning
- A willingness to challenge each other in the strategic planning team in the SAI contribution to quality
- Clearly defined staff responsibilities to make sure the momentum of planning is maintained, and results delivered on time
- Embedding of the Strategic Plan in local, national, and even regional plans to show the SAI is not isolated but is there to support citizens and their political representatives
- An understanding that you don't get it all right first time you set the draft strategic plan – the key is to prepare all staff and stakeholders for a process of refinement
- The need to engage regularly with donors and explain the needs for support to the SAI. They will support the SAI's Strategic Plan if they trust the SAI to deliver.

We hope these lessons shared can be useful for other SAIs in a similar situation and with similar aspirations.