Policy and strategy implementation in local government

A toolkit for local authorities to ensure better policy implementation and service delivery

"THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE LACK OF POLICIES, STRATEGIES OR INITIATIVES, BUT THE TRANSLATION THEREOF INTO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION"

Introduction

Over the years, most municipalities develop numerous plans, strategies and guidelines. The true challenge, however, is not a lack of policies, strategies or initiatives, but the translation thereof into effective implementation. This toolkit, developed in the partnership between the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (South Africa) and the City of Gothenburg (Sweden), aims to provide guidelines on closing the gap between policy and implementation in local government.

The toolkit focuses on local government and policies and is intended for every-day use by politicians and officials. We believe that our conclusions and recommendations will be relevant not only for the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the City of Gothenburg, but also for other municipalities with an ambition to improve their working models, ensure better implementation and, in the end, improve service delivery to citizens.

This toolkit has been made possible by funding from ICLD, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy.

We trust that you will find this toolkit as useful in your work as we do in ours.

City of Gothenburg

nelson mandela bay
MUNICIPALITY

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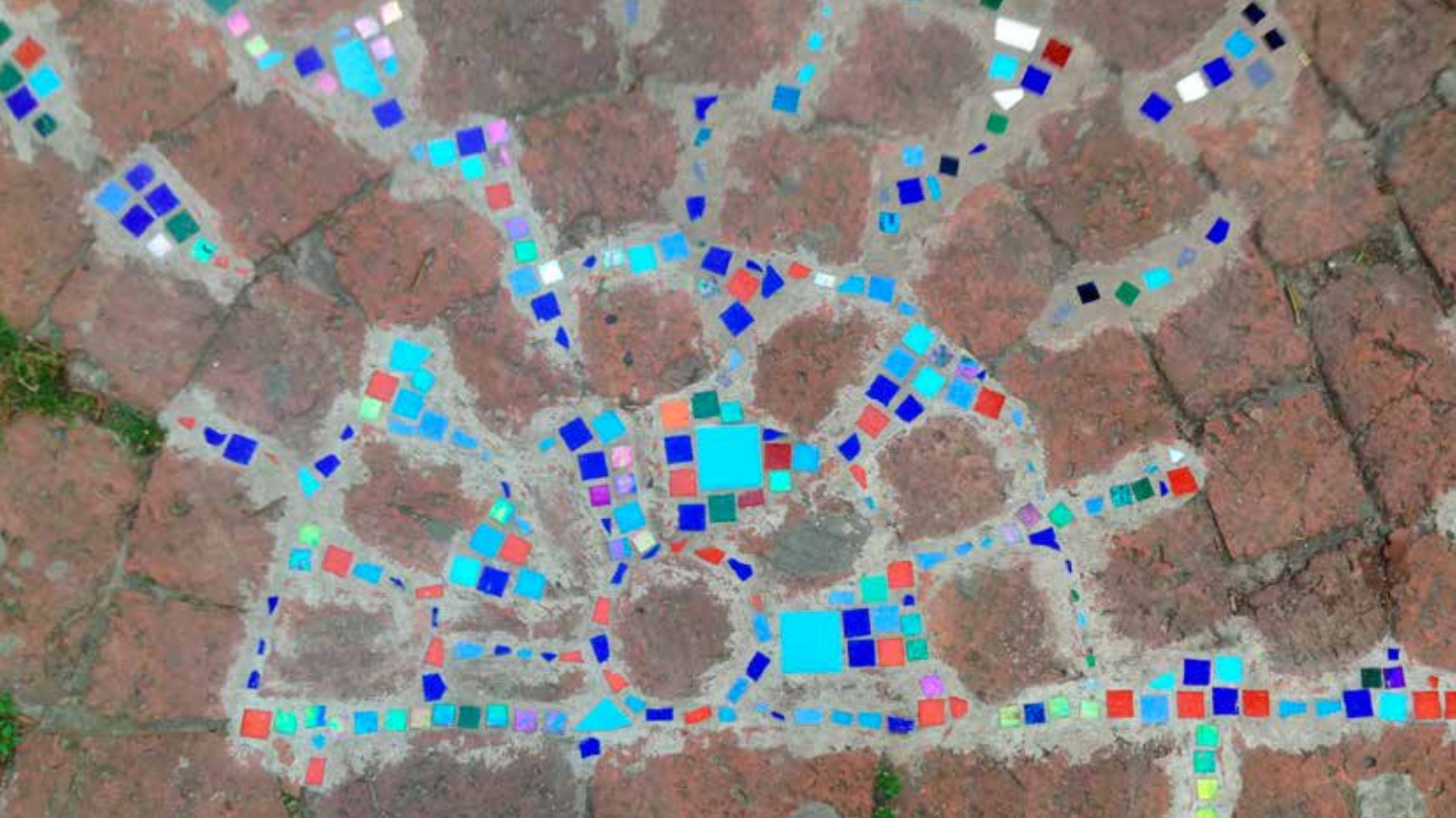
The focus is on local government and policies

Local government not only has to develop and implement local policies and strategies, but is also obliged to implement the policies adopted by other spheres of government. This toolkit is to some extent also relevant for managing the implementation of policies and strategies developed and adopted on a national or regional/provincial level. The main focus, though, is on the policies and strategies that are developed at a local level. Local governments initiate and have control over the policy conception and implementation phases in their municipalities. They can develop working models that match the local structure in the public and political arenas. No-one else can decide on these models. This toolkit might be of help in that work.

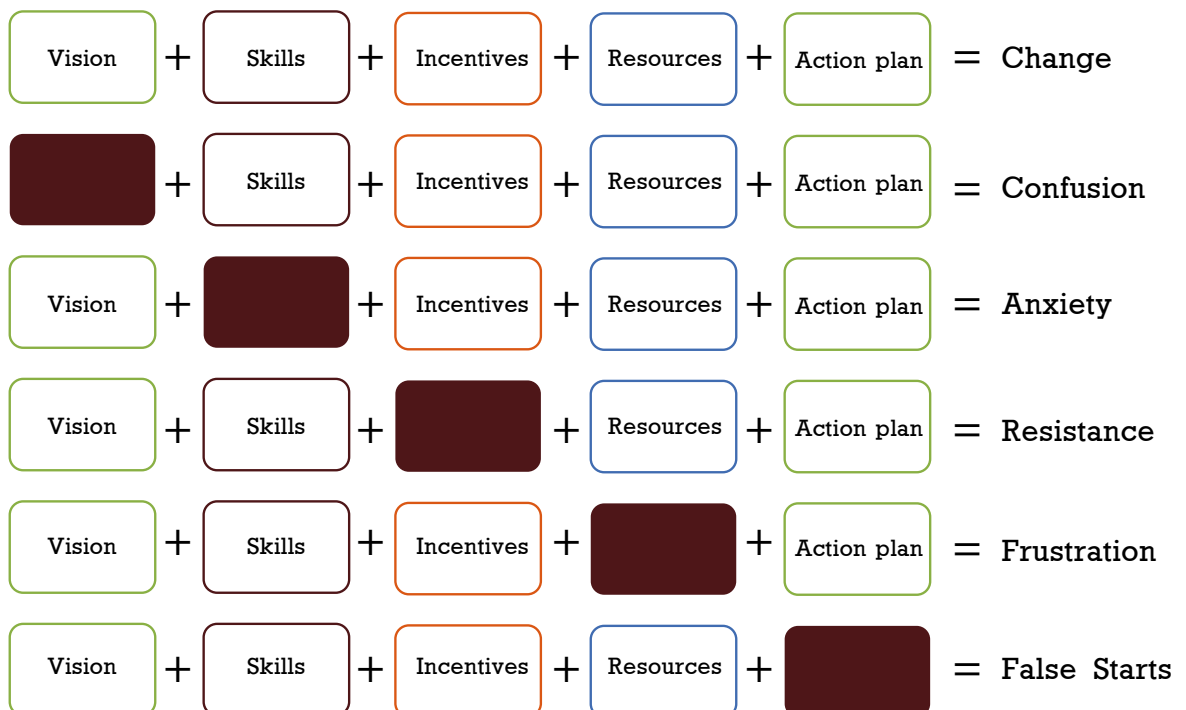## We need to overcome existing structures

Existing structures in government and administrations, as well as regulations and rules, could pose challenges in policy-making and implementation processes. For example, the structure of a public administration may be outdated or too rigid to meet current challenges. Initiating and bringing about changes in structures and regulations is difficult and time-consuming. Often, it may be possible to improve the work within existing contexts. This toolkit therefore focuses on how to work within existing structures and according to actual regulations.

We need to manage change

Improvement of working models and routines often means changes to the daily work of officials and politicians. And change can be difficult. The actions taken must be understood and accepted. Participatory processes are needed. The work has to consider and improve all phases, from policy conception to implementation. If every step is not accepted, the aim to change causes confusion, anxiety, resistance or frustration. This is illustrated in the diagram below (Knoster, Villa and Thousand, 2000).

Managing Complex Change

Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action plan	= Change
	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action plan	= Confusion
Vision	+		+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action plan	= Anxiety
Vision	+	Skills	+		+	Resources	+	Action plan	= Resistance
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+		+	Action plan	= Frustration
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+		= False Starts

The toolkit

The following are the main messages of our toolkit:

- ☑ Be aware of the prevailing cultures.

- ☑ Policies must respond to needs and priorities.

- ☑ Create an integrated platform.

- ☑ Policy and action should not lose sight of each other.

- ☑ Develop the tools needed.

- ☑ Analyse and optimise your resources.

- ☑ Communicate with active openness.

- ☑ Ensure progress.

Each of the main messages are explored and explained in the following.

"CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST"

Peter Drucker, Management Consultant and Author
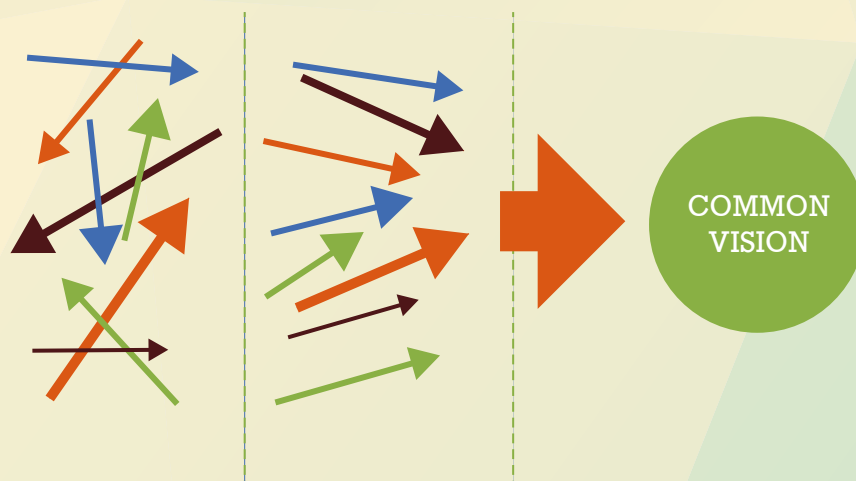
If every administration or profession works according their own agenda and priorities a lot of conflicts appears within the municipality. If you understand the aim with a policy and manage to bridge the gap between the different ways of thinking, you will be successful in executing decisions made.

☑ Be aware of prevailing cultures

"Execution is a minefield. The clean and elegant logic of strategy gets dirty in the real world. Agendas compete. Priorities clash. Decisions stall. Communication breaks down. Timelines get blown. It's never a question of if these problems will happen; it's a question of when and to what degree." (Doug Sundheim, Harvard Business Review, 2013)

The external and internal environments impact on one's ability to succeed in developing and implementing a policy or strategy. Each municipality and each administration has over the years developed its own ways of thinking and working. In Sweden there is a popular saying: "The culture sits in the walls". This often has implications when these parts are required to work together.

All cultures have their own strengths and weaknesses

Every working culture has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. One organisation or profession may be efficient in executing decisions, while a second may excel in creating consensus. The first may find it difficult to garner support from officials, while the second may follow time-consuming processes to reach that consensus. When these organisations work together, execution may be fraught with conflicts and delays.

Try to understand your circumstances

Understanding your situation is an important initial step before proposing action. Ask: What are we good at, and what are our weaknesses? How can different professions and divisions improve their understanding of each other's working cultures? Can we find examples to inspire our work? How can we speak to the priorities of others?

Bridge the differences in cultures

When you understand the differences in cultures of those involved in a project, you can start approaching each other in order to define a successful way of working together. You have to be actively engaged in trying to bridge the different modes of thinking and working. Otherwise, your project may fail!

✔ Policies should respond to needs and priorities

When the anti-apartheid Red Location Museum in Nelson Mandela Bay was planned and built, the ambition was to make an investment that would support economic development, create jobs and instill pride in the community. So far, these ideas have failed - and today the Museum is closed. The community living in the vicinity of the Museum has made clear that it wants housing and better living conditions – not museums, no matter how many visitors they attract.

A policy, strategy or project may fail or be delayed if it does not respond to the needs and priorities defined by the citizens. Even ambitious policies and the best of projects can be hard to implement if they are not understood and accepted by the affected citizens and other stakeholders.

What is a good quality of life in your community?

The needs of a community are not self-evident. Services may be provided and still not fulfill the requirements of the users. What defines good quality of life in the relevant community? Have the policies and strategies adopted, been accepted by the citizens and stakeholders? Do they meet their needs and expectations? To be successful, one has to understand what defines good quality of life in the relevant community. Ask: Which are the most important components, and how can they be addressed?

Create confidence/trust

Lack of trust causes resistance and conflict. If a policy or strategy is not based on a common understanding on what is needed to improve conditions, the implementation thereof will fail or be delayed. Explain how your actions respond to the needs and the reason why your strategy may differ from the community's proposal. Trust can be created if you listen to local perspectives; explain how your actions respond to the needs, what your priorities are, and why compromise is necessary.

Strengthen the strategic work

Policies and strategies are often adopted at different levels in municipalities; some in political committees, and some in the City Council. This may cause conflicts and delays in the execution of projects that have to respond to these different priorities. Strategic policies need to be adopted at the highest level.
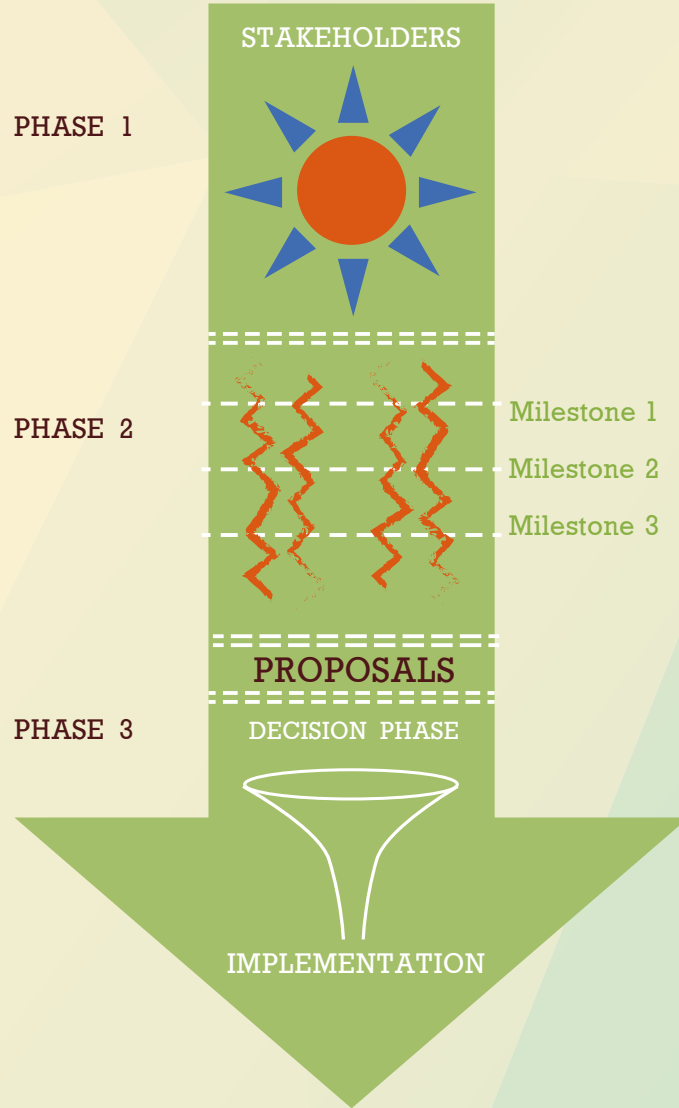
Avoid competing policies

Avoid conflicting policies or at least demand coordination/prioritisation. A formal process is needed to rationalise conflicting priorities. The allocation of your resources is an expression of your priorities. It is necessary to explain why compromises are needed.

Water and sewers

Mobility

Energy

Quality of the life in the city

Housing

Business

Recreation
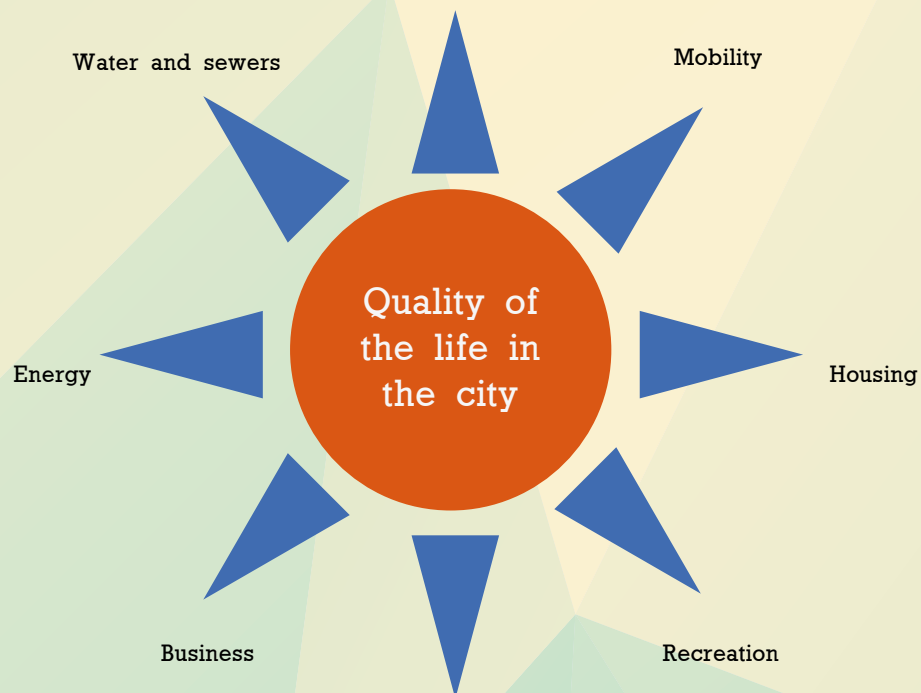
The symbol of the sun in the model symbolises the quality of life and shows the importance of including all different sectoral functions that affect the citizens of a city.

How can we together achieve quality of life for our citizens? Presently, we are used to working in silos, here represented by the sun-rays. All the various sectors have the same ambition, namely to create a better quality of life. However, there is no integration in functions.

START

STAKEHOLDERS

PHASE 1

PHASE 2

Milestone 1

Milestone 2

Milestone 3

PROPOSALS

PHASE 3

DECISION PHASE

IMPLEMENTATION

Quality of the life in the city

✔ Create an integrated platform

When the politicians of the City of Gothenburg initially decided on an urban development involving the old port and industrial areas along the river, there were many different opinions on what kind of city they should create. They initiated and led a visioning process, involving citizens, stakeholders, organisations and national and international expertise. In spite of that, when the implementation phase started, widely different opinions on how that vision should be interpreted were voiced. To be successful, each project needs to find a model of how to deal with that fact.

Consider the need for a vision and strategies

If there are uncertainties and different opinions on how the city, the city district or a neighbourhood should be developed, one may need to start with a visioning process involving all stakeholders and groupings. If possible, create a common vision that is not only accepted, but also appreciated and embraced by all parties concerned. Even if this is time consuming, it is often, in the long run, a more effective use of time.

Create an integrated platform to facilitate holistic solutions

Even with an adopted vision, balancing priorities remains a skill. The participation of interested and affected parties is key to successful implementation.

When starting a project, create a formal platform to facilitate holistic solutions. Consider this an open phase, in which all aspects of the intended work can be exposed and discussed. Why is this project important? What are the expectations of the politicians and the citizens? Agree on what you are supposed to do and create a platform for the intended work. It is important to document your decisions – you might need that documentation along the way.

Ensure the commitment of officials at the appropriate level

The work has many components, such as negotiations, prioritisations, agreements on solutions, financing, etc. You have to identify and ensure the commitment of officials and representatives at the appropriate level from all relevant departments and stakeholders, otherwise the process will be time consuming and uncertain.

Establish trust and understanding

The formal structures can be reinforced with informal engagements. Both in a working and steering group, you need to better understand the different positions and priorities. Discuss your ideas and interpretation of what to do and how to do it. Establish trust and understanding amongst all involved in the project. Go and have some coffee with your colleague.

✔ Policy and action should not lose sight of each other

There are numerous examples of where the core ideas underpinning a policy were lost in execution. In Hildedal, Gothenburg, the concept of a garden city was developed. In the visioning phase, following intense cooperation and many compromises, all involved, including public department officials and representatives of the developers, agreed on a holistic design that was believed would attract the market. When the implementers started to work, they neglected earlier agreements and followed their own tried and trusted long-established standards and procedures. The original idea of a garden city came close to being lost.

There is no clear-cut border

There is no clear-cut border between strategies and operations. Instead, rather consider the integrated whole. The experience gained in the implementation phases is essential when new policies are developed, and an understanding of the original idea is fundamental to the execution.

Ideas improve by being bounced back and forth

Strategists and implementers must work together to bridge the two worlds. Ideas improve by being bounced back and forth through all phases of a project. Implementers need to ask how the strategy will work in practice and what the detailed requirements are. The gaps in strategy can be closed in the implementation process. Integration is time-consuming, but policy failure is even more so.
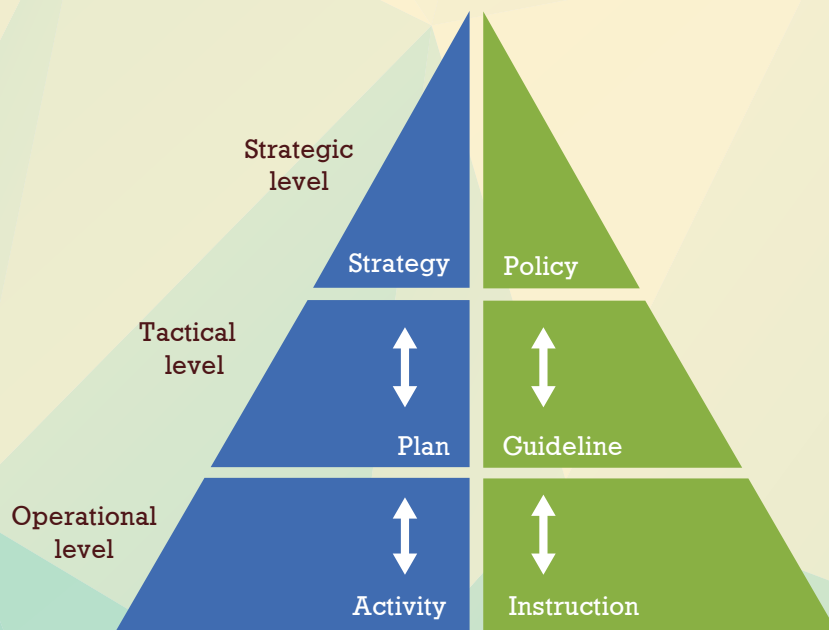
There is a need for a tactical level

Over the years, strategists and implementers will have developed their own methods and routines. But, as noticed, there is a gap between organisational and operational structures. A tactical level to bridge the gap is needed. If the operations don't inherit the beliefs of a strategy, they will most likely fail.
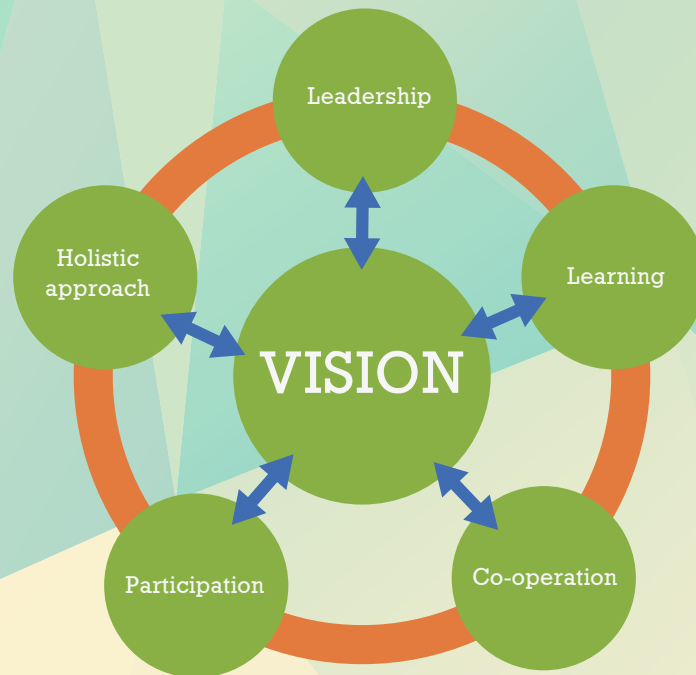
Consider a through-runner

To ensure knowledge exchange and that the original ideas will turn into reality, you could consider a through-runner: a person who follows the work from the policy making phase to the implementation phase. This person would understand the philosophy of the project and be committed to the implementation.
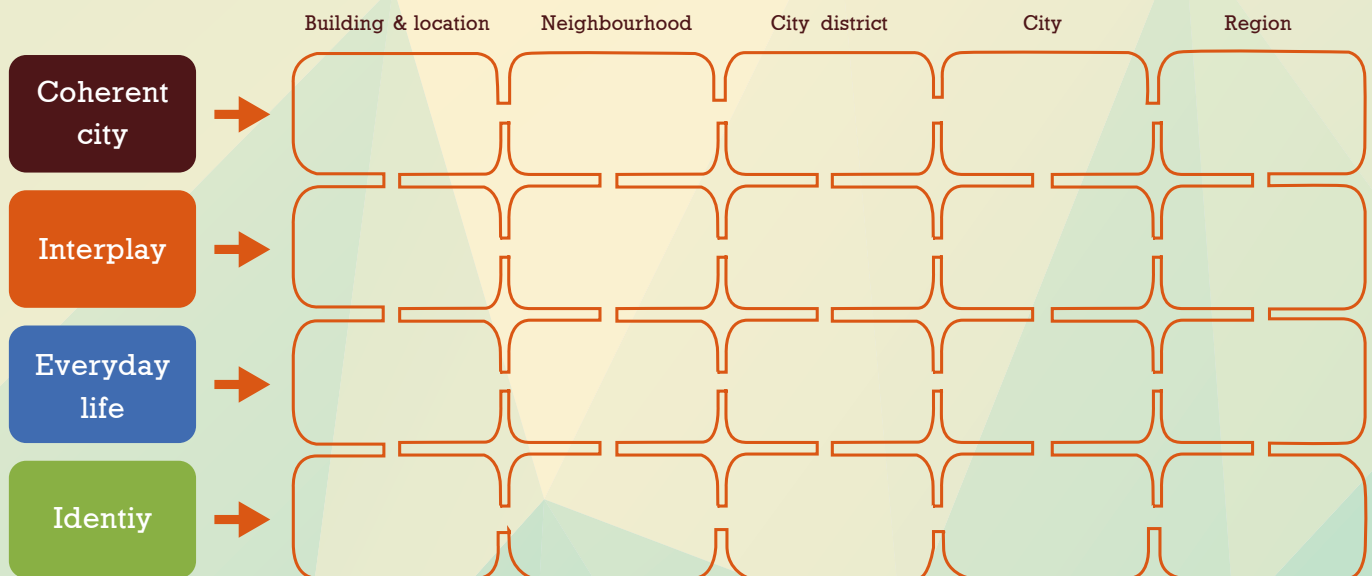
"A VISION WITHOUT ACTION IS A DAYDREAM, ACTION WITHOUT A VISION IS A NIGHTMARE."

Japanese proverb

Strategic level	Strategy / Policy
Tactical level	Plan / Guideline
Operational level	Activity / Instruction

A working model developed in the RiverCity Gothenburg visioning process.

	Building & location	Neighbourhood	City district	City	Region
Coherent city					
Interplay					
Everyday life					
Identiy					

Gothenburg's model for social consequence analysis.

✔ Develop the tools needed

Many municipalities today still have organisational structures and working models that were developed during the height of the industrial economy. These tend to be silo based, often top down and sometimes rigid. The challenges of today demand that we work in a holistic way, bottom up and with flexibility. Each task has to be planned with a broad, multi-sectoral approach. The old tools are not adequate to turn our cities into modern, sustainable urban environments. To succeed, we have to develop new methods – or improve the old ones.

Develop new tools if the old ones don't work

If you want different results, you will need to work in a different manner. One cannot simply continue as usual. Evaluate the tools you have in respect of what you want to achieve. You might realise that your organisation has to improve its working methods to get the job done.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is ownership identified and accepted?

- Is there a forum for ongoing discussions and cooperation?

- Is there support for dialogue and participation?

- How can persistence and commitment in the implementation phase be facilitated?

Involve people

The city belongs to everyone. Looking after and improving conditions in local communities is not the responsibility of politicians and officials alone. Participation and openness are essential to change and improvement in the urban environment, as well as the public services. Involvement increases understanding and provides better and accepted solutions. It reinforces the capacity to collaborate, creates trust and strengthens social cohesion.

Pilot temporary measures

Consider the use of temporary measures, activities and uses to support and develop your community. In this way, you can showcase potential and gain experience. The temporary measures can be used as the start of the implementation phase of a bigger project. In this way, you will get an immediate response from those that are concerned and will be able to improve your final project. These measures will not only bring activities to the area, but will also communicate what you intend to do.

✔ Analyse and optimise your resources

Policies and strategies often aim far and high – so high in fact that the aims may be out of reach. At an early stage in the policy-making process, one has to be aware of the resources needed for the implementation and of the maintenance of one's investments. You need not only funding, but also staff with the right competencies and the time to work on the project. If you are to succeed, you have to analyse and optimise the use of the resources available.

Be realistic about the resources that will be made available

One hardly ever gets what one considers necessary and has applied for. You have to make some tough choices. Inform the decision-makers of your conclusions and the consequences of the choices you make. Be prepared to explain your decisions to those concerned; citizens, developers and other stakeholders. Follow up by measuring impact.

## Evaluate your options with regard to costs and benefits

What are the priorities in the policy you are implementing? If necessary, initiate a discussion with the people in charge within management or on a political level. Which approach/tool is relevant in your case? A socio-economic consequence analysis may guide you to prioritise within the budget. Alternatively, you may have to develop your own model to assist you to prioritise.

Be creative

Being smart is where real value lies. Even if resources are scarce, you can sometimes find solutions by thinking outside the box. How can you make the most of what's available? Who can you involve? Where can you find the competencies or funding needed? Can you train the staff appointed? Is international, national or NGO funding available? Can you initiate a partnership involving the private sector? If possible, involve those who are willing to contribute with resources early in the policy-making process.

"THE JOB IS TO DELIVER RESULTS – NOT JUST IDEAS."

Budget

Result

Ideas
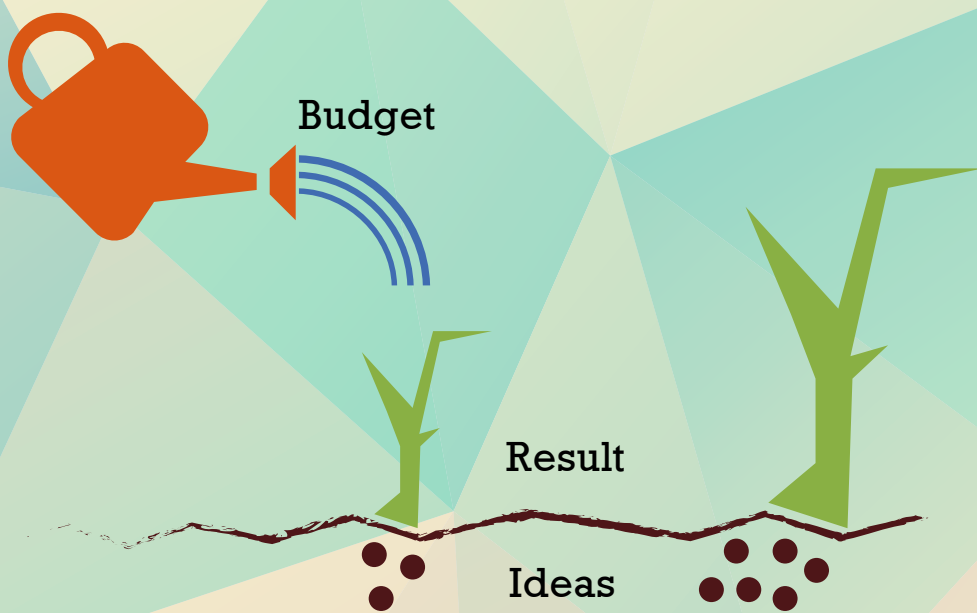
☑ Communicate with active openness

When the political assemblies decided on the West Swedish Agreement – a comprehensive investment in regional infrastructure – the decision emanated from a broad process involving all councillors in all municipalities in the Gothenburg region. The process had been going on for more than ten years and all involved, politicians as well as officials, were well informed. When the decisions were made and the implementation of the first projects started, the public reacted strongly. They claimed that they had not been informed and stated that they failed to understand the need for those investments. A new political party and some activist groups were established, which have since been working against the agreement.

Tell people what you are doing

Don't underestimate the importance of communication, of telling people and all actors involved what you are doing. We should all be able to follow what happens in our municipalities and learn about the plans for future development and investments. Most political decisions affect us all and if we are informed, we can react and influence the decisions made. This strengthens the belief in democracy, creates trust and also contributes to better solutions.

Be pro-active in your communication

Make sure that you are prepared to communicate over long periods of time to many different audiences. Practising active openness means making it possible for others to be part of the dialogue on what happens in the community. Not only do we need to inform and provide feedback to those who are interested and engaged in what is going on, but we must also anticipate situations where we must reach out to groups that normally do not make their voices heard. We should ensure that an increasing number of people experience that they are informed and are part of the working processes that make their every-day lives better.

Convey the consequences of the choices made

Be aware of the difficulty in communicating new concepts and how they are developed and revised over time. Also, share and convey the reasons for and the consequences of your decisions. If you have difficulty in implementing all parts of a policy or strategy, be aware of the importance of conveying your priorities and the consequences of the decisions made. Be prepared to reinforce your message in the different phases of the project.

✔ Ensure progress

To ensure progress, it is not sufficient only to develop improved working models; one also needs the capacity and competence to perform and to learn from what one does. You have to organise your work as a learning process. The experiences you gain along the road, must feed back into subsequent work on the project and the inception phases of future projects. The responsibility for this rests both with those who initiated and decided on a policy, strategy or project and those who are commissioned to execute it.

Define roles and mandates

To succeed, we need clear roles and mandates in every organisation and project. Implementation plans should identify responsibilities and accountability with a multi-sectoral approach. Everyone involved has to know what and when he/she is expected to deliver. There is also a need for clear mandates for all involved to represent their department in the working or steering group. Uncertainties in the mandates do cause delays in the processes.

Develop monitoring models

It is not sufficient just to commission your departments to implement the decisions made. You have to ensure that they manage to deliver what is expected of them. Is there a relevant and accepted monitoring model for the actual project?

If not, you have to develop such a model. The administration must be active in reporting the progress made back to the political assembly responsible. If that is not the case, the politicians must ask for feedback.

Calculate the risks

For each project, there are risks related to the implementation. Your aim should be to minimise those risks. Early in the policy-making phase, as well as later in the implementation phase, you can calculate what kind of barriers you can expect in the execution of your policy or project. Your action plan should embrace these risks. Ask yourself: Is the policy well founded and accepted? Do we have the resources needed? Are there any key positions that have to be secured? What partners do we have to involve? How do we communicate what we do?

Take action if needed

If the implementation does not succeed according to your plan, you have to learn about the problem and also take action. Why are there difficulties? Does the cooperation between all involved work? Are the resources sufficient to implement the plan? Sometimes you need a change in key positions or to bring in special expertise. Don't wait too long, take action based on what you have learnt, and explain to all why you do it.

POLICY   IMPLEMENTATION

GAP   GAP

POLICY
PLANNING
IMPLEMENTATION
STAKEHOLDERS
PUBLIC
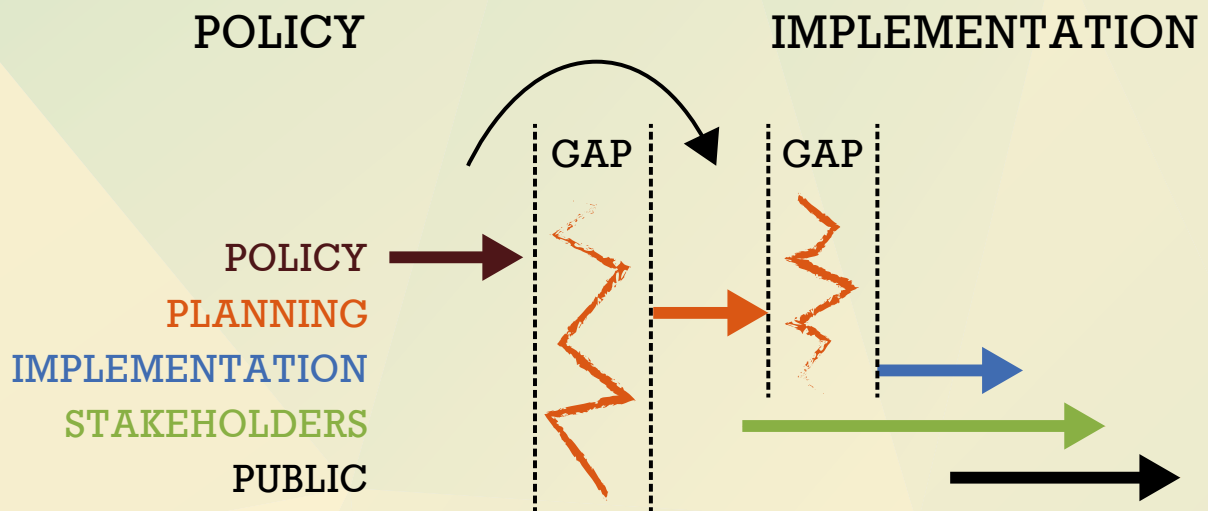
Gaps can happen when policy, planning
and implementation occur sequentially.

POLICY   IMPLEMENTATION

GAP

POLICY
PLANNING
IMPLEMENTATION
STAKEHOLDERS
PUBLIC

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY
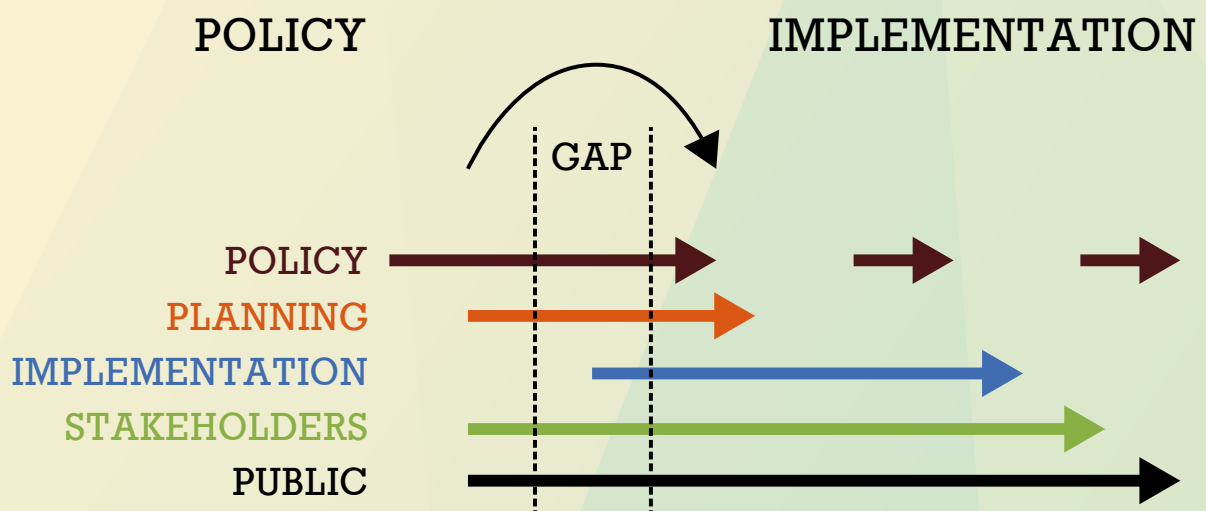
Gaps can be closed by undertaking
processes simultaneously and involving
stakeholders early.sequentially.

The partnership and the project

This toolkit is a result of a suite of projects that has been performed in the successful partnership between the City of Gothenburg in Sweden, and the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM) in South Africa – a partnership that has been running for more than 15 years. A number of projects have been performed over this time. Most recently in the project period 2013–16, five projects were carried out: Inner City Planning and Development, Sustainable Mobility, Sustainable Energy, Climate Change and, finally, as an overarching project, Examining the Gap between Policy and Implementation in Local Government using the four sub-projects as a resource. The four sub-project teams collectively drew upon their experiences to contribute to this toolkit for use by local government on the essential elements required to ensure better policy implementation.

The projects have been made possible by funding from ICLD, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy. The objectives for the overarching project as appear in the funding application are:

a) Overall objective:
To have more effective implementation of all policies and strategies within a city context in order to improve service delivery at a local level. This in turn will ensure a more sustainable and integrated city.

b) Project objective:
To develop a toolkit for our and other local authorities to ensure optimal policy implementation and service delivery.

c) Specific objectives:
Influence municipal policy environment to be more integrated.

- To examine examples of policy implementation through 4 support projects covering the areas of Inner City Planning & Development, Sustainable Mobility, Climate Change and Sustainable Energy.

- To have optimal service delivery for different circumstances as a result of policy interventions.

- Identify role players and their responsibilities.

- Understand barriers and triggers to effective implementation.

- Development of a best practice toolkit on policy implementation in local government.

REFLECTION VISION COURAGE CARING

"ITS BETTER TO TAKE
THE LONG-SHORT WAY THAN THE
SHORT-LONG WAY"

Göran Johansson, former Mayor of the City of Gothenburg

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"IN THE END,
IT'S UP TO YOU AND ME,
TO US!"

*"IF YOU WANT TO GO FAST
— GO ALONE.
IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR
— GO TOGETHER."*

African proverb

nelson mandela bay
MUNICIPALITY

City of
Gothenburg