

Future, change and choices

Peter Robinson

Reviewed by Prof. Verna Nel (University of the Free State)

In a country where skills and resources are limited, but the needs are immense, strategic planning and decision-making are essential to make the most of the available resources. This lies at the heart of the South African concept of Integrated Development Planning. While much attention is paid to the necessity of strategic planning, far less has been mentioned of the process, methods and techniques involved, particularly as applied to urban and regional planning. Peter Robinson's book, *Future, change and choice*, competently fills this gap. The book is founded on many years of practical experience as a consultant and educator at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

In a book designed for practitioners and educators alike, Professor Robinson sets out processes and techniques for strategic planning and decision-making. These cover the entire planning process, from an assessment of the issues, analysis, through developing scenarios to formulating visions, strategies and action plans. It also contains three chapters each of which is dedicated to a South African case study that demonstrates the process and illustrates the application of the techniques.

Chapter One reflects on the importance of strategic planning and the need for a strategic choice approach (based to a large extent on the work of Friend & Hickling¹) before discussing the difference between traditional urban and regional planning processes and strategic planning. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of several strategic planning processes.

The second chapter entitled 'Understanding the core problem and the driving forces' deals with methods to answer questions such as "What is the problem?"; "How did it arise?"; "Does it have multiple dimensions?"; "Where

and how does the issue arise and why?", and "Who is involved/affected and why?" According to Robinson, this entails understanding the historical context, the forces and processes of change as well as the linkages and relationships between elements and issues, in order to identify patterns and trends, and interpret these spatially, sectorally and institutionally (p. 34). The techniques discussed all include some form of stakeholder participation (experts/professionals and local knowledge) intended to complement "conventional data gathering and analytical methods" (p. 36). Among these methods are scoping, brainstorming, Delphi, focus groups, stakeholder participation matrix and a Participatory Appraisal of Competitive Advantage (PACA) method. Several of these methods are illustrated with examples from practice.

Chapter Three comprises various methods of strategic analysis which include identifying opportunities and constraints, or problems, possibilities and potentials, fixed and pivotal issues and drivers of change, degrees of control, SWOT analysis, and "best chances of success". Also illustrated are techniques often associated with scenario development, namely impact versus probability, rules of the game and key uncertainties and risk assessment. The chapter concludes with the importance of synthesis, focusing on the core problem(s), the main driving forces and key issues to be addressed. Again several techniques are illustrated with examples from practice, i.e. SWOT analysis, risk assessment and rules of the game with key uncertainties.

Chapter Four deals with scenario planning, mainly drawn from the work of Clem Sunter² and the 'Analysis of Inter-Connected Decision Areas' (AIDA),³ a component of the strategic

choice methodology. Again the process is not only carefully described but also illustrated with examples in a South African context.

The process of creating a vision, preparing strategies and formulating action plans is the subject matter of Chapter Five which develops the process of scenario planning. Robinson distinguishes between the type of vision so typical of corporations that is "characterised by fine words, but devoid of any chance of being achieved" (p. 87) and a development vision that is logical, rooted in the present, reaches into the future with an indication of how that future can be attained. By continually linking the vision to the strategy as part of scenario planning, Robinson demonstrates the integration of the entire process and the importance of strategy as the intended direction of development towards the vision. Action plans which translate vision to action to achieve implementation are also addressed. Robinson utilises a "logic based approach" (p. 106). The majority of the chapter contains examples illustrating the relationship between the initial assessment and analysis and the strategies and action plans formulated for different places.

Part two of the book, comprising Chapters Six to Eight, contains case studies demonstrating various techniques and approaches in different places. Each case study sets the scene, describing the development problem, discusses the planning response, including the methodologies used and essence of the plan, and concludes with the outcome (up to 2009). The three case studies are metropolitan Durban, the small town of Mount Edgecombe and the (re)development of Cato Manor.

The value of this book lies not only in Robinson's merging of numerous planning techniques and methods developed for diverse planning purposes into a single book on strategic planning, but also in its applicability to spatial planning.

The text is clear and accessible, even for the majority of planners in South Africa whose first language is not English. The numerous practical examples taken from experience assist in

1 Friend, J.K. & Hickling, A. 1987. *Planning under pressure. The strategic planning approach*. Oxford: Pergamon

2 See Illbury C & Sunter C. 2001. *The mind of a fox: scenario planning in action*. Tafelberg. Cape Town.

3 See Friend & Hickling, 1987..

interpreting and applying the methods, while the many diagrams illustrate and clarify the processes.

The methods and techniques in the book are applicable in a range of contexts including spatial planning, local economic development and integrated development planning. If we as planners applied more of these techniques to the formulation of integrated development plans, we would perhaps have more appropriate and effective plans and strategies leading to more rapid development.

Peter Robinson has over 30 years of experience as a professional planner, consultant and academic. His work has taken him to numerous places in South Africa and formed the basis for the many case studies included in the book. He can be contacted at <praplan@mweb.co.za>

Published in: 2009

Imprint: Westville, [South Africa]:
Osborne Porter Literary Services

ISBN: 978-0-9814276-6-9