STRATEGIC PLANNING IN GAUTENG GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL CLUBS

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning has become indispensable for organisations that seek to develop and grow, and grassroots football clubs are no exception. As large amounts of money are invested in football clubs, these entities may be prone to substantial financial risk if resources are not effectively deployed, underlining the importance of strategic planning and management. Against this background, this qualitative study explored the strategic planning processes of grassroots football clubs in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Interviews were conducted with representatives of 12 football clubs affiliated with the South African Football Association, and data were analysed thematically. The findings suggest that grassroots football clubs are like not-for-profit community organisations in their strategic planning approach (or lack thereof). Grassroots football clubs still have much to do in developing their strategic planning capabilities to create value and enhance the sustainability of football.

Keywords*: Football clubs; Not-for-profit organisations; South Africa; Strategic planning.*

INTRODUCTION

Strategic management is generally regarded as important and beneficial to all types of organisations, including not-for-profit organisations (Bryson, 2010; Barhem & Alwehabie; 2013; Grant, 2021). Vishnevskiy *et al.* (2015) associates strategic management with responding effectively to environmental challenges facing organisations, and Tjøndall (2016) argues that strategic management and innovation continually shape and improve modern sport. Sports organisations must accordingly think and act strategically to respond to the challenges posed by the commercialisation and professionalisation of sport and environmental volatility. Despite the upsurge in interest in strategic management in the public and not-for-profit sector since the 1970s (Goold, 1997; Stone *et al.,* 1999), and the increasing focus on governance in sports organisations as they become more commercial and professional (e.g., Hoye & Stewart, 2002; Forster, 2006; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), research on strategic management processes and tools in sports organisations remains sparse. In the few instances where published research does exist, it is typically based on sporting events, in sports governing bodies (e.g., Obonyo, 2021) or in governmental agencies with a focus on sports (e.g., Razak & Muhamad, 2022). As a result, we know very little about strategic management and its value in sports organisations, especially at the grassroots level. In this article, the focus is on grassroots football clubs.

Despite the widespread commercialisation of football and the corporatisation of clubs at the pinnacle of the sport, football clubs at the grassroots level are largely small amateur clubs dependent on support from the government and football authorities. This support is usually in the form of funding, technical training and administrative management (Sikes *et al.*, 2019). Grassroots football clubs belong to their local football associations, which are affiliated to the South African Football Association (SAFA), which is in turn a member of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). These clubs are in the third tier of South African football and comprise 144 teams divided into nine divisions within the nine geopolitical provinces of South Africa (South African Football Association, n.d.). Grassroots football clubs are more like not-for-profit organisations (NFPs) than profit-driven business organisations; they often exist for purposes of equal opportunity and participation in sport and are linked to community development, community recreation and welfare service provision (Morrison & Misener, 2022).

Strategy (a product of strategic planning) enables all types of organisations to better liaise with their various stakeholders in the quest to realise their legitimate claims (Chukwumerije *et al.*, 2019). Strategic planning can benefit grassroots football clubs by assisting them in planning realistically and allocating scarce resources optimally. Grassroots football clubs are involved in the overall governance of football. Some owners and managers of these football clubs serve as board members of their local football associations and are guided by and compelled to adhere to the SAFA policies and statutes. Moreover, SAFA makes available strategic documents outlining its strategic direction (vision, mission and values statements) to all football clubs as frames of reference and guiding documents (South African Football Association, 2013). To this end, while business organisations focus on maximising profitability and wealth, NFPs such as small football clubs focus more on making the requisite impact and creating value in their communities.

With this background in mind, this qualitative study investigated strategic planning, an integral part of strategic management, in Gauteng grassroots football clubs and sought to answer the research question: What strategic planning processes and practices are evident in these football clubs? Our interest was in specifically exploring:

1) Who is involved in strategic planning;
2) How much time is devoted to strategic planning; and
3) How the strategic planning process is applied.

In the next section, we examine strategic planning in not-for-profit settings and small sports organisations and the theoretical foundations of the research. We subsequently discuss the research methods and the findings. The study concludes with key findings of the research, recommendations to the football fraternity and recommendations for future research.

Strategic planning in small sports organisations

Given the dearth of research on strategic planning in sports organisations, this literature review focused on strategic planning in NFPs. The reason for this is that grassroots football clubs are more akin to community-based NFPs than to business organisations. Strategic planning is often described as the "thinking phase" of the strategic management process (Hansen, 2011:771), in

which organisational goals and strategic direction are set, and plans are made to achieve superior performance. Although strategic planning is important to NFPs to assist them in setting priorities in meeting their mission, Hatten (1982) and Goold (1997) have argued that corporate models and tools of strategic management and planning are not necessarily applicable to NFPs. While research on strategic planning is relatively scarce, it seems to converge around three themes, namely the internal and external determinants of strategic planning, the process and characteristics of strategic planning, and its organisational outcomes. These elements are discussed below.

Whether strategic planning is done, and how it is done, is influenced by several factors such as the nature of the organisation, whether it has a paid administration, the size of its membership, and the role of the Board of Directors (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000). In addition, the strategic management process is also influenced by three broad factors (Stone *et al.*, 1999; Miller, 2018; Ferrell *et al.*, 2019; Morrison & Misener, 2022):

- Internal factors such as the characteristics of boards, board collaboration and management and the extent to which the organisation's managers agree on goals.
- External factors such as the requirements of funders for professionalism, accountability, compliance and transparency; the changing needs of clients; and greater competition for funding. The effects of shifting demand and changing customer needs on strategy have received scant attention.
- Aspirational factors such as the desire of the organisation's management for organisational growth and performance. However, the focus could also be on self-interest rather than organisational interest.

These factors determine if strategic planning will be done and, if it is done, how it is done.
The way in which strategic planning is carried out has also enjoyed some attention in NFP strategic planning research. The typical components of a strategic planning process are outlined in Table 1. They comprise the creation of purpose (vision and mission), analysis of the internal and external environments, creation of a strategy and evaluation.

Table 1. **THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS IN NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS**

Component	Description	Supporting literature
Vision	A common vision development process in which stakeholders make their values explicit, combine their preferences, and negotiate priorities can be valuable in a not-for-profit organisation (NFP) to ensure stability.	Moxley (2004)
Mandate	NFPs typically have a mandate that they have to fulfil, and which guides their strategic planning.	Morrison and Misener (2022)
Mission	Mission statements can be useful to NFPs. Note that missions are not strategies and require a strategy to show how the organisation will achieve its purpose.	Goold (1997) Morrison and Misener (2022)
Long-term goals	These describe what the organisation wants to achieve in the long run, typically within a 3–5-year framework.	Morrison and Misener (2022)
Stakeholder Engagement	A stakeholder approach to strategic planning involves the management and integration of the relationships and interests of stakeholders in a way that ensures the long-term success of the organisation. Lack of stakeholder buy-in can hinder the strategic planning efforts of organisations.	Morrison and Misener (2022)
Attention to internal factors	These include internal analysis of performance, strengths, and weaknesses, striving for consistency between resources, organisational values, and strategy.	Hatten (1982) Giffords and Dina (2004) Griggs (2010)
Attention to external factors	These include external analysis of performance, opportunities, and threats, striving for environmental consistency.	Hatten (1982) Giffords and Dina (2004) Griggs (2010)
Functional integration	This is an integration of organisational functions into a holistic management perspective. Because of the difficulties in setting overall objectives for NFPs, the sum of functional strategies is often regarded as the strategy of the organisation.	Hatten (1982) Giffords and Dina (2004) Griggs (2010)
Evaluation	Strategies must be constantly re-evaluated and, if needed, reformulated to maintain consistency with the external and internal environments.	Hatten (1982)

Based on extensive empirical research, Crittenden *et al.* (2004) identified the following characteristics of strategic planning in NFPs, which are adapted for use in this study:

1) **Scope**: The extent to which the planning process includes the full range of strategic planning components, from objective setting to forecasting and evaluation.
2) **Formality**: The extent to which there is a written plan and explicit evaluation process. Most NFPs carry out strategic planning informally and have not adopted a formal strategic planning process.

3) **Administrative informality**: This construct encompasses short-term thinking, intuitive decision-making and laissez-faire leadership tendencies. NFPs are more likely to emphasise informality and short-run concerns in their planning processes.

4) **Level of participation**: This construct refers to the involvement of boards, key personnel, the organisation's members and volunteers in strategic planning, and the extent to which strategic planning is communicated in the organisation.

5) **External interdependence**: The level of influence of external stakeholders, such as customers or clients and external agencies (such as governing bodies) in decision-making.

6) **Implementation responsiveness**: This construct includes client-oriented strategies and the implementation of strategic plans and programmes.

7) **Strategic planning "routinism"**: This construct considers the extent to which strategic planning is carried out regularly and has become a routine within the organisation.

8) **Subjective planning**: This construct reflects a focus on subjective planning and the absence of analytical techniques, quantification and rigorous analysis.

9) **Resource misallocation**: The extent to which resources are occasionally misallocated relative to organisational objectives.

The outcomes of the strategic planning process should be agreement on the goals and objectives of the organisation and the required changes in how the organisation operates. In addition, strategic planning should lead to improved performance and sustainability, continuous learning and the creation of public value (Morrison & Misener, 2022). However, Miller (2018) found that few NFPs can tie strategic planning to organisational performance. Studies showed that NFPs that engage in strategic planning have improved performance (Liket & Maas, 2013), and others argued that strategic planning is a useful vehicle for organisational development in NFPs. Yet most NFPs do not have strategic plans (Gratton, 2018). Goold (1997) further argued that the notion of competitive advantage is not applicable in NFPs. Instead, the author argued that institutional advantage could be a more suitable concept. Institutional advantage exists when an NFP performs its tasks more effectively than other comparable organisations. However, there is no evidence of research on NFPs in this aspect of institutional advantage.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted from an interpretivist perspective, with the purpose of capturing rich descriptions about the perceptions and lived experiences of strategic planning in grassroots football clubs (Venter, 2017). We conducted a qualitative study using a semistructured interview guide. This research strategy was chosen to afford researchers the flexibility and convenience necessary to capture rich responses. All five SAFA regions in Gauteng Province were considered for the study, namely City of Ekurhuleni, City of Johannesburg, Mogale City, Sedibeng, and City of Tshwane. Data were collected by way of personal interviews with managers of football clubs affiliated with SAFA within the five Gauteng sub-regions.

A purposive sampling method was employed, and the list of potential participants was obtained from SAFA. The association's grassroots football clubs were the units of analysis, and 13 football managers from 12 football clubs participated in the research. Table 2 contains a summary of the study participants.

Table 2. **STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

#	Club type	Other role(s)	Qualifications	Gender
1	Ladies'	Club owner; treasurer local football association	Secretarial diploma; sports administration; financial management; coaching	Female
2	Ladies'	Club co-owner, coach	No formal qualifications	Male
3	Ladies' (same club as P2)	Club co-owner, assistant coach	No formal qualifications	Male
4	Ladies'	Club director and fundraiser for the local sport association	Life skills training	Male
5	Ladies'	Secretary of the regional football league	Officiating and Coaching Science Diploma (still studying)	Female
6	Ladies' and men's	Technical adviser	B.Ed. in Physical Education; Advanced Management Programme; Level 2 SAFA coaching certificate; Level B coaching licence with FIFA	Male
7	Ladies and men's	Club co-owner and CEO	First aid course	Male
8	Ladies	Community leader	Sports administration course; child tune athletics course, 5 × coaching certificates	Male
9	Men's	Club owner	Coaching courses; life skills training; first aid course	Male
10	Men's	Coach and business adviser	Coaching course; life skills training; first aid course	Male
11	Ladies' and men's	Coach	Coaching course (still studying)	Male
12	Men's	Volunteer administrator for other clubs	Coaching course; first aid course	Male
13	Men's	Coach	No formal qualifications	Male

Participants were contacted by the researcher, and an appointment was made to conduct the interview at a place and time convenient to them. They were also alerted about their right to participate voluntarily and their liberty to choose not to answer any questions and to withdraw at any point of the interviews. After being informed about the purpose and nature of the study

and their rights, participants had to consent to participation in writing. As part of the selection criteria, the participants had to be football club managers between the ages of 18 and 65, involved in planning and have been part of the clubs for at least 5 years. Their football clubs had to be SAFA affiliates and located within Gauteng Province, South Africa. When interviewing the second participant, his colleague, a co-manager, also participated in the interview. Most clubs are still managed by men, which explains the bias towards male participants. Most participants indicated that they play other roles in the club besides being club managers. Participants generally had no formal qualifications; for those with formal qualifications, the qualifications and skills were more technical than managerial.

Thematic analysis constitutes a descriptive approach of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). The interview questions focused on strategic planning processes within these football clubs. Open-ended questions allowed the researchers to capture rich data and receive less restricted feedback from participants (Zikmund & Babin, 2007). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then analysed using the Atlas.ti software. The data analysis utilised open coding, which means that the analysis did not use a predefined list of codes, but codes were instead allocated to data during the analysis, which is the basis of an inductive approach. The allocated codes were then allocated to categories, which were in turn linked to relevant themes and subthemes in the quest to give meaning to the data. The findings were considered against the initial research questions to generate meaningful conclusions.

Ethical clearance
Before commencing the study, ethical clearance was granted by the Ethical Review Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview commenced.

FINDINGS
We present findings by following the research questions that guided the study: who is involved in strategic planning, how much time is devoted to it, and how is it done? The findings are discussed below and summarised in Table 3.

Who is involved in the strategic planning process of football clubs, and how often do the planning sessions occur?
Most respondents were in the full-time employ of the football clubs and, owing to the small size of the clubs, it is no surprise that they may play multiple roles in the organisation and are generally very hands-on in the club's management. Being hands-on may be good for the football club, but that does not mean that these managers spent sufficient time thinking about the future and engaging in strategic planning.

When responding to questions about their level of involvement in the strategic planning processes of the club, respondents often seemed to confuse their management and coaching jobs with strategic planning:

> "Every day I'm working with coaches, players. Coaching the players." *[Participant 1]*

"I'm hands-on. Each and every day I'm there. Every time, even when players need me they know where to find me and contact me. Each and every player has my number." *[Participant 8]*

When football clubs plan, they focus on the short-term future, that is, their focus is on operational rather than strategic planning, even when it is referred to as "strategic":

"We meet once a quarter to discuss the annual plan. Every Friday we meet just to check how far we are with activity reports on what each of us is doing, and the challenges also. So, we meet four times a year but we make sure that every Friday or every second week, we meet to check the progress reports. So we meet as sports team and we meet individually with managers discussing strategic issues". *[Participant 5]*

However, some participants feel that there is not enough time spent on planning:

"Because … sometimes you don't … get enough time. Sometimes we can say six months because once we plan something, we don't even often have … many meetings. We … have once a month for planning." *[Participant 1]*

From these findings (see also Table 3), it appears there is little agreement about what constitutes strategic planning and how often it is conducted. In the next section, we consider the participants in the strategic management process.

Involvement of participants in strategic planning processes

We were also interested in strategic planning from the perspective of who participated and how often they participated in strategic planning activities. The responses ranged widely from daily meetings to annual meetings (see Table 1). However, it seems there is no clear separation between strategic management and day-to-day management. As already alluded to, most club managers assumed multiple roles (often fulfilling strategic, operational, administrative and technical roles), and this blurs the boundaries between strategic management and operations.

Participants were often unclear on the management structure and who is also involved in the strategic planning processes of the club. In only one instance there seemed to be a clear role separation in place:

"[There is] a structure that runs the team, so we set up our management committee where we have the chairperson of the club and the deputy. We have the secretary that deals with paper work and secretarial issues. We have the treasurer that leads the finance committee. We have the team manager that manages the whole team." *[Participant 8].*

Table 3. **FREQUENCY OF AND ATTENDEES AT "STRATEGIC SESSIONS"**

	Frequency	**Participants**
P1	Twice a week	Management team (including the participant) and coaching staff
P2	Daily	Not clearly stated
P3	Daily	Not clearly stated
P4	Once a week	Managing director (the participant), coaching staff and the board
P5	Twice a month	Football manager, team manager (the participant), logistics manager and coaching staff
P6	Four times a year	Football manager (the participant), two team managers and coaching staff
P7	Once a week	CEO/manager (participant), management team and coaching staff
P8	Once a year	Management team (including the participant), coaching staff and the board
P9	Once a month	Management team (including the participant) and coaching staff
P10	Daily	Management team (including the participant) and coaching staff
P11	Once a week	Not clearly stated
P12	Once a year	Management team (including the participant) and coaching staff
P13	Once a month	Management team (including the participant) and coaching staff

Only a few of the participants appeared knowledgeable about dealing with issues of a strategic nature:

> "We meet once a quarter to discuss the annual plan. Every Friday we meet just to check how far we are with activity reports on what each of us is doing, and the challenges also. So, we meet four times a year, but we make sure that every Friday or every second week, we meet to check the progress reports. So, we meet as sports and we meet individually with managers discussing strategic issues." *[Participant 6]*

Regarding the attendance of the sessions, most participants indicated that more than three individuals participated in such sessions. However, the findings were inconclusive, given that most of the participants were unsure or did not feel inclined to state this categorically. Participants were generally unclear about which issues were strategic, and the focus once again seemed to be on the short term:

> "How it works is that we have a full-on season plan and now and then, or should I say daily, one needs to revisit. Fortunately, I sit by myself and on very few occasions I get to sit with my superiors to discuss. But now, I can safely say daily, one sits and thinks about how to make ends meet in this club." *[Participant 7]*

Such a short-term mindset could be at the root of the unrealistic feedback some of the managers provided. Overall, there was at least some level of involvement in strategic issues. At the heart of the latter, reality provided key reasons, such as passion for the game, limited resources and the clubs' inability to attract and retain credible volunteers.

Not all boards seem to be active in a strategic role, but where they are it appears to add considerable value to the strategic planning process:

> "[The board] also engage our local football association as to say being the governing body, how can they help in terms of making sure that we fall in line with what is required from a football club. That is our board that helps us in terms of managing and guiding the club to be in line with our main objectives and goals. And then we have the management of the club that runs the club." *[Participant 7]*

Although some elements of strategic planning were mentioned, the data seemed to confirm a clear lack of strategic planning activities. There seems to be some confusion (or a lack of knowledge) about what is strategic and what is not, with operational and technical issues often registered by participants as strategic matters. Moreover, there seemed to be a lack of formal structures to address issues of a strategic nature. There was also an apparent lack of board participation (e.g., who should have been more inclined to become involved in strategic issues in most of the clubs). Whereas strategic planning should have a long-term focus (a 3- to 5-year focus is commonly mentioned), the clubs seemed to focus very much on the short term. The above observations are also evident of the annual or even shorter focus, instead of a longer-term focus for strategic matters. All these issues raise questions regarding the perceptions or knowledge participants may have about the strategic planning process.

Strategic planning process

When asked about their strategic planning process components, the participants mainly discussed the vision statement and long-term goals. Some participants shared their clubs' visions and long-term goals in some detail. The focus of the subsequent analysis was on the process rather than the content. Although not all the verbatim quotes indicate issues of a strategic nature, they nonetheless provided a good indication of whether the participants understood their strategic trajectory. The challenge in this regard was when some of the participants persistently referred to weekly team talks as strategic meetings.

The following participants explained their strategic direction and long-term goals. When dealing with the strategic planning process components, particularly the strategic direction and long-term goals, participants seemed enthusiastic to share them. They appeared assertive in what they wanted to achieve in the future, with vision, mission and long-term goals in their vocabulary. However, the use of these expressions of strategic direction appeared to be mostly in regard to what they wanted for their key constituents, namely the players, rather than what they wanted the clubs to achieve:

> "I can say long-term goals because we want to see players, most of them, play at the Sasol league. That is our goal. A team must always be at the Sasol league. That is our goal." *[Participant 3]*

"I think what we have done since I came here is to align the mission and the vision of the organisation which the club is affiliated to [identity removed to ensure confidentiality] to the general core business of the [identity removed to ensure confidentiality]. So, whatever that we do must be in line with the business models of the university and what the university wants to do. For example, we don't operate in isolation. We operate in conjunction with marketing so our events are known and me as a football major I have my own visions but I also try to align them with the core business of the organisation which the club is affiliated to [identity removed to ensure confidentiality]." *[Participant 6].*

"But our vision is educating, raising a child that is aware of the surroundings." *[Participant 7]*

One participant in particular had an excellent theoretical exposition of strategic direction and what it means to the organisation:

"We obviously do have goals: strategic goals, which you divide into a short-term, medium-term and long-term goal. And you do have your vision which is the bigger picture. Which is, at the end of the day, what do you want to achieve on a bigger scale? And then when you set up your goals, your vision will now guide how you set up your goals." *[Participant 7]*

"So maybe you'll say this year, this is our goal, in the two years this is what we need to do. So it grows into a bigger thing which is your vision … To say maybe, you want to be the best team in the province after so much time. And those small goals that we have become the small steps that you take in achieving your vision. Or they become the map that guides to what you want to achieve on a long-term basis." *[Participant 8]*

However, the role of the strategy was in attaining the club's goals was unclear. It could be argued that in this case, the vision was seen as the strategy, a common error in the application of strategic planning (Rumelt, 2013). Another participant referred to vision and goals, but the explanation of the application of this in the organisation suggested a bottom-up approach, where "strategy" is the result of achieving several short-term goals:

"Like any other organisation, we have a vision, a mission, short-term, long-term, medium-term goals. Those are the guiding factors for us to be able to realise the ultimate vision. Short term, like I said, we have cycles of five games and in every five games the minimum that we need to get is about 10 points. If we do well we get 15. If we say we've done medium, around 12 points. It's a good standard that we set for ourselves, unlike putting a rope around our neck and say out of every five games that we play we need to get 15 points." *[Participant 10]*

At the heart of the challenges to the strategic planning process was the lack of focus on strategy. This reality prevented the strategic planning processes from yielding the desired results. The perceptions about the strategic planning processes highlight the changes occurring in the internal and external business environments. These changes may be positive and may be

regarded as opportunities, or they may be negative and thereby constitute the clubs' key challenges. For instance, one participant recognised some of the major improvements in the resources her football club secured to better compete in their current football league. These seem to provide some form of strategic advantage and eased the administrative burden.

> "Last year, we were only allowed to use the small fields to train, but now we're also allowed to use the main stadium to train and play our games. We also have more training equipment and we are able to choose which fields we want to use. So, resources now have become a variety." *[Participant 5]*

External changes impact internal changes. Some of the external changes are often imposed on the organisation and are beyond their control.

> "Nothing much has changed because we're always faced with challenges with regards to SAFA delaying kick-offs because they don't address challenges the team has or had in the previous season so you find delays because the club won't start the league without having answers to challenges they had the previous season. That's normally the challenge and it's been constantly happening in the last 7 years since I've been involved. Eventually it will kick-off but it's something that shouldn't happen." *[Participant 11]*

Participant 11 had to deal with external challenges and forces stemming from the systematic anomalies of the football association. Such realities may hamper the planning processes if left undetected (Turner, 2012). The burden rests with the organisation (i.e., football clubs) in terms of how they respond to these changes. As strategy is a means to an end and not an end, positive points ought to be celebrated, while bearing in mind that there are constant challenges ahead that need to be overcome. Moreover, there is a need for football clubs to differentiate between those challenges and weaknesses that are within their control (and more especially those that may be self-inflicted) and those that may be beyond their control.

> "Our strength here is that we are still young, and we try very hard to fight for our space. We avail resources, even though they are limited. We are in Gauteng and it's very difficult to compete. We are a third grade if you were to grade the teams and the clubs. So like I say, we always try to fight for space. One of our weaknesses is that we cannot attract the best students because we are not yet the university of choice." *[Participant 6]*

Using appropriate strategic analysis and planning, these challenges and weaknesses can be isolated, analysed and addressed. If such systematic steps are taken, this could assist football clubs in making meaningful progress regarding their strategic planning processes.

Table 4. **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
Lack of knowledge on strategic planning	Confusing their management and coaching jobs with strategic planning	Hands-on management
		Managers play multiple roles
		Lack of relevant qualifications
	Operational focus at the expense of strategic focus	Frequent "strategic sessions"
		Not enough time spent on planning
		Lacks agreement on what strategic planning is
		Short-term mind set
Responsibility for strategic planning	Role of boards	Active boards can add a lot of value to the strategic planning process
		Generally, a lack of board participation in strategic planning and issues
	The responsibility for strategic planning	Not clear on what issues are "strategic"
		Lack of role clarity – who should be involved in strategic planning?
		Lack of formal structures to address strategic issues
	Motivation for involvement in strategic issues	Reality provided key reasons for strategic involvement, such as passion for the game or limited resources
		Organisation is not the focus of "strategy" – players and the personal visions of managers are
Flawed strategic planning process	Flawed perspective on what constitutes the strategic planning process	Lack of strategic planning activities
		Vocabulary of strategic planning used, but incorrectly
		Focus on a limited range of strategic tools, such as vision and long-term goals
	Role of strategy in the organisation	Limited theoretical understanding
		Misunderstanding role of strategy, e.g., vision seen as "strategy"
		Role of strategy in attaining club goals is unclear
		Skewed perception of process, e.g., "strategy" is the result of achieving several short-term goals
Environmental impacts on strategic planning	Internal factors	At the heart of the challenges to the strategic planning process was the lack of focus on strategy
	External challenges	External changes imposed on the organisation that are beyond their control
		External challenges relating to the football association

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When considering the *determinants* of the strategic planning process, most of the impetus for strategic planning in grassroots football clubs seems to come from the internal desire of the clubs for their players to succeed. In line with other research findings, the characteristics of managers and boards play a major role in determining the way in which strategic planning is carried out (if at all), whereas the lack of resources (as might be expected) constrains strategic planning. Although SAFA as a key role player and funder provides its strategic documents and strategic direction to all football clubs as frames of reference, there is not much more guidance and structure to assist these clubs in their strategic planning. Whereas some participants did mention the external environment, there is a lack of clarity on what the external changes are and the way in which they influence their strategic planning.

Although some participants had a good understanding of the strategic planning process components, there was a great deal of inconsistency in knowing what strategic planning is, when it is done, the way in which it should be done, and who participates in it. In this regard, the board's role deserves mention, as proactive, participative boards can add value to the strategic planning process. There also appears to be focus on strategic direction (e.g., the vision) to the point where it is seen as a proxy for strategic planning. The diverse backgrounds of the managers meant that there is a large gap in knowledge about strategic planning, with little evidence that analytical tools to guide strategic planning are issued, or that the clubs document their strategic plans.

Regarding the *outcomes* of strategic planning, there was a general recognition of its value, especially regarding the creation of a common strategic direction and the potential for helping the football clubs achieve some form of institutional advantage. However, there was little clear evidence that strategic planning improved the performance or institutional advantage of the clubs. On the positive side, regular evaluation and feedback appeared culturally ingrained in grassroots football clubs and could be used to their advantage.

The shortage of strategic planning knowledge in grassroots football clubs necessitates more education, training, business coaching and mentoring of club managers and boards. In this regard, the appointment of board members with strategic planning expertise could boost the strategic planning effort, and strategic planning (and management) training should be required of individuals occupying board or managerial positions in these football clubs. Corporate executives and strategic management practitioners could also play a pivotal role by providing some form of practical value (e.g., executive coaching) to football club managers.

SAFA, as a key funder of these clubs, also needs to consider its role in enabling and even demanding quality strategic planning from all its affiliated clubs. Strategic planning enables innovation and progress in the sport. By providing proper guidance, SAFA can do much more than just providing terms of reference to improve strategic planning as a framework for organisational development in grassroots clubs. Better strategic planning could lead to stronger, more professional grassroots clubs.

Stakeholder management is a key aspect for grassroots football clubs because these clubs directly serve the communities they are based in. As many stakeholders as possible should be

involved in strategic planning. This involvement will assist in giving more clarity to the external strategic challenges these clubs face. This is also consistent with principles of inclusivity in strategy, which is recommended by the King IV Report.

There are several avenues for future research, and we highlight the following as particularly necessary. First, there is a need to understand the composition, roles and performance of boards in grassroots sports organisations, especially as they pertain to strategic planning. Second, the link between strategic planning and club performance requires further scrutiny, especially in the long run. As strategic planning has a long-term perspective, longitudinal, inductive case studies are necessary to determine the effects of strategic planning in organisations. Third, the link between external factors and strategic planning in small sports organisations remains under-researched. For example, what effect did the Covid-19 pandemic have on the strategic planning of such organisations? How do grassroots sports clubs keep track of external factors such as changes in consumer behaviour? The study limitations also highlight opportunities for future research. The study was limited to one sport and one province, and future research may extend the scope to include other sports and geographical areas. In addition, the study was cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies would assist in developing a deeper understanding of the way in which strategic planning takes place over time and shapes club performance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, four main themes emerged from the empirical study. Firstly, managers in grass roots football clubs lack a clear understanding of what strategic planning is, which means that they tend to focus on their operational roles at the expense of the strategic planning process. Secondly, there is lack of clarity on how strategic planning should be managed in these organisations, and who should be responsible for it. Thirdly, even where strategic planning does take place it is flawed, incomplete and often incorrectly applied. Finally, as might be expected, internal and external factors impact the use of strategic planning.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the research conducted and the publication of this article.

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