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**Published First Online:**

22.12.2025

**Pages:** 178-188

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMS A.2025.2.03>

# STRATEGIC FOCUS IN STRATEGIC PLANNING: EVIDENCE FROM EDUCATION, HEALTH, WATER, AND PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICE DELIVERY IN TWO SELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES -TANZANIA

## ABSTRACT

Strategic focus is essential for strategic planning effectiveness in public sector organizations. The paper analyzed strategic focus orientations adopted in education, health, water, and physical infrastructure service delivery in two selected Local Government Authorities in the Lake Victoria zone in Tanzania. The paper employed a qualitative approach by obtaining data from secondary data sources comprising the strategic plans implemented from 2016/2017 to 2020/2021. Inductive content analysis was employed by reading the documents several times to establish codes, categories, and associated themes. The results

showed that the two selected local government authorities adopted a multi-focus strategic orientation in education service delivery. Multiple issues, such as increasing accessibility to primary and secondary schools, enhancing schools' hygiene, students' desk availability, construction of teacher houses, and promoting students' academic performance, were strategic plans' multi-focused priorities. In the health service, strategic plans also had multiple focuses, including the construction of new health facilities in their jurisdiction, ensuring the availability of essential drugs and diagnostic supplies in health facilities. Reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates was among a multitude of issues emphasized by strategic plans. The two selected local government authorities also paid attention to the increase in the percentage of people with clean and safe drinking water, water sector staff quality improvement, and repairing the water schemes to a functional level. Strategic plans from the two authorities focused on a set of multiple issues in the infrastructure sector. The plans focused on increasing better access to districts and village feeder roads, and at the same time improving the quality of the existing road network through the construction of bridges and culverts. A choice of a multi-focus strategic orientation on specific issues potentially relieved the two authorities from strategic complexity and indecisiveness. The paper increased understanding of strategic focus in strategic planning for service delivery in local government authorities.

**KEYWORDS:** Strategic focus, strategic planning, multi-focus, local government

**JEL:** H70, H75, H79

## INTRODUCTION

The multiplicity of dimensions in social service delivery may compel public organizations to undertake a strategic focus during strategic planning. Stock *et al.* (2024) conceptualize

strategic focus as a choice of a set of priorities being emphasized out of multiple dimensions for the organizations to achieve their goals. Wright (2025) puts forward that organizations should at least develop 3 to 6 focus areas, whereas having more than 6 focus areas risks organizations being unfocused during strategic planning.

Debick *et al.* (2020) suggest that strategic focus on relational capital improves quality relations with suppliers, customers, the general environment, and the image of the organization. Strategic focus also increases the speed for achieving the vision and mission through a set of priorities that allow effective allocation of resources (Sauer, 2021). Strategic focus in general enhances organizational performance (Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Gwangwava & Muranda, 2024; Kemunto, 2019). The assertion of the preceding scholars reminds us of what Tsonkov (2024) put forward: that the local policies and business environment are responsible for regional growth. Local governments can achieve growth in their regions when they have a strategic focus on their internal strategic environment.

Even though the strategic planning guideline published by the United Republic of Tanzania (2005) underscores the importance of strategic focus in public organizations, the extent to which local governments in the lake zone operationalize the concept during strategic planning is not visibly stated in various research papers in the field. As put forward by Boaz and Malisa (2023), the implementation of local governments in the African context faces challenges such as poor linkage of budgets and strategic plans; they lack clarity, are poorly communicated, and are not adequately monitored and evaluated by leadership and staff.

The scenarios above suggest that strategic plans in the local governments from the lake zone in Tanzania may be implemented without paying attention to specific strategic focus during the delivery of education, water, health, and physical infrastructure services. In other words, strategic plans may have no articulations of specific choices that have to be stressed in an environment of limited financial resources (Waller, 2018).

Potentially, the lack of strategic focus and prioritization during strategic planning in the public sector in Tanzania may have similar devastating consequences pointed out by UNCTAD (2013). It can lead to inefficient allocation of scarce resources, failure to meet public organizations' mandates, and lack of capacity to maximize the impact of actions. Ultimately, local government authorities are vulnerable to ineffectiveness during the implementation of strategic plans. In light of the predicament created by inadequate strategic focus in local government authorities, the objective of this paper is to analyze the strategic focus orientations adopted by two selected LGAs in the delivery of education, health, water, and physical infrastructure services. The paper establishes the application of the strategic focus concept during strategic planning in local government authorities in the public sector.

## **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1. Theoretical Literature Review**

Strategic focus in public sector organizations originates from Michael Porter's three generic competitive strategies: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus (Wardhana, 2024). Based on Michael Porter's understanding, an organization has three strategies to choose from to achieve competitive advantage (McGee, 2015). If the organization chooses a cost leadership strategy among the three strategies, it adopts low costs in its business operations by paying attention to low-cost inputs and pricing products or services below competitors' prices (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Thus, a cost leadership strategy allows an organization to offer its goods and services at more competitive prices and to capture a substantial market share (Bhat *et al.*, 2024). The drivers of adopting a cost leadership strategy as a focus relate to the maximization of

economies of scale and operational efficiency (Kimiti *et al.*, 2025). However, some researchers criticize the cost-leadership strategy as one that produces low-priced products that raise perceptions of poor quality and discourage research and development by avoiding costs (Baack & Boggs, 2008).

Based on Michael Porter's generic strategies, when an organization resolves to concentrate on a differentiation strategy, it offers unique design and quality products or services in contrast to its competitors to maintain customer loyalty (McGee, 2015; Okatahi *et al.*, 2024). Today, many organizations adopt the differentiation strategy just by offering many differentiated products and services. Possibly, the drivers towards a differentiation strategy are to achieve high sales volume and revenue. When differentiation becomes intensified in the organization, it eventually leads to positive organizational performance (Razzouki *et al.*, 2024).

Michael Porter further supports that sometimes organizations adopt the focus strategy. Under this strategy, an organization develops an understanding of its markets and seeks ways to satisfy each specific market (Okwemba, 2023). In other words, the company or an organization chooses a niche market, customer group, or geographical area, which this strategy may be characterized as market segmentation (Gakuya & Njue, 2018). The focus strategy has been linked to customer loyalty and more revenue (Farah & Kungu, 2020). Hansen and Hawes (2015a) caution that a focus strategy should be undertaken after a comprehensive analysis of the resources, strengths, and weaknesses existing in the organization. Less emphasis on the analysis of such factors can make the focus strategy unsuccessful.

Apart from the typology of generic strategies, Stock *et al.* (2024) also introduce a conception that stresses that a strategic focus unfolds in the form of single-focus, multi-focus, and blurred-focus orientations. The single-focus and multi-focus strategies given by the above-mentioned scholars partly correlate with Michael Porter's focus strategy and differentiation strategy. When organizations opt for a single focus, they emphasize the mono-performance dimension during strategic planning. A single focus connotes the fact that organizations may decide to reject several other priorities and emphasize just one priority for achieving the goals of strategic planning.

With a multi-focus, organizations choose a set of priorities in their strategic planning, yet avoid taking everything on board. A multi-focus orientation during strategic planning offers an opportunity for organizations to deal with fewer manageable issues, leading to strategic planning effectiveness. A blurred focus tends to focus on every strategic dimension by choosing everything in an unfocused manner. Tallon (2008) hypothesizes that a blurred strategic focus may create complexity and drive organizations into being stuck in the middle. This can lead to lower organizational or firm performance than adopting a single strategic focus. A blurred focus also may create what Francoli and Cinquini (2014) perceive as ambiguity in business strategic planning.

## **1.2. Empirical Literature Review**

Mostly, research on strategic focus has been conducted in organizations beyond local government organizations. Attention in research from such organizations is directed to the effect of the focus strategy on certain outcomes. Empirical studies by Ochodo *et al.* (2020) and Achira & Mutua (2024) have found that a focus strategy has a significantly positive effect on hospital performance. Despite the usefulness of focus strategy in the health sector as found by the above-mentioned studies, strategic focus in local government organizations is not adequately given priority in the empirical literature.

An empirical study by Njoroge *et al.* (2022) has shown that focus strategies help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in putting more efforts on certain niche market. In this way, SMEs understand the dynamics of the market and the unique needs of the customers. Then they develop the unique low-cost or well-specific products for the considered market. The current paper seeks to understand the strategic focus of local government authorities during strategic planning for education, health, water, and physical infrastructure as opposed to the study above.

Hansen (2015b) also reports a significant positive relationship between focus strategy and customer loyalty in SMEs. In a similar vein, Madhani *et al.* (2020) also point out the building blocks of focused strategy. Some of those blocks consist of CEO leadership, a collaborative approach inside the organization, a compensation and reward system, customer insights, and competitor awareness. This paper is not a duplicate of the knowledge already provided by the researchers above. It considers analyzing the strategic focus dynamics in local government organizations to enhance knowledge among strategic planning practitioners.

## 2. METHODS

This section describes the methods that were used to meet the specific objective of the paper. Thus, two LGAs, including Ngara and Geita, were selected purposively as the study areas. The two LGAs were chosen out of 37 similar entities established in the administrative zone of Lake Victoria. Both LGAs were selected because their strategic plans, communicated to the public via the internet, were considered by the author to be clearer than those of their counterparts. The paper employed a qualitative approach and used secondary data sources, including strategic plan documents published online between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021.

Documentary analysis was a data collection method, while the two LGAs acted as units of analysis. Inductive content analysis was used to analyze secondary data extracted from the strategic plans. Usually, inductive content analysis in qualitative research aims to condense extensive, varied textual data into a summary of the underlying structure of textual experiences (Thomas, 2003; Vears & Gillam, 2022). Inductive content analysis seeks the meaning of the content without counting frequencies or generating statistical correlations among content items. During inductive content analysis, each strategic plan's priorities, goals, strategic objectives, strategies, and key performance indicators were read thoroughly to identify codes, from which the paper developed categories that assisted in establishing important themes. Data were presented in the form of tables, as included in the section of the findings.

## 3. FINDINGS

This section presents the paper's findings on the strategic focus orientation revealed by two selected LGAs during strategic planning. The section in general addresses the answers to the specific objective, which intends to analyze the strategic focus orientation revealed by the two LGAs during strategic planning for education, health, water, and physical infrastructure services delivery sectors.

### **Strategic Focus Orientation Adopted by Two Selected LGAs in Strategic Planning**

Based on the findings presented in Tables 1 and 2, both study areas have a multi-focus orientation in strategic planning for all service delivery sectors. Both LGAs almost adopt a similar multi-focus strategic orientation in education service delivery. The selected LGAs focus on issues related to expanding access to primary and secondary schools among children

and youth and increasing school quality in terms of hygiene improvements, distribution of desks, and teacher housing construction, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The findings further reveal that both LGAs aim to improve students' academic performance in national examinations during the strategic plan implementation period. The findings imply that both LGAs pay attention to a set of priorities ranging from access to educational opportunities, educational quality improvement, and enhancing primary and secondary schools' academic performance. The findings further reveal that both LGAs adopt a similar strategic focus orientation in health service delivery, as displayed in Tables 1 and 2. There is a set of issues in a multi-focus strategic orientation in health services delivery. Based on the findings, both plan to expand access to health services by constructing a specific number of health facilities in their areas of jurisdiction. Further findings show that the respective LGAs are committing their strategy to improving quality by raising the availability of essential medicines and diagnostic supplies in the existing health facilities. The findings also reveal that the two selected LGAs would put efforts into reducing health bottlenecks such as maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate through social support, immunization, and addressing other ailments by providing sexual reproductive health services to the at-risk population. The findings imply that the two selected LGAs focus on a set of specific issues in strategic planning for health service delivery.

A strategic multi-focus is also revealed in water service delivery, whereby the two selected LGAs pay attention to increasing access to clean and safe drinking water to a particular percentage of residents and improving the quality of water sector staff. The water sector staff quality improvement focuses on training skills among a certain number of staff in the design, operation, and maintenance of water schemes within their boundaries. Tables 1 and 2 further display that the selected LGAs focus on quality by repairing several water schemes to raise the functional water supply. The findings imply that the selected LGAs concentrate on some issues in the water sector to avoid being stuck in the middle during implementation of the strategic plans in the water sector. Tables 1 and 2 further display that even the physical infrastructure service delivery adopts a strategic multi-focus orientation. By doing so, the selected LGAs are emphasizing better access to the road network by constructing district feeder and village roads up to a certain number of kilometers. One LGA also plans to construct 18 bridges and 350 culverts to improve the road network for its residents. The issue of quality improvement is also part of a multi-focus orientation in their strategy. Both would like to rehabilitate feeder and village roads and upgrade some urban roads to tarmac level for a particular kilometer. The findings imply that there is no blurring of strategic focus in the physical infrastructure of both LGAs in their strategic planning for the respective periods of strategy implementation.



**Table 1: Strategic Focus Orientations in Strategic Planning from Ngara Local Govt. Authority**

Service Delivery	Physical Infrastructure	Water	Health	Education
<b>Codes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Construct district feeder and village roads from 476.3 to 750 kilometers.</li> <li>-Maintain and rehabilitate the feeder and village roads, upgrade Ngara urban gravel roads to tarmac roads from 27.7 to 60 kilometers by 2021, and increase cleaned and opened culverts from 20 to 60 and ditches on district feeder and village roads.</li> <li>-Supervise a total of 810 kilometers of roads</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increase the number of people with access to clean and safe drinking water from 60.3% to 85%</li> <li>-Training 8 water sector staff on the design, operation, and maintenance of water supply projects, decreasing non-functional water points from 251 to 0</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increase health facilities by June, 2021</li> <li>-Increase the availability of medicines, health equipment, and diagnostic supplies in health facilities.</li> <li>-Reduce health bottlenecks by reducing HIV/AIDS, prevalence, maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate, neonatal mortality rate, malaria prevalence, mental health condition, and non-communicable diseases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increase Form I student enrollment from 83% to 100%</li> <li>-Ensuring that latrines are constructed in 115 primary schools, teachers' houses are constructed, classrooms are constructed, and desks are distributed to 115 primary schools,</li> <li>-Administration of national examinations in 115 primary schools, demarcation of 115 primary schools, supply of teaching and learning material to 115 primary schools provision of meals to 140 pupils with disability install electricity to 20 primary schools, monitoring and supervision of national examinations, increase science teachers from 100 to 219, construction of 5 libraries, 20 staff houses constructed, construction of 120 pit latrines in secondary schools, construction of 20 administration blocks, install electricity in 10 secondary schools, constructing 40 classrooms, 8 teachers' houses completed in secondary schools, demarcation of 15 secondary schools' compounds, install internet services in 10 secondary schools, constructing 10 dormitories in 10 secondary schools. The performance of pupils increases</li> </ul>
<b>Categories</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Access to physical infrastructure</li> <li>-Physical infrastructure quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Access to water services</li> <li>-Quality of water services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Health service accessibility</li> <li>-Health service quality</li> <li>-Health bottlenecks reductions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to educational opportunities</li> <li>- Quality improvement in primary and secondary schools</li> <li>-Primary and secondary schools' academic performance improvement</li> </ul>
<b>Theme</b>	-Multi-focus orientation in physical infrastructure service delivery	-Multi-focus orientation in water service delivery	-Multi-focus orientation in health service delivery	Multi-focus orientation in education service delivery

**Source:** Strategic Plan Prepared by Ngara Local Govt. Authority for the Period between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021

**Table 2:** Strategic Focus Orientation in Strategic Planning from Geita Local Govt. Authority

Water	Service Delivery	Physical Infrastructure services	Health	Education
<p>The population supplied with clean and safe water at recommended distances increased from 37 to 80% by the end of the strategic plan.</p> <p>-Reliable water sources and management increased from 50% to 85% of sources</p> <p>The number of functioning water schemes increased from 6 to 20</p>	<b>Codes</b>	<p>-Construct 18 bridges and 350 culverts in the district by the end of the strategic plan.</p> <p>-365 kilometers of community roads formed by the end of the strategic plan, 5 bus stands constructed by the end of the strategic plan</p> <p>Rehabilitate and maintain 1,700 kilometers of district rural roads by the end of the strategic plan</p>	<p>-Community participation in health promotion, prevention, and home-based care for communicable diseases. Maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition increased from 50% to 80%.</p> <p>-Immunization coverage for children under one year for DTP and HB3 increased from 90 to 95%.</p> <p>-Social support for PLHIVs, OVCs, widows, and widowers enhanced from 400 to 900, school-based gender sensitivity, sexual reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS education strengthened from 50% to 100% in all primary schools; and sexual protective gear increased from 40 to 50%</p> <p>- Household membership to the Community Health Fund increased from 6,036 to 34,882.</p> <p>- Dental health services in health facilities expanded to 70%.</p> <p>- Health infrastructure deficits have been minimized from 55% to 75%</p> <p>- HIV/AIDS prevalence reduced from 33 wards to 37 wards, TB/HIV fatality cases reduced from 6,500 to 1,200</p>	<p>-Increase enrollment rate, minimize school dropout in primary education, and establish 2 new high schools.</p> <p>-Increase school classrooms in primary schools, increase pit latrines from 1,600 to 7,363, increase teachers' houses, and increase the number of desks, primary school shelves, primary school cupboards, and primary school tables from 501 to 3,637. Employ qualified teachers in primary schools, increase teachers' resource centers, increase literacy rate from 67% to 80% in the council, and raise pupils' desk ratio.</p> <p>-Increase the number of classrooms in secondary schools from 498 to 578, the number of pit latrines in secondary schools from 496 to 696, the number of hostels from 5 to 8, the number of laboratories from 10 to 90, and the supply of tables and chairs.</p> <p>-Increase the number of qualified teachers from 808 to 1500, and create a conducive working environment in schools.</p> <p>-Raise the standard seven performance from the current 88% to 100%.</p> <p>-Pass rate in national examinations Form II increases</p>
<p>-Access to water services</p> <p>-Quality enhancement of water services</p>	<b>Categories</b>	<p>-Access to physical infrastructure enhanced</p> <p>-Quality network</p> <p>-Quality enhancement of rural roads</p>	<p>-Access to health services</p> <p>-Reduction of diseases</p> <p>-Health service quality improvement</p> <p>Health bottlenecks reductions</p>	<p>-Access to educational opportunities for residents</p> <p>-Quality improvement of schools</p> <p>-Primary and secondary schools' academic performance improvement.</p>
Multi-focus Multi-focus orientation	<b>Theme</b>	-Multi-focus physical infrastructure service delivery	Multi-focus orientation in health services	Multi-focus orientation -Multi-focus orientation in education

**Source:** Strategic Plan Prepared by Geita Local Govt. Authority for the Period between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021

**\*\*Key:** DTP = Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus; HB3 = Test of Sickle Cell Anemia; PLHIVs = People Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus, OVC = Orphans and Vulnerable Children

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The paper observes that the selected two LGAs adopt a multi-focus orientation in strategic planning for education service delivery. Both LGAs put their efforts into a set of issues such as expansion of primary and secondary school accessibility, quality improvement of schools, and promoting the academic performance of students in their local areas. These patterns of issues reflect a pronounced strategic multi-focus orientation, which basically emphasizes that an organization chooses two or so issues to emphasize in strategic planning in education service delivery. A multi-focus orientation that is displayed by the study areas in education service delivery almost reflects similar practices conducted by other organizations during strategic planning, as revealed by the Social Promotion Foundation (2021). This orientation is adopted by the two LGAs, possibly as an attempt to narrow the scope, thereby reducing stress during the implementation of the strategy. Tallon (2008) suggests that a narrow-focused strategy reduces strategic complexity and enhances efficiency.

Furthermore, the selected two LGAs emphasize a set of health strategic dimensions, including increasing accessibility to various health services, improving health service quality, and reducing health bottlenecks in their administrative areas. Each of the selected LGAs adopts a strategic, blurred focus in health service delivery by committing to addressing a narrow set of priorities. The Human Resource Industry White Paper (2013) recognizes that a strategic focus that emphasizes fewer issues and avoids including all strategic dimensions increases managers' effectiveness in organizations. Likewise, both LGAs adopt a multi-focus orientation in strategic planning for water service delivery. Both LGAs focus on expanding the delivery of clean and safe drinking water to a certain percentage of their population, improving water scheme quality by rehabilitating water schemes, and promoting the quality of a certain number of staff in water service delivery. A multi-focus in water service delivery captures global interest in promoting access to and the quality of water services for the rural population in the developing world (Mugabi *et al.*, 2007).

It is further found that both LGAs have commonly adopted a multi-focus orientation in the delivery of physical infrastructure services. Both have focused on a set of several issues which range from expanding accessibility, a specific number of better kilometers of roads, and the construction of several bridges and road culverts by the end of strategic planning. Regarding quality improvements, both LGAs plan to spend resources to rehabilitate and maintain the existing distance of roads in their areas of jurisdiction. Based on the perception by the International Transport Forum (2017), a multi-focus orientation in physical infrastructure planning reduces risks and uncertainty arising from taking the entire aggregates of strategic dimensions in the physical infrastructure.

#### CONCLUSION

The paper sought to analyze the strategic focus orientation adopted by two selected LGAs in the strategic planning of service delivery in education, health, water, and physical infrastructure. It has been found that both LGAs have put their efforts into adopting a multi-focus strategic orientation while avoiding a single focus and a strategic blurred focus in their respective service delivery. Both establishments do not show significant differences in strategic focus dynamics. The two LGAs pay attention to a set of priorities, including accessibility, quality, and performance issues in education, health, water, and physical infrastructure services delivery. A multi-focus orientation in strategic planning in the two LGAs may arise from central government strategic planning guidelines and internal residents' demands for a set of services in education, health, water, and physical infrastructure. The paper contributes to the scientific literature by analyzing the strategic focus typology being



used by two local government authorities during strategic planning to deliver education, water, health, and physical infrastructure in the Lake Victoria zone in Tanzania. The paper also recommends that the two local government authorities proceed with a multi-focus orientation since the residents in LGAs have a set of needs that must be addressed by strategic plans. The paper's limitation lies in the fact that its findings are purely qualitative and cannot be generalized to other LGAs in the Lake Victoria zone in Tanzania. In the future, a similar paper may be authored to examine the strategic focus orientations by using quantitative and qualitative approaches to scrutinize the way resources are allocated to balance competing priorities in strategic planning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*The author acknowledges the two selected local government authorities for communicating their strategic plans to the public to read and promote strategic planning education free of charge.*

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