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“Managing” wicked problems: Uncovering the roles of budgets, financial systems, and collaboration

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## FOREWORD

### **“Managing” wicked problems: uncovering the roles of budgets, financial systems and collaboration**

Guest Editors: Anna Thomasson (Lund); Irvine Lapsley (Edinburgh); Ileana Steccolini (Essex)

The last few decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the emergence and persistence of wicked problems, the ways in which they can be addressed, the roles of the public sector in facing them (Head, 2019), as well as the implications for accounting scholarship (Jacobs and Cuganesan, 2014, Steccolini, 2019). In this Foreword, the concept of Wickedness is revisited to put it into context. The research contained in this special issue is also discussed to elaborate upon to demonstrate the contribution made by this special issue to the study of wicked problems. Finally, this Foreword outlines a Research Agenda for scholars engaged in the study of wicked problems.

### THE NATURE OF WICKED PROBLEMS

The concept of wicked problems is not new. The discussion on the nature of wicked problems and the related implications for public sector organizations and policymaking dates back to the 1970's (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Head and Alford, 2015). In their seminal article, Rittel and Webber (1973) distinguished between ‘tame’ problems and ‘wicked problems. While ‘tame’ problems are those which can be clearly defined and for which solutions can be found, wicked problems are inherently complex, and involve and often across different policy areas (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Head and Alford, 2015). Therefore, to manage wicked problems requires complex approaches (Joosse & Teisman, 2020), involving actors from different policy areas and sectors (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Klijn & Koppenjan 2012). Interestingly, given their nature, the very definition of “wicked” is often the outcome of political discussions and lengthy negotiations among stakeholders (Head, 2019).

However, it is not only the definition of a wicked problem that requires negotiations. The diverse and contested nature of wicked issues suggests that, as there is no one “right” definition of what a wicked problem is, similarly there is no one specific solution promptly available. Part of the “wickedness” of wicked problems is related to there not being one optimal solution, but several potential solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973), which are, similarly, subject to negotiations. These negotiations are influenced not only by how the problem is defined, but also by the actors involved in the process, their interest and value configurations, and the context in which they find themselves (Head, 2019). Classic examples of current wicked problems, spanning across sectors and policy areas, relate to issues such as demographic changes and movements, climate change and environmental sustainability, poverty and inequality, many of which are addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (2015). Given the latitude, scope and impact of such challenges, there have been various calls to increase our understanding of how wicked problems are defined and managed (Head, 2019), as well as to explore their implications in the accounting arena (Jacobs and Cuganesan, 2014; Steccolini, 2019).

Responding to such calls, this special issue is a testimony to the variety of forms of “wickedness”, as well as to the ways in which it is faced, coped with, governed and managed in the public sector. Each paper offer an original, novel contribution to our understanding of how wicked problems have been

defined and managed differently by stakeholders within different, specific contexts and institutional settings. When it comes to the definition of wicked problems, the articles in this special issue represent a large variation of different types of wicked problems, ranging from how to adjust prisoners to a life outside prison walls to how to work with child victims to how to manage issues related to climate change and natural disasters. Besides the variation in regards to the character of the wicked problems studied, this special issue also provides us with a wide range of different methods for managing wicked problems in different contexts and institutional settings.

## WICKED PROBLEMS IN ACCOUNTING

A first group of papers explore accounting and financial systems for managing wicked problems in the context of social care and prevention of social problems. Newberry for example explores in her article the consequence of how solutions implemented with the purpose to manage wicked problems over time can be subjected to changes in policy. In the case of the New Zealand's Natural Disaster Fund, the policy conflict came to its fore with the introduction of fiscal targets in the wake of New Public Management (NPM). The article by Newberry thus shed light on how the absence of 'one right solution' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) makes the methods implemented to manage wicked problems an easy target when political agendas and policies changes.

Also investigating the effects of NPM reforms in relation to the management of wicked problems, Lagström and Ek Österberg explore in their article, the implementation of social investments as a method to manage wicked problems and to measure the value of preventive work. In focus for the study is how social investments are problematized and argued for in the context of a county region with the aim to further our knowledge of how calculative practices can be used as a method for managing wicked problems. Thus, even though Lagström and Ek Österberg similar to Newberry take their point of departure in NPM, the focus of their study is different. Lagström and Ek Österberg show how the use of calculative practices and a rhetoric associated with NPM, was a way to justify the investments. By showing how the value of preventive work, the complexity of the problem was reduced, and the problem as well as the solution deployed became because of this more comprehensive.

Both the article by Newberry and the one by Lagström and Ek Österberg, provide us with more context specific analysis of the roles of financial systems for managing wicked problems. On a similar note Lloga Balep and Junne explores the use of accounting for managing wicked problems at the micro level. They do so by focusing on the relationship between prisons and prisoners. In their article, the use of personal budgets as pedagogical tool for preparing prisoners for life after imprisonment is explored. More specifically, the authors explore how the use of budgets can prepare prisoners for the life outside prisons by becoming economic citizens that takes an individual responsibility for oneself.

In addition, Chow and Bracci explores in their article the use of personal budgets as a tool for managing wicked problems. Through the governmentality, the authors explores the use of personal budgets in the context of adult social care and budgets can be used as a tool for transforming social welfare delivery. Much like Newberry as well as Lagström and Ek Österberg, the study by Chow and Bracci takes its point of departure in the neoliberal ideas associated with NPM. Chow and Bracci also, like Lagström and Ek Österberg chose to analysis this at the micro level by focusing on how the subjectivity of individual social workers are influenced by accounting reforms. The result of the study by Chow and Bracci, shows how the use of budgets changes the behaviours of the social workers as well as that of the clients and thus altered the relationship between the state and the users. The study also show how this change was partly inhibited by an increasing focus on financial resources due to austerity. The study by Chow and Bracci thus, like the study by Newberry, show how the deployment

of methods implemented to cope with wicked problems, becomes subject to conflicts emerging between different policies and agendas and how that might influence the effectiveness of the method implemented.

## WICKED PROBLEMS IN ORGANIZATION

To involve actors from different organizations is considered one way towards securing the resources and competences needed to manage wicked problems (Weber and Khademian, 2008; Klijn & Koppenjan 2012). In this special issue, we have two examples of such collaborative efforts, the article by Dudau et al and the article by Thomasson and Wigren Kristofersson.

In the article by Dudau et al focus is on analysing inter-organizational networks formed with the purpose to manage wicked problems in relation to child victims in England and Wales. More specifically the authors put focus on the role of trust and control in inter-organizational network as methods for managing and securing the outcome of collaborative efforts. The study by Dudau et al show how in situations with high degree of uncertainty and complexity, formal control systems is not applicable. Instead, managers use rhetoric to establish trust among different parts of the network. The article by Dudau et al thus provides us with an example of the challenges related to the management of collaborative efforts.

Thomasson and Wigren Kristofersson also explores the complexity of collaborative efforts in their article of a Triple Helix organization in the south of Sweden. The Triple Helix was created with the purpose to spur innovations aiming to manage challenges related to climate change and development of sustainable urban development. The study by Thomasson and Wigren Kristofersson show how the hybrid character of the Triple Helix imposes challenges to the management of this organization at the same time as cross-sector collaboration is considered a pre-requisite for innovations related to wicked problems. The conclusions drawn by the authors is thus that the organizational solutions created with the aim to address wicked problems are themselves wicked.

The results presented by Thomasson and Wigren Kristofersson are thus similar to the result from the study by Dudau et al as both studies show how, even though collaborations and networks of different kinds often are considered a prerequisite to manage wicked problems (Weber and Khademian, 2008), they are due to their complexity inherently wicked. Organizational solutions created with the purpose to address wicked problems thus runs the risk to add complexity to the already complex task of managing wicked problems.

## A RESEARCH AGENDA

All the articles in this special issue provide a fresh analysis of current wicked problems faced by the public sector internationally, but also rich details on the varied processes and systems deployed to cope with them, including, among others, budget tools, financial systems, trust-building, as well as of their outcomes and consequences (Head and Alford, 2015). In doing so, they adopt a variety of theoretical perspectives, which go well beyond policy studies, the field which since the 1970's has dominated research on wicked problems (Head, 2019; Head and Alford, 2015). In addition, they provide the reader with rich in-depth studies on the implementation of the processes, systems and methods deployed to manage wicked problems and challenges related to this implementation.

Besides the individual contribution of each of the articles included in this special issue, the six articles combined provides us with a deeper knowledge about the multifaceted nature of wicked problems and the challenges associated with the management of these problems. For example, several of the studies points towards the importance of rhetoric for justifying the methods implemented as well as defending their use. Especially important seems it to be to find a rhetoric that resonates with the current policy and be able to adapt the rhetoric to changes at the policy level in order for the method deployed to remain legitimate. One possible explanation for why rhetoric and adaptation to shifts in policy is important is that for each wicked problem there is several potential solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). If there is not one given solution, but several, it is likely that the solution chosen is subjected to critique and conflicts at the policy level. This can impair the effectiveness of the method deployed.

Consequently, there seems to be a need to in future research explore the use of rhetoric in the context of wicked problems. Perhaps especially in relation to how wicked problems are defined. This is of relevance as it will influence not only how organizations address them, but also the method they chose to implement as well as how the outcome of the method chosen is assessed. More studies building on the results from the articles in this special issue as well as the article by Head, 2019, is thus called for. Further, given the illusive nature of wicked problems, they are, as several articles here highlights, subjected to shifts in policy agenda and political interests. Here it could be of interest to use sense-making research that interrogates perplexing situations.

Given how previous research on wicked problems mainly have been within the field of policy analysis, additional studies using other theoretical perspectives when analysing not only the nature of wicked problems, but also the methods deployed to manage them, is needed. Already suggested here is the use of rhetoric and sense making. However, additional studies focusing on the area of accounting and organization building on the results presented in articles included in this special issue, is also called given how we so far only have scratch the surface and beginning to understand the nature of wicked problems.

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