

SURRENDER
COMMUNITY

Wicked!

What we're learning about the nature of complex community problems

BY MARK CABAJ

*F*or most of the 20th century, we have made great improvements in our quality of life by means of an “industrial” approach to community issues. Henry Ford industrialized the manufacture of automobiles by reducing it to a series of relatively small, simple procedures.

Similarly, we broke down community problems into little pieces. We ensured that we developed a deep expertise on each piece of the issue and build an institutional infrastructure around it. We created a standardized “recipe” – a set of precise rules that have been developed through constant experimentation and refinement – to guide our work. And we hoped that all these little, well-controlled pieces chugged along in relation to a much larger set of parts so that the societal “factory” gave us the desired outcomes.

We have benefited from the approach. Ninety-nine percent of people are housed. Practically every child has a chance to go to school. Literacy rates are much higher than a century ago. Child mortality rates have plunged, life expectancy has increased, and poverty rates have declined dramatically.

Industrial problem-solving as served us well.

Recently, however, progress seems to have decelerated. Kids may get to school, but many do so hungry and in a system that

struggles to accommodate different learning styles or cultures. Poverty rates refuse to decline any further. In some populations, especially among Aboriginal people or recent immigrants, living standards are completely unacceptable. In many places (like Alberta) much economic wealth is being created at the expense of natural capital and eco-systems.

Why?

In the early 1970s, two observers of social planning, H. J. Rittel and M. Webber, made the observation that many of the simple or “tame” problems had largely been solved. The industrial approach worked on them. Unfortunately, it is totally inadequate to dealing with the problems that remain. These problems are far more difficult to frame. They have inter-related root causes. They involve multiple stakeholders. They are dynamic and adaptive. They are unique in each community. And they are difficult to fully resolve.

Rittel and Webber termed these problems “wicked.”

I have been involved in efforts to tackle wicked problems for some time. But only recently – thanks to having the luxury to observe and reflect on the experiences of many communities – has the nature of such problems become more clear. By looking at their characteristics in detail, practitioners of CED and social economy can challenge traditional responses to community deterioration, and make the case for strategies that differ dramatically in their design, structure, time horizon, and goals.

Épouvantable!

Des années de travail sur des initiatives communautaires holistes rendent claire l'importance que les citoyen.nes captent toute la complexité de certaines problématiques communautaires. Il peut être possible de mettre fin au rejet d'ordures à l'aide de quelques personnes, organisations et actions sur une courte période de temps. Toutefois, pour s'attaquer à la violence des gangs, à l'industrie du sexe, à la pauvreté ou au trafic de drogues et de cigarettes, il est nécessaire de travailler à partir d'hypothèses très différentes. Ces problèmes sont tellement complexes qu'il vaut mieux les décrire comme « épouvantables ».

Les problèmes épouvantables ont six caractéristiques majeures. Ils sont difficiles à définir avec précision, et changent dramatiquement d'ampleur et de composition selon la perspective de différentes personnes. Leurs racines débordent des limites bien définies telles que « social », « économique » et « politique » et les stratégies ciblées n'auront probablement aucun effet sur ces derniers. Ils impliquent divers groupes de personnes qui néanmoins doivent trouver un terrain commun afin de pouvoir travailler ensemble.

Les problèmes épouvantables ne sont jamais tranquilles, ils changent dans le temps en réponse à différents événements et circonstances – incluant les mesures prises pour les contrer! Alors que le même problème peut apparaître dans deux communautés, les mêmes mesures ne peuvent être appliquées de la même façon aux deux places. Le problème est unique à chacune.

Finalement, alors qu'il est possible de les contrôler, il est improbable que les problèmes épouvantables soient résolus. Les citoyen.nes qui souhaitent « faire quelque chose à leur sujet » doivent s'attendre à une longue route tortueuse qui progresse au meilleur par coups et dont ils ne verront probablement jamais personnellement le bout. Lorsque l'on fait affaires avec des problèmes épouvantables, c'est ce dont *gagner* à l'air.■

Difficult to frame

The traditional, “industrial” process of problem-solving requires stakeholders to try to define a problem precisely, to specify how they want conditions to change, what they plan to do to make that change come about, and how they will measure progress objectively and quantifiably.

The wicked problem resists such straightforward analysis. Defining it is as complex as the problem itself, because stakeholders view the problem from such different vantage points. People may agree on the importance of something as broad as “community safety,” “quality of life,” or “environmental sustainability.” They will find it difficult to agree on exactly what these ideas mean.

How, for example, should a community define “poverty”? The efforts of a diverse group of local leaders I encountered in a southern Ontario town demonstrate how difficult this can be.

Initially, the group defined poverty as a “lack of stable and sufficient income.” As one person in attendance noted, there are a half-dozen measures of “sufficient income” already in use. Some members then proposed strategies that would create economic opportunities for people who find it difficult to secure good employment. But another person commented that even with a good job, high housing prices were forcing many

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working people to live on the streets. A third chimed in to the effect that many single parents could not secure a job because of a lack of childcare. A fourth reported how people who have access to financial assets (as opposed to income and no assets) were better off over time.

Before long, the people present were thinking of poverty as a lack of a variety of inter-related assets: stable and secure income, safe and affordable housing, healthy social connections, and financial assets. This reframing of the issue had very real implications for their subsequent decisions about the actions to take and the means of measuring their impact.

The processes of *framing* wicked problems and *developing solutions* are iterative, therefore. One affects the other as communities roll up their sleeves, undertake initiatives, and learn more about the nature of the problem. As one community member remarked, the shifting nature of the problem is part of the problem itself. “It’s like trying to nail jello to the wall,” she said with a mixture of frustration and delight.

Indeed, only when you accept that fluid boundaries are characteristic of wicked problems can you give up trying to “nail it to the wall” and instead begin searching for more effective ways to address it.

Inter-related root causes

Wicked problems originate in a tangle of factors that cross the traditional boundaries of “social,” “economic,” “cultural,” and “political.”

The high rates of property crime in poor neighbourhoods across Canada can be traced to a vast array of causes, for example. Racism, a lack of economic opportunities, dysfunctional families, and poor educational and human services systems all lead some people to resort to crime in order to make ends meet. Residents too busy and scared to assume ownership of the neighbourhood encourage even more crime, as do slow response times on the part of the police (which might reflect both understaffing and indifference). The role played by drug abuse in local crime extends the problem’s root causes well outside community, even to international locations.

The factors contributing to chronic unemployment are similarly inter-related. A welfare recipient who lives in a run-down house, is kept awake by night-time noise, has limited access to childcare, worries about her children’s poor grades, and about neighbours who reinforce destructive patterns of behaviour – such a person is going to face greater barriers on her journey to employment than a recipient who lives in a neighbourhood with good housing conditions, safe streets, quality schools, and appropriate services.

People are both individuals and community members. So an unemployment program that addresses only the individual is not likely to be as effective as one that is directed at both the individual and the community.

Sustained and deep progress cannot be made on wicked problems without concurrent progress on *all* the factors contributing to that problem.

Multiple Stakeholders

To broach that array of other, related factors, however, the problem-solving process must involve individuals and organizations that have some stake in those other issues. That makes the process fundamentally social and political in nature. Moving ahead with a solution is as much about having stakeholders accept and support a path forward as it is about getting the “right” answer.

The challenge of reducing the sex trade is a good example. On the surface, the central actors in the sex trade are the “johns” who purchase the services and the “workers” who supply them. This relationship, however, is nested in another set of relationships that include pimps, family members, and colleagues. It also includes people and organizations that are directly involved in:

- the police and criminal justice system.
- human service organizations.
- business owners, home-owners, and other residents of the sex trade district.



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- public safety organizations.
- human service agencies that provide support to sex trade workers.

Over the long term, a community could include all the people and organizations whose policies and behaviours shape the sex trade. There are the government agencies guided by policies that are supposed to prevent (or that inadvertently encourage) the sex trade, for example. Likewise, you could include educational systems that “fail” to help sex trade workers along a different path.

The more broadly you frame a problem, the greater the number and diversity of players involved and the more socially complicated the problem-solving process. The implications of this are profound. It requires creating conditions and processes in which diverse players can develop a shared understanding and commitment on an issue and work together to address it over time.

Dynamic & Adaptive

The nature of complex issues means that they never remain the same. Changes in key actors, political and economic events, new information or experience that leads to an evolution in thinking about the issue – all these can alter the characteristics of the problem, sometimes substantially. With them changes the possible and appropriate set of responses.

The problem of biker gangs and the drug trade in Québec, for instance, took on an entirely new light in the late 1990s. Gunfights and bombings between rival gangs in Montréal killed innocent bystanders. The spontaneous and overwhelming public pressure to “do something” led to new provincial crime legislation, new provincial and federal policies, and heightened collaboration among police organizations. Emboldened by public support and a new mix of tools, the police and criminal justice system achieved a string of high-profile arrests and prosecutions that contributed (at least temporarily) to a decrease in biker gang violence.

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Complex problems are also adaptive. People and organizations in the community – from police services to the perpetrators of crime – will adapt and adjust to measures taken by other actors. The biker gangs in Montréal, for example, have reorganized themselves and the way they operate. They now deal with their conflicts in a less violent manner and have changed their illegal activities in response to greater police and public scrutiny. This in turn will eventually prompt police services and courts in the community to respond with different strategies and techniques.

Changes may not always be so dramatic and sudden. They may also unfold slowly and subtly over time. Rural police forces and communities, for instance, have developed a range of strategies over the last 20 years to reduce excessive alcohol consumption among young people. Recently there has been an increase in the number of young people using crystal meth, however. Its effects are far more serious than alcohol. Relatively simple production processes have also encouraged a greater and more diverse array of people to get involved in manufacturing and distributing crystal meth than other illegal drugs. The nature of the drug problem among rural youth is now very different from what it was a generation ago.

The dynamism and adaptability of wicked problems defies approaches to problem-solving that rely heavily on extensive, up-front analysis and strategy selection and that assume a relatively unchanging environment. As I was once told by a workshop participant, “By the time you have developed a comprehensive plan to attack an issue, everything – and sometimes almost everybody – has changed and the plan is already outdated!”

Unique (to specific contexts)

Just as root causes and the composition and capacity of stakeholders differ from community to community, no two communities are alike in their experience of a wicked problem and its attendant set of appropriate and manageable responses.

One of the great challenges for the federal government in the last decade has been trying to create a childcare infrastructure that fits the unique set of institutional arrangements of the provinces. Québec’s vaunted childcare programs do appear indeed to be of high quality, but they emerged out of a specific cultural, political, and social milieu, very different from Alberta’s. There, parents prefer nonprofit, registered childcare, but only as one option among several others.

There is a great variation in childcare practices even within provinces. A far greater percentage of childcare operators in Calgary, for example, are privately owned than in Edmonton where nonprofit centres represent a larger part of the overall capacity. Efforts on the part of the provincial or federal government to offer standardized childcare policies nearly always “rub up” against this reality.

The distinct nature of wicked problems means that you can’t expect to do in Community A what is being done in Community B. The practices of one community may inspire and inform those of another, but responses must be tailored to the local context both in their design and in the way they are implemented.

Can Be Reduced, But Tough To Eliminate

Wicked problems are difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate. A community that can claim to have perfect knowledge of the dynamics underlying a problem, full agreement and commitment from stakeholders to a particular course of action, and an environment that evolves slowly, if at all – such a community stands a good chance of eliminating a problem.

Unfortunately, these conditions rarely exist. Communities should not expect to solve wicked problems once and for all. Rather, they should seek to strengthen their capacity for comprehensive and collaborative thinking and action in response to such problems, in order to reduce their depth and scope over time.

This is what leaders and residents of the neighbourhoods in Winnipeg’s historic North End are doing. They are not in a position to reverse single-handedly the downward spiral of the community over the last 30 years. But thanks to organizations like the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC), they are becoming more capable of playing an effective role in that undertaking over time.

NECRC has pulled together people and organizations around the mission of community renewal and helped create a culture of co-operation. It has managed to develop a process for identifying and understanding community issues that points to interlocking

solutions and that invites collective action. It has developed partnerships with organizations outside the neighbourhood (like the police) to help deal with issues (like organized crime) that are influenced by things outside the community. NECRC thinks long term and is open to learning and adapting its work to shifts in the social, political, and economic environment.

The needle is beginning to move in the North End. The major commercial district has some new buildings and tenants. Houses that used to be boarded up are getting renovated. Safety on the streets has improved. Some of the neighbourhoods' most marginalized residents have completed their education and/or have found decent paying jobs.


Will the needle hit "zero" on all these inter-related wicked problems? No. But given the right long-term support, effort, and luck, the residents and organizations of the North End, and the many external organizations that work with them, have the prospect of "progress." Not "progress" as a long slow climb uphill, but progress as a series of shifts forward, then backward, with pauses, abrupt halts, and sudden lurches ahead.

Implications for CED

Jane Jacobs, the late grand commentator on the nature of cities and societies, argues that healthy societies seek out and embrace feedback that something is not working, and continue to find ways

to self-correct, to come up with and experiment with new approaches. Unhealthy societies, on the other hand, ignore such feedback or simply reinforce current practices in a stubborn hope that they may eventually lead to a different outcome.

The push for self-correction in how we deal with wicked problems has been around for quite some time. Witness the presence (even growth) of the CED movement and the increase in government-community responses under the umbrella of comprehensive community initiatives. All are rooted in an understanding of complex issues and seek to develop more organic, holistic responses. All express the conviction that the problems before us are essentially different from those of the past, and will only bend before an essentially different approach.

To paraphrase Robin Murray, an advisor to the long-gone Jobs Ontario program, the challenge for Canadian society may now be to evolve from a "regulatory" paradigm to a "developmental" paradigm. The first emphasizes a command and control approach to a world beset with relatively "tame" problems. The second is rooted in collaborative, organic approaches, under the assumption that the problems facing our world are more convoluted than any one group or agency is able to imagine, much less address. 

MARK CABAJ is a principal in Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement (www.tamarackcommunity.ca) and a member of CCEDNet. Contact him at 780-451-8984 or mark@tamarackcommunity.ca. In his next article, Mark will explore the features of a developmental paradigm and what it might mean for CED.



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